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**TWO YEARS AFTER THE MASSIVE UPRISING IN BELARUS:
BELARUSIANS IN LITHUANIA ON THE NATIONAL IDENTITY**
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Summary: The nation-wide uprising in 2020 in Belarus had a huge impact on the Belarusian society with the emergence of bottom-up communities and activities. This research focuses on Belarusians who moved after the 2020 protests to Lithuania. In interviews with fourteen Belarusians, the personal narratives, actions and expressions of the Belarusian national identity have been discussed in the light of the 2020 events and the social transformation. The data shows no evidence the 2020 protests have influenced the participant's national identity in ethnocultural terms, but theories combining the studies of trauma and national identity give a better understanding of the Belarusian national identity.

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Introduction

It is Anna Triandafyllidou who argues that the national identity may be conceived as a double-edge relationship. On the one hand it involves a certain degree of commonality within the group, based on a set of common features that bind the members of the nation together. On the other hand it distinguishes itself from other nations and individuals who do not belong to this in-group (Triandafyllidou 1998, p. 599). Although the author mentions the existence of the national identity in terms of civic or territorial ties, Triandafyllidou presents the approaches of theorists who do primarily understand nations in terms of an ethnocultural homogenous group related to a specific territory. The national bond may relate to a belief in common descent and/or to a common culture, namely a system of traditions, ideas, symbols and patterns of behavior and communication that are shared by the members of the community (Triandafyllidou 1998, p. 599). These approaches, which primarily try to understand the national identity as an identity of distinguished groups related to a specific territory and bound by ethnocultural characteristics, will be referred to in my work as traditional approaches in the understanding of the national identity.

Many scholars who examined the Belarusian national identity in the era after the collapse of the Soviet Union did approach the national identity with traditional approaches, thus perceived as a homogenous group by ethnocultural characteristics such as language, traditions and a shared history. In comparative studies which aimed to understand Ukraine's and Belarusian's different paths of development in the first decade of independence, the picture emerged that Ukraine has strong national ties, whereas in Belarus a strong anti-Soviet national identity has not been developed (Nordberg, 1997 & Way, 2006). The lack of a distinguished national identity is seen in the light of the dominance of the Russian language and the maintenance of strong Soviet sentiments after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The year 2020 in Belarus was marked by the massive anti-government protests. Although the anti-regime protests are not unique phenomena during election time, the 2020 events stood out for several reasons. The scale of the protests were massive, the protests took place months before the elections and the Belarusians had created a large amount of online Telegram communities in which, among other things, all the necessary information was shared for organizing local and national protests (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). In 2020, Lukashenko reaffirmed his reputation as 'Europe's last dictator', at first by arresting other candidates for the presidential elections and later with the violence crackdown of the protests with thousands of Belarusians being beaten, tortured or

incarcerated (Sierakowski, 2020). The on- and offline gathering of millions of Belarusians, a national mobilization as Onuch and Sasse (2022) call it, in which new networks have been established, did and do potentially have an influence on the Belarusian national identity. The Belarusian national identity took, in comparison to Ukraine, a different path of development and these impactful nation-wide events, which in fact led to a social transformation as well, can have an influence on the Belarusians's national identity.

With the ongoing violence and repression in Belarus, many Belarusians have fled their homeland and since the start of the war in Ukraine, there is an additional fear that Belarusian men can get forced for mobilization to take part in Putin's war. Only in the first six months of 2022, Lithuania has granted more than ten thousand residence permits to Belarusians (Gaučaitė-Znutienė, 2022). Living in Lithuania does not only mean that Belarusians are safe from unlawful prosecution in Belarus, but it also gives the opportunity to reflect on one's national identity and to bring it in to practice, such as speaking the Belarusian language or organizing Belarusian cultural events, without immediately facing harsh consequences.

The research question in my thesis:

If and how did the 2020 protests in Belarus have an influence on the national identity of Belarusians living in Lithuania?

For my research I have interviewed fourteen Belarusians who all participated in protests and who moved to Lithuania in the time span from the first days after the 2020 presidential elections until the summer of 2022. The questions of the research have been focussed on the personal associations and narratives of the Belarusian national identity, as well as on the expressions such as speaking the Belarusian language or participating in Belarusian activities in Lithuania. With national identity I do mean the double-edge argumentation of the nation as distinctive from other nations and the nation itself as being bound by commonality (Triandafyllidou, 1998).

The Belarusian's personal narratives, actions and expressions regarding the national identity will be examined by theories which I have divided in two different categories: the traditional approach and the new approach in the understanding of the national identity. Most of the theories in understanding the development of the national identity do examine the development of the national

identity on a macro scale, influenced by significant societal change such as the industrial revolution. Since my research is focusing on narratives and actions of individual Belarusians, I will argue in the research results which elements and characteristics of these general theories I will adopt to understand my research data.

My aim is not to make any claims on whether some individuals feel more Belarusian than others, nor is my research focussed on the question whether the Belarusian national identity in general is stronger or weaker since the mass movements in 2020. I do not believe the strength or the ‘increase’ of a national identity can be accurately measured, but with my qualitative research I hope to contribute to the process of understanding how individual consciousness of the national identity can change in the light of impactful nation-wide uniting events such as happened in Belarus.

In the past, scholars have conducted research on the Belarusian national identity particularly in the post-Soviet era of country’s formal independence and mainly emphasized to understand the national commonality and distinction with traditional approaches, thus by focussing on the development of homogenous ethnocultural characteristics such as the use of the Belarusian language. In my research I will analyze the data with both traditional and new approaches and I will argue why the new approaches give a better understanding of participants’s narratives, actions and expressions regarding the Belarusian national identity.

Research about the Belarusian national identity is scarce and in particular in relation to the 2020 protests. As I have argued before, scholars in the past have researched the Belarusian national identity in comparison to the Ukrainian national identity and have elaborated on the different development in terms of ethnocultural characteristics. The Belarusian case shows that more research is needed to examine the development of the national identity and the evolving study field of nation, national identity and nationalism give scholars the opportunity to get a better understanding of the Belarusian national identity.

1. Literature review

In the literature review, I will discuss the conducted research related to Belarus and the national identity. I will focus on the literature written about Belarus and the national identity from the period after the break-up of the Soviet Union. What has been written about Belarus and the national identity since the country became de jure independent in 1991, which actors are often mentioned, what conclusions can be drawn and which topics remain (partly) undiscussed?

I will draw the main conclusions at the end of the section in which I will describe how the discussions, conclusions and the bigger picture of the previously conducted research regarding the Belarusian national identity are related to my research and how the gaps in the literature will help to understand the relevance of my research.

When searching for literature about Belarusian identity, one thing immediately stands out: there could be roughly made a categorization of the articles which are dedicated to 1) comparative studies between Belarus and Ukraine, 2) the transformation of the Belarusian national identity since Belarus became an independent country and 3) the role of the (Belarusian) language in shaping the Belarusian national identity. I will briefly discuss a couple articles on these three topics and I will begin with the comparative studies between Belarus and Ukraine

A recurring overarching topic is the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the north of Ukraine in 1986. Below, I will briefly summarize the conclusions written by a couple of researchers. Furthermore I will examine more comparative studies which do not touch upon the nuclear disaster and I will draw a few conclusions which can be made when reading the comparative studies regarding the Belarusian national identity. How can we understand the Belarusian case in comparison to Ukraine, why does Belarus significantly differ and why is this relevant for my research?

Ekatherina Zhukova conducted comparative research about Belarusian and Ukrainian media coverage on how Europe and Russia handled the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (Zhukova, 2018). Zhukova argues that the Belarusian media in the beginning of the 1990's, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, assigned an important role to Chernobyl within the construction of the national identity. Due to the dominance of the Belarusian state in ruling media companies, the Belarusian opposition which was even after the break-up of the Soviet Union extremely limited in their ideological expressions, used alternative media to oppose the dominant narrative spread by the regime which was in favor of Russia. Therefore, the media coverage in Belarus, in contrast to

Ukraine in which the opposition was better represented in media and politics, became the subject of a polarized debate in the orientation and development of the national identity (Zhukova, 2018). While the Belarusian alternative media advocated breaking relations with Russia, the Belarusian official media argued for ending dependence but not the relationship itself (Zhukova 2018). Furthermore, Zhukova (2018) argues that the unequal attention given by the two countries' media to the Soviet state as a perpetrator of Chernobyl was linked to Ukrainian attempts to construct its national identity in opposition to the Soviet past and to the Belarusian desire to preserve its Soviet heritage.

In another article dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster, the author Tatiana Kasperski argues that the Belarusian Popular Front, who were nationalist orientated, challenged the government by speaking on behalf of the victims. The Chernobyl disaster can be perceived as an important tool for the opposition to counter the regime (Kasperski, 2013).

Lucan Way explains the difference between Ukraine and Belarus in terms of mass mobilization in the period of color revolutions in the 2000s which toppled Kuchma in Ukraine but never formed a serious threat for Lukashenko despite the similar institutional legacies and similarly semi-presidential systems in the 1990s (Way, 2006). According to Way, the different outcomes resulted not from greater support for democracy or opposition tactics, but should rather be understood in terms of the interaction between the national identity and the incumbent power in the two states (Way, 2006).

Whereas in Ukraine a strong divisions in the national identity (pro and anti Russia/USSR groups) have made it possible for both sides to use the national identity as a tool of mobilization, in Belarus there was a relatively weak anti Soviet Belarusian identity to use as a mobilization weapon. Way argues that the wide popularity of the Soviet-Belarusian identity has several reasons: Belarus had during the USSR the highest standard of living and strong heroic national myths surrounding resisting the nazi's in WWII (Way, 2006).

The last article I will elaborate on regarding the comparison of the two neighboring post-Soviet countries is presented by Marc Nordberg (dated from 1997) who argues that Belarus shows a stronger interdependence towards Russia in comparison to Ukraine which can be explained by the strong Ukrainian national identity already back in the 1990's (Nordberg, 1997).

According to Nordberg, Ukraine's disassociation from Russia should therefore be understood by its strong national identity, which seem to play a marginal role in the Belarusian case

(Nordberg 1997, p. 634). The author admits the impact of the national identity is difficult to illustrate and therefore states the importance of history in understanding the difference between the two countries. Ukrainians awareness of an independent nation dates back to even the Kievan Rus maintained to be a strong identity during the Soviet reign and the process of nation building continued after restoring independence with the adaptation of the symbols of independence (the flag, anthem and emblem) and the increase of the Ukrainian language (Nordberg 1997, p. 620).

Although there is a significant historical difference, Belarus faced just as Ukraine, an uprising of the national identity during Lenin's nationalities policies, Stalins's terror of collectivization and horrific massacres during the Second World War (Nordberg, 1997). Despite the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the discovery of mass graves Karupaty in which 250.000 bodies were found executed during Stalin's reign, the support for the pro-independence national movement remained low (Nordberg 1997, 621). In 1995, only 15% of the population viewed the break-up of the Soviet-Union as a positive development (Nordberg 1997, p. 623). Positive sentiments towards the Soviet-Union, a lack of national movements and the unchanging character of the Belarusian society in terms of architecture and economic reforms makes the Belarusian national identity according to Nordberg a less influential variable to endure its sovereignty compared to Ukraine (Nordberg, 1997).

David Marples examines why the color revolution did not lead to a regime change in Belarus (Marples, 2006). The lack of economic reforms in Belarus, the dominance of the Russian language, the importance of the great patriotic war in the creation of the national identity and the highly centralization of the state have not contributed to the awareness of a national Belarusian identity standing apart from its Soviet history in comparison to Ukraine and this should be seen as important reasons for the lack of result during the 2006 protests (Marples, 2006).

In this second chapter I will briefly elaborate on the literature written about the transformation of the national identity in Belarus. As will become clear, the conclusions of the articles, as well as the approach of the researchers have much in common with the previously discussed comparative research.

It is geographer Ioffe who examines the Belarusian national identity in 2006 on the basis of conducting surveys and exit polls after the presidential election (Ioffe, 2007). According to Ioffe, Lukashenko embodies a strand of nationalism that is aligned with self-perceptions, mentality and aspirations of many ordinary Belarusians (Ioffe 2007, p. 54). The economic success under the lead

of Lukashenko should be seen in the ability to exploit Belarusians' cultural leanings towards Russia and at the same time denying Russian corporate access to the country and this success breeds according to Ioffe the particular nationalism rather than an overt appeals of the Belarusian language (Ioffe 2007, p. 54). Lukashenko's pragmatism was winning, back in 2006, against the divided oppositional national movement and Ioffe argues the importance of these groups to unite (to build together the nation) to overcome 'Europe's last dictatorship' (Ioffe, 2007).

An interesting approach about the transformation of the Belarusian national identity is provided by Titarenko (2011) who rejects the dominant Western models (transitional theory and social memory) in the understanding of national identity in Belarus. According to Titarenko, the approach of collective memory is both applied by different groups of interest (The government and the Belarusian national front) and these contrary narratives shows on the ground that 'ideal' national identity strived by both groups has not reached a "dominant" view shared by the majority of the population on their national identity (Titarenko, 2011). Therefore, the author argues that Belarus needs a new national identity which goes beyond political limits and ethnic frontiers and which is backed by the idea of Belarusians as the subject of their own actions (Titarenko 2011, p. 18). "Belarusian identity must be constructed as a civic one – like in the Czech Republic, as described by Hroch. Only this kind of national identity corresponds to the modernity challenges facing Belarus. It can be constructed on the basis of civic consciousness without direct connection to any language or ethnicity" (Titarenko 2011, p. 9). Titarenko further mentioned that the 'revolutionary events' in 2006 provided hope that this kind of national identity is under construction.

A handful of articles have contributed to the relation of national identity and the 2020 protests in which different approaches have been conducted. Kulakevich states that Lukashenko unintentionally unleashed a process of national awakening as a bottom-up process in which Belarusians became aware of each other (Kulakevich, 2020). With the approach of nationalism as an every-day practice, Kulakevich describes the events in 2020 in terms of the creation of a civic society, symbolized by the white-red-white flag, which gave birth to a new Belarusian national identity predicated on the basis of shared Belarusian ethnicity and culture, departing from the narrative of the shared Soviet values cultivated by the Lukashenka regime for decades (Kulakevich 2020, p. 108).

Bekus emphasizes in his research regarding the Belarusian protests in 2020 on the use of symbols during and in particular the imagination of the victimhood (Bekus, 2021). According to

Bekus, the oppositional discourse of nationhood consolidated around the remembrance of the victims of Stalinism, which opposes the dominant Soviet narrative of the state (Bekus 2021, p. 14).

Kazharski emphasizes just as Kulakevich on the importance of the performative approach of nationalism since the traditional theories do not fulfill the understanding of the Belarusian national identity in the light of the 2020 protests (Kazharski, 2021). Kazharski argues that new studies regarding the understanding of nationalism have put more focus on everyday nationalism which do not rely on the presumption of a homogenous national imaginary and have more space for the explanation of bottom-up activities by ordinary citizens (Kazharski, 2021). Kazharski perceives the meaning of the revivalism of protesters' symbols, the white-red-white flag and the coat of arms, as shifting from the representation of ethnocultural Belarusian nationalism towards symbols with the meaning of a civic, anti-authoritarian moral solidarity among Belarusians (Kazharski 2021, p. 71). Kazharski therefore argues that the mass-manifestations and their symbols can be interpreted as the foundation of a new civic national identity.

In the third and last chapter I will focus on the research written about language and Belarusian national identity which has been an often discussed subject for many years. In many articles, the language is an often mentioned topic in the understanding of the Belarusian national identity and interestingly enough, Belarusian nationalism is not exclusively assigned to Belarusians who speak the Belarusian language. Marharyta Fabrykant did research about the Russian-speaking Belarusian nationalism in which the Belarusian language in the beginning of 1990s as pillar of the Belarusian nationalism have made place for the more pragmatic Russian language (Fabrykant, 2019). In the research about the Russian-speaking Belarusian nationalism, the nationalist have constructed a more comprehensive narrative of the Belarusian national history that differs from the early post-Soviet nationalism. The fewer criteria that are regarded as necessary for a national identity, the fewer demands are imposed on potential aspiring co-nationals (Fabrykant 2019, p. 133). This does not mean that the new type of nationalism is less exclusive, since the views Belarusians according to this new nationalism narrative should have are much more hostile towards the majority of Belarusian neighboring states (Fabrykant, 2019).

Shumskaya also argues that the Belarusian language as a singular language became a less important identity marker in the nationalist narrative and the awareness of Belarusians as being different than its neighbors. Language has made place for other identifiers such as culture, tradition and history (Shumskaya, 2021).

Language is a frequently mentioned topic in the discussions regarding the Belarusian national identity since the Russian language is more dominant than Belarusian. The approach of the researcher in these literature makes that language can or should be seen as an important identity marker of the national identity. When focussing on the Belarusian national identity in ethnocultural terms, the Belarusian language as distinctive identity feature is a subject which can not be unnoticed, but as I will discuss in the conclusions is that both researchers and national movements in Belarus have come the realization that the Belarusian national identity is hard to describe from merely an ethnocultural perspective.

The transformation of the Belarusian identity does not stand on its own and it is often seen in relation to the Soviet past and the different path the country took compared to Ukrainians in the post-Soviet era. There seems to be a concession in the literature about the weak national identity which was, particularly in the first years of independence, related to the positive sentiments towards the Soviet past, the lack of societal transformation and the absence of significant national movement. Top-down approaches have tried to explain how this state-dominant narratives could prevail and how nationalist movements, such as the Belarusian National Front, tried to counter the argument to emphasize on the ethnocultural aspects of Belarusians as binding identity markers.

Researchers mainly have tried to understand the (in)significance of national identity in traditional national identity approaches which chiefly aim to understand the national identity in homogenous ethnocultural meaning and in the top-down spread of narratives. It was Titarenko who rightly pointed out that there should be a commonly supported narrative which goes beyond the political and ethnic frontiers (Titarenko, 2011). Despite her attention for the 2006 ‘revolutionary movement’, generally there has been little attention for the actions and perceptions of individuals and how they perceive the national identity. One can argue the research examining the importance of Soviet sentiments is backed up by survey data, but this quantitative data does not entail the conclusion that there is no national identity at all. The one does not exclude the other.

The more recent studies regarding the transformation of the Belarusian national identity which I have elaborated on in the previous section are deviating from the traditional approaches with a structural top-down approach towards an understanding of the nation which more focuses on the bottom-up actions and expressions of individuals. While aiming on the individual’s performance of the national identity, literature regarding the national identity in the light of the 2020 protests concludes that the awakening of the nation in 2020 should be interpreted in civic terms rather than

perceiving the white-red-white flag as a symbolization of a ethnocultural homogenization. The national identity can in the Belarusian case best be seen as a collective experience which binds the nation and this collective experience does not necessarily have to be a historical experience imposed by certain key actors or a reference to an alleged common ethnocultural past.

In the next section presenting the theoretical framework I will elaborate on both the traditional and new approaches in order to understand the actions and expressions of the interviewed Belarusians back in the 2020 events and after moving to Lithuania. Only a handful of research have been conducted so far in the relation between the 2020 protests and the national identity and none of them included the interview methodology to get a better view on individuals's choices, perceptions and motivation regarding manifestations of the national identity. Partly this is the reason why I think my research provides an important contribution to the understanding of the never-ending development of the Belarusian national identity.

2. Understanding national identity: theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework I will elaborate on the theories regarding the understanding of the national identity and here I will divide the chapters in traditional approach and new approach in understanding the national identity.

The first chapter with the name ‘traditional approach in understanding the national identity’ will be split up in two groups: the primordialist theories and the modernist theories. The primordialist theories aim to understand the national identity as a crystalized attachment of individuals by their kinship, whereas the modernist theories focus on the understanding of the national identity in the context of the process of rapid social, political and economical transformation. I have named this chapter traditional approaches since both the primordialist and modernist theories have general conceptions of the national identity which is applied on all nations, they assume every nation can be described as a ethnocultural homogenous group and the structural approach does not leave much space for the agency of ordinary people. I will introduce the chapter with the research of Triandafyllidou which helps to understand the variety of the traditional national identity theories.

In the second chapter, ‘new approach in understanding the national identity’, I will first elaborate on what Özkirimli means with the new approach. In the second part of this chapter I will discuss two theories matching the descriptions of the new approach. Both intersectional theories do combine the study of trauma and the nation in examining the development of the national identity. I will discuss these theories in analyzing my research results since they first help to understand the development of Belarusian national identity as I will argue and second the theories expose the shortcomings of the traditional theories.

2.1. Traditional approaches in understanding the national identity

Anna Triandafyllidou has written an influential work about understanding of national identity in which the arguments are primarily based on the traditional national identity theories (Triandafyllidou, 1998). In her work, Triandafyllidou argues based on influential theories that the national identity become meaningful in contrast to the other and thus for the nation to exist, it is presupposed that there is some other community, some other nation, from which it needs to

distinguish itself (Triandafyllidou 1998, p. 594). It is important to understand Triandafyllidou's understanding of the concept of nationalism, which is an inevitable concept in exploring national identity.

Nationalism: 'Ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation' (Smith 1991, p. 73 in Triandafyllidou, 1998).

In her understanding, Triandafyllidou refers to the given explanation by Smith. The different theories of national identity, which I will discuss in the next section, are often mentioned as theories to understand nationalism as well. Different theories about national identity and nationalism both try to understand the origin of the nation. Some theories argue the existence of an ancient ethnic identity as a 'natural' precursor of the nation, whereas theorists following a different approach argue the political idea of nationalism resulted in the emergence of the nation.

The different approaches in national identity which aim to understand the origin of the nation will inevitably have an overlap with the studies focussed on the understanding of nationalism. Therefore, the concept and theories about nationalism are inevitable in the different approaches of the national identity.

The national identity is according to Triandafyllidou a collective feeling of belonging which is developed in a group of people with common features. However, national identity is not limited to the process of self-description or common and shared features of people within the group, hence she argues that national identity only becomes meaningful in the contrast with others (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Thus, what distinguishes the nation from other nations or ethnic groups is as important as the common features in terms of meaning giving (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Therefore, the national identity is a double-edged relationship that creates national consciousness based on communality and being distinguished from other nations.

Triandafyllidou provides in her argumentation different theories and a brief elaboration on a couple of theorists is important to understand the division of the two subsequent chapters, the primordialist and modernist approach.

Triandafyllidou's first discussed theory is provided by Smith who emphasizes on the importance of the emergence of nationalism in order to understand the national identity. For Smith

the identification of the individual with the nation is characterized internally by the ethnic roots of the nation and externally by arguing that in the context of the philosophical and discourses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the concept of identity as sameness has been established (Smith 1991, p. 75 in Triandafyllidou 1998).

Karl Deutsch perceives the national identity in terms of functionality and argues that members from the same national community will experience more convenience in the communication with fellow nationals compared to others, therefore according to Deutsch boundaries are created and it keeps people together (Deutsch, 1966). Thus, the more efficient the communication between members is, the more distance is created between the different groups (Deutsch, 1966).

Elie Kedourie who derives his theory from the nationalist doctrine that the world consists of different nations and that the nations have a duty to not mix in with others (Kedourie, 1961). Kedourie further argues that nationalism should be perceived in the context of the nineteenth century as an European invention in which the doctrine does not merely determine the borders of the nation, but also legitimize the sovereignty of the nation (Kedourie, 1961).

The three briefly elaborated theories about the national identity show three different approaches in which Kedourie and Smith theorize about the origin of the national identity: in order to understand an individual's identification with a nation, one has to understand what this nation is and where it comes from. Kedourie and Smith both have a different view on the origin of nations. Whereas Smith focuses on the ethnic origin of the nation, grounded many centuries ago, Kedourie emphasizes on the political development of nationalism. The essentialist approach and the constructivist approach is an important division in understanding different theories about national identity. Bellamy writes in his work about the two different approaches of the national identity in terms of the primordialist approach and the modernist approach. According to Bellamy the primordialist approach argues that the origin of the nations derives directly from a priori ethnic groups and it is based on kinship ties and ancient heritage (Bellamy, 2018). The modernist approach emphasizes on the novel of the nation and political organization in the context of the 19th century dynamics of industrial capitalism and is not necessarily related to the ethnic heritage (Bellamy, 2018).

I will discuss in the next two chapters ‘primordialist approach’ and ‘modernist approach’ the most influential theorists which perceive homogenous ethnocultural features of the national identity as important characteristics in the conceptualization of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

2.1.1. Understanding the national identity: primordialist approach

The first theorist I will discuss in this chapter is Edward Shils. In his philosophical work ‘Primordial, personal and sacred civil ties’, Shils argues that the modern society (work is written in the 1950’s) is not a collection of lonely individuals, but the society is bonded by an ‘infinity of personal attachment, moral obligations, primordial affinities and civil sense’ (Shils 1957, p. 131). Societal deterioration such as modern warfare or economic stagnation and pressures on a person’s standards of living does according to Shils not form a danger of internal disintegration.

In his argument, Shils focuses on the ordinary man who is rather concerned with his concrete near surrounding in terms of moral notions instead of incorporating an abstract belief system. Aside from some occasional meetings with the central authorities and societal symbols in times of national trouble or a coronation, morals, ideals and beliefs in a modern society primarily influence the individual alongside personal ties, primordial attachment and responsibilities in corporate bodies (Shils 1957, p. 130). Shils refers in his research to the rapid changing society in the nineteenth century in which sociologists analyzed the influence of capitalization on the human bonds in the contrasted terms of *Gemeinschaft* (villages and local communities with intense solidarity) and *Gesellschaft* (rationalization and individualization, in essence the modern, tradition-destroying society (Shils, 1957).

Another research having a big influence on Shils’s argument is Charles Cooley’s work which aims to understand the society in terms *primary groups* (small groups such as neighborhoods and families with a strong we-feeling, solidarity and direct interaction) in contrast with the selfish, disagreeable and conflict aspects of the modern society (Shils, 1957).

For Shils, kinship, bonded by blood ties, are the foundation in the understanding of primary groups. The closely connected primary groups became bonded together in ethnicities and therefore the emergence of the nation can be understood as a coalescence of ethnicities, which is in essence the coalescence of the different kinships (Shils, 1957). It is according to Shils the interaction of kinships, merged by blood ties, that have created ethnicities which eventually expanded to become

a nation and therefore the people in the nation are primordially connected to each other by blood ties.

The next influential primordialist approach I will discuss here is provided by Clifford Geertz, who argues just as Shils that ethnic groups were the direct antecedents of nations. Geertz argues that cultures are inevitably involved in the process of transferring “assumed givens” of social existence with kinship as the main primordial attachment (Geertz,. Therefore, Geertz supports Shils’s theory to a large extent, but also mentioned the importance of the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices (Geertz 1963, p. 259). According to Geertz these primordial bonds differ from society to society and from time to time, but to virtually every individual, regardless of the society or time, this bond seems to flow from a sense of natural affinity rather than from a social interaction (Geertz, 1963). Geertz identified six forms of primordial ties which, when present, convert loose social groups into nations. These ties are: assumed blood ties, race, language, region, religion and custom (Geertz 1963, p. 262).

Geertz mentions in his work the context of the modern society which has destructive effects on the strong primordial ties since the national unity is increasingly maintained not by calls to *Blut und Boden* but rather to a ‘vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to a civil state, supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by governmental use of police powers and ideological exhortation’ (Geertz 1963, p. 260). Here Geertz targets the modern society with harsh criticism for not only causing a destructive effect on strong-tied communities based on primordial attachment, but more importantly he warns at the same time for the rest of competing loyalties which might cause a threat for the government as well for the nation since for those who are infused with primordial sentiments do not have an alternative definition of the nation (Geertz 1963, p. 261).

The core argument of Geertz can be summarized as the six previously mentioned primordial ties, the culturally assumed givenness, which regardless of time and space seem to have a bigger impact on converting societies into nations than social interactions. Governments in modern societies can not pass by this primordial attachment since disaffection might lead to the societal partition (Geertz, 1963).

Geertz's approach can be perceived as an extension of Shils's argument regarding the primordial attachment based on kinship and both authors' critique must be reflected in the light of criticism towards the modern society. But it is important to mention that Geertz uses the term 'assumed givenness' whereas Shils speaks about the nation connected by an objective feature, namely blood ties. This seemingly minor nuance marks a big difference in the approach of the two authors, whereas Shils emphasizes the primordial attachment can not be ignored since it is the fundament of the nowadays nation, Geertz arguing that the 'assumed' primordial attachment can not be ignored due to the threat of the survival of the modern society.

2.1.2. Understanding the national identity: modernist approach

Ernst Gellner is known for his influential theory about nation and nationalism. In his constructivist approach, Gellner argues that the nation is a product of nationalism and not vice versa. According to Gellner, nationalism and national identity are inherently political terms and therefore the emergence of the nation should be analyzed as an outcome of the nineteenth century social-political demands of the industrial revolution (Bellamy, 2018).

Gellner's theorization of nationalism and the nation consists of five stages in which the first three stages aim to understand the transition of a pre-national social order of what Gellner calls a 'national order of things' (Gellner, 2008 in Bellamy, 2018). The transition from a medieval stage to the emergence of the sovereign states, followed by a stage in which the international moral order established due to the Enlightenment and in the third stage the equalization of the idea of the nation, which means the inclusion of the ordinary citizens to something that was only preserved to the political elite (Gellner, 2008 in Bellamy, 2018). This last stage was a direct cause of the urbanization and the spread of education due to the industrial revolution.

For Gellner, the emergence of the nation and with it the national identity, is a direct cause of the social-economic transformation the society went through. It was not the nation that created social homogeneity but the nation itself evolved from economic demands for social homogeneity (Gellner, 2008). With Gellner's emphasis on economic change as the cause for the emergence of the modern state and nation, the question remains how the social order became a 'national order of things'. According to Gellner, this order was legitimized by the predominance of 'high cultures' which could be spread to the ordinary people as I have described as the third stage of the Gellner's

scheme of nationalism (Gellner, 2008 in Bellamy, 2018). Therefore, the theory of the spread of a high culture is important in the understanding of the homogenization of the society in which the local culture of the ordinary man became less prominent.

In Hobsbawm's highly influential book 'The invention of tradition' the author argues that many traditions which appear or claim to be old in fact turn out to be relatively recent or even invented (Hobsbawm 2012, p. 1). The author argues with historical examples, such as the choice of rebuilding the British parliament in the nineteenth century Gothic style after its destruction in the Second World War, the importance of the assumed continuity of the past. According to Hobsbawm, the continuity of these traditions are largely factitious since these traditions might rely on historical novels which created by repetition of their own past (Hobsbawm 2012, p. 2). It is thus the repetition of an invented tradition pretending to be historically rooted which establishes its own truth. The question here remains who is responsible for these invented traditions.

Hobsbawm mentioned the difficulty of tracing back to where and which individuals are responsible for certain invented traditions, but he argues that these inventions are more likely to occur during rapid social transformation which weakens the social patterns for which the 'old' traditions had been designed (Hobsbawm 2012, p. 4). Thus, according to Hobsbawm, social transformation requires new traditions and therefore argues that it is not a coincidence of the emergence of such traditions in the last 200 years in which societies underwent rapid transformations, starting to mention the industrial revolution (Hobsbawm, 2012).

Hobsbawm furthermore argues that the observations about the invented traditions of the period since the industrial revolution, seem to belong to three overlapping types: establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or membership of real or artificial communities, establishing or legitimizing institutions or power of authorities and the socialization of people into a system of certain believes, values and behavior (Hobsbawm 2012, p. 9).

Thus, according to Hobsbawm, the emergence of the nation should be seen in the light of rapid social transformations such as the nineteenth century industrial revolution, just as Gellner argues. But the theory significantly differs in the cynical top-down approach of establishing and legitimizing the power of the political elite compared to Gellner's approach, who emphasizes the homogenization of the nation as a result of the combination of modernization itself and with it the ability to spread 'high culture'.

The last influential theory which can be ascribed to the modernist approach is presented by Benedict Anderson (2016) in his book 'Imagined communities'. Anderson aims to explain why the world today is divided in states and how, due to technological developments, people feel strongly connected to the territory of the human created states.

Print, maps, museums and literature have contributed to the strong sense of belonging to a certain territory which might feel natural, but the borders of this territory, how the nation came into existence, and how it is expressed are human made constructions (Anderson, 2016). Anderson calls it imagined communities because we are never able to see all members of the community despite we feel strongly connected with them.

Thus, for Anderson, the modernization of the society, the technological inventions which came along with this modernization process and the construction of the modern states are key factors in the understanding of the emergence of the nation (Anderson, 2016).

What all these three theories have in common is the context of the modernization of the society which makes it possible for the nation to emerge. Gellner emphasizes on the spread of 'high culture' which can be explained by the availability of education for a larger part of the society because of the rapid societal change due to the industrialization in the 19th century. Anderson as well argues the ability of the spread of binding narratives of the nation due to modernization but emphasizes on the technological development of the printing press and maps which gave ordinary citizens the awareness and imagination of belonging to a community within a particular territory with whom they share common features.

The work of Hobsbawm must also be perceived in the context of the modernization of societies, but he argues the importance of understanding the spread of the novel regarding the collective nations in terms of invented traditions to establish or legitimize political power.

The modernist approach is characterized by arguing the emergence of nations in terms of a top-down approach in the context of a rapid societal transformation. Whether it is the novel is real or invented and regardless of the interest of those who are responsible for the spread of the novel, the common factor in these theories is the explanation of how modernization contributes to the process of unification the people as contrasting to the essentialist primordialist theories in the previous chapter.

2.2. New approaches in understanding the national identity

In the second part of the theoretical framework I will provide two theories regarding the understanding of national identity which I will describe as the new approaches, inspired by the book of Umut Özkirimli (2010). Özkirimli argues for the gradual change towards a new stage of theories in the understanding of nationalism (Özkirimli, 2010).

Özkirimli explains why he names the approach a new approach and emphasizes here in particular on a new wave of theorizing which is characterized by the critique on the previous mainstream approaches of the scholars on nationalism (or national identity) (Özkirimli, 2010).

The first and maybe probably most obvious topic which is discussed by the new approach is the assumption of having homogeneous national cultures, static notions of culture as coherent, harmonious whole (Özkirimli 2010, p. 169). According to Özkirimli, this trend has been broken by what he calls a ‘cultural turn’ in the social science, precipitated by new social movements in the last decades of the twentieth century which emphasize on the fluent process of culture and which meaning is continually negotiated, revised and reinterpreted by successive generations and by various groups that are presumed to make up the ‘national’ society (Özkirimli 2010, p. 169).

The second point is the emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach of understanding national identity. New epistemological perspectives such as feminism and post-modernism have entered the field (Özkirimli 2010, p. 170). With the emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach, the elite perspective of the traditional approaches which merely seemed to focus on the top-down approach of understanding the national identity has been merged with a bottom-up approach in which the actions and expressions of ordinary citizen have become more discussed in the new approach theories (Özkirimli, 2010).

The last major point of critique by the new wave of scholars can be formulated in terms of taking explicitly the context of a certain nation into account instead of creating a general idea of nationalism or national identity which can be applied to every nation (Özkirimli 2010, p. 170). Therefore, by emphasizing on human agency, the every-day cultural actions and expressions of individuals, the new approaches highlight the ability of the individual in maintaining or changing the nation. Since most societies have drastically changed in the last one and half century in terms of ethnocultural diversity, the bottom-up development of the creation of the nation rather focuses on

what people connects in the nation and which path they are taking instead of the traditional structural or top-down approach in the understanding why and how people are culturally forming a homogenous group.

One of these new approach theories studies the link between nationalism (or national identity) and collective trauma. Beukian argues that the social memory in relation to the formation and maintenance of the national identity has often been examined on the glorifying versions of the historical past and that more recent scholars have increasingly put emphasis on the traumatic collective past and the memory of mass trauma (Beukian, 2020).

In Beukian's literature study, the author argues there are three angles through which the concept of trauma has been connected to the study of nationalism: trauma as a trigger for a national identity discourse, trauma as a continuation of creation of a discourse of denialism trauma and examining trauma through the lens of justice, recognition, and retribution (Beukian 2020, p. 2). In the first chapter of her work in which Beukian discuss the literature that examines the explanation of nations and nationalism through collective trauma, Beukian mentioned in particular the studies which have been focussed on the internalization of collective trauma and the various acts and practices of remembering (Beukian, 2020). In this paragraph, Beukian describes briefly Assmann's theory of trans-generational transmission, which I will now elaborate on since it helps to understand the feeling of belonging of people in a group based on collective memory.

Aleida Assmann states in the book 'Performing the Past' there has been a whole new discourse built around the collective memory studies. Assmann argues the question whether collective memory truly exists. Assmann refers to Susan Sontag who denies the meaning of a collective memory by arguing in her book 'Regarding the pain of others' that a society is able to choose, to think and to speak but all memory is individual and unreproducible (Assmann 2010, p. 37). By examining memory as being a physical structure it is indeed tied to individual lives and dies with each person, but according to Assmann, this statement is incomplete. Once the memory is verbalized, the individual memory is fused with the inter-subjective symbolic system of language after which it can be confirmed, corrected or simply shared (Assmann 2010, p. 37). Another argument against the statement of Sontag is the externalization of memory by material images which are not only an important props of memory but they can reproduce or trigger individual recollections (Assmann 2010, p.37).

Assmann argues that, the memory boom as she calls it, reflects on a desire to reclaim the past as a part of the present and that the individuals reassessment and reconsideration of this past is an important dimension of individual biographies and historical consciousness and hence it is connected to the repository for group affinities, localities and identity formation (Assmann 2010, p. 39).

Assmann makes in work the categorization of four formats of memory which I will briefly explain. The criteria for distinguishing the formats, from which the borderlines are rather fuzzy, are based on the extension of time and space, size of the group and the volatility or stability (Assmann, 2010). After explaining the four formats of collective memory I will elaborate on my interpretation of the categorization why Assmann's approach of the different types of collective memory are important for understanding my research data.

The first format is the individual memory which is studied by neurologists and cognitive psychologists and the skeptical consensus in the field seems to be that the memory of the individual is not designed for accurate representations of the past and it cannot be trusted in any way (Assmann, 2010). Despite being unreliable and subjective, humans very much depend on their memory in creating a self and to establish contact with other human beings. Since human memory is socially constructed, its memory is always connected with the memories of others (Assmann 2010, p. 41).

The second format is social memory and it is, next to the formats I subsequently will discuss, a replacement of the according to Assmann vagueness of the term of collective memory (Assmann 2010, p. 41). For Assmann, social memory is referring to the past as experienced and communicated in a given society and it should not be perceived as a homogeneous memory but rather as a division into different generations of groups of people with more or less the same age who witnessed historical events and therefore share a common frame of beliefs, values, habits and attitudes (Assmann 2010, p. 41).

The third frame provided by Assmann describes the collective memory as political memory. Political memory differs, just as the next format cultural memory which I will discuss, from individual and social memory. These memories are less embodied as the previous two and need to be re-embodied by symbols and material representation to become a kind of memory (Assmann 2010, p. 42). The difference between social memory and political memory is that social memory is often examined by social psychologist in how historical events are perceived and expressed by

individuals, whereas political memory becomes rather institutionalized and is often examined in top-down approach in the understanding how the collective memory contributed to the reshaping the national identity and how this collective memory is used or abused for political action.

The fourth and last format of the collective memory is cultural memory, which is understood by Assmann as the process of creating a collective narrative based on long-time storage of memory which is constantly repeated by performances, readings and references and what has been discussed and neglected over time. This is an active way of creating and recreating cultural memory with signs from which the meaning in comparison to the political memory are less homogenous and have the potential to have more changes and transformation over time (Assmann 2010, p. 44).

By combining the field of a collective memory and the creation of collective (national) identity, Assmann's work does fit in the frame of the new approaches in understanding the development of national identity. Assmann has emphasized on the importance of social memory, in which embodied individual memories are expressed by language and externalized by material images. With social memory, individuals from a generation who have witnessed or experienced certain events, in the case of Belarus the ongoing violence and repression by the state. These common experiences create a holistic framework of common characteristics such as shared values that connects the individual to the larger group of people through common life experience, communication, identifying and participation (Assmann, 2010). The work of Assmann shows that common lived-through events can create a holistic framework of common experience, values, behavior etc. which by means of expression can create a new narrative of collective identity, in this case the Belarusian national identity. Therefore, the work of Assmann perfectly can be ascribed to the new approach since the narrative is not focussed on homogenous ethnocultural characteristics and there is a focus on the human agency to change the collective narrative and by its actions and expressions.

The second theory I will discuss is provided by Jeffrey Alexander in the influential book cultural trauma and collective identity (Alexander, 2004). According to Alexander, cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective group feel subjected to horrendous events that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander 2004, p. 1). Alexander emphasizes here not only on the causal relation between the traumatic collective event and the new social bond, but also on

the aspect of social responsibility and political action (Alexander, 2004). Since Alexander argues that events are not inherently traumatic, the author explains the theory of how a traumatic event has been recognized by the larger group (e.g. the nation). The social process of cultural trauma has been extensively discussed by Alexander in clear steps which I will explain below.

The first step is what Alexander calls claim making in which Alexander emphasizes on the expression of human agency and they broadcast these representations as members of a social group (Alexander 2004, p. 11). The cultural construction therefore begins with claim(s) of (the) individual(s).

The second step is called the carrier groups which refers to the collective agents of the trauma process. Carrier groups (could be both in the formal and informal sphere) have for example ideological interests and are described in terms of having particular discursive talents (Alexander, 2004). In this step the claim of the individual(s) will be brought to the public sphere.

The logical subsequent step is describing how the claims are broad to the bigger audience. Alexander refers to the Speech Act Theory in which the carrier group makes use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures (Alexander 2004, p. 12).

The next step is the creation of a new narrative in which four critical representations are essential: the nature of the pain (what happened), the nature of the victim (who was involved), the relation of trauma to the wider audience and the attribution of responsibility (who caused the trauma).

The fifth step is the incorporation of the narrative in the institutional arenas. In the case of Belarus it is obvious that this narrative is not spread by the governmental institutions, but with institutional arenas Alexander also refers to region, science, and mass media. In Belarus these institutions are all dominated by the state, but the collective trauma has been massively spread by the bottom-up Telegram channels established by the political opposition.

The next step entails the questions of how carrier groups are facing constraints to spread the narrative. Questions raised by Alexander are related to understanding the societal hierarchy and the representations of groups in the previously mentioned institutes such as region and media: who controls the religious order and who owns the newspaper (Alexander 2004, p. 21).

The last step of understanding trauma as socially mediated attribution is the revision of the collective identity by experiencing, imagining and representation of the trauma (Alexander 2004, p.

22). The collective memory is revised by searching for re-remembering of the collective past. Once the collective past has been reconstructed, there will eventually be a period of calming down in which affect and emotions become less inflamed (Alexander 2004, p. 22). Subsequently, according to Alexander the trauma becomes objectified in museums, statues and historical artifacts and leads to a process of routinization (Alexander 2004, p. 23).

Alexander has argued with his theory the process of the creation of a new collective narrative based on (a) traumatic experienced event(s). The theory explains how new narratives of a collective identity could start with the claim of one single actor. In the case of Belarus, the repression by the state was experienced nation-wide and this makes it even easier to understand a new collective narrative. The theory elaborated how traumatic events can leave an indelible impact on the groups consciousness and how social responsibility and political actions of representing the trauma will contribute to the creation of a new narrative which will make the memories forever alive.

The intersectional theory of Alexander is important to understand my research data about national identity since it emphasizes on the creation of a new collective narrative, thus for example a narrative of the nation, which is based on collective experienced trauma and established by social responsibilities and actions. The homogenous ethnocultural aspects of the nation's narrative do not play a role and the establishment of the narrative is not perceived by a top-down approach.

3. Methodology

In this chapter I will explain the collection of data, the digital analysis of the collected data and lastly the ethical considerations which are very important in my research since the statements of the Belarusians who participated in my research could bring them in danger when returning to Belarus. Therefore, guaranteeing anonymity and discretion has been of utmost importance over the course of the research.

3.1. Data collection

Statistical facts

- 14 semi-constructed interviews conducted in English
- Age 19 till 45
- 7 men, 7 women
- Average interview time 1:15
- Interview analysis: 45 codes, 841 quotes

For my qualitative research regarding the Belarusian national identity I have interviewed fourteen Belarusians living in Lithuania after the Belarusian protests in 2020. This does not mean that all participants immediately left after participating in the protests or that their discussions to leave are causally related to the personal experience with the Belarusian state. Whereas some participant literally had to escape the country, others entered Lithuania only in 2022 which I will further elaborate on in the research results section.

Thirteen of the fourteen interviews have been conducted in face to face meetings and one interview has been conducted online. The average time duration of the interviews was approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

The first four participants for my research have been found via my own network and a personal network of an acquaintance by whom I have been invited to participate in a Belarusian dancing class. After talking with the attendees, three Belarusians were interested to participate in my research. Vilnius University confidentially handed me out a list of email addresses of Belarusians making use of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania scholarship. After sending out an email

with the request to participate in my research, two students were willing to be interviewed about the Belarusian national identity. Other participants in my research have been found by a ‘snowball’ sampling method. It is a method which is often employed in qualitative research, obtained by asking each person interviewed to suggest additional people for the interviewing (Rubin and Babbie, 2016). The appeal to the networks of the interviewed participants has ultimately led to the total number of fourteen participants.

All interviews were conducted in English and had a semi-structured approach. A semi-structured interview can be centered, as the name suggests, between a structured (almost survey guiding interview) and an unstructured (free-flowing) approach of interviewing (Knott et al., 2022). With choosing the semi-structural approach, I have combined the two approaches which resulted in a questionnaire with pre-selected questions but with space left for the participant to come up with their own input and this resulted in the gathering of information which I could not have foreseen in advance.

The questions were focussed on four different topics: the perceptions and ideas of the national identity, the 2020 protests, moving to Lithuania and living in Lithuania (See appendix nr. 2). The audio of all interviews has been recorded and before starting the interview I communicated the bullet points of the informed consent which I will further explain in the sections ethical considerations.

3.2. Data analysis

All gathered data has been analyzed in the coding software Atlas. The audio recordings of the interviews have been transcribed after which all the transcriptions have been uploaded in the program. All interviews have been read again and the potential relevant quotes for my interview have been coded which resulted in a total of 45 different codes applied to a total of 841 different quotes. The codes are related to the previously mentioned topics of the questionnaire, but since the interviews were semi-structured, frequently shared information which was not particularly related to one of the four previously mentioned topics, but which was relevant for my research have therefore also been included in the codes.

To answer my research question in the next chapter, different sub-topics related to the main research question will be discussed on the basis of the gathered data. To comprehensively discuss

these different topics, the gathered data of the explicit topic, such as ‘using the Belarusian language in Lithuania’, can be selected by clicking on the particular code in the coding software which entails the information of reasons why the interviewed Belarusians left Belarus. The code in this case has been applied to all information indicating information about the use of the Belarusian language in Lithuania. Thus, the 45 codes encompass the data shared by all participants about 45 separate topics which will help me in the next chapter to answer the main research question.

3.3. Ethical considerations

The informed consent form has been an important document during my research since it communicated both the topic and aim of my research and it provided a brief list of rights for the interviewee, such as the right to stop the interview at any time without any consequences (see appendix nr. 1). The informed consent forms have been handed out digitally to the participants in advance to carefully read the one-page document and the bullet points of the form, regarding the anonymity, the right to stop the interview and question to record the audio, have been repeated before starting the interview to get the most recent oral agreement possible. All participants have agreed on recording the audio and none of the participants did use the right to stop the interview and all the questions I have asked have been answered.

Anonymity of my participants in the research has been from the beginning of the research an important point. Data which can lead to the participant’s identity has not been transcribed and when quoting a participant, his or her name will be replaced by a pseudonym. The communication about the aim of the research and the rights of the interviewee beforehand and the encouragement of the participants to indicate if they prefer not to answer certain questions was meant to create a confidential conversation. I am very grateful to the participants that they were willing to share sensitive information with me, information that could even potentially endanger them. Therefore it was my responsibility on the one hand to guarantee the anonymity of the participants and on the other to be transparent about myself and the aims of the research towards everyone participating in my research.

4. Research results

In this section I will analyze my research results which will answer my research question how the 2020 protests had an influence on the national identity of Belarusians living in Lithuania after 2020. As I have argued, national identity is referring to Triandafyllidou's definition of the national identity as a double-edge relationship between communality and distinction.

The theoretical framework will be guiding in analyzing my research results, hence the section will be divided into three different chapters named after the division in the theoretical framework: primordialist, modernist and new approach. The first two chapters will be related to the traditional approaches, primordialist and modernist, and therefore I will analyze the data which is related to characteristics of the traditional approach theories, such as perceiving national identities as homogenous ethnocultural groups.

In each chapter I will analyze the outcome of the interview data with the help of the theories and I will argue if the national identity, thus the communality and distinction, can be understood with the use of these theories. As an example, the primordialist theories argue that the nation emerged from ethnic groups and hence the implication in this approach is that nations are bound by ethnic ties which are unchangeable. Thus, in the primordialist chapter, I will analyze if the data provided by the Belarusian participants regarding the national identity can be examined with the help of the concerned theories.

Since the research is aimed to examine explicitly on the effect of the 2020 protests on national identity, simply analyzing all provided data does not tell anything about whether these narratives, expressions or actions have been changed after 2020. Neither does it mean that certain actions or expressions causally relate to the national identity, since participating in Belarusian activities in Lithuania might also be encouraged by building a social network abroad. The argumentations and motivations for certain actions and expressions will therefore be very important in the analysis and when discussing certain variables I will elaborate on the construction of my argumentation.

The same goes for the provided narratives regarding the national identity, because the narratives about perceiving the national identity in ethnocultural terms might not be explicitly triggered by the 2020 events. Here I will carefully focus on the argumentation and motivation and whether participants share certain experiences from before the 2020 protests which relate to these narratives as well.

The development of someone's identity can certainly be described as a dynamic holistic process in which it is potentially influenced by a large number of factors and actors. I do not aim to track back someone's personal process of the development of the national identity, nor does this research generalize the research outcome for the Belarusian nation or diaspora. But with a focus on the individual Belarusian who participated in the 2020 protests and currently lives in Lithuania, I will examine how such impactful nation-wide activities can influence someone's narratives, expressions and actions of the national identity.

Since I will often refer back to the narratives, expressions and actions, I will first give a brief understanding of what I mean with these terms.

Narratives of the national identity: The personal perceptions, associations, notions and beliefs shared by the Belarusians regarding what is understood as the Belarusian national identity. An example of such a narrative is the Belarusian national identity described as the belief in a shared history.

Expressions/actions of the national identity: Brining the national identity into practice. Expressions related to the Belarusian national identity, in the case of the traditional approaches, the use of the Belarusian language. An example of an actions participation in Belarusian cultural events.

With the traditional approaches I will focus on the national identity from a traditional perspective, namely the theories that have in common an emphasis on the nation in terms of homogenous ethnocultural characteristics. The chapter of the new approach, in which the intersectional theories regarding the national identity will be discussed in relation to the research data, I will argue the necessity of the new approach both in the light of the shortcomings of the traditional understanding of the national identity and the importance that these theories do not merely focuses on the top-down approaches.

I will begin in each chapter with a brief overview of the theoretical framework and I will elaborate on which variables or answered questions in my interview data will be analyzed in relation to the particular approach. Further, I will discuss which element of the theories is important in understanding my data. Here further I will emphasize elements of the theories, as well as

outcomes theories are aiming for, such as the understanding of the national identity in ethnocultural homogenous terms.

4.1. The primordialist approach

In the section on the traditional approach of the thesis theoretical framework I have provided influential primordialist theories which argue that ethnic groups have overtime transformed into nations. According to Shils, the interaction of kinships, merged by blood ties, has created ethnicities which eventually expanded to become a nation and therefore the people in the nation are primordially connected to each other by blood ties (Shils, 1957). Geertz later expanded Shils's theory and argued as well that ethnic groups are antecedents of nations by presenting six primordial ties: assumed blood ties, race, language, region, religion and custom (Geertz 1963, p. 262).

The primordialist approach thus argues that the nation emerged from ethnic groups and eventually from even smaller kinship ties, which implies that the nation should be understood by rock solid ethnocultural characteristics which are rooted in history and can not be changed. This exclusive ethnocultural element of the theory will be compared with the interview data I have collected regarding the participant's notions about being Belarusian.

Twelve participants have answered the question "who according to them can be a Belarusian, in other words, what does it mean to be a Belarusian?" A wide variety of answers have been given, but none of the participants agreed with a primordialist understanding of the Belarusian nation. Four participants have mentioned directly that self-identification is leading in the understanding of being Belarusian as the quote below shows:

"What does it mean to be Belarusian? Um.. For me it just means self-identification for which you can choose any criteria you can like most. It could be passport, place of living, feeling inside of you, any.. that's it." (Aksana, 33)

One participant explicitly mentioned the birth of a new nation after the 2020 protests and that being Belarusian means to be part of this new society. Most answers were related to Belarusian culture and the Belarusian territory. The logical question which subsequently follows here is: why can the

notions related to culture and territory not be seen as a primordialist understanding of the Belarusian nation?

The participants who mentioned the importance of being Belarusian by mentioning the culture and the territory emphasized the fact that these factors are not seen as absolute requirements, but rather as factors which help to understand why Belarusians feel Belarusian:

"[...]first of all to be Belarusian is first of all the Belarusian language. Maybe the second thing is to identify yourself with the Belarusian territory, with the Belarusian culture [...]. Even if you don't speak Belarusian but if you support, identify yourself as well with Belarusian culture like the songs, like national events something like that." (Aliaksei, 36)

In a few cases in which territory or culture were mentioned, I have posted to clarify the subsequent question whether the meaning of being Belarusian is related to ancestry and all of the participants answered the question negatively.

Interviewer: yeah ok so it's not depending on your parents or grandparents?

Participant: *"Ya no I don't believe it's just the origin of your parents, because to my inside it is what is coming from inside, from your thoughts, your mindset"* (Anastasia, 28)

Two participants even came up with an example of someone who was born abroad, moved to Belarus and who is seen by the interviewees as a Belarusian. In the case of the example provided below provided by means of self-identification.

Interviewer: It doesn't matter where your family is coming from? [...]

Participant: *"Even so ya. Because I have one friend who is half.. umm. Afro-American, half Belarusian and he also just identifies himself as Belarusian since he really is Belarusian."* (Aliaksander, 34)

The ostensible contradiction here is very interesting because despite the fact that participant argues the self-identification is leading, the friend is considered as half Belarusian because of his origin. However, this remark can also be interpreted that despite a person not born in Belarus, he or she can

still be Belarusian. In such cases it is important to analyze someone's argumentation. This person argues again the importance of self-identification and later he is even very outspoken against perceiving Belarusianess regarding the primordialist approach:

Interviewer: So that's [self-identification] the leading aspect?

Participant: "*Yea, yep. Of course we can speak about some blood but nah...that comes to nazi haha*" (Aliaksander, 34)

I have not found any evidence in my research data showing that any of the participants has primordialist narratives about the Belarusian national identity. Many have argued the importance of Belarusian culture in their understanding of the national identity as I will explain in the next chapter, but none of them have argued that being Belarusian strongly depends on for example someone's ancestry or any other fixed characteristics. An argument for influenced consciousness of the national identity by the 2020 protests can not be supported by the use of the primordialist theories, since none of the notions regarding being Belarusian is related to these theories at all. The Belarusians see themselves as part of a distinctive nation as I will argue in the next chapter, but these distinctions are not argued in fixed characteristics.

4.2. The modernist theories

In the second chapter of the traditional approach I will analyze the data with the help of the modernist theories. Just as the primordialist approach, the modernist approach understands the national identity in terms of ethnocultural groups. Although this communality, modernist theorists emphasizes on the (radical) societal transformation as explanation for the emergence of a homogenous culture instead of the essentialist approach of the primordialist.

In my theoretical framework I have elaborated in three influential theories which aim to understand the emergence of the nation in different ways. Gellner argued the social-economic transformation of the industrial revolution which led to accessibility of the narrative of the nation due to urbanization and the wide availability of education (Gellner, 2008). Hobsbawm focussed in his theory on both the weakening of the old traditions due to rapid social transformation and further argues that the new established traditions should be seen as legitimization of institutions or power

of the authorities (Hobsbawm, 2012). The last discussed theory is the influential book ‘Imagined communities’ in which Anderson (2016) emphasizes on the technological inventions (to spread the narrative of the nation) which came along with the modernization process and the construction of the modern states as key factors in the understanding of the emergence of the nation.

All theorists put emphasis on different aspects of the modernist approach, but what they all have in common is the reasoning towards the question why the nation is bound by common cultural characteristics such as language, traditions, and habits. Did the 2020 protests have, and with it the societal transformation, an influence on the narratives, actions and expressions of the national identity in terms of the creation of a homogeneous cultural group?

4.2.1. Narratives about the Belarusian national identity

First I will elaborate on the provided narratives about the national identity. Every participant has been asked the same first question in the interview: ‘What is the first thing you think about when we talk about the Belarusian national identity?’

Most of the provided answers were related to Belarusian cultural features which makes the Belarusian national identity different from other nations. The majority of the participants gave multiple examples of their first notions of the Belarusian national identity and the most common answers were language (which I will discuss in a later part), culture, history, certain behavior, history and a sense of belonging.

“ [...] it’s [a] connection for majority of people with the same vision to like, with the same habits, language it’s important.” (Piotr, 30)

“To my mind the first thing that is coming is the union of culture, history and language I think.” (Anastasia, 28)

“For me the Belarusian identity in our .. modest[y]. Humble people, we are humble people, Belarusians are humble people from my perspectives.” (Raman, 29)

Two participants referred to a piece of literature which dealt with the question of national identity and one person mentioned his own name to point out that it is written differently in Belarusian

compared to the Russian variant. For three participants, the first association with the national identity was directly related to the 2020 protests with mentioning the experienced proudness after the ‘life-changing’ events in 2020, the white and red colors as symbols of the new Belarus and the independence flag.

"I think the flag [...]. To me it has been the symbol of our nationality when [it] in 2020 basically stood up and we kind of... realized that maybe before that we forgot." (Natasha, 19)

Twelve participants have throughout the conversation mentioned explicit examples of what makes the Belarusian nation different from other nations and the answers varied from subtle differences such as slightly different folklore costumes and a better financial situation compared to Ukraine and Russia to having an independent language, a separate culture and having different national traditions such as Kupala Night.

There seems to be a clear understanding of what makes the Belarusian nation distinctive from other nations and for most participants cultural features play an important role here. These cultural narratives about the Belarusian national identity have not suddenly appeared in the year 2020 since this is a gradual social process in which for example education in schools, lyceums and gymnasiums plays an important role (emphasized by ten participants). As I have mentioned before, it is not my aim to track back the participant’s history of actors and factors that played a role in the shaping consciousness of the national identity, since this is an impossible task. Hence, the focus is on the arguments of the participants regarding the national identity and whether the 2020 events could be perceived as an explicit trigger to think differently or more actively about the national identity in terms of Belarusian cultural characteristics.

The interview data shows that two participants explicitly mentioned the increased interest in Belarusian cultural features since the 2020 protests. One participant mentioned that her thoughts about Belarusian culture became certainly increased after 2020 and another participant emphasized on feeling the responsibility to save the Belarusian culture since she moved to Lithuania and brings this as well into practice:

"[...] and maybe I feel some responsibility to save this culture outside of Belarus because there I understand that it is getting worse and worse and for example, I have some friends from Belarus

who also relocate to Vilnius and we [...] decide that we can have every week a Belarusian speaking evening” [...] (Anastasia, 28)

It is difficult to analyze the holistic process regarding the narrative of the national identity, but based on the interview data I can argue that none of the participants experienced a radical change after 2020 in their narratives regarding the national identity in terms of Belarusian cultural characteristics. Expressions and actions regarding Belarusian cultural characteristics on the other hand did for many participants, intentionally or unintentionally, change after 2020 as I will argue in the subsequent sections.

4.2.2. The Belarusian language

All participants I have interviewed can to a greater or lesser extent speak the Belarusian language. Only one participant mentioned the difficulty of speaking the language, but understanding the written or spoken language was not considered as a problem. At the same time, all participants do speak the Russian language. The Russian language is for most participants the language that is used on a daily base and the most provided reasons were:

- The use of the Russian language is a habit because of growing up in an environment in which people spoke mostly Russian.
- Speaking Russian is more practical than Belarusian since most people in Belarus use Russian as the first language.
- Speaking Russian in Belarus was generally more (socially) accepted than the Belarusian language.

Although for most participants Russian is the most common language, six participants argued that they intentionally use it to a greater or lesser extent the Belarusian language in Lithuania. Two participants emphasized that it is a matter of principle and that the language is strongly connected to the national identity, another participant felt the responsibility to preserve the Belarusian culture and even organizes Belarussian language courses with friends and one participant mentioned the war in Ukraine as a trigger point to speak more Belarusian:

[...] *“I started more after the start of the war. I know more people who started speaking Belarusian, and also I was so sick with Russian, so now .. my social media is also either in English or in Belarusian even though I see Russians there and yah..I kind of did it myself at some point, I muted all the Russian language sources, I did it all my self .. it was... yeah.. I felt the need to come back to the Belarusian language finally and to start it speaking in my life.”* (Tamara, 22)

Five of the six participants who mentioned the intentional use of Belarusian to keep the language alive by practicing and speaking it in Lithuania emphasized on the educational environment of lyceums and universities. Going to the right lyceums with motivated teachers and being in the surrounding of students who actively express and study the Belarusian language and culture was considered by them as an important aspect to get familiar with the Belarusian language and to a greater or lesser extent intentionally use it to communicate with other Belarusians.

The elaborated situations of the participants above using the Belarusian language show the examples of deliberate choices in the use of the language, in some cases in relation to the reflection on the participant’s national identity. But increasing speaking the Belarusian language does not always have to be an intentional or ideological choice as it will be argued below.

I have asked the participants if they increasingly used the Belarusian language since they are residing in Lithuania and five Belarusians mentioned the increased use of Belarusian due to various reasons. Two participants mentioned the war in Ukraine as a (potential) trigger to increase the use of the Belarusian language. One participant made the decision to reject the Russian language since it reminded her of the Russian regime as I have cited her in the previous section. The other participant recently felt the need to speak more Belarusian which was, according to her, most likely related to not getting associated with being Russian.

For the three other participants the increasing use or increasing need of using the Belarusian language is directly or indirectly linked to the 2020 events. One participant argued the increasing use of the language for communicating a political statement:

[...] *“because in 2020 and later when I was in Belarus, I tended to use Belarusian in some public places like especially [...] because I could definitely sometimes see confusion in the eyes of the people who I was addressing. Sometimes some surprise, but sometimes there were very opposite*

feelings, like I could see their like... I don't know excitement about it. [...] How people react by using the language. So of course it became much more of the political statement maybe.” (Iryna, 27)

For the two other participants, the 2020 events can be seen as the indirect influence on the increase of the use of the Belarusian language. As I have argued in the introduction, the 2020 events did not only stand out because of the massive scale, but also due to the emergence of a huge amount of (local) communities and activities. In the interviews the communities and activities have been discussed and it turned out most of the Belarusians participate in (online) communities and activities here in Lithuania and that the structures of the strategies of the communities, such as the emergence of neighborhood's chats to share (practical) information with other Belarusians, have been copied to Vilnius. In the next section I will elaborate on these processes in more detail, but the Belarusian uprising in 2020 that brought Belarusians together did not stop at the Lithuanian border.

The modernist theorists argue the construction of the ethnocultural homogenous group in the light of rapid societal transformation. It is Anderson (2016) who emphasizes on the technological inventions (printed press, maps) that made it possible sharing narratives of the nations, making people aware that they are part of an imagined constructed community which is the nation in fact is. The modernist theories emerged in the light of analyzing rapid social-economic changes such as industrialization and therefore these societal developments have a different origin with different effects if we compare it to the uprising in Belarus in 2020. But to a certain extent, some aspects of the model, such as the fact that the Belarusian society underwent a social transformation with the emergence of a huge number of bottom-up activities and Telegram communities, can explain a transformation or construction of the Belarusian national identity. If we perceive Anderson's argument regarding technological inventions as new possibilities to share narratives of the nation, then the popularity of Telegram in 2020 and beyond can definitely be argued as an important instrument for spreading new narratives regarding the Belarusian national identity.

This brings me back to the argumentation of the Belarusians who mentioned using the Belarusian more since they are Lithuania. Below the quotations of two participants:

Interviewer: “But now you're here. Do you use it [Belarusian language] more?”

Participant: “*I start to use it more that's true.*”

Interviewer: “You feel more free to use it?”

Participant: “*Uhm..yeah and in some communities, like during dancing club or when I meet some people who speak Belarusian I switch to Belarusian too*” [...] (Anastasia, 28)

Interviewer: So you started to use it more?

Participant: “*Yeah and even I started using more, in the migration it helped us to keep our connection.*”

Interviewer: “Like abroad you mean?”

Participant: “*Abroad, many Belarusian people are abroad.*”

[...]

Participant: “*Sometimes, we have for example bicycle rides, and when we go for a ride, we only speak in Belarusian. Maybe I see someone who speaks in Belarusian, I also.. me and my friends started to use Belarusian in social networks.*” (Raman, 31)

What I am arguing with these provided examples is that some elements of the modernist approach can be used in explaining the influence of the 2020 on the national identity in terms of unique ethnocultural characteristics. The two examples above potentially show how the consequences of the societal transformation, in Belarus the emergence of a new social network in Belarus, indirectly can lead to the nation which is bound by unique ethnocultural characteristics. I deliberately say here potentially, since the increase of the Belarusian language does not mean that the Russian language has been abandoned. Despite that some participants used the Belarusian language more frequently, a potential influence of the 2020 events on the national identity by analyzing the data regarding the Belarusian language can not be argued with the modernist theories.

It argues maybe the (increased) communality, but a national identity as being distinctive can not be argued due to the aspect of bilingualism.

4.2.3. Belarusian communities and activities

In this section I will analyze the research data with the aspects of the modernist theories with a focus on the Belarusian communities and activities. As I have argued in the previous section, the

2020 events in Belarus have caused a social transformation on which I will now elaborate more in detail.

Twelve of the fourteen Belarusians participate or have participated in one or more of the Belarusian communities or activities in Lithuania. Nine Belarusians did participate in activities which are explicitly related to Belarus, for example the commemoration of the Night of Executed Poets, participating in traditional Belarusian dance classes, joining public Belarusian protests and visiting conferences where Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya attended.

There are plenty of options for Belarusians to get in contact with other Belarusians in Lithuania. Some of these activities are centrally organized, for example by the organization Belarusian House in Vilnius, other activities are more local and on a smaller scale such as Belarusians who gather in neighborhood chats.

“There are many and lots and lots of activities: to study languages, to study different dances of different countries, to swim, to play tennis, badminton, to watch movies and afterwards discuss them and some poem parties, some writer parties, lots of activities. For today there are at least four activities for Belarusians, exactly for Belarusians.” (Aliaksander, 34)

Also here, the argument can be made that the Belarusian uprising and the emergence of the communities and activities have an influence on the social relationships of Belarusians abroad. The fact that these Belarusians live in Lithuania gives them the opportunity to participate in Belarusian cultural events which most likely would be forbidden in Belarus, since expressing Belarusian culture is associated with the political opposition.

“So so strong [censorship]. They already forbidden some books, so ya it’s mostly like local culture of local artists and everything.” (Natasha, 19)

The social network ties established after the 2020 events do give Belarusians in Lithuania the opportunity to organize and to participate in Belarusian cultural events such as traditional Belarusian dancing classes. During my own participation in one of the dancing classes, two

Belarusians told me that back in Belarus they were not aware of the existence of these traditional dances.

I am not concluding that every Belarusian participating in Belarusian cultural events in Lithuania is encouraged by a sense of their national identity. As argued in the previous section about the Belarusian language that speaking Belarusian might not be intentionally stimulated by the ideology to secure the Belarusian culture, the same goes for participation in Belarusian (cultural) events. Joining cultural activities can be encouraged by several reasons such as building a social network abroad. But the main observation I would like to make here, analyzed with the modernist approach, is that the radical societal transformation of Belarus with the emergence of bottom-up communities and new social ties has created the environment for Belarusians living in Lithuania to easily organize or join these cultural activities and events. For two participants, preserving and promoting Belarusian culture was explicitly mentioned as the main reason for participating in and organizing Belarusian cultural events. Thus, for these two Belarusians the argument can be made that the 2020 events indirectly had an influence on the national identity by bringing narratives of the national identity as being characterized by Belarusian culture into practice.

4.2.4. Critique on the national identity as a homogenous group of cultural characteristics

Three participants explicitly criticized the idea of the national identity as a homogenous cultural group. One participant mentioned the connection with other people living in the same country is not based on cultural characteristics but rather based on civic ties and shared values regarding human rights. Another interviewee painted her ideal world in which borders do not exist and everyone would have “some identity”. Another participant shared the ideas of the ideal world with a lack of borders in which selecting an identity would be as easy as joining a Facebook group and later he added to the story:

“[...] but honestly I think that nationalism is outdated, the idea we should abandon.” (Raman, 31)

It is clear that for these Belarusians the ideal future of Belarus is not characterized as a homogeneous culture, but this does not mean that the 2020 events had no influence on for example the increase of the use of the Belarusian language. Both participants who described the utopian

feature with open borders use the Belarusian language more and mentioned the increasing popularity since the 2020 protests.

[...] *“we have for example bicycle rides, and when we go for a ride, we only speak in Belarusian. Maybe I see someone who speaks in Belarusian, I also.. me and my friends started to use Belarusian in social networks.”* (Raman, 31)

For the other participants, the 2020 events had ‘definitely’ an influence on the use of the Belarusian language. She used the language before 2020 occasionally, but after the 2020 events the Belarusian language became much more of a political statement for her to observe the responses she received. The responses of these participants show how the 2020 events directly and indirectly had an influence for them on the use of the Belarusian language. The bottom-up creation of (online) networks and communities that emerged in 2020 has an influence on the personal networks of Belarusians participating in these communities. These communities give new opportunities and possibilities to get exposed to the Belarusian language or specific Belarusian cultural activities. In this case the methodology of interviewing participants shows the added value regarding the validity since the examples show that an increase of the use of the Belarusian language does necessarily mean that someone’s national identity has been influenced.

“I do believe that there can be several language that unites people and that’s ok.” (Iryna, 27)

The examples of these participants show that someone’s cultural expressions and actions should always be seen in relation to the perspective of the person. And this immediately proves the importance of the qualitative methodology of interviewing in examining the national identity and that a general strength or increase of a national identity can not simply be stated on the base of simple statistics such as the number of people using the Belarusian language as their first language.

In this chapter I have analyzed the interview data with the help of the modernist theories in understanding if and how the 2020 protests had an influence on the national identity in terms of homogenous ethnocultural characteristics. I have examined the narratives, expressions and actions regarding the Belarusian culture in the light of the 2020 protests and I have argued that the

emergence of new bottom-up social networks and communities in Belarus as well as in Lithuania can create the environment in which Belarusians can organize and participate in cultural events. This might also lead to the increase of the use of the Belarusian language if people within certain communities or events insist on the use of the Belarusian language by for example ideological principles. The narratives about the national identity showed that the participants have a clear understanding about the cultural characteristics of the national identity and how these features are distinctive from other nations such as Ukraine and Russia. But the data does not show that the social uprising in 2020 and beyond had or has a significant influence on the national identity in moving towards the creation of a Belarusian cultural homogenous nation.

4.3. The new approach

In the third and final chapter of the research results I will analyze the data with two theories in the new approach of understanding national identity. The new approach theories make a difference by no longer examining nations as bonded by homogenous cultural ties. Whereas traditional theories had their aim to understand the origin of the culturally united nation, the new approach theories have a broader view in examining people's identification with the nation. Apart from shifting focus on cultural unity, the new approach theories are characterized by intersectional studies with more attention for the agency of ordinary people.

One theory combines the field of collective memory and identity and the other study focuses on trauma and national identity. I have chosen these specific theories since the events in 2020 and beyond have a huge impact on the society as I have argued before and these theories might give a better understanding of the influence of the 2020 events on the Belarusian national identity.

Assmann distinguishes in her research on memory and the creation of identity four different formats of memory. One of the four formats called 'social memory' explains how individuals within a generation personally have experienced certain impactful events which have shaped the generation's identity by having similar habits, attitudes, values and beliefs (Assmann, 2010).

The second theory I will use in my analysis is provided by Jeffrey Alexander who argues that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel subjected to horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander 2004, p. 1). Since according to

Alexander event(s) are not inherently traumatic, the author explains in seven steps the process of how an experienced traumatic event will be recognized by the larger group, for example the nation. (Alexander, 2004). In his theory, Alexander argues how traumatic events can establish new collective identity narratives. The spread of the narratives by institutions such as the media is an important step in this theory since Alexander describes that a new narrative of a collective identity could derive from the traumatic claim of a small minority or even a single person (Alexander, 2004). The last step of understanding trauma as socially mediated attribution is the revision of the collective identity by experiencing, imagining and representation of the trauma (Alexander 2004, p. 22)

These two intersectional theories do not emphasize on homogenous ethnic or cultural aspects of collective identity, such as the nation. Either experienced by individuals or a large part of a society, the personal experience or the power of narration of certain events make that people within a group get affected by the events which have an influence on their collective identity. Now I will analyze the research data with the discussed new approach theories and I will explain which elements of the theories help to explain if and how the 2020 protests had an influence on the national identity of Belarusians living in Lithuania.

Every interview started with the question: what is your first association with the Belarusian national identity? The answers of three participants were directly related to the 2020 protests:

“I think the flag haha. It is weird, but I think it is the flag. To me it has been the symbol of our nationality when in 2020 basically stood up and we kind of... realized that maybe before that we forgot.” (Natasha, 19)

“Ow god haha., ok I mean for me it’s definitely something personal I have and I think I did not really have it before 2020. So actually I think I cannot give a general definition for everyone.” (Yulia, 20)

“First thing for me is the colors, red and white now, because it is symbols of new Belarus” (Paval, 45)

For one interviewee, the white-red-white represents the Belarusian uprising and the realization that despite cultural similarities with Russia and the West, Belarus is an independent nation:

“[...] we are a separate nation, we were not Russian” (Natasha, 19)

For another participant, the 2020 protests affected the feeling of proudness for the Belarusian nation:

“[...] in 2020, when all the things happened, it's like my life changed like before and after and after it, overtime now like here, somewhere like with foreigners and I moved to Lithuania so I am constantly with foreigners and I am saying: “I am Belarusian, and I am so proud of it” So for me it's something personal which was born in me two years ago.”
(Yulia, 20)

By referring to the 2020 protests and the symbolizing white and red colors, these participants explicitly mentioned the influence on their notions of the Belarusian national identity. But the fact that only three participants mentioned the 2020 protests as a first association with the national identity does not mean that the 2020 protests did not have influence on the other Belarusians. Neither can these answers be clearly analyzed with the new approach theories and referring to the white and red colors does not in itself explain the communality or distinction of the Belarusian nation.

All fourteen participants have participated in at least one street protest in 2020 and for nine of them it was not the first time of being socially or politically active. Five interviewees have participated in protests before 2020 and four participants were active in NGOs or political organizations. I have asked the participants their decisions for joining the protests in 2020 and the most given answers were (or related to):

- Protesting against the regime because of the rigged elections and the violence used by the police responses against peaceful protesters.
- A belief that the protests in 2020 might be finally successful.

- Fighting for freedom and democracy.
- Going out on the streets to support and show solidarity with other protesting Belarusians.

[...] *“I didn’t lost my feeling till maybe the middle of October 2020, so before that I do believe that something can change, something can be changed.”* (Piotr, 30)

[...] *“it was a case of, case of supporting people who are previously suffered from regime, I mean suffered in this way. I know.. some of my relatives or friends, they were very let’s say suspicious about this protest, that people are paid by Western countries and so forth. So.. joining this protests, I wanted to show that I do it by myself, it’s my choice, I support people. Like support and solidarity.”* (Aliaksei, 36)

“It was very difficult to be home a just watching what happened, a lot of blood, [...] a lot of friends who were detained.”(Paval, 45)

The massive protests in 2020 have brought Belarusians together. The growing number of events and participants gave people the push or encouragement to take part in the social uprising which in 2020 finally should lead to the end of the 26 years reign of Lukashenko. Nine of the fourteen interviewees have been either socially or politically active before 2020 and for five participants the events were the first time they publicly spoke out against Lukashenko’s dictatorship. The anti-Lukashenko narratives did not all of a sudden emerge with the growth of the massive protests, they were already widespread. But the fact that so many Belarusians were involved in the protests against the regime has created a collective memory, a collective experienced trauma, which has a potential influence on the national identity as I will argue below.

With the introduction of the new approach theories, I have argued that the national identity has no longer merely to be considered as a nation which is bound by homogenous ethnocultural characteristics. Commonality and distinction of the nation can also be characterized by a collective memory. In the case of Belarus, the narrative of the collective trauma did not had to pass all the seven steps of Alexander’s model (2014) since the events were so widespread that many Belarusians have personally experienced it. The collective experience of the regime’s terror have

brought Belarusians together in bottom-up created networks in which they have even demonstrated their ability to perform government duties:

“Our government said: Covid doesn’t exist. Ok, we can make it without it.” (Paval, 45)

As I have argued in the traditional approach chapter, the bottom-up communities and activities did continue to exist in Lithuania and twelve of the fourteen participants have been mentioned to be members of at least one community or participated in at least one Belarusian event. There are various reasons to participate in these communities and activities, but to get a better understanding of Belarusian interactions I have asked the questions of whether and why it is important to be in contact with other Belarusians in Lithuania.

Three participants mentioned the importance of being in contact with Belarusians in Lithuania since there is common understanding for each other's pain and emotions:

“And when you read this [Belarusian news] you of course get the emotions and you need to express them, you need to talk about this to some one because if you just keep reading and it just all..everything that goes into your head after you read it is hell. [...] it’s you know a bit more comfortable when you speak with someone from your own nation.” (Natasha, 19)

Interviewer: “Is it important for you to have Belarusians around you in Lithuania?”

Participant: *“It appears so.”*

Interviewer: “How come?”

Participant: *“Uhm.. I think first of all it’s this emotional support, when something happens we don’t have to tell each other what happened, we just share directly our feelings and our emotions. If we like.. there has been plenty of situations and you meet someone and you ask the person how they are, and then they reply something like: Ah well it’s fine but all the things you know.. . And then I know a ya shit all the things, and you know what this means.”* (Iryna, 27)

Participant: *“Yeah yeah I have a lot of acquaintances and friends from Belarus there are now there and we keep together.”*

Interviewer: “Do you also talk about things in Belarus with people from Belarus?”

Participant: “[We are] fixing our pain.” (Paval, 45)

During the interviews it became clear how much impact the events in 2020 and beyond had on the personal life of Belarusians. The experiences of being beaten and detained, leaving family behind to escape from prosecution and general living in the conditions of a dictatorship caused a lot of pain for many Belarusians. One participant intriguingly described the pain of the Belarusian nation with the use of the white and red colors of the Belarusian independence flag:

“This protest is like way through pain. White like our life, pain and our new life. It’s a very interesting thing. It’s a very exiting flag, exiting colors, like we, our souls lived before and red piece is our life in the earth and a lot of meanings.. and for me it’s also if you talk about 2020 protests, it’s like restore the flag. Because after.. through the pain, through the pain.. red band. Red band on flag is our pain.” (Raman, 29)

The three previously presented quotes of Belarusians who emphasized on the importance of having contact with other Belarusians in Lithuania, show how the collective experience of traumatic events can have an impact on the collective identity. The collective experience of a traumatic event, or as Assmann calls it the social memory, can effect a generation’s identity by having similar habits, attitudes, values and beliefs (Assmann, 2010). In the Belarusian case, the events are not limited to a specific group of people in the society, but the events had an effect on the large majority of the Belarusian nation, which resulted in a bottom-up social transformation.

The interactions between Belarusians to process grief and the new social networks which since the 2020 events have been established show the process of how collective experienced trauma can have an influence on the national identity. It is Alexander who in the seventh and last step of his model the revisions of the collective identity, thus for example the nation, explains by experiencing, imagining and representation of the trauma (Alexander 2004, p. 22). Talking with other Belarusians about the events can be understood as processing grief, but it also shows the example of how the narratives of the traumatic events live on.

By elaborating on the process of social transformation and the need of Belarusians to process pain and grief with other Belarusians, the new approach theories show how the 2020 events

had and still have its influence on the national identity. The commonality of a large part of the nation is not characterized by a common language or tradition but by common experienced traumatic events, the commonality which is the first half of Triandafyllidou's definition of the national identity as a double-edge relationship (Triandafyllidou, 1998). Regarding the other half, distinction, one could argue that the experience Belarusians have with the Lukashenko regime do not much differ from other people suffering dictatorial regimes such as in Iraq or in Iran. But what makes the distinction is not explicitly related to the common anti-dictatorship narratives, but the people being personally involved in the street protests that took place in Minsk and many other cities, the dynamics of the social mobilization, the white and red colors and the unique slogans such as *жыве Беларусь!* (long live Belarus!). This holistic process of nation-wide protests, events and expressions that emerged in 2020 and beyond makes the collective experience unique and distinctive from other group's or nation's collective memory or trauma.

Conclusions

With two significantly different approaches in understanding the national identity, I have analyzed my research data to answer the question if and how the 2020 protests had an influence on the Belarusian national identity of Belarusians living in Lithuania.

In the first part of the analysis, I have examined the interview data with the traditional approach theories. In understanding the national identity from a traditional approach, a unique set of ethnocultural characteristics binds people in the nation and these characteristics mark at the same time the distinction with other nations. The traditional approach is divided in two chapters: the primordialist and modernist approach in understanding national identity. Whereas primordialist argue the nation is a fixed ethnic bond, modernist agree the origin of the nation is constructed by rapid societal transformations.

In the first chapter, the primordialist approach, I have argued that despite the importance of the Belarusian culture in the participant's understanding of national identity, no one agreed with a primordialist understanding of the Belarusian nation as anciently rooted in kinship ties.

In the modernist approach chapter, I have analyzed the narratives, actions and expressions regarding the Belarusian national identity and I have elaborated on the emergence of bottom-up communities and activities during and after the 2020 events. These communities and activities have created new social networks and this explains the context in which Belarusians who moved to Lithuania can organize and participate in cultural events such as Belarusian dance classes. For two participants, preserving the Belarusian culture was explicitly mentioned as a reason for participating in these events.

As I have argued, the new social network ties also explain for some of the participants the increase of the use of the Belarusian language since the 2020 protests. It explains the context in which Belarusians got more exposed to the Belarusian language since some of the community members insist on the use of the Belarusian language due to ideological principles.

Despite noticeable intentional and unintentional shifts in the narratives, actions and expressions regarding these Belarusian cultural characteristics, the research data shows no evidence, that the 2020 protests had a direct or indirect influence on the participant's national identity. That is because the traditional approach theories explain nations as ethnocultural units with unique, homogenous ethnocultural characteristics. The interviewed Belarusians has a clear understanding of the Belarusian nation in terms of ethnocultural characteristics, but based on the data it can not be

argued that the events in 2020 and beyond had an influence on the national identity in moving towards the creation of a cultural homogenous nation.

Focussing on narratives, actions and expressions of the national identity in combination with the interview methodology has an added value in understanding both the motivations and the context in which actions take place. Although the increase of the Belarusian language does not indicate that the participant's national identity is moving towards the creation of a homogenous ethnocultural group, the modernist theories give an understanding of how rapid social-political changes in the society can lead to a gradual transformation of the national identity. Despite the premise of the rapid societal change in the modernist theories, the transformation of the national identity itself is not necessarily a rapid process. Therefore, in future research it is important to examine whether this social transformation in 2020 and beyond created the context to influence narratives, actions or expressions of the national identity in homogenous ethnocultural terms.

The new approach theories discussed in my research have been focussed on collective memory and trauma in understanding national identity. The intersectional theories, which pay more attention for human agency and which do not primarily focus on the ethnocultural characteristics of the national identity, give a better understanding of the Belarusian national identity being influenced by the 2020 protests. I have argued that the collective experienced protests in Belarus in 2020 left a strong impact on many of the Belarusians I have interviewed. Some Belarusians have mentioned the importance of being in contact with other Belarusians in Lithuania to talk about the shared experience in 2020, to talk with someone who shares this collective memory of traumatic events. The 2020 street protests and the bottom-up communities and activities, have created for a large part of the Belarusian nation a collective memory. A collective memory with every individual having its own expressions, thoughts, perspectives and experiences related to these protests, which makes this memory distinct from other groups's or nation's collective memories.

By analyzing the data with the traditional approach theories, there is no evidence that the 2020 protests had a direct or indirect influence on the participant's narratives, actions and expressions of the national identity in terms of a homogenous ethnocultural group. With elaborating on the emergence of the bottom-up communities and the process of coping with the traumatic events with other Belarusians, the new approach theories give a clear understanding of how, directly and indirectly, the 2020 protests have influenced the Belarusian national identity for some of the interviewed Belarusians.

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Informed Consent Form for Participating in Research Interview

Research Master Thesis

Student: Gerrit van de Streek

Contact: Gerrit.de@tspmi.stud.vu.lt

Study: Eastern European and Russian Studies at the Vilnius University Institute of International Relations and Political Science.

Master's Thesis topic: The influence of the Belarusian protests in 2020 on the experiences and expressions of the national identity of Belarusians living in Lithuania.

Research

By conducting interviews with Belarusians who moved to Lithuania after the 2020 events will I, Gerrit van de Streek, research in my masters thesis the experiences and expressions of Belarusians regarding the Belarusian national identity. Topics which will be discussed in the interview will vary from the Belarusian protests and being resident in Lithuania to personal opinions, thoughts, ideas and expressions regarding the Belarusian national identity.

The interview data will be anonymously stored and the findings of the data analysis will be published in the master thesis. The research findings will be supported by interviewee's quotes which will be fully anonymized.

The interview/rights of the interviewee

Important: all points below will be asked/discussed again before starting the interview.

- Interviewee has the right to stop the interview at any time without any explanation or consequences.
- The collected data will be stored anonymously.
- In case quotes of the interview will be mentioned in the research, a pseudonym will be used instead of the interviewee's real name.
- To improve the quality of the research, the interview (sound) will be recorded.

Note: Question regarding the objection of an interview recording is asked at the bottom of this form.

- The duration of the interview will be approximately one hour.

I have read the interview's conditions and I do like to participate in the research.

Name:

Signature:

Recording: I do / do not agree to record the interview

Questionnaire - MA Thesis Belarusian national identity

In the thesis, the distinction in the theory/literature review is made between identity and community. Hence the questions in the questionnaire will be related to the (perceived) identity and the community/expression of the identity.

Identity

Introduction questions

Age:

Gender:

- Can you explain to me, what makes you aside from your passport, Belarusian? What are the first things that comes to mind if you have to identify as Belarusian?
- How import is the language? Belarusian traditions, and what do you think about religion, history?
- With whom do you talk about the Belarusian identity?
- How can people see or know you are Belarusian?
- How did you learn about the Belarusian national identity?
- Who could be Belarusian according to you? -> (Self-identity/history family/passport/living in the country: who should be included or excluded according to you?)
- What makes you as a Belarusian distinguishable from all other nationalities?

Presidential elections 2020

- What were you fighting for? What was the idea of the protest?
- Why did you decided to join? Did you protest before?
- Are you still protesting in Lithuania? Online /Offline
- Do you think different about the national identity before and after the 2020 events?

- Is there a different between the Belarusian national identity in the opposition and the state? (media/education)
- What did you think about the political opposition? And has your opinion changed after the events?
- Was the rising opposition for you a wake-up call to join the opposition/ideas of the national identity or were you already actively thinking about it before?

Residency Lithuania

- Why did you move to Lithuania? How long do you live her?
- For how long do you live in Lithuania and what are the mayor differences with your life in Belarus? (Freedom of expression/political views/daily life)
- You explained how it is to be Belarusian. Did your ideas/identification about being Belarusian changed since you moved to Lithuania? Are you more aware of your Belarusian identity?
- Are you still in touch with your friends/relatives on a regular base? And can you express everything you want?
- Do you feel free to express yourself in Lithuania?
- How do you express your Belarusian identity? -> (Online/offline, difference with being in Belarus)
- Are you in touch with other Belarusians here in Lithuania and did you participate in protest actions? -> (Participation in Belarus/difference, topics of talks)

Community

- Is there an active Belarusian community in Vilnius/Lithuania?
- Who organizes the activities for Belarusians?
- Do you participate in this community? (If yes, explanation about activities/expressions of identity)
- What is the purpose of the community/are there common goals the community aims to achieve?
- What events or community is missing her in Lithuania for you?
- How do you see the role of the community in relation to your identification as Belarusian? (Match between ideas/ideology/aims/identity expression with community members)

Interview 1 transcription

Date: 29 September 2022

Time: 16:00

Gender: Male

Age: 34

Interviewer (i)

Participant (p)

I: If we talk about the national identity, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? Like, what is very typical for you if you think about it?

P: Very typical is language, culture and history. So that is the three main points that is making everyone's identity

I: aham ya, and in the case of Belarus is it ...is there some.. from the three from which you say that counts more for me?

P: probably culture counts more for me because uhm.. I'm working with it every day and trying to make it more rich. It is rather rich but continuing working with it to write some texts, making some music and still..I'm living here for 2 years and uhm still continuing to be involved in that cultural process which I started in Belarus. So I am still working on exactly Belarusian culture.

I: So you mentioned music, but what kind of music?

P: I'm playing different kind of music, I'm starting from... Ok now I'm playing more folklore, but also... I'm a lead singer and also of texts in a punkrockband. So I'm working not only on some kind of high level culture [...] I'm working with some underground culture. [interruption waiter]

I: But if you talk about the Belarusian culture you primarily talk about making music.

P: Not only, I'm also a scientist. I have a scientific degree.

I: In what?

P: In arts. I'm Master of Arts. I also finished some kind of PhD, but in Belarus we have that Masters, after that some kind of PhD but not phd because PhD is next to the grade. So we have three steps before doctors. I finished it also but I didn't defenced by work. I didn't have time for that.

I: Where was it focussed on?

P: What?

I: Where was your research focussed on?

P: Uhm.. It was in Minsk and the research was about some a archaic rights in the north of Belarus. I almost finished it but still I have it. And here I just started stying on October first, studying on the Europeans humanitarian university a Masters again, but it would be concluded with exactly traditional culture and how to improve it nowadays. Probably I'm making It without that Masters. As ya.. and making that traditional dances, it really helps people to... still feel that they are Belarusians because we are dancing Belarusian dances. Also.. when it's possible I'm trying to play instruments. I'm playing back pipe and dances. I don't like harmonics, cause they're not so traditional for me, they just appeared in the end of the 19th century in the Belarusian culture so.., for me it's important to play more archaic music.

I: Aham

P: Harmonics are some kind of .. more city culture, not some village. But real culture was settled exactly in village .. of course in cities also, but it's a bit different, it's more cosmopolitik in cities and in villages less.. got that way of exactly keeping that ... that topic we are talking about.

I: That's also the first thought you have when you think about folklore, Belarusian folklore, you immediately would have the pictures of the more rural areas.

P: O yeah, some kind of it!

I: And you also mentioned the importance of history before we talked about the national history.

P: Yes of course

I: Which part of the history?

P: Uhm, probably Belarusian history starts from middle ages when big cities were settled and started to be some kind of counties and so on, and after that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, because haha.. we totally have a common history with Lithuanians about that. And all of nowadays Belarus was involved in that duchy, so probably for me national identity starts from some kind of that formation, it started before but it needed some time to become something more.

I: Something more distinguishable

P: And uhm. We still have something and of course people living in Belarus are not all Vatniks or Lukashists, there are many nice people ahem... they cannot leave or do not want to leave cause.. I also don't want to leave but I got a criminal case and I understood that it is much better to live somewhere here than to sit in prison for 5 years.. For me ya.. I'm making much more when I'm out of prison.

I: It was not worth for you to stay there of course.

P: And I probably would be arrested if I stay because I got that criminal case for three till eight years but usually people got five years.

I: Why did you get it, the criminal case?

P: I was caught at the barricades in Minsk during the protest after the stolen elections.

I: Aham

P: So, I was in prison and I didn't like it [smile]

I: How long were you there?

P: Ahm it was 4 days but those were the most brutal days. So first day was some kind of hell.. I.. If you want I can send you interview for Associated Press, what happened with me. But yap.. I don't like to [laugh] repeat it too much, soo.., It was, it was not so nice.

I: You got a criminal case, but then how did you managed to escape the country?

P: It's another nice story, cause when I was arrested, all my docs were taken away, but just.. when I released I just went to that pasport authorities [cabony], "O, I just lost my passport" And my face was in bruces haha. But they didn't asked what happened with me. Just I wrote a paper that I lost my passport and they asked: "Maybe someone stole it?" O no no no I just remember where I lost it, so I wrote the paper and payed the money and in five days I got another one. After that I asked Lithuanian embassy to give me humanitarian visa and after that, the same day I just sat in the bus and went away, because usually people now got in that black list so they got cannot leave. But it was just in that..

I: Chaos.

P: Yeah, September second so ya I'm officially here, didn't cross the border unofficially cause some of my friends went through the forest, though rivers but yep I just had time, it was that chaos, that black list, so I said that I'm going to Vilnius to record some music for computer games.

I: You had your story prepared.

P: ya, so.. Still.. I'm involved in the cultural process. On Sunday I'm participating in Belarusian congress which would have part in Kaunas so. I'm still making some scientific work, some cultural work, amm... and I don't want to stop cause since the age of 17 I started involved in exactly Belarusian context. Not some kind of Belarusian with Russian texts, but exactly Belarusian is Belarusian language and...

I: So a long time already before..

P: Yes of course! I just revealed that I'm a Belarusian and what a crap... we just need to hold up our culture, not some kind of Russian.

I: Yeah? When you say we need to hold up our own culture, did you felt it was not really represent back then?

P: It wasn't presented enough. Now it's much.. for me much better but in Belarus, because lot's of people who were involved in nowadays cultural processes they left. Cause they had problems with government and of course they like freedom so they won't shut up and of course they understand that also they don't want to sit in prison for just believes. And ya... lot's of musicians, writers, actors are leaving now to Poland, Lithuania, Tsjech Republic and yeah.

I: The diaspora is very wide spread over Europe right?

P: Yep and now yep. Really lot's of real nice Belarusians.

I: Would you say that people who try to keep up the Belarusian culture, the Belarusian national identity, are they as much in danger as those who were participating in for example in the protest or is it.. Better to say: is it dangerous for you to for example, if you live in Belarus and you do not protest but you want to keep up the Belarusian identity, or the Belarusian culture, is it dangerous itself?

P: If you don't say anything against the authorities probably everything will be okay, but if you start participating or make reports in social networks about something like: national identity, so you can have problems. Many of my friends who stayed in Belarus and are still staying they totally try not to say anything to each other and they just.. understand that...

I: It's a hard life to live then.

P: Yep, and nowadays war in Ukraine they also feeling bad for that because they don't know what will happen tomorrow. Just two days ago I had a conversation with one of my friends and she said that: " O that's really shitty, because now it would be mobilization for our army" Just.. being afraid about her boyfriend, who can go to army and he is not some kind of warrior. So ya.. he would be some flesh killed. All the situation right now in Belarus is pfff

I: Ya...

P: some kind of ... I don't know how .. I know but I cannot believe still. There are so many nice and clever people but, that neo-Sovieticus is wow. Totally yah.. every Belarusian stuff is exactly some dinorasrius period again.

I: And that is also wha you see in for example how the state want you to be? In for example the national identity, is it like... you said before, I don't want to be Russian, I want to be Belarusian. So, would you say that the identity the state tries to express and communicate with the people is much more into this soviet identity?

P: Aam, some people really like it and young people like it, but that's just because of half of way it's because their parents are like that so.. that soviet thinking people and they just raise their children in the same way. I have some relatives who say.."nothing happened" and I don't think they understand what is national identity, for them it's almost nazism, like some kind of radical [?]. When you start to speak Belarusian many people just start to like like that [dissatisfaction]

I: If you say you want to preserve the national identity or.

P: Or if you just..

I: Is that a bad thing for them?

P: If you just speak in Belarusian, not saying anything about national identity. So, I also had some problems about that but through time and when I started to be a lecturer in university.. [?] much better but usually when I start to speak Belarusian on the streets many people just start to look: O your from the opposition!

I: O serious? So it is very much associated with..

P: O yep Exactly!

I: Was it a kind of forbidden by social pressure?

P: Uhm.. It's not forbidden but yap, you really have social pressure about that because..” Ow your'e in the lessons of Belarussian, why do you speak Belarussian?” And I just usually said that what a crap.. I'm a Belarussian and I'm from Belarus and why asking me such a stupid question? But we really have that problem and now we have it much more because..

I: after the 2020 events? Was it such difference you felt?

P: I almost didn't feel it, but I see how people are reacting on social networks and also if you are speaking Belarussian in public places, some cops can just say: “show me your phone” And if you subscribed to some extremist Telegram channels, you're going to jail.

I: And before it was less the case?

P: It was less, but also some people just: owwww what a crap, why are you speaking that language? It's just for lessons and so... I worked a lot to make it more popular and I had lectures in Belarussian and also my punkrockband is not so much popular but rather popular and all the texts are also in Belarussian, so I made rather [?] To make it more popular and to show other people that you can express yourself in Belarussian. And that it is not only for some kind of old far literature that you have to obligatory have to read in school, that it's a life substance. So..

I: Ya, so that you can join.

P: Exactly. And this winter I will publish my book of poems so I really have hope about that

I: And if you say that for example this Belarussian identity, for example the language is very much associated with the opposition, but what is then according to you those people who are not opposition, and what is their identity then? Is it to be part of Russia? Or is it.. speaking Russian language?

I: Some people speaking Russian cause they just have that habit to speak Russian and they're a bit lazy, or sometimes they just have some psychoproblems to start speaking Belarussian cause for them they just feel uncomfortable but they identify them like Belarussians, but still speaking Belarussian. And.. because of the Soviet Union and before the Empire. Worked a lot to make Belarussian ... “Your're from village?” [shows mimic dissatisfaction]. So ya, and they are afraid to speak Belarussian cause of that they can have problems. And .. What the..How.. In Belarus you cannot speak Belarussian? What a.. so..

I: And if you for example would Talk about Belarussian traditions. What kind of traditions are particular for Belarussians compare to Russians, Ukrainians..?

P: Okay we have 6 ethnical regions in Belarus, and if they are bordering with Lithuania, Russia or Ukraine of course they something in common. But of course they also have some points that are totally different, um.. those dialiects are different and you can see that they are more common to each other then some other languages and even I've participated in that weekend in one festival and band from Belarussian Poland came and they spoke some kind of Polish language, but it was more like Belarussian. So... Always so why... haha why Belarus exist was really .. we are different from other other nations cause we really have that main root and .. somehow it really.. you can always say it's not Russian, It's not Ukrainian, it's not Polish, it's not Lithuanina. It's totally. Not totally but rather different and yeah that it it some kind of other nation. So yeah..

I: So language is an important part of it?

P: Language and also culture because it combines together. So all the texts and songs and so on and far tails is Belarussian. Also some culture in architecture, dresses, style of life, cuisine, just outstanding and yah...

I: And that makes it very much different according to .. despite the regions are having overlaps, but that's really distinguishable from other countries surrounding Belarus.

P: Yeah! But the closest country for me is exactly Lithuania and I decide to come here.

I: That's why you decided to come here.

P: Exactly. It has really nice and polite way to keep their own culture and I like it cause... they are a really good example of how to keep their identity.

I: For me it's... I'm from the Western part of Europe and for me .. me is always taught in school that national identity is bit of a.. dangerous thing because you know nowadays we have rightwing political parties

P: Yeah yeah!

I: And we don't have a history of such a suppression by Russia of course and now I come here in Lithuania and I see the proud of the national identity and really appreciated that because it is not only a bad thing.

P: Yes exactly. That's normal

I: You know where you coming from, what is your language, your roots.

P: It really works nicely, it's not just some nazistuff

I: Yes exactly. But it it hard sometimes to..

P: It's not so hard when you're educated...

I: for policiticians sometime..

P: For politicians..., Politicians are working on people who just don't have their normal point of view. It's just business.. so pffff [shows waving hand symbol]. To listen politicians.... Bleh.. haha

It rather helped me in Belarus cause, when I had some talks with KGB guys, just made them understand that I totally don't want to work with politics, cause I'm a man of culture and that's why... Culture is much more stronger than politics.

I: Yeah.

P: and you just.. with some kind of politics also, but they don't it. So ssstt [finger on mouth]

I: So it's hard to understand for them...

P: yeah oww it's culture ... [whatever, waving hand]. But culture is stronger than politics. that's because I'm started to work with children because when you starting to make them understand about exactly that identity, as younger they are it's much better

I: Yeah.

P: It's some kind of ideological stuff but also...as I know it won't be some kind of nazi stuff so that's ok.

I: But If I hear your story you are really a man with a mission.

P: Yep, I decided that well..., we totally have problems with our national identity. Because.. When I remember I was young, my mom said: "For what does the Belarusian language exist? Why? You don't need it. I don't want you to go to school to learn it. Beacuse no-one speaks that" but that's not true, when I was a student and I went to some expeditions in the countryside I just saw many people speaking Belarusian. So after that... wow nice. And in the cities it was really... nehhh "Why are you speaking it?" But., in the beginning of this century the situation changed a bit in a better way. But some people really continue saying : "Nah we don't need it, what the fack we have some kind of nice relations with Russia" so...

I: That's very pragmatic

P: Yeah, I don't like pragmatic people because they don't have soul. They are some kind of ... " Hmm it suites me, oke.. O I don't need it, I don't need it". Nehh.. I don't have such friends like that pragmatic people because they are empty, they are just. I don't know for what they are living even.

I: They can live everywhere

P: yea they can but I don't like that. Because in [?] it's just some kind of communism brain for me because everyone is the same. "Ow.. Everyone is different and that's oke".

I: Yah you should appreciate it.

P: "Ow that's normal..." ah.... For many people it's difficult to understand it's normal to be different. Cause we are all not some kind of [?]

I: And if we talk about this, what is according to you.. who could be Belarusian to you? Is it depending on Belarusian passport?

P: Of coruse passport is just some piece of shit and a piece of paper

I: aham.

P: So.. When a person understands that person is Belarusian, that's enough because

I: So the self-identification.

P: Yep exactly and only because when you just identity you Belarusian, sooner or later you just start to think about that and to be in the context and you work on yourself and that's how it works. And no-one will make you Belarusian except yourself. That's all.

I: It doesn't matter where your family is coming from or...

P: Even so ya. Because I have one friend who is half.. umm. Afro-American, half Belarusian and he also just identifies himself as Belarusian since he really is Belarusian.

I: So that's the leading aspect?

P: Yea, Yep. Of course we can speak about some blood but nah...that comes to nazi haha

I: Yah yah

P: Yah .. It is real but when you just understand that you're talking about some kind of genetics or some kind of .. that's ok but his parents are from Belarus. But If he'll decide to go to Belgium and learn French and stay there he will probably feel that he is not Belarusian.. maybe he will remember that he is still Belarusian and keep it in his mind.. so it always depends on the person

I: Aham. But for you it's very much important that someone identifies himself as Belarusian and it doesn't matter if you're for example half Russian family or if you're from...

P: Officially my paper of birth it's written that my mom is Russian and my father is Belarusian, but my mom .. uhm .. 1/4th Belarusian, 1/4th Russian, 1/4th Ukrainian and 1/4th a mix of other blood so .. and.. me probably.. I could be Russian also but ... I just like the place where I was born and I don't know how it works, it's some kind of metaphysics for me because I really just like the place where I was born, I like that culture, I like that history and I like that language and .. If I was born.. I just keep that culture cause for me it's very important, cause I don't want to be some kind of gray mass and really.. Belarusian culture is very rich and outstanding and.. I just want to keep it, cause many people make march just to kill it and...

I: how is that in universities nowadays? Is it forbidden?

P: No, we just have Belarusian lessons and that's all. And most Belarusian lecturers are not speaking Belarusian because they really don't like because I worked...

I: Also because of the association?

P: Also because they are pro-Russians and they're like: "Nah that Belarusian culture " and " It's from country side blehh"

I: It sounds like they think it's backward.

P: Yeah some kind of it. And I worked with that kind of people and I know them and ahh....and I annoyed them every time cause I was just writing Belarusian, speaking Belarusian, making everything [?] and I just saw like they're shaking about anger because "Ahhh...again that nationalist" but.. some reacted okay and "Ow wow interesting, you're doing well, nice". Ya and I just finished that university and after that I finished academy of science, masters classes and after that I went to work in the same university I finished so many of my colleges were my teachers and they were like "O no he came here" cause uhm.. One lecturer of history, she totally was... I don't know.. probably her father gave her that work, cause she is not professional at all and her PhD was about how many kilometers of railway did partisans bow up.

I: That sounds like very scientifically..

P: Just.. I made a joke on her. "Did you count one way or both haha". Ya.. After that she started to hate me more.

I: Ya, but you already something is wrong there.

P: yeah, ne... yep. Nice amount of lecturers. It's just from that happy soviet families so their parents just gave them that work in the university of culture because it's easy "ahh.. culture... nah""Okay you'll do it" and yeah so... many of people are just making serious view they're working hard but they just non-educated. And of course there is no soil to raise some mind in it for them.. and of course everything is okay for them "Russian ok, working ok, you friends are Russian ok, everything is ok" cause they just were grew up in that way. For them everything is ok because family will help us, but if you just will see the history, Russia has always made lots of harm for Belarus. Not for Belarus, as Belarus is settled in 1917 first time, during the first world war and after that. We had some independence and after that communist came just graped half of Belarus, half went to Poland so. After that, during the second world war, the Soviets gripped that second part back and.. also.. uhm.. 1937,38, more than one thousand people were killed. Pfff....

You know, real nice clever people who are just also worked on the Belarusian culture. Probably if I lived in that time, I was also shot. Cause ya.. so ya...Belarusian culture is really bloody haha. Not because of Belarusians

I: By external factors, if we go back to the 2020 events, can you explain what you were fighting for. During those protests, those events, could say there was a common goal or was there a common kind of social awakening?

P: It was really a social awaking and I was... I've participated in protests from 2005[?] and in 2015 I just saw that KGB had not normal candidates, except that mother fucker and ... I just didn't go anywhere cause I understood that it doesn't have any sense. But in 2020 I just saw how meetings are going and all that lines to subscribing for other candidates, scholars and lots of my friends just really saw that society woke up. "Okay... It might work". And that's .. I've participated in the main meetings, in the main protests but ya... Just for 2 days and after that oops jail haha.

I: Why do you think it was in 2020 particular? That there was just such a dynamic process..

P: Probably people were angry for how authorities started to act and just how they putted all the candidates in jail or didn't register them and of course people wanted some changes and.. finally they saw it was possible and that's how they woke up.. And I just "yeah finally" and lots of them don't speak Belarusian, but some processes finally started in their heads that we are not living in a nice country and yeah...everything is...

I: They started to realize that things could go better?

P: O. Yeah! But.. and that's interesting because there is some kind of interesting variant of Belarusians. They're seeking Russian but they totally identifies themselves like Belarusians and they do understand that they are not Russians but someone else and that worked... and wow I was just really happy because usually on protests.. there were not so many people and now just wow...

I: It exploded

P: yeah finally and I thought it will work but... [sigh]

I: Would you say that.. the opposition and the ideas of the opposition was united or would you say there were many individuals with many different ideas and that they just joined the opposition or was it like everybody with a common goal?

P: Everybody was just tired from that authorities which we had and .. cause everyone probably everyone, even that people who cheated saw how it works and everyone was just tired after that machine. They just.. many of my friends said I will vote for everyone except that because I just want to see some changes, that USSR 2.0 is just.. is trying me. And uhm.. There were many people in the opposition and .. the most powerful people were set in prison who really had nice programs and could do something but people were just tired. And even after that there were no normal candidates, they nevertheless wanted to have some changes cause they understood that.. enough of that. And that's really nice and yeah.. I was really surprised though that because ya.. I was pessimistic about that but wow..People very surprised me nicely.

I: Aham.

P: Yes of course it is a pity it didn't work in that way we wanted but at least people saw that everything is not lost. That's for me the main point, because.. and many people saw that there were many normal people around.., that was an important part.

I: Aham, ya a common understanding

P: Aham. We are in that as.. ahah .. but we can revolt.. [sigh] but yep..

I: Were there also more people who came to you who were more interested in the national identity of Belarus or didn't you really experienced such things?

P: honestly. I think that people just want to communicate and .. most of them are still not in to that cultural movement but .. I hope that.. Cause it's not working like [finger click] you need some time to get it and it started to work, I hope in ten years we will see the results.

I: Yeah

P: Cause yeah.. All that social processes are not.. so fast haha. And that's ok and you don't need to panic about it and be said or disappointed , that's ok, that's normal that works in that way and it always works in that way.

I: How did your ideas and expression of Belarusian national identity changed after you moved to Lithuania? Do you feel more free or are you even more aware of your national identity? And of course you mentioned before you saw some recognitions by Lithuanians by how they...

P: I think that my national identity changed at all because I formed it in Minsk already so .. I'm just continuing my stuff and Lithuanians who meet.. they see how I am acting and my Lithuanian friends they are not [?]. and they say "wow how can you do so many activities?" I don't know haha

I: What kind of activities all together? Like you're working on your book and playing in a band

P: Yep so, I have my main job. And that's funny because my main job is to teach children Russian haha

I: Haha serious?

P: haha so ya that's some kind of tragic comedy for me but ok. I'm making it with fun so.. yesterday we watched a cartoon about Carlson and in the end of the cartoon Carlson disappeared and after we watched the cartoon I asked some questions to children and of the guys just answered to my question were did Carlson disappeared: "In the ass!" Haha
Yep.. but yep, but sometimes I'm not stopping them about joking so I asked which ass? "That young guy" but I said look Carlson is so big and that guy is just eight years old no way! And he said "OK deal" he disappears somewhere else so ya just haha I'm trying to have some fun and to make fun also and then say we are just [?] That language Not because you need but just to train your brain so just think about that and don't care about what is happening cause I know that wars goes ... we cannot do anything about it.

I: Just making the best out of it.

P: So.. some kind of that. And also I am making that dances and also theatres for children from 5 till 12 and sometimes it's so annoying cause they're crying so loud my head start to [?] after some lessons because [imitating crying child] haha . Ooo... Pls common kids don't cry [imitates crying child]. But ok. And also I have sometimes some projects, exactly cultural projects. I'm continuing making Belarusian culture great again haha

I: Are there many like ... Would you say there is an active community of Belarusians in Lithuania? For you of course.. would say it is very reachable for all the Belarusians?

P: yep, and all my lessons are free except my teacher work.. but yep I'm some kind of volunteering about that so.. I'm making what I like and it is not on a bad level. Everyone can join us, that's not a problem. There are lot's of activities for Belarusians here, sometimes people even say: "What to choose today?"

I: How is it communicated? Online?

P: Yep

I: Are there Telegram groups or Facebook groups?

P: Yep Telegram, Facebook. Yep exactly haha, Instagram. There are many and lots and lots of activities to study languages, to study different dances of different countries, to swim, to play tennis, badminton, to watch movies and afterwards discuss them and some poem parties, some writer parties, lots of actives. For today there are at least 4 actives for Belarusian, exactly for Belarusians.

I: Is there something like a centralized organization?

P: There are different organizations and that is nice there are different organizations because you can choose different what you like and that's nice. If it would be centralized by one organization it would be some kind of communism again haha. And I don't like it so..

I: So they're very open for individuals' initiatives?

P: Yeah and I'm working totally independent. I don't work with... Okay I'm working with some organizations but I'm totally independent I can say no or yes every time I want. I'm boss by myself. That's how I like to work, I don't like that obligatory stuff, and I just controlled myself and it works and still it works so... ok..

I: But I also heard during the dancing classes from two people.. back in Belarus I wasn't aware of these folk dances for example. And now I go abroad, I'm going to Lithuania and now I got confronted with this Belarusian culture.

P: haha

I: so.., would you say that maybe.. maybe because many Belarusians live abroad they maybe became more aware of their national identity and they also started to initiate on that.

P: They started to... need it more here. Because they have some kind of.. mental problems because they ... it's rather difficult to remove from your place of living. I also have that...

I: So you're building up your network?

P: Yep, when I just totally fixed up my head... After all that happened... I started to build exactly build that network almost the same I had in Belarus so.. I'm just continuing what I started in Belarus so ... I't s totally in that Belarusian context.

I: Do you feel free to express yourself?

P: Yep exactly. Sometime I stopped myself in Belarus because I knew ok this would work very bad for authorities..ok no.. But here I totally feel free and .. probably it will be a problem to publish my book in Belarus because it is not for children, it's for adults. Here I exactly know it is possible and in Belarus I thought that I will have some problems about that because .. uh.. ya.. It might work against me.. And here it might work

I: Is there still, aside from all the actives form the diaspora, is there still acts of resistance or protests or abroad or is it more activities like dancing or.

P: I don't think it makes much sense to make protests here because some kinds of actions near embassy are ok but not in the city because as for me we are just annoying Lithuanians by that haha and...

I: Ah ok, but isn't there some kind of moral support? Or not really?

P: Uhm.. It looks like.. ok you can do protests and we cannot in Belarus. "Aha you're living so good, you're having a nice jobs, you can protest. Even now it doesn't make much to us" I don't know how people react. As for me it is much better to make some cultural stuff because people need it or even if they don't need it we make them making need it haha

I: yeah, yeah

P: Cause yeah, lots of Belarusians moved to here and I just don't want to forget them that they are from Belarus, cause yeah.. but nevertheless if they don't want to be Belarusians, ok good luck. Because I don't like torturing people about some activities and everything because if person decides to do that "ok, I won't make anything against that". Some people decided not to come to dances after they went there for half a year. OK. That's your business. I won't write you about.. ask .. " where did you.. hah"

I: I think we are reaching the end of the topic list... one more question is about the political opposition. Tshikanovskaya is here, is there a lot of interactions between organizations, protests here and he political opposition?

P: Probably there is some times connection but personally I.. As I have to decided in Belarus I don't like to be active with some politics because ... If I'll need I'll connect with them but as for me.. For me it's not obligatory but I know there are some .. fonds to give some money, for cultural projects, that's good. In summer I participated in some kind of project and got money from some political organization. So, that's nice, they're supporting that but .. I just.. prefer to be independent from anyone cause

I: But I can imagine there is some similarities between the messages they both share.

P: Sometimes yep, but .. about tshinavskaya, everything is ok, but there are some other organizations which are also supporting traditional culture and national identity but .. some of them are not nice for me because ... I just have another opinion that's because I usually .. don't go to that official comments about politics or something like that. And yeah, i have my own opinion and..

I: Gives some friction sometimes..

P: Oh yeah! Thath's.. many heads many minds, but sometimes no.... Some people are just acting very angry and I don't like that angriness. Some organizations are reacting to another ones who have the same sense of being. I'm talking about..

I: Some competition among each other?

P: Some kind of competition and sometimes say impolite stuff and that's shit.

I: Just like normal people actually..Everywhere where people create communities...

P: that's ok, it's nice there are many communities but .. don't say bad about each other because you are doing the same work, and that sometimes anoyes me.

I: The opposition should be in any way united and of course there can be different views ..

P: Yep but, they of course can have some discussions but that's how it works, that,'s normal. But don't say any shit to each other, officially at least. You just can go somewhere and say .. "I hate you" but don't make it officially haha.

I: You damage...

P: Yes it works so shitty.

I: What is right now the political oppositions' main goal according to you?

P: As for me Tshikanovskaya's office makes everything ok. I just see exactly they don't say any bad kind of shit, they just moving straight, working with foreign politicians and that how it might be, that is ok.

I: To keep attention of the situation of Belarus.

P: Yep, so that's their main job. My main job is to keep culture. So, yeah.. I think that office is working good. Because they're acting like professional politicians, not some kind of "Nahh I'm just so ... feeling bad cause I didn't .. nahh.. I'm living here for 10 years and you just came here 2 years ago"

I: Ah yeah

P: so.. You are working on the same stuff come on haha! Don't be like that small children. So, some kind of that.

I: are you always Belarusians with Belarusian here? Of course some of them don't speak Belarusian but.

P: 99 percent, some times I'm just joking haha. And also .. making a parody of Lithuanian way of speaking Russian.. [speaking Russian with Lithuanian accent]. Sometimes I'm just joking. But ... sometimes I just don't want people to recognize me, so ...making fun. But in the dances I'm speaking Belarusian and English. And sometimes.. with people .. with children I have t speak Russian because some of the children...

I: You're teaching them.

P: Yeah I'm teaching but also saying it in Belarusian, saying it in Russian and then repeat it Belarusian to make them understand

I: ahh ok.

P: so it works.

I: You also see the flow of migrants form Ukraine of course, there are already living a signifant amount of Russians here in Lithuania since the end of the Soviet Union. Does it give any friction between ethnicities or different groups of people?

P: I totally don't feel it because.. I don't have any friends from Russian here.

I: So you're very much focused on your Belarusian people..

P: Probably Belarusians and Lithuanians and that's all. Some of the Lithuanians are speaking English and now I'm learning it much more and much more. Sometimes I'm answering them in Lithuanian, I can understand what they are saying finally. When I came I had that barrier. And also .. terrible mood, had a headache, was under the pillows for a year, so yeah.. I just could't do that physically, and now I'm much better.

I: Slowly crawling out of the..

P: yeah, now I'm totally fixed. So.. That's because I just started to make so many activities and before I was just like... Enough of negative for me.

Interview 2 transcription

Date: 4 Oktober 2022

Time: 19:00

Gender: Male

Aage: 36

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: The most general question I start with: If you think about the Belarusian national identity, what is the first thing that comes up in your mind?

P: What is.. Is the question about the Belarusian identity?

I: Yeah the national identity, what do you think about it if I ask you what is the national identity of Belarus.

P: I wanted to ask you: do you mean some material things or?

I: It's up to you

P: Or not material things... ok.

I: It is a very broad question. You can bring up the things that comes...

P: Okay first of all that Belarusian identity is history, because uhm.. Belarusian have deep history, big history during a long.. a lot of centuries so as we know... lesser countries had the same name like you know.. I can't remind some examples for you. I.. Belarus is little bit a new name, but Belarus like the country, people from Belarus had more deep, more old history. It's about Belarusian identity, it's also about Belarusian costumes [sizing?] Becasue Belarusians have special clothes, national clothes

I: Aham

P: Um... with special signs on the dress, you know. Special belts, special culture, which is different from Russian, from Ukrainian. Because we have similar culture, like Russians, Ukrainians, Poland.

I: For example the dresses?

P: Yes, but if you research in this topic you will find [?] Belarusians have a little bit different culture in this sense, different signs on dresses, a little bit different songs, topic of the songs

I: So you would say it has some overlap with the countries which surround Belarus, for example Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia. But specifically in Belarus it is, it is different in what you would see in for example Russia?

P: Yes a little bit different yes

I: You also mention the history, and that is for many hundreds of years already...?

P: I mean, I mean that nowadays the territory of Belarus was included in the territory of Grand Duchy of Lithuania, so there are some complications on this topic because Lithuanians think that it was Grand Duchy of Lithuania so.

I: That's how they say it yeah

P: So Lithuania is.. I don't know how to say.. on this day have right to think that it was their old country.

I: Aha ok, so maybe because they say it was their Grand Duchy of Lithuania.. the Belarusian culture is a little bit copied from Lithuania or?

P: No, not in this sense. At least on my mind, at least Grand Duchy of Lithuania is a country of at least 2 nations. Lithuanians and Belarusians. Because in that country, the main rule, the constitution, the statute, it was in Belarus, in old Belarusian language. So that is it, and it was a combination of these two cultures, these two nations. Belarusians and Lithuanians.

I: Together in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

P: It is not only about Lithuania, it is also about Belarus. So I think that it is also our Belarusian history, and before we had some, some countries, not countries but duchies in Belarusian territory, nowadays Belarusian territory. It was the Palotsk duchy, I don't know how to say it right in English. You had a city, a town in the north of Belarus, it was the first country, let's say the first county on the territory of Belarus.

I: Aham

P: So to say about identity, I think first of all it is history. Old history, culture as well, language as well.

I: Language is I think a very important one

P: Yes yes, because some scientists, I heard one, professor in my university, Belarusian language more authentically, more.. closer to Sanskrit. I'm not scientist, I can't...

I: So it is an old language with less development..

P: Uhhh.. Also as well, but I mean this language didn't change a lot.

I: Compared to for example Russian language

P: Yes

I: Why would that be you think?

P: I don't know, I can't answer this question. Maybe, maybe because during many centuries, Russian occupier had impact on Belarusian culture and tried to restrict this cultural development.

I: Aham

P: Did you.. did you spoke all your life more Belarusian language or did you spoke more the Russian language?

I: In my family, spoke Russian language. Usually my mom... we spoke Russian. But when we go to school, the higher school, I switched to the Belarusian language and now I'm trying to speak in Belarusian with more or less close friends. You know if I go to the shop in for example Belarus, nobody... not can't understand me...

I: Not everyone speaks the language?

P: no no, everybody understands me because Belarusian language is not so different from Russian, so if I speak Belarusian it's ok. Almost everyone understands me. But in Belarus it's something like this: if people... they... they don't hear the language every day so it's... so strange for someone to hear the Belarusian language.

I: Is that the reason why you speaking the...

P: It's not a negative reaction.

I: It's more that people are surprised?

P: Yes yes, or something... you speak Belarusian, okay

I: Is that... because you say I use the Belarusian language with a close group of friends or relatives. Is it normal in Belarus that you only use the language in groups of friends or family or is it your personal thing?

P: Uhhh.. it's my personal approach. I know that some people have the principal to speak Belarusian everywhere with everyone, everywhere. But I have such approach that I speak.. If I understand that this person is from... higher... so this person is so intelligent, this person can know a lot about culture, about things like this. I think I can speak to this person in Belarusian. If I see someone... usually women who sells only in the shop.. maybe he or she is not so high in education of... life level. So i don't think to, I don't use to speak to this people in Belarusian.

I: So you're making just a kind of distinction. If you think someone is from a more educated level you will use the Belarusian language because you think those people will also speak in Belarusian language?

P: I don't expect to.. the person will speak to me in Belarusian, I just only expect that it will be normal for this person to hear.. It will not surprise to this person to hear this Belarusian language.

I: Is it also.. more used in what you mentioned the higher class?

P: I think no. Unfortunately less of people use the Belarusian language.

I: Why is that?

P: uhm.. so..

I: Is it forbidden? Or is it a social norm?

P: It's like a habit. Because lots of people in their live speak Russian so it's a habit. If you know Russian and Belarusian language, it's more comfortable, it's more common to use Russian language. So when I speak Belarusian, it's some kind of principle.

I: aham ok..

P: This principle, during the time transformed to my habit. So now it's principle a little bit, but in more level it's already my habit

I: was it already a principle things when you said you changed your language when you went to high school. Was it already a principle or was it because you got the Belarusian language in School? What was the reason you changed it when you went to the higher school?

P: You know, in Belarus we have a... less Belarusian schools. So almost all schools in Russian. Belarusian schools are in 5 or maximum 10% of all schools, when you have all subjects in Belarusian language. So I... I studied in school, not university, but school. Also study ya?

I: Ya, you went to school..

P: I studied in Belarusian school. One of this less counting Belarusian schools, but even in this Belarusian schools it was not so popular to speak between people in Belarusian. Usually all students speak between in Russian..

I: Aha because they're probably use to..

P: But in the same time, almost all people understand Belarusian and can, can receive information in Belarusian. And then after the school I went to the Lyceum, because from first till seven class I was in usual Belarusian school and then, it's an important part of this history, and then I went to the Lyceum, a very Belarusian Lyceum in sense of culture and language

I: aham

P: Because we had real intelligent educated teachers, very educated students. And then in the lyceum we had much more Belarusian language. Subjects between people.. so I don't know if you heard about such lyceum, it's so famous lyceum. Maybe if you know, our nowadays president is Svetlana Tshikanovskaya, she has an advisor, Franc Vicorka, do you hear about?

I: yes

P: He also studied in that lyceum. So it was a real Belarusian Lyceum. So from that, the place, I took a deep Belarusian identity.

I: So that was also a question from me.. So there was a lot of attention in this lyceum about this particular Belarusian culture. What were the classes about? Was it for example about the dresses, the history, traditions or.

P: No it was a usual school. So we had the school program, usual common like have all schools. But sometimes we have. Okay, maybe more interesting teachers, people that know really a lot about his subjects. We had one teacher, he was from old Belarusian parlement, Lewan Bazorfski, and he teaches us literature, Polish language and something Belarusian. I don't know exactly what. So one person can study different subjects. We had a teacher for Belarusian language, that women issues books for ... with studies for Belarusian language. With this books a lot of students from other schools used to learn the Belarusian langue, used to pass how to say, the main exam of the Belarusian language. Belarusian state langue exam, something like this.

I: It's very interesting

P: It's some example from which teachers we had.

I: Ok, so then you would say it is very.. it's not only about the lyceum but also about the teachers you have.

P: Yes yes

I: If you have a more popular lyceum with more educated members, more educated stuff you dive more into Belarusian culture. But would you say that in all schools, even nowadays learn about the Belarusian language, culture, traditions or would you say that it changed?

P: Could you repeat the question, I didn't get it.

I: You for example had a lot of good teachers, you learned a lot about the Belarusian history, about the language, about the literature etc. Would you say that in every school, every school from north to south in Belarusian ... did all Children learned about the language, the culture, the traditions.

P: I think that maybe some schools in Belarus, some particularly schools have some teachers we had, cause you know we had such a good pool with teachers in one place. Maybe other schools also have such teachers, but I think less than we had. Potentially I think there can be any school in a town in Belarus which has such teachers, but I only know this.

I: Aha okay you only have this experience, so if we go back to Belarusian identity. We talk now about the language, history and culture. Would you also say there are some specific Belarusian traditions?

P: Traditions... If we talk about folklore, ethnography, we had something like community/organization in Belarus, especially in Minsk and I think there are similar communities and organizations in all country. That support culture development, I mean Belarusian folklore. So, as I rememeber there are some events for folklore events that we have in Belarus. And what about traditions...if we have some.. ok. It's I think it's a little bit difficult to say if we have any traditions we have that other countries don't have because... but... I try to remember. I can't say exactly, but I tink I'm sure that we have some events, some how to say.. uhm.. days, special days.

I: Which are only in Belarus and not in Russia

P: Yes yes.

I: But probably there is also some overlap between such national days or is it?

P: I'm sorry I don't understand the word overlap.

I: Ow it's that it's like have similarities, it's like they have for example the same national days in Belarus as in Russia.

P: Uhm national days.. I think that days we have difference in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine etc. But some... because you know we are slavic nations, so it's obviously that we have similar traditions. Sometinh like, I don't know how to say in English, Ivana Kopala. It is midsummer. It's like midsummer.

I: I think... Is it in July?

P: Yes. End of June, sometimes the start of July

I: It's more in rural areas right? More in the villages or also in the bigger cities?

P: In the cities as well, but sometimes people from the big cities goes to the river, to the lake somewhere in the city or near the city. Such tradition have Poland, Ukrainians and Lithuanians as well, In Latvia.. I'm still trying to remember if we have something special. I think I should have more to remember haha

I: Ya... If something is comming up later then... then bring the point sure. But it's hard to remember, cause if you would ask me I would also think...

P: We have something like.. On a special day it is like the 8th of September. It is related to the 1514 year, when the army of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had a victory, I don't know the position under, on the Russian army.

I: Aham

P: So for some people it is a special day, the 8th of September, when near prosja, it is near... it is a town and in Belarus it was a great great victory in this war

I: On the Russian army?

P: Yes

I: But that is at the same time... there are many people who are probably more... because of the history feel more related to Russia so is it celebrated by everyone or...?

P: Not everyone. It is very close event, because you know now Russia and Belarus are brothers

I: Ya exactly

P: On the government level, it is obviously they can't say about that

I: Happy 8th September, of course ya ya ...

I: And if we.. speak about being Belarusian. What makes you Belarusian? Do you have to live in Belarus to be Belarusian? Do you need a passport? Do you need to have parents... what is your interpretation of being Belarusian?

P: Being Belarusian.. First of all I think it is language. You know it is quite difficult question because quite a lot of Belarusian do not speak Belarusian

I: Yea.

P: But I can't say that they are not Belarusian

I: They are not Belarusian ? [mishearing]

P: I can't say.. but for me first of all to be Belarusian is first of all the Belarusian language. Maybe the second thing is to identify yourself with the Belarusian territorium, with the Belarusian culture. First of all, if I can say language is a part of culture. So ok. Even if you don't speak Belarusian but if you support, identify yourself as well with Belarusian culture like the songs, like national events something like that.

I: So do you think the self-identification is leading in this way?

P: What is leading?

I: It is the most important thing.

P: On my mind yes

I: Do you think that everyone can be Belaurisan? If I move to Belarus and I would integrate in the society, do you think that for example if I feel Belarusian you would say I am Belarusian?

P: I think so, because I have one example. A very good example. I know one girl, she is from Poland. She is usual Polish, but he come to Belauris, he learns the Belarusian langue, he o.... She sorry, she learns the Belarusian language, she is living in Belarus, she lives in Belarus. And she learned Belarusian dances. Now if you talk to her, you can't imagine she is not from Belarus. So she is already part of the Belarusian culture.

I: yeah... even though she is not born in Belarus, but just by integrating, speaking the language..

P: yes

I: So it doesn't matter where you parents come from.. for you it's if you integrated and identify yourself as Belarusian..

P: I can say in that way ... if you have parents, your parents or your grandparents from Belarus. It is easier for you to integrate in Belaurisan culture. If you don't have parents form Belarus maybe it will be more difficult, maybe it will takes you a lot of time but, it's real I think. I'm very hoping that I'm answering your question.

I: Yeah of course, and feel free to bring points you think I miss or you want to bring extra information... it is just an open conversation .. feel free to share what you want.

I: I would like to ask you some question about the 2020 events

P: Aham

I: Did you participated in the events?

P: Yes, because you know. In the elections before It, before this year [2020] I know it, I saw that there is a very difficult political situation and to take part in ... elections yeah? In elections, maybe it couldn't change a lot, but in this year I hope you saw the situation political before the elections. And there was a lot of important changes, important events related tot the political life. So, in this year, 2020, it really looks like something can change

I: Aham

P: So I decided to take part in the elections. So there was some instructions in ..

I: In the elections or in the protests?

P: First of all in the elections.

I: Because you did not vote before?

P: Because I didn't take part in the elections in 2015. Because I saw ...

I: It won't change

P: there are no sense to take part in that elections. But in 2020, I saw that it can make sense. So, first of all about the elections and after about the protests. We had some interesting instructions about how to... what to do in the elections. I mean that, when you have paper and you should sign your vote, you should make a photo

I: Aha ya and share online

P: Yes and you should send to the special source

I: Becasue you said you had instructions, but was it ... was it like an organization or was it just..

P: It was rather political... how to say.. community.. a group

I: Online?

P: Yes first of all online. A group of people around Svetlana Tshikanovskaya. A group of people that supports of her. There was some initiatives. When people are doing some for any goal... initiating ya?

I: Aham

P: there was some initiating and they had this.. this people had the same idea, the same idea that we should make in such way, we should do in such way. So we should go to that elections, we should take the paper, sign it, take a photo and send it

I: aham. So they though about what could be the most useful way of .. to make this elections a real change

P: yes yes, and it really looks like a plan how to count real votes. So, even if we can't vote for Svetlana Tshikanovskaya, at least we can see that official paper from government, is different at least from that people that send this paper. So if you see that really there are more votes for Svetlana Tshikanovskaya then it is in official data, we can say that ok, we can't say but we can show that it looks different. So it was a real plan to show that, maybe to show other people who are not interested in politics.

I: Did many people say that before?

P: yes yes yes

I: Many people say they're not interested in politics, did you had to convince them?

P: yes yes exactly. Because, you know, I think in every country there is a lot of people who don't interest in politics. They only want to go the shop, buy products, eat, drink, sleep..

I: "Politics is not for me"

P: Yes, but if you... it is not politics. It's just your life. You don't interest in politics, you should just take part in this life. If you say nothing of what is happening, we.. less of people can't do important things. So, include a lot of people to be able to do something.

I: Ya

P: So it was rather a plan how to show to other people that this elections are ... it's liar, that they are lying

I: that they are stolen.

P: Aham. Yes exactly, and then after that the same day of elections, I went first if all to the school. My school near my home, because we usually have... pls help what is the name of place exactly you have to vote?

I: A voting station.

P: yeah, exactly. So we have voting stations and usually they are in schools. So, I went to my school in the evening because there were a lot of people.

I: The last day? Because there were, I think Lukashenko said, three days for voting right?

P: yes yes yes,

I: I think point of the opposition said: we all gonna vote on the last day, the 9th of Augustus.

P: yes yes exactly. You should go on the last day and vote only on that day. And after that you should go to the school or another place of the voting station and wait for official result of this elections. And there were a lot of people and then... I don't rememberer. Aha ok...

I: You were in the capital?

P: Yes I was in the capital, if it is important, it is the region in Minsk [region].

I: I don't know the region.

P: ok it doesn't matter. And I try to remember, maybe the people .. ok.. official people didn't show the results on that day, they showed it the next day.

I: They were scared for the people right?

P: Exactly. So the people were near the school, went there to wait for the results. Then they go home and .. Aha and I remember the situation in our school near my home when there was a lot of people waiting near the school and the people who counted the votes, they're scared to the go out through the main entrance, they went out from the backyard. And ... what was the situation .. there was a lot of people and then comes that Belarusian word Avtazak [police van]. It's big car of police and ... were they can get a lot of people.

I: Aha, so they started to arrest people?

P: First of all they went to the yard of homes, near that school. But it was difficult for them to catch because people ran away but they had the main goal to take that official people who counted the votes. It was the main goal of them. And then after that we went to the center of the city, and there were a lot of people to join it, to make something, to do something.

I: Can you explain me, what was the common idea, what were you fighting for?

P: Uhh the common idea...

I: was there a common idea?

P: Uhm.. I think first of all.. In the past.. we should see very much people on the street in the center to show that we, like in opposition, are big force, a big force. And then maybe we can see what we can do later. So first thing on my mind was to collect a lot of people in the streets.

I: And if we talk about this protests. Were you already active in some kind of position before the 2020 events or was it the first time you were more actively...

P: not the first time. I am taking part in such opposition events from 2003.

I: That's a long time. A very long time

P: Yes, almost 20 years. Because you know, when I went to the Lyceum it was in [?] 2000 and then my mind started to change. I was more.. how to say... more and more I was start to think I was Belarusian.

I: And this was stimulated in the lyceum?

P: yes, It was not stimulated by saying you are Belarusian, you might fight... no...

I: There was no active agenda..

P: It was something like... they say it.. the teachers, that you are part of Belarus. Belarusian culture. You should take care about your culture, your country, something like this. I received it in this way. So I decided that I should do something. So from that time I entered the streets and join the protests and trying to do something. At least enter the streets.

I: And of course we had the big protests in 2006 I think, in 2010. Those were already relatively big protests if I remember in 2010.

P: Yes

I: And then if we make the jump to 2020 events. What was changed in society? What makes it so big?

P: mmmm... I think 2 main things. First of all people saw the real plan. How they can change it.

I: They got the believe that it will be successful

P: yes, they saw real people who can, who can help with it. You know, it was Svetlana Tshikanovskaya who collected many thousands of people before the elections. Such situation.. there was no such situation before

I: Would you say it was better organized?

P: Yes better organized, that was one thing. Second thing that people was tired to wait. So, they decided: "ok, this is a good moment to do something".

I: How did you... you said like people were tired to wait, but how did you feel the Belarusian state in your daily life? Why did you feel something had to be changed, like in your normal life... can you give an example?

P: umm um... an example of people can't wait anymore for changes. Uhm...

I: What were you seeing, what were you feeling, experiencing. You felt something had to be changed, what...

P: Difficult question for me, because I knew about, we should change something for already for 20 years and it is strange for me why people didn't see it before. So now in 2020 I saw that people say ok something needs to change and I thought .. People.. why didn't you thought about this how many years ago..

I: But you did already way before.

P: Why they decided to do anything exactly in 2020 I don't know. Maybe they saw that.. well organized protests.

I: Maybe a bigger change, maybe before it was too much risk, scared to join and now they are with so many people.

P: Maybe you know that Ukraine, it's one more reason for this. Ukraine started her transformation process when they change... still changing their presidents so people see that something can be changed.

I: Successful revolutions yes

P: yes yes. They understood that.. people in Ukraine, still that lives not so good, but it is a big process, but this process is gone.

I: aha It is a inspiration by Ukraine.

P: Yes I think that people in Belarus saw that people in Ukraine, at least started this long big process for a better life. Maybe, that was the reason as well.

I: It is a complicated thing to answer because many small things all together makes the change, it is not always easy to find a clear explanation for it.

P: I think there was no big event, big thing that happened.

I: that gives a different perspective on that ya..

P: I think it was a lot of small things that was combined to one..

I: Did it changed something in your national identity? The feeling of being Belarusian?

P: Yes I was proud of being Belarusian because I saw a lot of people around me, want the same thing that I want, that they have the same goal as I have.

I: And did you start to express more yourself? For example use more uhmmm... maybe even use more the Belarusian language since the events of 2020?

P: Maybe a little bit more. Because you know I think I use the Belarusian language a lot before.

I: Already.

P: Yes yes

I: And the people around you, they started to feel more Belarusian maybe?

P: I think in hart, in soul haha they are more feeling Belarusian. Especially since the 2020.

I: I think it's also because the political oppositions.. It was also very much related to this Belaurisan national identity

P: yes, ok one more reason I think.. some people like Viktor Babarika, you know, Paleptikala, they suggested real plans. They talked about that: we have some similar situation in economics for example, in this country in the past. In this situation, in that county in the past. And to me, that experience in the past country and we can do it as well. We can take this experience and implement it in Belarus. So I think it was one more reason that some people like Babarika and Tsipkala..

I: Had a clear plan yea...

I: Would you say that your idea about being part of the protests, was it the same as for example for example the political oposition, or were there many different people with different ideas which had to be changed.

P: Is it a question what I think about myself?

I: ya, what you think about for example participated in the 2020 events and there is of of course a political organization around Tshikanovskaya which has clear plans of what to do. Did you agree with that or did you have many different ideas bout..

P: I think that I was agree with that plans form Tshikanovskaya and other people surrounding her, I think, maybe I don't have absolutely different ideas. So my ideas was very very similar, I think that .. ok in another word, I think that they could, the party, feel straight .. what people want, want Belarusian people need. They collected this ideas and described it like a plan.

I: And you felt it really

P: Yes

I: Or was something missing for you?

P: I don't think something is really missing

I: aham.

I: Was it also about the national identity in this plans?

P: It was not abou identity, it was about a better life. Because a lot of Belarusian want to have a better life, want to have much more money, want to have..

I: Far elections..

P Far elections first of all, then it can help they.. the people to make their life better, to have freedom of You can you everything you..

I: Freedom of speech ya..

Interviews continued in another location since the initial starting location was closing

I: When did you decided to go to Lithuania? Was it shortly after the..

P: It was after the Ukrainian war started

I: After the war stated aha

P: Because it was so strange situation for me, I had about such cases when someone from Belarus, somebody from Belarusians, the government people, the police, found the persons from videos, from photos and went to home of the person and catch it.

I: Ya

P: I was on almost every protests in Minsk after the elections in 2020 and every time.. I expected that somebody from police can come to me, but nobody came to me so far. So I was feeling a little bit free being in Belarus, but when Ukrainian war started a lot of people thought they can be mobilized to the army and me as wel. I decided I should go out from Belarus, I made a request in my company for relocation and I did my request in the march...

I: Difficult?

P: It was not difficult, and then at the start of April I relocated here. So I just wanted to say I didn't have such motivation to go soon as possible, because nobody from police so far went to me.

I: And why Lithuania? Because you had the change for work or was it also because of more closer to Belarus?

P: I thought before this, before the relocation the best country for me is Poland because I studied in Poland, it was also an interesting history of my life. I went to Poland to study after Lyceum so from school to the higher school I went to Poland. The director of our Lyceum decided to make the opportunity for our students to study abroad Belarus. And then I thought in such way, the lyceum was closed, completely closed, removed in 2003. And one year, and some year we started, not official and then I thought in such way: ok the government can close the lyceum, can remove one school, ok but if I go to the university like states university, governments, they can't close such university.

I: Yes of course

P: But then I understood that it is a good opportunity to not study in Belarus, because if somebody took part in the protests and was caught by the police, that person could be thrown out from the university. And then I understood if I study in Poland, they can't throw me out of the Polish university

I: At least your safe ya

P: And then I understood that it was really good idea to study not in Belarus. So therefore now in this year I thought Poland is good country for me

I: You speak the language

P: Yes, I lived in Poland, I speak the language, I lived in Poland for 5 years.

I: Ya that's a long time

P: Yes, but why not Poland. Ok, Poland was the first country I wanted to relocate, Lithuania was the second country where to go. But my resource manager, for that moment I decided to relocate, Lithuania is a better solution. Because in Poland in the moment there was a lot of Ukrainians, a lot of other employees from our country who decided to relocate and Lithuania there are less. People there are less requested for relocation and my resource manager said it would be easier to relocate. So I decided to let it be. First of all I want to be more close to Belarus.

I: Physically

P: Because as I said before, I have the opportunity to go to Belarus now so. Living in Vilnius, I live very close to Minsk.

I: That's true, how far is it? 2 hours?

P: 180km, so it is a very interesting thing. From Minsk to Vilnius it is less kilometers than to any big city in Belarus. From Minsk to Grodno, from Minsk to Brest. It's more kilometers than from Vilnius to Minsk

I: And I think the connection is very good

P: Yes, connection as well. The road is good. I can't... [?] It was a very comfortable train, I mean not comfortable, but a good opportunity to travel by train but it was before COVID. And currently there are no such trains from Vilnius to Minsk

I: Only the avtobus

P: Yes. So it is the answer on the question why Lithuania

I: Yea. Is it if we talk about you living in Lithuania, if you speak with Belarusians here in Lithuania, which language do you use?

P: Belarusian

I: Is it also a principle thing? Or is it also as you said before..

P: I think 50/50. 50% it is principle, and it is habit.

I: Many people from Belarus live in Lithuania right now, do they speak the Belarusian language? Because you said not so many people ..

P: Not so many people nowadays.. in Lithuania as well..

I: So they do not learn it..

P: Yes there are no such process which appears in Ukraine after the war started. I mean that after the war started in Ukraine, a lot of Ukrainians say that they don't want to speak Russian because it is the language of the aggressor. Unfortunately for Belarusians there are no such process. Because my dream is really to see almost all Belarusians can speak in Belarusian language.

I: Ya, that's also why I asked you the question. Because I was thinking maybe when people are moving from to Lithuania that they feel more the need, the feeling of being Belarusian because you are abroad.

P: I see that people, Belarusians who relocated here, they don't see the language as the first identity of Belarusian. I see that they see that to be Belarusian, it is not first of all about language. I think they see that to be Belarusian first of all about now about.. know a lot of things about Belarus, know what is happening in Belarus, know...try to do something for Belarus, for changing good changes in Belarus. I think..

I: Not particular the national identity but more what we together as a country can change?

P: Yes yes. I know that some people have some ideas that people who relocated to another country, they how to say, maybe will make good career, earn lot of money here, when they will free they're free. Then they are coming back to Belarus if it will be possible when the president changed, and they could, would be able to bring a lot of good things to Belarus. Some such ideas I had. But I don't think it is a real good idea, because a lot of people who participated in protests and relocated to another country, they decided that in Belarus we can't change everything, we can't change it at the time, it will take a lot of time to change it so I think a lot of people who relocated decided that they will not be able to Belarus during a long time. So, they understand they, who relocate here, will already live here, not in Belarus.

I: You think that they will stay here

P: yes.

I: And what about you?

P: pfff i don't know. I can see in that way.. I want, I dream to go back to Belarus but I undertnd that really it will take a lot of time to do that. So I should be, realistic, something like this

I: You want to be optimistic and at the same realistic

P: Exactly.

I: Especially in these times, a lot of things are happening on the political level, not only in Belarus but also the surrounding countries so it is hard to make a prediction..

P: Exactly exactly

I: If you're open to go back and bring your ideas to Belarus, how to improve..

P: I very hope that the Ukrainians that they can take the victory in this war and I hope that if this happens, Belarusians also will have the opportunity to take something in our country.

I: yeah

P: And i hope to be it as soon as possible because it takes a lot of time, it can be that I decide to stay here and will be here for a long time. So if it happens soon as possible I have more changes to go back.

I: The longer it takes, the more you get used to live here, use the language, have a community here, to get more settles in this country and I think that's also very natural.

P: As I said before there are some people who already decided not to live in Belarus. "I will live here, ok I am staying till the end of my life"

I: Is there an active Belarusian community in Lithuania?

P: I think there is, because you came to the Belarusian dances.

I: Yeah that's one example

P: I think there is a lot of other communities, other interests. So I think there is an active Belarusian community.

I: How is this.. because I also hear there are different organizations with ideas what to do in different events, for example sport events. Do you know about these organizations?

P: No no,

I: How did you know there is a dancing class?

P: I heared before a lot about the Lithuanian folk festival which name is skamba skamba kalte
And when I went to this festival, they had dance night.

I: And there you saw the Belarusian dance?

P: Yes I saw [name] whom I knew before.

I: Online?

P: Not online, but it was not friendship but something like... I know who he is, he knows who I am. We are just saying hello

I: In Belarus already you mean?

P: Yes yes but we didn't have close relationship. But here we met on this festival, dancing night and [name] says that he will show us Belarusian dances, join us! I joined that evening, that night and then he says me that we have a classes of Belarusian dances, you can join us.

I: Do you do more Belarusian actives?

P: I think no, because I have some deals for myself, because I work in a IT-company and I try to learn more things in IT sphere. I participated in different courses provided by our company, so some things I spent on these courses to do some tasks.

I: So you don't always have the time?

P: yes yes

I: And friends in Lithuania, a lot of Belarusians or also Lithuanians?

P: Before I started working in IT, my job, my hobby, it was historical jewelry. So I was participating in many festivals in Poland, Lithuania and I know a lot .. some Lithuanians.

I: You made the jewelry yourself?

P: yes yes. So I met some Lithuanians on these festivals and now I can sometimes meet these friends, these people, some are in Vilnius. So that's my Lithuanian friends. But when I came to here, probably I didn't get more Lithuanian friends.

I: So only the people you already knew.

P: Yes yes exactly.

I: Is it important for you to be in contact with Belarusians when you are in Lithuania?

P: I think so ya

I: why is that?

P: I think so first of all because now I think a lot of people, maybe not everyone, but a lot of people wants to have contact with people to communicate something with somebody.

I: In your own language?

P: I mean that ok... In your own language it is more easier to communicate with somebody. I don't mind to communicate with Lithuanians more and more, but sometimes it is difficult who a little... you have little bit different language specifics. I don't know how to describe it.

I: It is not only the language, but of course you also from the same country, the same ideas so..

P: Maybe. Why I didn't meet more Lithuanians I don't know, maybe I don't have topics.. I don't have related topics to communicate. But yes, if you say about Belarusians... it is easier to find something what could be a good topic for communication.

I: Do you feel proud as a Belarusian in Lithuania?

P: Yes, I feel

I: And did anything change when you moved to Lithuania? About your Belarusian identity, do you feel more proud or do you talk about it more?

P: I don't think that something changed, I feel more that I can ... in another environment, I'm feeling more Belarusian. When you are Belarusian and you are in Belarus

I: It feels normal haha

P: It is normal, and when you are in Lithuania you think about it more. "Ok, I'm Belarusian, I'm not Lithuanian, I'm not from here, I come from another country, I have my culture, my identity" Something like this. So I don't think I'm feeling more that I have more identity but I just feel it more

I: It is sometimes hard to explain

P: yes yes

I: Do you feel more free here? To say what you want?

P: Exactly. It is absolutely different because I know many cases when you just can write some specific comment in Facebook, Twitter etc. You will be treated like a criminal.

I: Ya you'll have the chance to go to jail

P: But here I feel more free

I: And if you have contacts with your friends in Belarus, do you feel free to discuss everything?

P: You know sometimes, I am scared a little bit to write something because I know that it's... someone from Belarus who could see it... so sometimes I go to Belarus to say something. In this sense... sometimes I'm not scared but thinking every time. What I'm writing in Facebook, what to say. Ok here I can say, I know that I can say everything. It's.. there is no danger for me here, but if I write something in Facebook it is more dangerous. So if I say something here in Lithuania I feel free, if I'm writing I'm thinking...

I: Do you want to have more activities, you already mentioned have limited time, but would you like to have more time for Belarusian activities here in Lithuania? Or having more contact with Belarusians?

P: I think that it is enough that Belarusian dances. Sometimes I meet with people on events, like concert of Belarusian events. One concert was 1,2 weeks ago. So I met a lot of Belarusians, a lot of friends and it is enough for me to sometimes not meet people on such events. Do I want to have more time? Maybe no... it's ok for me what I have now. Because some hobbies interest which I spent my time only for this.. in other words I'm doing myself. Now it was my job before, making jewelry, now if I want to make something. I'm just doing it myself, alone. I sit in my workshop and I'm doing something, it is not about contacts.

I: Yeah you are already spending a lot of time on that.

P: I'm such person I want to do a lot of..to meet a lot of people, to be on a lot of events. But I don't have the time for it.

Interview 3 transcription

Date: 11 Oktober 2022

Time: 19:30

Gender: Female

Age: 19

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: I think there are some pretty open questions, and I want to make sure that if you have any information you'd like to share, or you think I missed something or you like to bring up something related to the topic.. just feel free to bring up what you want. I think that's important to know. So the first question I got is very broad: if I ask you about the Belarusian national identity, what is the first thing that comes up in your mind?

P: What Is the first thing that comes to my mind when I hear Belarusian identity?

I: Yea, the national identity of Belarus.

P: I think the flag haha. It is weird, but I think it is the flag. To me it has been the symbol of our nationality when in 2020 basically stood up and we kind of... realized that maybe before that we forgot.

I: Yea

P: That we were a separate nation, we were not Russian. To me that was the time when people started to realize things haha yes.. That we are a separate nation so yeah to me it is probably the flag.

I: Yeah..

P: And it is a broad question indeed, but that is for me the first thing that ..

I: ya ya that's good, you just mention the thing that comes up first in your mind, that's very good. So it's for you the flag, the white-red-white flag is symbol for this movement.

P: Ya for the identity

I: Are there other things that are important for you when it comes to the national identity?

P: Thing that are important. Let me think. Just like in broad do you mean? Any thoughts that come to mind.

I: Yeah.

P: Well it's probably the thing that.. there are basically two ways as I think. There are two ways in which people think about our nation. The first way is that we are close to Russians, the second way is that we are closer to the western people, like to the Polish, to Lithuanians. But to me it is important to understand that even though there were times, when we were in one country with the Western people, then with the Russians and you know it was all mixed things like that, but it is important to understand that despite all that, despite all those events, historically we are not them, we maybe similar in cultural things, maybe in some languages and so on...

I: Aha

P: But it is the fact that we are still are a separate nation, I don't know. I keep repeating this because this is the main point! I absolutely hate to hear when people hear me speak Russian and then it's like 'are you from Russia?'

I: Ah... Is that what you hear a lot?

P: It's uhm.. ya.. It happened in Lithuania to us, even before the war, it happened. Not everyday of course haha but it happened. And it's the language, it's the thing that is important to understand that Belarusian is a dying language, unfortunately it is a dying language.

I: Do you speak it?

P: Uhm.. I don't speak it on a daily basis. I can understand it, like I can understand what is written, when it's spoken, but it would be a bit problematic for me to answer for example in Belarusian. For example one of my group mates, she is Belarusian, she started speaking Belarusian to other Belarusians.

I: Ok, as a matter of principle or?

P: so.. Yeah.. typically our conversation would be that she speaks in Belarusian and I answer in Russian. So we both understand each other perfectly, but it's not a problem. So even though we don't speak Belarusian on a daily basis, this is still part of our national identity. Unfortunately, around 20

years ago, when some how is it called, referendum, well you know how they go in Belarus and Russia, right? It was decided that Russia is another national language and that was approximately the time when people started speaking it, but you know.. some people are just accusing it of not speaking it. There just.. well you see there Ukrainians for example, they are speaking there own language, first of all this is some kind of the basis things what people think when they have their own national identity. "But you don't speak this Belarusian language, you don't have this national identity right? Well, we are kind of forbidden to speak it, it is a kind of.. people are afraid to speak it on the streets...

I: Why is that you think?

P: Uhm... I don't know how deep you are in the topic. So I'm just explaining how it is...

I: Yeah sure

P: When there were protests.. Yeah haha I know you've worked with such people, but still so... When there were protests, you know when people just started to .. you know stand up for their opinion, for their right to speak, uhm.. That was also the time when people wanted to start speak Belarusian. That was when our national identity was a bit find out by thousands of people.

I: So you think it is the language of the opposition?

P: Yes! And now it is considered the language of the opposition exactly. When a people speaks Belarusian on the street, got forbid, you do that on social media... You would most likely be traced down. It is almost a 100%... There were cases when people starting posting on social media in Belarusian language and they were just tracked down by the KGB, I'm not joking.

I: ya ya. I've seen the examples.

P: Yeah they were tracked by the KGB, that's why I'm saying. As long as you started speaking on social media or texting on social media in Belarusian, you are considered as the enemy of the government. So if you are unlucky enough haha.. You will be caught. So that's why I'm saying... It is really stupid to accuse Belarusians of losing their national identity because of this. We would love to, honestly, we would love to.. I know it. Is weird... we learned the language, we studied for like 11 years school, but in real life, people are just afraid to speak it. I know it is weird but this is how thing are done. So again, another point to understand is that.. pleas don't accuse us of this. We are not the ones to blame.

I: No no I completely understand this, and I've heard such stories before. And it's very worrying I think, that a language is associated with the opposition. It is just your language.

P: haha true...

I: And you mentioned your classmate starts to speak Belarusian when she came to Lithuania right? Did it changed anything for you? Are you maybe for example more willing to speak Belarusian language since you're here and feel maybe more free to use it?

P: Ahmm.. ok. Well first of all, my group mate started speaking Belarusian but it was not after she came to Lithuania, it was maybe months after the war started so there was another event, let's say, that triggered this. That's why.. I know some other Belarusians that started doing this because they don't want to be associated with the Belarusian language.

I: Aha ok

P: Yes this is a real thing absolutely, that some people think that just because they are speaking, atomatically get associated with the Russian government. For other people actually it might also be the fear that they get discriminated. So for instance, I know I'm just jumping from one topic to another, but

I: No no it's good, that's why I record it so I can transcribe it later, don't worry

P: Ok ok, sure.. Another thing about the fear of discrimination. So, as it is for me know, I have a lot of Ukrianians to whom I'm talking to. And as you probably know, these are the people that can both speak Russian and Ukrainian, it's no problem, however not all of them.

I: True

P: And sometimes when I start speaking to a new person.. When I start speaking, texting to a new person I immediately ask if it's ok. Because there were cases when people just started to you know.. will not thronging hands of course haha, but they were a kind of hostile to those who spoke Russian, but you know, it's my native language. "Do you want me to forget it or what?" Seriously... and as for my group mate... So she started speaking Belarusian to other Belarusians, maybe in April I believe.. already a month or 2 after the war has passed and it's actually a bit weird for me because, well first of all... let's just understand.. with all of the willingness.. we cannot really speak pure Belarusian. It is really problematic, we didn't had the practice ok haha. We don't speak it in real life, so for most people, when they decide to kind of switch the language, they decide to speaking in a mix kind of of.. ,mix of Belarusian and Russian, it might sound a bit weird.

I: Aha ok

P: And also, there is one important point to mention, there are some people who for example after the war switched to Belarusian, because they didn't want to be associated with the Russian government and it was their choice, they know it is their choice and they perfectly understand that for other people, it is absolutely their choice to stay... you know not witch to Belarusian, talking Russian to others who understand it.

I: Ya.

P: But then there were those.. Again coming back to for example my group mate, then there were those who start accusing other people, which is again ... I don't even know how to describe it, maybe it is stupid, maybe it is weird, but still... they have made their choice but they don't want to respect the choice of other people. And again, this is the thing.. This is a real thing that I have faced, for example that one group mate, she started accusing other Belarusiana who still spoke Russian, so her main argument was that..If you know Belarusian, and you speak Russian to other Belarusians, you support Russia, you support the war!

I: O that's a bit a strange conclusion in my opinion.

P: Yeah ha ha, it is a strange opinion. Everybody thinks that, everybody who knows this story.. she even.. I don't know. I think she even accused Ukrainians who spoke Russian, I don't know, but that's that's... weird but such people exist, honestly they exist, ya she.. like.. she even blocked some Russian speaking people so....Uhm yea haha. This can be a thing, this is real. But in most cases, also about the language, yes, sometimes we just fear discrimination but honestly, I didn't want to make me speak Belarusian more.

I: OK..

P: First of all, I can't speak it well..

I: Would you like to learn it?

P: Sorry?

I: Are you willing to take classes or more willing to learn it?

P: Uhm.. haha well..

I: Not actively right now

P: Not actively, yes, I just consume the content you know ok. I can consume the content in the media, in the social media, in Telegram and so on. There are some Belarusian, texting channels and things like that. I wouldn't really take out the learning actively because I know, to me it is probably of no use honestly. Like 99% of Belarusians are Russian speaking. Why would I .. haha do that? And in Lithuania a lot of people are speaking Russian so.. This is ya.. I can understand when someone speaks my native league, to me it is not a problem. Sometimes I actually .. one thing is that, I start in the last year, and especially in the last half year, for some reason I.. catching myself on the desire to speak Belarusian a bit more in the sense that.. I can sometimes just forget the words in Russian haha.. and I remember them in Belarusian, but that is little weird. I think that all of those words I remember from the school text books. I don't know, maybe it just works some kind of psychologically, I don't know... the fear of discrimination or..something else. Or maybe again, I don't really want to associate that much with Russian or everything that is Russian. I think this is the main reason, I would like to kind of .. to make sure that the people understand that .. haha I am not from Russia, I am not associated with that. So psychologically, I kind of speaking, I am starting to understand that this is some kind of mine..

I: I didn't know this perspective, you are the first one who mentioned it.

P: Aham, well..

I: But ya I completely get it. And I was asking you before about your thoughts about the national identity right. And you mentioned the association with the political opposition, but you personally before the 2020 event, were you already thinking about the national identity or like... Belarusian traditions or.. About Belarusian culture? Or is it something that became more active since the 2020 events?

P: Well it certainly became more active after the 2020 events. I can't say that I was thinking about it before, but before .. like in 2020, I finished high school and I was literally 17 years old

I: ya ya

P: And when all this happened I was just thrown into the political life of my country. So, yeah in most cases, whether you like it or not, but you... I don't know whether you willing to do this, whether you not willing to do this, I still kind of..you thrown into this circle of events, you read all of those posts, you see the pictures and so on and maybe, if it haven't been in August 2020 and everything that followed, umm,... maybe I would just be, I don't know how to describe, maybe a bit interested in the culture, like I love my country, just that I hate the government but that's obvious. Uhm.. It was .., the thing that kind of escalating my interest in all of this, but again we need to understand that, it's umm not the best thing to do now if you're in Belarus, like now that I'm in Lithuania it's different, but being interested... I know how it sounds haha, but even being interested in the culture is something that might get you to trouble. So one of the actual examples I have it might be interesting, is that we used to have an online shop, they also had some kind of retail shops, but still... they were associated with the Belarusian culture. They had everything like the clothing, the souvenirs and so on, but a lot of them were, you know, in white red and white

I: Yea

P: And yes.. they operated for I don't know how many years, but before the 2020 they were actually popular, people were buying from them.

I: already the white-red-white flags and stuff?

P: Yes yes it was some kind of a oppositional thing but it wasn't; the focus of that shop, the main focus was just the culture, so I don't quite remember what they were selling, but yes the souvenirs, the nothing, the things like that, the pokes, but some of them were in... in that collection of colors haha. I remember when I was like 10th or 11th grade, it was before the 2020 events certainly, I was looking through their online catalog, and I was actually thinking well that looks great and I was actually willing to buy from them. Then I forget about this for some time, and then I don't remember exactly, but it was around that time, that collection of events. And they were just closed down, and I'm not sure, maybe that owner is in jail, I think they are, so... it's just so [?] And honestly this is like the perfect example of what you can get in to if you're just interested in the culture. And then how I am supposed to be interested in the culture, if there are literally maybe no online shops left, you know they sell the national things, so they were not selling some kind of postcards of when .. there would be portrait of Lukashenko, it would written something like hang him, it wasn't like this, it wasn't anything like that, it was just a national shop.

I: It is just the criminalization of the ..

P: Yes they got in trouble, they got closed down and.. now . After all that I was like ahh.. ok so, no more cultural interest then. That story is a perfect example

I: Sad it is...

I: I'm making a bit of a jump right now, because I exactly wanted to ask you about the... we were just talking about the Belarusian national identity, but if I'll ask, who can be according to you Belarusian?

P: Like what kind of person would be called Belarusian?

I: Yeah, who can be Belarusian? What do you have to be? Or what do you have to do to be Belarusian according to you personally? Is it for example having a passport, or is it a matter of self-identification? Or do you have to speak the language? How do you see this?

P: Honestly, I think to me the main criteria is first of all to be born here because is this the thing that actually makes to understand the culture. If you were an expat, even if you came here, maybe on a very young age this is still different. So there is a thing that you just feel belonging to that country

I: ya ya

P: So the first thing is probably to be born there and the second thing is just to love the country. Because honestly I don't think that knowing a language can make you a Belarusian. I don't even know if I can say I know the language, because I don't speak it. It would be really problematic for me you know to all sudden start answering some in Belarusian. That's really a problem unfortunately. And also because it is a dying language a lot of people just learn that in school, but some of them remember only a few hundred words, but still they're Belarusians. And also just to live there is absolutely not a criteria seriously, specially after 2020 when people just relocated to other countries, thousands of people yes and then after the war... if you don't feel safe in your country and you flee away from there, wait who said who doesn't make you a Belarusian then. And also I'd like to mention here, I talked to a friend few weeks ago, so he is staying in Belaurus right now, well now that I'm here we suddenly start talking, not only about politics but about moving, relocation, things like that and at some point he sad I don't consider you Belarusian and I was like "OK...now could you please explain?"and he just said that.. well it's probably not the most ethic way to do but I just want to tell you that there people who think like this.

I: Yes

P: And he was like, "Well you don't live here, you live in the West, you kind of listen to the Westen news, you get the Western agenda, you get the Western point of view and you haven't been here in a long time." And his main point was like, well you're siting there in Lithuania and you're saying things about our government. AndI was like " yeah.. and?" Because I was like.. Because I don't want to go to jail ok? I can better be here and talking about the government instead of staying there and talking about the government. And he was like "well, if you are saying such things, you should be willing to take responsibility for that" And I was like no thank you, I would politely decline haha. I don't want to that, and to me it was really, it wasn't actually weird, it was actually painful to hear that when the person, who you've known for several years just all of sudden says: "Well you are saying bad things about the government and you are sitting abroad, and you haven't lived here for a long time and you're more into Western agenda, more into Western lifestyle. I don't consider you Belurussian. Like real Belarusians stay here and do good for your country."

I: Aham.. taking responsibility, but that can cause some signifiant dangerous sitaitions so..

P: Yah absolutely, that would actually put you in such a dangerous situations I don't even want to imagine. But that's what he said to me.

I: Maybe he was afraid that your Belarusianess will be influenced by being in a Western country. And you will lose you Belarusian identity according to this person?

P: Probably, probably, but again that's why he said, I don't agree with this at all.. There are thousands, dozens of thousands of people from Belarus living abroad and that fact, just does't make them less representative of their country, so that's really stupid.

I: I would say it's maybe even the opposite around right.

P: Yes absolutely

I: Maybe you can be more Belarusian abroad than Belarusian itself

P: yeah yeah, because here for example you're more kind of allowed to express your love for your country, but in our situation love for the country basically equals hate for the government.

I: Yeah, yes yes

P: So, yes things go like this, things go like this and people who flee from Belarus they are usually a lot more free to express their opinion, to say that they just love the country. A person can post in social media like I love Belarus, they can put the flag, the white-red-white flag, they won't get punished for that. So..that's a basic example of course but still...So for me it's just being born here and just loving the country. Even if you're not kind of doing anything exactly, to make it better, just somewhere at heart loving for what it is, feeling sorry for what is being done to it, for me I think it is ya...

I: yea yeah... And you're feeling of being Belarusian? Did it changed after moving to Lithuania?

P: Are you saying like.. Am I feeling less or more Belarusian haha?

I: Yeah just in general... do you maybe feel more Belarusian since you live here?

P: mhhh...

I: You mentioned you're also more free to express yourself.

P: Aha aha. Well uhm.. I just say I met a lot more people who also more free to express their opinion about what's going on, so after we talk about it, after we just speak it out, after we just you know we are just sitting in one company and we just start talking about this from an objective point of view like.. some persons starts saying like do you even see what's going on, like seriously this is hell and so on. And we just start speaking about all those events and so on, this certainly brings a bit more awareness so I would say that this feeling of belonging to my nation it has transient/tracent. Maybe not a lot, but after you talk about this, after you hear other people's opinion and so on, after you're not afraid, I think, I think yes. I feel a lot

more free, a lot more free and not ashamed, not afraid to say that like yes I love Belarus and I hate the government and I love my language so yes probably it has strengthen it a little bit.

I: Yeah yea. Is that a common topic with other Belarusians to talk for example about politics or the social situation in Belarus?

P: Yes yes absolutely, because you know.. even these days, we're living among the historical events

I: Yes yes

P: So, yes right after 2020, after the war started, even now, like every day I talk to people from Belarus, not even from Belarus, like the Belarusians and Ukrainians, we talk about politics all the time. Seriously, I can't even recall if in the last year there was a day when I didn't read the news as you know... news is really about politics most of the time.

I: It's inevitable

P: Yes yes I can't even recall if there was a day when I didn't discuss like even a little about politics to a person so that is ... this is, is really kind of a burning topic, it's been like that for a long time. And you know, [?] is usually the same haha so um.. I guess that's really common of course. Like however, I would love to stay away from this a bit, but it's like... you just got stuck in this vicious cycle. You can't get enough, it's like a drug seriously haha. I just can't imagine myself staying away from the news, from what's going in my country. I'm not talking about Ukraine cause that's a bit different, I don't have an emotional connection to it. I just see what's going on and I'm like oh my god. That's different, when I see what's going on in my own country that's different.

I: Yrah

P: So, I can't stay away from it. And when you read this you of course get the emotions and you need to express them, you need to talk about this to some one because if you just keep reading and it just all..everything that goes into your head after you read it is hell. So you need to Express this, you need to talk this out to someone and this is why yea... almost everyday is discussion about politics, of course

I: How is your contact with people in Belarus? You just mentioned you had contact with someone a couple weeks ago, but do you still have on a regular base contact with family friends and about.. also about this topics? Or are you more careful?

P: You know actually in my case, it might be.. you know as for the family and friends who stayed there. It's really different for every person. For example about this friend who was saying I am not Belarusian anymore, well... he is staying in Belarus. And I just prefer not talking politics to him at all because recently I found out that he actually supports the war

I: O oke..

P: And I'm not gonna explain how I felt, but let's say it wasn't the best day. Of course it's really painful, so I just try no to talk politics to him at all. Then there is another friend of mine, she haha she gets really anxious all the time every time I send her anything about politics at all. Today for example, no it was yesterday. Yesterday I texted her something to her about did you see that Lukashenko is mobilizing the army? And she just ignored me for several hours, like she read the message and then she ignored me.

I: Aham

P: I texted her: Is everything ok? And she was yeah but I'm getting extremely nervous when I hear this and read the news. And I'm like ok ok I got this, I'm not gonna send you this anymore. Because I know how you're feeling and that's fine, because my nervousytem is still function somehow, hers is probably more broken. So I'm like I'm not gonna send you this anymore, that's fine, we can discuss something else. As for my family, when my parents..I discuss this mostly my father because we have a kind of the same point of view on this My mother stays kind of neutral, cause she is just not in to politics at all. She doesn't read the news and so on, she doesn't want to discuss this. My grandmother reads the news, she read the news, the non-government news, like the normal news. She reads them, she knows what's going on but she prefers not to discuss this with me because as she says it is dangerous to do this over the phone because they can hear us haha.. that's that's a real thing yea. So we don't really discuss this, the last time we discussed this was probably 24th of February when I called her and I just like ahem well... the war started. That was probably the last time I remember when we discussed something like this. Any other time, when I just start even mentioning it she is "naananana aha, when you come here and you sit in the kitchen you can say whatever you want"

I: Aha ya ok.

P: Ya it's a normal thing haha when you're in the kitchen you can say whatever you want, but not over the phone, not anywhere like this, even hypothetically someone can hear you

I: aham

P: And with my grandfather it's um... it's a lot more complicated because he reads the government news, he [?] the news and he supports the war even though he is actually, his nationality is Ukrainian so..

I: Ok, and he supports the war of Russia in Ukraine...

P: I don't know, he even has relatives in Ukraine... Seriously, he has relatives in Ukraine and he supports the war. This is how strong our propaganda is.

I: It's hard to imagine..

P: You know he grew up in Ukraine and he knows that there are normal people there, they're not nazi's, they're not fascist, not anything like this. He has literally his relatives there, but as he is watching our news, our propaganda, they got him to think that it's like this so the power of our propaganda, Belarusian and Russian propaganda here.. so with him we just don't discuss politics at all because there have been cases, when I come to Belarus, as for example the 2020 mostly, whenever I came home, my parents and my grandmother they were just telling me, don't you dare ... even

mention this. Because it happened a few times when we got in real bad fights about this. So yes, as I am saying, but my friends and relatives who stay in Belarus, their opinions differ a lot so I just have some kind of scheme you know, with whom I talk about this and with whom I don't so..

I: And was it also after the 2020 events, the discussions with your grandpa, or was it more particularly after the war started?

P: Actually It was after the 2020 events, after the war it just got worse, but after 2020 .. you know it was an interesting thing..

I: Did you participated in any protests?

P: Uhm.. Let me just finish about this topic and then we will speaking about that. So about my grandpa in 2020, you know in August, September and for a year after this, I lived in Minsk, I'm not from Minsk, I'm from a smaller town. But for that year, I lived and studied in the capital city and my father work there as well. And there were cases when I would come home and in autumn 2020, we would sit at the table with my grandfather, my grandmother and my father and we started discussing this and my grandfather would be like.. You know what's going on in those protest: "They're killing the police men, they're doing this, they are doing that" and there was just sitting me and my father, who literally saw this situation, who literally lived in Minsk in that time and we were like "na na na it wasn't like this, it wasn't like this". But he, actually believes more the propaganda more than he believes us, his relatives, his own granddaughter, who saw the whole situation with her own eyes. Yes that's that's the real situation unfortunately. And as for the protest. Am.. There was only one protest, maybe 2, no only one protest in which I participated actively and it was in my hometown. And in that time I wasn't living in Minsk, when it was all started, on the night of the 9th August, and in that time, again if you're in to the topic, you know that people weren't discussing this before, it just all happened on the sudden that people saw the results and they just went to the streets, it wasn't planned. So that was the same thing for me, I was just riding the bicycle in the evening and then I saw the news, and then I saw the people and then I heard the cars beeping, you know near the center of the city, you know then I just went there. I saw hundreds of people standing there, they didn't know what they were doing. They just for some reason saw this, they saw you know the situation. They saw that they just were being deceived and they just went to the streets but there was no plan. Then they also saw the police men, then they ran for the police men even though they didn't do anything, they just...that's the instinct. We were running from there towards... I don't know if it can be called activated participation in the protest but we were just in the streets, I met a few of my class mates, I met a few of my teachers, like highschool teachers. And we were just all in the streets and we don't know what we were doing but we do not agree with this. And then the next time, probably two weeks have passed, a week or two. So the protests were mostly on Sundays and there was a really really large protests, probably the largest that has ever been, in my hometown. So, then is where I actually decided to go there, so it was just my decision. I don't remember, I had no flag at that time, but still.. we took the flowers, the streets, and I was actually in the first row with my classmates and again we met our teachers, met my classmates, met a lot of people, it is a small town.

I: How was this organized? How did you about it? Like online or?

P: Yeah yeah i was just posted online, I saw the post, and I was like no no I'm going this time, like this time, like this time is my decision you know, I'm not a passerby as it was the 9th of August and I was like I'm gonna go there, I'm gonna go there and stand up and say what I was thinking. So we were standing literally in the first row and there was even haha some video of an oppositional musical band who were in our time at that time so they filmed like a music video with some kind of their track on the CD So and I actually even partially got there, fortunately my face wasn't there like in full, you know haha. Fortunately it wasn't like that but still I was surprised to find that out and in Minsk, when I moved to Minsk, it had been three weeks since the start of protests, yes three weeks. And there were already repressions, and we already saw the violence, we already saw what was all about so this is why I got scared of course, I was 17 years old haha so I got scared to that point that for example I was studying university and our campus was right in the center. And on Mondays there were protest of old people, I don't know how to say that, pensioner, old people who were marching, it was kinda their day, and approximately at that time our studies ended, like the last lectures ended and we had to go exactly though that place where exactly took place so we were scared. We were like what if we get on someones camera, what if some kind of police sees us, even though we're just passersby, we are not marching there, we are not saying anything, we are not just..[?] No just standing there, so we got scared even after this point we were just afraid to go on the streets. So in Minsk there was probably, no... I don't think there was one case in which I made the decision to you know to go to protest cause at that time I was already scared to do this, I already saw the consequences.

I: What was the exactly the reason for you to actually participate in this protest in your hometown, cause you said like. I want to be here, I want to stand up, but can you explain what was the main thing you were fighting for?

P: uhm... honestly. The main reason I was there. You know there is that feeling when you're deceived. When you're deceived and um... And I wasn't allowed to vote, I wasn't 18 years old at that time, but a lot of my friends and again teachers and so on, acquaintances were there and their votes were stolen, were stolen and you know and I was like.. he didn't get 80% ok, that is impossible. I can believe that he had maybe 20%, cause there are people who support him. I can believe in 20%, maybe even in 30%, not 80. The reason, I think one of the reasons why people came to the streets, and that was also the reason why I did this, it was because mmm... because we saw the lie, he didn't even hide this. He could easily write 60% and say: "you see, I won". [?] You see, I won, I legally... I'm the president". But no, he actually wrote 80% which is far from the truth.

I: It's the brutality right?

P: Ya.. it's a bit.. no it's not true, it's not true at all. If he wrote 60%, people well.. they wouldn't be satisfied of course but it wouldn't be like this. If he had done this one thing, if he would not have been so.. I don't know, so for sure, it wouldn't be like this now. This is something I am absolutely sure about, so this is one of the reasons why I came to the streets that day, because I just knew with all of this.. like..this is a lie, this is all such a lie and in this case you just want to show that you're against this lie, that you can see that they are lying to us, that we don't want to take this. So that was the reason actually, absolutely.

I: Did you feel rally associated with the political opposition? Did you support all the ideas or did you and some different ideas about it?

P: At that time yes, now I can't say that I support them fully.

I: on what point?

P: Because... you see.. at that time, even psychologically, there was this case.. for how long... 26 years. There wasn't even one person that even stand up to him this bluntly. There wasn't even a person who could make competition to him. But at that year, we saw that he... well he lost.. that's what we saw.. absolutely. This is the case. And to us, it was a kind of new hope maybe, because for so many years we haven't seen anything new in this case. You know I'm 19. And for all me life he has been the president, like I don't know any other person that rule my country. Like.. the one and only, this is.... It shouldn't be like this, and umm... for that... it was like a fresh air, it was a new hope, we were hoping for a new beginning in the country and then we were lied to. We were just deceived, everybody saw that he was losing, but he still deceived all the people. That was so [?] Really really we

were just angry at some point, I was angry seriously, if I just talking about myself I was really angry. And at that time even psychologically, when you see this you just kind of hold on to this new hope, sometimes not even objectively thinking about it, like.. you just start thinking about it.. they're absolutely right, and he is absolutely wrong. No I don't think like this, because I think that is absolutely wrong, but they are not absolutely right. So just to explain, it's gonna be complicated right now. Like..Tshinakovskaya, she goes around the world, she's talking to democratic leaders talking about the country and so on, but it's not like a lot has been done.

I: Aha

P: Of course there is progress, there is progress, our country is being recognized as of the regime. This is progress, this is progress. There were countries for example like Czech Republic who refused to give the resident permit to Belarusians, then Tshinkanovskaya talked to them, she talked to the diplomat, she talked to the president, then they're allowed. This is progress, but this is not much progress for you know 2 years time. So that's why I'm saying, I know people who are in the democratic forces, I know exactly one person who is in my dormitory really. And he just like said, he went to one of this forums where there would be like Tshikanovskaya and other members of that team and they were saying yes you can propose anything you want, and then literally any of the proposals were taken, like none. People were like students, young professions, they were talking out their ideas, like what if we do this, what if we do that, and they were like yes that's a good idea but they're not gonna take any of that, they're not gonna take it. And on this forum, thousands of dollars were spend. So people who went there just wondering like.. "So where did all the money go? Where did all the money go If you didn't take any of the proposals that we had?" So that's why I'm saying, it's not all that easy, it's not all in black and white". I do not support the government, but I don't fully support the opposition, that's what I'm saying. It doesn't make me neutral, no it doesn't make me neutral, but still that's what I'm saying after being 2 years in all this political stuff, I can just see that it's not all black and white

I: Ya that's politics ha.

P: It's complicated on the sides

I: But.. what do you think, what could be better according to you then?

P: What could be better in which regard?

I: What could the political opposition do better? The team of Tshikanovskaya for example, like as you said it's not black and wait, they also have their limitations probably. What is an important thing or you, like you would say that's a point they could really change, I really like to see this changing as soon as possible. Do you have an example?

P: for now I think it is fighting the discrimination, because in a lot of countries, now we get associated with our governments and the Russian governments unfortunately. I see they are doing the work, again with the Czech Republic and so on, but still there is a lot of discrimination, I don't want to go too much in details but just believe me, there is a lot, all around the world. Sometimes we just got discriminated against speaking Russian, just like.., one of my friends got a new job, he landed a new job and it was after the start of war, like his first day was after the start of the war, so when they were conducting interviews with him, he had not started yet but still. His first day was the 27th of February or something and he came in to the job and of the first questions he was asked by his colleges was: "Do you support Lukashenko?" The guy had just turned 18, and he was like no... like.. really? They didn't believed him at first. That was how hard it got. And even now, half a year has passed, like... it is still complicated at time, some people for some reason still associate us, but you know like.. with people it is more or less understandable, we are people, we are emotional ok. Some people just see the news about what's going on in Ukraine, they see there are missiles, there are you know.. they go from Belarus [missiles] and they see the destruction that it brings and they automatically accuse us.

I: Like you're from Belarus, missiles were shot from there..

P: yeah..we are involved in the war. Well I do not support this. But at some level I can understand their emotions. Those Ukrainians, I can understand their emotions, we are not there, we don't know how it's like, they are there, they go through this and even psychologically they need someone to blame. The government... it's apparent, but they also blame the people. Here I can understand, we are just normal people. What I am saying with the discrimination that really needs to be fought, the discrimination on the government level. Because when there are countries that even kind of ban Belarusians, I'm not saying Russias it's different, It's different I can understand that. Again I can go in detail but still ... mm Belarusians like.. we are not that actively involved in the war ok. We're ..ok.. I mean the government. It's just assisting. They're not attacking, they're not exactly attacking. It's complicated, it's so complicated. Even I don't know what to believe anymore. But still the main attacker is still Russia. The main country who does the whole thing is still Russia. Our people just sit there, thinking, what the hell is that, because seriously we don't know whom to believe, and for us in Lithuania here it is easier here because we can see kind of the normal news, but for people in Belarus it is the propaganda, even the young people like I was saying when I found out my friend supports the war, he is 20 years old, he's not 70 like my grandfather.

I: Yeah then you could say it is a generation difference

P: Yeah.. Even the younger generation, some of the people of the younger generation, I know some people who didn't but still even they support this. You see for us it is mostly clear.

I: What would be a clear solution for the discrimination? Making a clear distinction between the people and the government?

P: Yes there should be a still distinction between the people and the government, even though there are ordinary people who support the war, it is not like a 100%, believe me they're such a small minority. Such a small minority. They're...if we are talking about democracy, even if we you just talking about the situation when the opinion of the most should be taken into account this is exactly the case. There are people who support this, but then there are, 97% of those who don't. So why are you fighting for those 3%? So what I'm saying is that .. countries should not discriminate on a government level, they should not ban Belarusians from coming, they should not forbidden residents permits, actually Latvia does.. They're going crazy about this, again I can understand why they are doing against Russians but why against us? So on this level I think the opposition should do more work, they should do more work in let's say the education sphere, you see after the 2020 there were a lot of scholarships and grants especially for Belarusians because after all these events, the world saw all of the things that were happened, all of the violence, so for us there were a lot more opportunities cause a lot more people fled the country, but then the war came, I know the focus is on the Ukrainians now, I know I'm not blaming anyone for this, but what I'm saying is that Belarusians now get discriminated. Only a year ago, the universities, the government, ordinary people, they were empathetic, they were like: "yes we understand it is the government, it's just the government, it's just the regime, it's just the victims". Of course if you flee from the country we will give you the support" But all of this is still going on. All of these violence, all of these repressions they're still going on. Just because they're not on the world agenda anymore.

I: Less priority.

P: yes. Ukraine has priority, but what I'm saying is that it doesn't mean all has stopped. It got even worse, it got even worse, this is why I think education and just the government level and just coming to the countries, getting visa's, getting resident permits, for me these are just the two main things. Education of course because you see it is mostly for young people, let me tell you, 99.9% of young people do not support the war, but for some reason you're just punishing them by banning them from coming to country, getting a working visa, a resident permit. Like why are you doing this? They are young people, they could bring something to your country, to your economy, they will work in the important spheres, they will work in the IT-spheres and so on, they will get you the money. This is actually.. when European countries are doing this, they are shooting themselves in the legs. Seriously. Absolutely. So for me these are the two main points the opposition should really work on more than they do know.

I: I'm making a bit of step again. When did you moved to Lithuania?

P: In August 2021. Actually .. yeah like exactly after a year after the protest. I came here the [...] of august, I remember the date.

I: And why did you chose for Lithuania?

P: Mostly because of finances. I knew that, my family wouldn't be able to support me financially somewhere in Germany or somewhere more in the West, even here it is not as cheap as some people thinking especially with the inflation, so financially that was the first reason. Then probably because I knew there were opportunities here, obviously more than Belarus and don't want to even talk about this. What I'm saying is that, I saw that a lot of IT-companies from Belarus were coming to here, it was like their main choice. So I knew that the industry would be really growing, and it's actually.. it is booming haha! So, I knew there would be opportunities for me here, it was also partly a bit of cultural similarities, even in the feature I decide to remove somewhere to other countries, like to the West, this is like temporary solution to you know feeling how it is to live abroad, to experience other culture, but not experiencing the culture shock.

I: Aha good point.

P: While I'm still young, it would probably better to not get a cultural shock, still they're a different nation, but it is easier than if it is China or something haha

I: ha absolute.

P: That's what I'm saying yes, but mostly financely.

I: What kind of similarities do see for example in terms of cultural?

P: First thing that comes to mind is the food haha, seriously, apart from the zapolinai, most of the things are very similar, when people for example come here and they see the pink soup, they're like what is this? But this is actually very common in our culture, like the potato pancakes, things like that. Things you can see on the Lithuanian menu, they are basically on the Belarusian menu. I know it's probably not the most convincing point, but let's just not argue that food is an important cultural expect haha yeah.. and also it's probably it's kind of our common past I think. In the beginning I said that there are two ways, some people think we're closer to Russia and some people think we closer to Poland and Lithuania, I think we're just on our own. But if we getting to this, and I have to chose, which side we are still closer to, it's probably Lithuanians, not even Polish, but it probably the Lithuanians yes. Because of the common past and Belarusians just have a more European mindset, like the young people they're more European than you think.

I: So the people are more on the Western side and the government is more on the Russian side.

P: Yes exactly. I'm not talking about this 3% who supports Lukashenko, that's different story, but most of the young people they have a European mindset, they want the democracy, the freedom of choice, the freedom of speech and this is .. that's the real thing. So, and also because most of the people speak Russian, not most of the people, but let's say more people than somewhere in I don't know in the Netherlands haha, let's say.

I: I get it, the climate makes it much more comfortable for you to live here, cause you head a lot of Russian on the street for example.

P: Not maybe exactly on the street, for example in the office, I almost never hear Russian. They just.. Lithuanian speak to other Lithuanian in their own language, they rarely use Russian. So, only if they talk to someone who doesn't speak Lithuanian. Only then it's the case, in other cases they just took note. So.. maybe I'm that lucky to rarely hear it, but honestly, I wouldn't say it's really common. I'm just saying there is a higher change that someone understands you when you speak Russian, you can just make your point you know. Cause I don't have troubles expressing my thought in English, It's just.. well you know if it's you native langue it's like..I don't know what about you, maybe you speak to your family in Dutch I think haha.

I: yes!

P: Yes, so it's probably a bit more comfortable, you're soul is in this language so yeas.. that's what I'm talking about, even if you don't have any trouble expressing your thought, your emotions in English, although emotions is a little bit different story, but still even if you can express.. you still probably feel more comfortable to talk in the language that you were talking in .. in you know.. from when you were 0 years old haha so ya..

I: Yes absolutely.

P: Thath's what I'm saying, as much I love English, nothing can beat Russian haha. Of course, it's comfortable.

I: Are you in teach with many Belarusians here in Lithuania?

P: a lot, yes a lot yes. I have a small group in the university, but most of my group mates are from Belarus, my friends, some of my acquaintances here, no.. I think there are a lot of them. I don't know how it goes that way, but still.. it's you know a bit more comfortable when you speak with someone from your own nation

I: yes, a common understanding

P: I. I never.. tried to such for Belarusian on purpose, just to make only Belarusian friends and.. no it wasn't like that. We had our own chats, you know disucsons and so on, that's how we got aquintant. But here, yes yes I know a lot of them, I'm usually in contact with yes a lot. But we mostly speaking Russian, we speak Russian haha if ..

I: Is it easy for you to recognize other Belarusians? Like aside from language?

P: Belarusian yeah haha

I: But how? Can you give some examples?

P: honestly, it's sometimes even in the streets, I can tell if that is a kind of an other person or not. It's just that, sometimes I can mix them up with Ukrainians but still. You know for the girls for example, that's easy, that's really easy because if the girl is maybe like all make-up, with the.. I mean that in a good way, in a good way. If she looks likes if she really mmmm kind of made an effort to look this way, to dress this way, even if she is holding a bag of garbage in her hands, maybe went to nearby shops and she is still looking that way she is probably Belarusian or Ukrainian. That's for sure, like really that is the probably... At some point I thought that was a stereotype, but I noticed not haha. Maybe like.. in 80 or 90 percent of the times this is the case. This is really the case, for guys it's a bit more difficult but mostly uhm.. you know.. our guys dress better you know haha, I don't know.. and also I don't know how to explain this but it's kinda a spiritual level, seriously I noticed this, a few months ago., I could just walk along the street and look at the person and instantly know that they speak Russian, and if that's a young person and speaking Russian, they're most likely not Lithuanian. So you probably know how this goes, but young people in Lithuania, very rarely know Russian language perfectly, and there were cases when I was just looking at the guy and I was just seeing his face: "No you speak Russian, you speak Russian" Like I know this for sure. "And you're probably Belarusian" and a minute passes, and his phone is buzzing and he takes it out and start speaking Russian and I'm like that's what I'm saying

I: ya..

P: this is exactly on a spiritual level. And also in our office, for example there is a Belarusian company, war gaming. I don't know if you ever played World of Tanks

I: I know it's from Belarus

P: haha yes yes. And we're in the same office as them, it's just that we're a bit higher in the floor. And as we all go to.. go on a lunch, which is in the neighboring building. I can just look at the face of the person and just see that they're Belarusian. Mostly who work in that company, they're still Belarusian. I don't know, like 80%, 85%, they're relocates, they're immigrant, and I can just see that seriously. I don't know how to explain that, but probably it is on a spiritual level.

I: Probably the face features ha?

P: haha maybe the facial features, maybe, I don't know. I never got deeper into this, but you just kinda feel that this is.. your person haha. In a foreign country you learn to recognize.

I: I kinda have the same experience actually haha.

P: Haha, are there a lot of Dutch people here?

I: As far as I know not, but yeah of course when it comes to tourists. It's getting a more popular destination, so who you walk in the center you.. sometimes even from hundred meters you can just see some group of people and you think like..and you get closer and you think like has this might be some Dutch people. And then they're passing and .. yes I'm right haha

P: Yes that's what I'm saying.

I: But it's sometimes hard to explain, maybe it's a kind of feeling, how they walk, talk like...

P: Yes yes that's what I'm saying, it's just a general feeling about a person. You just see them and you instantly think like ya.. than's haha..

I: Thaht's intersting how it works.. so you were having a lot of contact with Belarusians in Lithuania, but would you say there is an active Belarusian community in Vilnius? When it comes to activities or...

P: Honestly, I don't know if I'm saying this right, but I believe that in Lithuania, the Belarusian... diaspora? Is that the word?

I: aham

P: So .. yes, the Belarusian diaspora improbably the largest, larger than in other countries.

I: Maybe Poland

P: I'm not sure, I'm not sure, maybe it's a kind of the same, but still. I cannot say I'm actively participate in the activities which are organized by the Belarusians here but I know there are a lot of them. I'm not even saying like the protests, the flags and things like that. I'm not into this, seriously, I'm just tired of this, but .. and I just don't want to get in trouble, I just don't want to get on like photo's, maybe someone will post it somewhere. Like.. no.. thank you, I'm not gonna do this. Yeah as you can see, I still want to go to Belarus some day haha. In the weekend so As far the things I know, there is like a Belarusian house, those are Belarusians who organize activities, they have like... actually all kind of event, they are like teaching to paint, teaching to sing, teaching to dance and things like that so that if people who come here will just feel more at home. Becasue they can instantly connect, yes with other people from the same country, yes they can just feel at home here, but honestly I'm probably not the right person to ask about this, I know people who go on such events, but I myself like .. no, I'm not that kind of person. I just meet other Belarusians at the university, not at work, cause as work we have Lithuanians. Like most of the time Lithuanias, no I don't know any Belarusians in the workplace. So mostly just in university. I never go to special events organized by the Belarusian diaspora.

I: Is it because like you said you're not really the kind of person, but is it in general you don't really like to participate in such events, or is it just because you have a kind of enough by just talking to your friends and people in the university about Belarus?

P: Actually... I think it is the latter option. I get enough talking about politics and about what is going on. I wouldn't really mind to make more friends, it's just that .. making them exactly the Belarusian diaspora... it just feels a bit weird to me, because a lot of people whom I talking to right now ar from Kazakhstan, from Ukraine and so on so that doesn't really make much difference to me, but inn the speialed Belarusian diaspora, I just don't want to come cross people who you know like.. nationalists or anything. There are people like these here, and honestly I have enough talking about politics and our country and so on with the people who are already my friends and acquaintances. No... and so on. I don't want to get this anymore haha. I'm already a bit tired.

I: But that can also be a downside as you mentioned, that there are even nationalist or people with a very active, different views. Yes because you know, these are the people who.. As I was saying, I don't fully support the opposition, I think they're making some mistakes, I'm probably not the one to judge them but still you're asking my opinion so that's why I'm saying this. I don't fully support them. But they're are people who do, there are people who do and to them, if you.. you know like mention a little bit like.. well they're probably doing something wrong, they could have done better, they could just I don't know attack you haha.. not in the worst way of course, but they would strongly disagree, so I don't want to get in to this kind of fight about this. Im really done fighting about police now and as I was saying, three days ago when I found out my friend supports the war, we had a very, not a very nice conversation about it, I was just emotionally drained, it is really emotional, yes it is emotionally draining all of those conversations. Even though he is a person who supports the war, you know...it's different from the Belarusian nationalists but still these are .. as I would say uhm.. you know there are the ultra-right and then there are the ultra-left. So these are probably just the both sides that, yes very haha.. and I wouldn't like to go in a fight with any of them, cause the ultra thing is..

I: so you would say like in the 2020-events , In the protests in August 2020 there was a really united opposition and now you kind of suggested there are different groups with different ideas, more on the extreme sides or more on the ..

P: Yeah of course, of course, at some point in 2020 we were actually more united.

I: Yes exactly

P: Yes we had the same goal, we kind of similarly hate Lukahsenko yes of course but then as one time past, people start getting different perspectives. Yes, well they fromed different opinions, same have more radical views, they still do, yes some have radical views. Others, or just like..and there are those who just prefer .. forget about politics, they stay neutral. I wouldn't say there are just like.. definite groups of people, I don't want to label people like this, but I would say that in this regard we are not as united as we were, just no... and even in the opposition team, It's not all that easy they are still.. they can't agree on things among themselves. There are actually.. Disagreements and misunderstandings between members of the team. A few months ago there was a forum in Vilnius, maybe 2 months ago. But people who consider themselves as the opposition, who hate the government, who hate the war, they actually were laughing, this oppoiton team, because you can't even sort out the things among yourselves. Like how do you expect to sort things, you know, in our country, this is stupid. So honestly, this event was also one of the reasons why I just .. no. I'm not fully supporting it. I.. Yes like I support, they have a nice goal they see in front of them, but they're not united enough to make united decisions on this.

I: All the same goal, but different ideas in how to reach it.

P: Yes yes

I: But that's kind a normal human process I think.

P: Yes yes, they can't even decide between themselves. There is real conflict of interest there haha

I: I wasn't really aware of this before

P: It was actually even written in our social media, you know there is.. I'm already mixing the words, it was even part of the news that our Telegram channels that were usually supportive of the opposition, when they were you know making articles about that form, that event, it seemed like they were kind of laughing about this. They were like.. look at that. We wanted to you know, go and do what they want us to do. So it really not that black and white anymore, now we have being in the topics for two years, two years, I can just see that it's not all that easy unfortunately, I wish it was, I wish it was but...

Interview 4 transcription

Date: 13 Oktober 2022

Time: 16:30

Gender: Female

Age: 28

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: So my first question is, if we talk about the Belarusian national identity, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

P: to my mind the first thing that is coming is the union of culture, history and language I think, I mixture and it is hard to say that this is just the one major point, but maybe language is also the part of the culture so in this way I can say shortly yeah it's history, you know patterns of thinking that you like you get from your parents and they get from their parents and some kind of kind of stories you were risen on and the way you thinking, you behave, like some mental characteristics.

I: Can you give some examples?

P: Ok, for example a lot of persons say that Belarusians are really tolerant and very like.. we don't like to react aggressively, so they are like polite, kind and tolerant. And it's like.. it's really going from old times, history, some like.. persons, some fairy tails they're telling about, some kind of person... that's it's good characteristic you should treat a person. And that's why like in protests, people do it not violently, but the calm way.

I: Taking off their shoes before they go on the benches.

P: Haha yea, so, I mean that is going through generations. So it's like..

I: That's the first thing that comes to your mind.

P: Ya.

I: And if you mention, how far is it going back in history? Or is there any specific point you would say like.. that really reminds me to be Belarusian.

P: Ok, I think it's the.. if we talk about the history it's more starting from the 9th century, it's the beginning of some little unions, duchies, like polask is for example, it was one of the oldest with starting some [?] that they use some cultural things that like.. were really popular in this area and this region and it's not taking from other countries, it was really local.

I: From that territory

P: Yea yea. So and then it was the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then union with Poland and some problematic periods I would say with Russia haha. So, it's also the reason why I live in Lithuania cause I feel some similar culture here. Because for example some great guys who respected Belarus, like Vytotas, Vytotas the Great, they said it's also the great ruler of..

I: So that makes it more easy for you to move to Lithuania instead of another country.

P: Yeah, but you know about Belarus, if we talk about, it's also between East and West. It was trying al the time to be, to stay, to be, own nation, trying to be without the East or the West, but it was hard, because of this wars.

I: Do you feel that you sometimes have to make decision? To make a choice like we are more east or more west?

P: Uhm.. I sometimes even, now I can't [?] because our government, maybe our government prefers now Russia if you consider economic reasons and some politician unions and so on. But if we think deeply about Russia, like about the way they behave and how they think, some [?] Things that we need to get more money and more authorities instead of like making good points of the authority they have, or this attitude that, I don't know, if you don't with us, you're against us. This polarization, it's more about Russia and I don't like this ideas. In this way I think, if we speak about this ideas about tolerance it's more about the idea.. it's more about the Western culture I think. But I truly believe that maybe some time later, the regime will fall and things get change, we still can be like neutral country to different neighbors, like east and west. But maybe this is a little bit more related to the West.

I: Aham. And who.. You mentioned also the Belarusian language of course. Do you speak it?

P: Yes, I speak Belarusian language, but we really have a big problem with this issue...uhm.. you know its.. for know if you speak Belaurisan in your ordinary life it's like you consider to be an oppositional, a protester, you should go to prison just in case yes.

I: It's considered as the langue of the opposition yeah.

P: Yeah and maybe ...

I: But now you're here. Do you use it more?

P: I start to use it more that's true.

I: You feel more free to use it?

P: Ahm..yeah and in some communities, like during dancing club or when I meet some people who speak Belarusian I switch to Belarusian too. But still, I use Russian in most cases because I got used to it haha

I: Yeah of course

P: And right now I really understand that I want to speak more Belarusian because it really a [?] and maybe I feel some responsibility to save this culture outside of Belaurus because there I understand that it is getting worse and worse and for example, I have some friends from Belarus who also relocate to Vilnius and we went decide that we can have every week a Belarusian speaking evening, just to..

I:To teach yourself ok!

P: And to cook some Belarusian dishes, like made from potato like Draninky or Bapka...

I: So to bring a little bit of Belarus to here.

P: yes yes and yeah I hope it will be some day that Belarus willl not be on paper some official language, but it will be more popular in the country and I think it should come from the government. Because if people are afraid to talk it's a problem and ..

I: it should be more normalized to speak

P: Yeah and even if the.. maybe it was 100 years ago, in the 1920s, it was the uprising of the Belarusian culture, there were a lot of poets, writers who used the Belarusian language

I: Yeah, the golden age

P: Ya the golden age. Like, but later it was all the Soviet Union, attempt to make Belarus more Russified. And they were pushing all these talented people to go down and.. yes the history is repeating we also see the situation with the culture and the.. but .. I really like this idea and I don't know if

you have heard about it but after 2020, Belarusians like in matrix you know could take a pill and see the reality, it's really wow.. it's different, we were blind all the time, and in this time, I think if we have seen it, maybe we will not going to close our eyes haha ya..

I: And if we talk about Belarusian... about the Belarusian identity, who could be Belarusian according to you?

P: Ha ha that's an interesting question

I: Could I be Belarusian?

P: Let me think.. umm.. you know.. I can imagine the situation, the person who wasn't born in Belarus but becomes Belarusian.

I: How?

P: ha ha in my opinion it is part of the culture, to learn some history, learn language, to pay respect to this national idea, to understand it, and try to make something good. So in this way I can imagine it ya..

I: to integrate..

P: Yeah, to integrate. Maybe it can be even from another country, not in Belarus, but if you're abroad and you share this ideas, you're Belarusian according to me.

I: yeah ok so it's not depending on your parents or grandparents?

P: Ya no I don't believe it's just the origin of your parents, because to my inside it is what is coming from inside, from your thoughts, your mindset

I: So it depends on how I identify. If I for example let's say to a certain culture, I learn the language and have respect to the culture and I'm feeling Belarusian then I could be Belarusian

P: Yes, in this way I understand it and it's also why I am a little bit like .. confused about that many Belarusians went abroad, living there, and if we speak pessimistically, if the situation in Belarus is not going to change in 10/20 years it will be a problem because the new generation of people will be born in different countries and there will be really more.. into this culture, more integrated. I don't know if you're born in Poland, but your parents were Belarusian and you go to Polish school, kindergarten and so on, you start feeling yourself a polish guy, so it's like .., sometimes if you.. some sadness about it.

I: many people believe that the population will be like..

P: And ya of course it is, most people who moved are almost all good people and maybe more creative, who can do something good for the country, so I hope.

I: Those who respect the culture are maybe most abroad?

P: yeah yeah, it may be a problem but I hope it won't go so long to become a problem.

I: Let's hope it is less than 10/20 years.

P: yeah..

I: You just mentioned what is according to you the idea about the Belarusian national identity, but how do you think you learn such ideas? Do you learn it in schools, do you get it from your parents?

P: I think practically it comes from school, because we learned the language there and the history, maybe not the history not in the best way, because you know in books they write some, maybe when you're a kid it might be boaring or they want you to show it in a way they want to show you the facts, to hide something or outline something ghat is not so important, of course our books were maybe more Russian, but still there were some information and I think it's a lot from family, especially from grandparents, like they for example my granny and granddad they were from a small village, so they were more closer to some traditions to celebrate holidays and they were spoke in Belarusian more at home, not like my parents, they spoke Russian so it changed during one generation.

I: ya ya, what did they learn you? Because they were from a village so they maybe learn some traditional dishes or?

P: Of course they cooked this potato pancakes, maybe we had draninkai, actually Belarusian and Lithuanian cuisines are very close, it has a lot of meat and potato dishes, even drinks are similar. Some herbal drinks..

I: Gira, uhm Kvass..

P: yeah yeah haha, yea so yea it's family and from the school and maybe somewhere else, it's hard to answer to immediately understand how it is grown this ideas.

I: And for example you said before, you were a bit reluctant to use the Belarusian language, because people associate it with the opposition. Was it already before the 2020 events that you were careful with the Belarusian language or was it just more practical to use language because your parents speak it..

P: Uhm.. at that time it was not so dangerous to speak Belarusian, but I used Russian because it was more comfortable, my parents, my friends, most of my friends were speaking Russian and I worked some time in a bank with costumer and I remembered one client and he was from America, he was there for a long time and he came speaking in Belarusian and I was like: "wow, he haven't been in Belarus for 10 years but you still speak Belarusian" Ok and then I talked to him in Belaurisan and I checked some specific words which should be used in banks and I decided Ok.. and later I had a few more clients and this is the way I started to talk to clients some more in Belarusian and they were so surprised, so happy that Wow some official like.. institutions that they can use it.

I: that was new for them?

P: Yeah haha, and they were wow, why should we consider it something strange if its just our national language. So it was yeah.. like ... [?]. But now I feel even more responsibility to use, language not to forget, because if you don't use it you start to forget [?] You can read and understand but if you start talking.

I: you have to keep practicing.

P: yeah yeah

I: Do you speak with all your friends and people you know from Belarus in Belarusian with them?

P: in most cases I spoke in Russian, it could be even the case with some friends they speak Belarusian and I understand but it was no problem, but later with this Belarusian speaking costumers I switched to Belarusian. And sometimes with my parents we can switch to Belarusian but it can be some special occasion like ow toady is the day of Belarusian language, so ok let's speak Belaurisan language, but it wasn't so common.

I: Ow ok, is there such day ya? The day of the Belarusian language?

P: i cannot say the date, but ya it's the date of the mother tongue or something like that.

I: then you wake up and having a different language

P: haha

I: I want to make a bit of step, to the 2020 events, the protests, did you participate in the protests in Belausr?

P: yes yes, and I remembered how it changed the mood from the beginning and that... but I stopped participating in December when my boyfriend was in prison, I was close to the fact too, but you know the guys who were arresting him decided we won't take a girl. They were noble maybe... But I was really lucky, because in most cases there was no difference between boys, girls... yes we protested but it was you know, peaceful protests and ... how it said, it could be .. no I'm working in IT-sphere so sometimes we organized some IT-events in a hightechpark, we took some mouses, keyboards, billboard and some words and I remembered a lot of cars were beeping, a lot of people were wow.. we are with you! Later it was some marches, every Sunday, we .. casued.. along the streets and in the beginning we believed it can changed everything, I remembered we didn't cover our faces, so it was ... I can show you a picture..

I: was it the first time for you you went to the protest in the 2020 protests?

P: yes yes it was first time, because I remembered from my childhood in 2010 there were also some protests after elections, but I was just entering the university and I was in a small town not in Minsk and in small towns it's harder to participate, they see all the time and later I started.. only form 2020 and yeah so it was some women marches, then all to gather local it was hard to gather a lot of people, they were trying to get some prison tracks, you know some cars, they were try to stop us, divide in small groups and try to arrest. So later we had some local small marches but, but it was like, 20/30 people but it still was dangerous, we just did take take phone with ourselves, a toothbrush, some pair of socks to be ready, to be arrested in some case haha.

Yeah some pictures from that time, this is how IT-workers in protests... [shows pictures] and some.. So this place is [?] maybe you know this..

I: yes is was constantly painting over again and...

P: yeah yeah, I see like, this musicians are in prison too because they organized concerts, now even I cannot show this picture because it is dangerous . Yeah so, maybe later, protests didn't help, but I think it was still useful for Belarusians in the way that we really could see how many people supported.

I: And you were saying that really were thinking something is gonna change, but what was your personal thing, where did you fighting for? What had to be changed for you?

P: At that moment, first the stolen election results and second it was against this violence which was used against this peaceful people

I: yeah yea..

P: So it was two major points, but of course later if you think more deeply we want to change everything. You know how many...all system can be changed, like judges should be in prison themselves, all this deputies like they vote for laws that make possible to legitimize this system works yeah but..

I: total change of the system.

P: Yeh total change of the system, it is the only way I think that can hep so.

I: Why would you think it was 2020 so massive?

P: I think..

I: Casue you also made the decision to join.

P: Yeah.. personally me maybe I was more grown up, because before I was more than 25. Like the age in which you start more thinking and analyzing I: more politcal aware of course..

P: It's not so ... maybe during the students time, it's more like some inner riot, but not so thinking. Like if you talk about the first years of studying. And in generally the society I think it was because possible to watch, to receive some information from the internet, like Telegram was must have for

everybody, like even when the internet was blocked, sometimes I remember the night after the election I was sitting with my parents and I was trying to use some proxy to get some information and we thought like. O really in some cities they showed some real results and Tsichanovskaya won for us wow it was a victory, and later we received some messages about this protest, about fighting, about this brutal areas. But I think that a lot of people from older generation also saw it, maybe their kids showed, they even become more ... used more internet and so on.

I: they became more aware of the situation

P: yeah and I can say it's also like.. for older generation it's important not to just read some in Telegram or some site, but to revive messages from someone who is inside these events like..

I: and not only the state propaganda.

P: yeah yeah because it was in a vacuum. I had a friend, she was .. she's like.. it's a girl and she was arrested in the protest participation just because her face was recognized by some system and she was arrested coming to her work in the bar to her birthday and it was .. interesting that when she got in prison for 10 days and when I talked to her mom, I said ow you know this girl, like your daughter is in prison, and in the beginning she was saying, ha... she dived to participate in all these things.. oo my daughter, I should tell all these protesters and so on so it was her words in the beginning and later, she voted of course for Lukashenko, and later when she was trying to call, to understand where her daughter is, to give some cloths or food to her and she faced with all this attitude, like you're all animals, not people at all, then she started thinking at that moment.

I: And then she slowly changed her mind?

P: yeah and it was like 10 days before her daughter came after prison, we talked a lot and I recommend her to subscribe to some .. non-official media and she was sometimes calling me like.. "really, so, I saw .. I saw the news that European countries, they announce some sanctions against Lukashenko. Is it true, because I haven't seen it on the TV"

I: aha ya

P: so she was questioning some other aspects. And, but..

I: it's interesting how you can live in two different worlds right?

P: yeah yeah, if you just watch TV, go to work and going home and talk to your friends who are also with this shut eyes

I: In the bubble..

P: ya, this is how it works. Maybe it's because people saw it. And for me it was really touching when you go this marches, to this protests, when I saw some old people, you know.. maybe 90 years old. And they say [?]

I: the old women which was always arrested, I forgot her name.

P: ah Bayinska ya?

I: with the leather jacket

P: ya ya it's her. And I remember once we trying to gather more people in one place but it was hard because there were a lot of police officers around and [?] old women and they were going with this official flags, like... we thought ow maybe they support Lukashenka, but when they came closer they said: "Ow guys, the police is at that place" so they were like you know, spies, and they helped the protesters to recognize to which place they should go and where not to go.

I: Ow ok that's smart! And I just saw the pictures of course, you were using this symbols. What is the feeling of the symbols?

P: I.. I like this symbols. The white-red-white flag and this like.. horseman symbol which is close to Lithuanian, I don't know the word but I think you understand this symbols...

I: aham.

P: So I believe that in new Beluars it should be again our official symbols, because I cannot.. see.. this official red and green flag because it was a an old prison flag, you know stated with some propaganda lies and [?] I think it should be changed. Of course even colors, you know white red white, it's colors of Belarusian used a long time ago, like if you see the colors in [?] They used all this types of colors and symbols.

I: So it's also a symbol of better representation of the Belarusian culture, of the people.

P: so, maybe a bit difference, it's a better representation and second ... and it became a symbol of protests that united. Maybe not so many people like, maybe not like, but a lot of people didn't care before this events, "Ok we have this flags and no matter what". But later they realized ow it's a real history so we should respect it and change it.

I: Ya that's how it became a symbol of the opposition.

P: Ya, so I think now we can have some questions... maybe I don't know.. 80% vote for symbols and not for the official.

I: If there would be a referendum

P: ya ya

I: Do you think different about your Belarusian identity before and after this 2020 events?

P: mmm maybe just one thought about the symbols. When you know there are some leaders of protests, Tshichanovskaya, Babaryka, and other people. Nobody from that side, like asked people to use this flag, they offered some neutral things, like “you should wear white band or something”

I: yeah during the voting

P: Or use some white flag, this is I think some neutral, but I think all people remembered like, ow we have our national flag so just use it, it's how it happened. So it's not from above you know, but from inside.

I: Yeah yeah like the bottom-up process.

P: yeah yeh so could you please repeat the question haha

I: Uhhh ya your feeling about your being Belarusian, did it changed after the protests?

P: I think it changed a little bit, because I thought that in some way I could be more, you know be more an active participant for the life in my country, at least I try.

I: How?

P: I voted for the president, of course my vote wasn't here, wasn't like counted, but I tried to show that I'm against this authority, that I'm against this.. all this violence and so on and in this way it's a fact that I becoming more active participant of life in your country, like you're not so best..you start thinking more about your identity in general and I even thought ow it's really interesting to relearn our history for example.

I: You became more interested after that time?

P: yeah yeah, because I said it's [?] and I read a book about Lukahsenko, it's written by Vydata, how he came to the power and I realized wow it's so obvious from the beginning that he is a liar, so he cannot control the country, so at least not the much longer than the period he won, like 5 years. And I started to listen sometimes listen to some podcasts about history of Belarus to know it better. You know it wasn't so good since the system of education and maybe I started to feel some responsibly to have it in me this knowledge and to share with friends and talk about it, asks more about history and..

I: was it more topic to discuss with your friends?

P: Yeah yea, during the protests it was the main topics, sometimes we decided: “ok lets start to talk about this all kind of things” and of course we couldn't stop ourselves, we talked about the current situation, about the history, about the future, what can be...

I: so not only protesting, but also try to find solutions for the..

P: Aham! Ya I really know a lot of people moved to.. like.. to. We talk a lot with them, like a majority will go back if the situation change, because they want to be more closer to the roots.

I: Yeah of course, they still keep the connection

P: Yeah...

I: And of course there was an political opposition in that time, mostly around tshichanovskaya if I'm right, what did you though about the ideas, did you completely agree or did you already were thinking, like maybe something can be better..

P: Could you repeat the beginning of the sentence, because I think I misheard..

I: like there was of course, like a political opposition and they were active to get people around them, were you like completely agreeing with the ideas or did you already had different views or?

P: Ok I see, I can say that just before the election company.. Like a few different politicians are like united into one position around Tsichanovskaya and it was really like.. quite wise step and I supported it, now I know that some different politicians have different opinions about Belarus in how Belarus should develop later.

I: yeah I heard that before

P: And sometimes, it can be not so good to watch, like they are trying to argue, ok not fight, but show different opinions, but I think it's ok if people have different opinions. It just should be you know free elections to vote, to chose what's the majority of people.. so and that's why we need this first major step for new elections and change the people who rule and.

I: So you say that's the main idea, the basics

P: Yeah so in this regard I support fully and

I: And the details will come later, and that's what you see right now, the discussion about this

P: yes and that's good they are discussing right now and yeah.. I know that..

I: It can also be dangerous right? Cause people can get more divided because they have different ideas about how to reach it.

P: yeah, but maybe it can be some not you know directive way, but in the discussion there is kinda some true, so if.. I even cannot remember, how in Belarus it would be possible to you know, to debate, to discuss, to vote and... It's like .. If in our parliament someone votes for the laws, it's like 99% or 100% yes.. so it's ok, to be 61% against 39%. So it's ok, maybe we see next year it's a problem and we need to switch to other options, it doesn't

work. So I don't worry so much about this ideas that they may be really different in some parts of economics you know, some symbols and so on... it's not the major point we should worry so much right now.

I: yeah yea it's all about the..

P: But it's ok to have people who are really into this topics, like you know some investigations, they also write their plans, it might be useful ya.

I: Yah.. I have some questions about being in Lithuania. Wen did you decided to go to Lithuania?

P: Ok ya.. I decided to go here, it was after the beginning of the war, it was maybe march I think.

I: Yeah, end of February was the start of the war

P: Yea so maybe in March I decided and it took a few months to prepare documents, via and so on. And I relocated with my work visa, so I work here now. Yeh.. And

I: And you already talked about that Lithuania was a reason of culture of communalities [?!]. Was that the reason, like the only reason? Ya work maybe of course..

P: no it wasn't the only reason. In my work I had the possibility to chose different countries and if you talk about this cultural reasons, I decided it's better to live in Europe and not to live in Asian countries so I crossed it from my list and ..

I: No cultural shock

P: Ha ha and also.. I also like.. knew that people here are more supportive for Belarusians. Like they understand more, like give some safe place to politicians.. They have like how to say, escapers from Belarus and.

I: yah

P: I know that Tsichanovskaya and her cabinet also lives here

I: So that all is also contributing to your ideas to come here to Lithuania?

P: Yeah in some way too.. And I understood that I'll see some people that are also in the same position as me. And variant people of Belarus, like the population from Belarus is quite big and I can still communicate.. of course it is possible to integrate in some way.. But still I want to get in touch with this people because I still have plans to go back later. And also one more reason is langue, so it's easier just to come here and know that Russian and English is enough.

I: Cause here everybody either speaks English or Russian

P: Yah so it was like easy and comfortable. And I were here a few times before and in Belarus we joke that sometimes we go to Vilnius just to drink coffee

I: haha it is so close.

P: Yeah it is so close and some Belarusians even think ow it is former part of Belarus, Vilna, you know it...

I: So yes you feel this commonalities you share. How is it to be Belarusian in Lithuania? Did it changed anything about your feelings of being Belarusian?

P: Uhm.. I think it is really comfortably here so I wasn't mistaken in my thought before, because I haven't face some situation that someone you know disagree Belarusians live here, they even like.. tolerant.. if you speak for example Russian, they mostly say "ow you're from Ukraine or Belarus but it doesn't matter, we support you". There were no problems like this..

I: So before the tolerance you described about Belarus is also here with your experience

P: yeah and you know, in all the cases I can say it is really comfortable, people are supportive and I even cannot remember someone saying like" Ow Lukashenko is a great guy, why blaming him". I think they are even more into this topic and they understand it.

I: Yeah yea..

P: yea and I'm trying to be more.. you know in some way to be more respectful to Lithuanians. I haven't started planning the language, but I try bit by bit some words like

I: Laba diena

P: Aciu ha ha and some few words, and I think they're even wow... that's good.

I: They appreciate it ya.

P: Yah yah

I: Do you have any expressions of your Belarusian identity?

P: Expressions umm... Sometimes I can, like here wear outfits that are not possible in Belarus. Like I can wear I don't know some t-shirt with some Belarusian symbols, but I cannot do it in Belarus, because police might say: "ow you're trying to [?]"

I: is it important for you to wear this symbols?

P: You know it is important to have this possibility, to have to feel right and not to be afraid, because maybe you have heard that sometimes people could just get prisoned just for wearing white socks with red stripe.. And I like the idea that..

I: Ya just the freedom to.. and you feel the freedom to do it?

P: Yeah and I'm still planning to buy a flag for my balcony and I want to put the Belarusian and the Lithuanian flag. Like the Belarusian flag, you know non-official haha, to feel that.. like to see it, like I'm used to do it at my side but I had to stop it because it was too dangerous and the Lithuanian just to pay respect because I can live here, I can show my views and not be banned. I can see how it express maybe something more... I don't what your order interviewers shared some interesting ideas?

I: About expression?

P: Yah

I: Well ya it is mostly that people feel more free, was you also mentioned, feel more free to use the Belarusian language. So before, some people mentioned that if I go back to Belarus and I'm very careful in what I do and in what language I use and right now exactly what you say I feel much more freedom to talk about the topic, to be not afraid to.... So its more like. Just the full ideas about Belarus I can share here, I just feel the freedom and that's what people say..

P: About this topic I talked to some guys from Russia which also live here and they say ow we finally can call the war a real war, but not the special operation and for them it's also like wow!

I: It's just the feeling of the freedom ya

I: Is it like.. of course you said you're in touch with Belarusians here in Lithuania. Is it important or you keep in touch with Belarusians?

P: Yes it is important, of course I have my relatives in Belarus. A lot of friends removed some here to Lithuania, some to Poland, Czech Republic, so even if I come back to Belarus for the weekend, of course I see my parents, some relatives. But not so many friends right now live here because it is such tough period of time. But generally if yo communicating with Belarusians, you still feel... like at home in some way

I: ya. Before you said like speaking the language and making the Belarusians dishes

P: Here in this way, I don't know what it will be tomorrow, ok not tomorrow but maybe in a year, I'm not sure if I stay here or if I go to another country or maybe good news and I can go back to Belarus. So in this way I don't do it like in this home, like home that it's my home. You tried to create this home with people that you care and love and share the same ideas and that's why I appreciate the time with Belarusians.

I: I can imaged that ya

I: Is there.. you're going to the Belarusian dance classes, but is there an active Belarusian community in general here in Lithuania?

P: I would say it is quite active, like for example, we our dancing class participated in Belarusian folk festival, and I was surprised like wow in Vilnius we have Lithuanian folk festival, we don't have such in Belarus haha

I: Ya you also mentioned that you didn't know there were these dances

P: So like I feel there are quite a lot of activities, from people I know there are some chats, a lot of chats in Telegram for people in different areas.

I: in different neighbourhoods?

P: Ya ya, in my neighbourhood there is no chat for that, I decided Ok I'll wait and if not I will join some like.. the closest one..

I: But you're looking for to be active in this community?

P: I think it's also a good point be with each other with different people, not only with friends, but you know to stay in touch, to share some ideas, to have the same moods, thoughts, sometimes to do some good things like I don't know, like in Belarus I think it's after this 2020 protests we had also a lot of telegram chats, like with also communities and we really did good things like, like we renewed some places.

I: Also local right? So there are the bigger groups, but also the more neighborhood chats?

P: Yes yes, so it was not only about location, but it could be some musical events or

I: Do you say that those kind of chats of do still exist here in ?

P: Just in Vilnius ya

I: They copied the idea from, the experience from..

P: That's how it works ya

I: That's interesting, that's interesting

P: If you see a lot of people initiating you. You know it's inspiring, to be active to do something

I: Yah

P: One cannot do so much, but you together can I don't know, take your money and safe [?] need help or you can take some garbage from the forest, so this is really good to..

I: I hear there are also some organization that organize things, do you know this organizations?

P: I know there is an organization [?]. [?] it's like help, they help to people who move here from Belarus to adopt, but I haven't visited so I don't know too much about it, and I know there are some events about [?] topic how to organize [?] so it's like also charity things for Belarussians just to know how it works, but I didn't know that so.. I know it exist but I don't know ya..

I: What is for you the most themes coming goal for this events or this communities? Is it to be a community or is there not higher goal?

P: I think, maybe it is some .. maybe to safe this Belarusian community, to safe something.. like close to each other all this things.. to be active citizens of country, now I does't even matter so much which county to be active participant, later in Belarus you will be also.. you know how to do it, how it works, you'll do it. And maybe for some people it is also the reason to do.. what you can and to feel some satisfaction from it. If to chose the main reason it's just the ... to be part in the community, it is important for persons too.

I: What is the thing you would say is, you answered it already a bit, but this is something that I miss from Belarus.

P: I think the first thing is about people, my parents, some friends too but not so much haha. Maybe in some way I miss some places that are places of some memories, or some [?] that you used to visit in some different situations of you life and you have a lot associations.

I: Familiar places in your life.

P: yea yea, but.. ya I think that's the major point of what I miss. But.. you know that now there are a lot of these pressure of system in Belarus, even if you [?] you still feel under control and it's not so pleasant to be here right now

I: But you go back sometimes?

P: Sometimes I go, but still I am afraid that I can be like caught. I know that there are some pictures from from the protests and maybe they'll find it and I can be arrested. Because there are some similar facts, so sometimes

I: Sometiems you're taking the risk to go

P: Uhm. I'm deleting my Telegram before crossing the border. And also hie some pictures that shown't be.. but still 'i miss my parents and I sometimes visit and I hope for the best ha ha. I think I'm not so important person for them to pay you know so much attention

I: It's like a kind of calculated risk

P: Ya in that was ya haha. But now I do it rarely, maybe once in half a year or in four months.

Interview 5 transcription

Date: 18 Oktober 2022

Time: 15:00

Gender: Female

Age: 22

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: And the first question I always ask, of course the research is about the Belarusian national identity, and if ill say the national identity of Belarus, what is the first thing you think about?

P: Uhm ya I was actually thinking about it, honestly I don't know, I guess we are like very very lawful, extremely lawful, maybe it's growing up in autocracies, but like.. me and my friends are always joking about it, if we are in some other country and it's an empty road, like an completely empty road and it's a red light, Belaruisans will stay, even if all other people will cross the road, they wouldn't care because it is empty, there are no cars. We will wait until the green light, because it is the law, it's rule and we have to follow the rule.

I: aha

P: Also, yeah.. like extremely polite, like even when it's not even necessary. Like when someone bumps into me on the street I would apologies automatically like ow sorry, even though I didn't do anything, but it is just some automatic response if something happens. Yeah and ... I don't know, it's really hard to tell, what else...

I: How do you feel connected other Belarusians? The Belarusian nation?

P: Uhm.. it's interesting.. I guess like, ok ya I noticed here in Vilnius that if I talk to Belarusians people, even though we might have completely different opinions and everything, we would not be aggressive about it. Like.. when someones says something I completely disagree with and I hate what they say actually, it might be even so stupid I can't stand it, I'd be like.." Ahh you know what..." Not being aggressive..

I: Being very polite

P: Ya all this, but I think it's also kind of growing up in dictatorship, we didn't have this... like being aggressive in Belarus was always kind of banned, no matter what, and even being rightfully aggressive if something happens, sometimes we struggle with that, so ya...

I: So you would say that during history you didn't really had the opportunity to stand up..

P: Ya like.. at least in my life.. I'm 22 years old so I was born and grew up by Lukashenko was the president so all the time, so I grew up in this regime and I didn't see anything else, so ya... also what I noticed, during some parties when for example we are smoking outside, Belaurisans would literally stay with this how it's called, left overs of the signets, and they will stay and wait to find some other places where they can drop them, like some trash bin or simmering. Even though it could be covered with trash everywhere, we would not drop it. We would just wait and find some other place to do that Which is also like, in Belarus it's banned to [?] On the streets, but also if you leave some trash, you can be fined by the police so,...

I: You can be fined by police?

P: Yes they will give you a fine if you leave some trash in the streets.

I: And they are very actually in checking that?

P: I don't know how actively actually haha, it was just always in my mind when I go out, like ya I shouldn't do that and you know...I guess we are just.... Soft haha

I: I don't know if soft is the right word...

I: And if you would think about um.. for example.. cause also some people mentioned the language or tradition, is that something very important for you?

P: Uhm.. language is a very compicated topic as you know, because mostly Belarusians speaks Russian, but after this fill scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine, more and more people started to speak in Belarusian which is a very good thing. And .

I: Do you speak it?

P: Yeah I speak it, but with me it's a kind of different, because I come from the south part of Belarus, so this region is called palesia[?] if you have heard about it, it's like.. they are close to Ukrainian border and also Polish border, and historically even, this people were kind of separated from the other Belarusians, they had different names for them and for example my family, we don't really speak Russian to each other, my family speaks some mix of Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian and sometimes Polish.. it's some other dialect

I: Ow wow, so kind of local dialect?

P: Ya, so for me it was always easier to start speaking Belarusian, because I was always hearing it in my family, in the city, in the town where I live, it was normal to speak the dialect, no-one spoke proper Russian. Yeah...

I: There was no difference in for example the inner circle and the people you met in the streets or in shops?

P: yeah, in this region it was very normal. Ok, in this region, like people in the villages will speak more dialect, people in the town would speak more Russian with a mix of dialect but still, it was not proper Russian or something. But when I went to study in Minsk, it was different, because everyone is speaking Russian there. But, yah I speak Belarusian fluently and yeah.. now I think.. my life is really like English, Russian and Belarusian. So sometimes my brain just breaks haha

I: Everything mixed ya...

I: And since you're in Lithuania, you said after the war, people started to speak more Belarusian, um... but did you always tried to speak the Belarusian language?

P: not really, it started more after the start of the war. I know more people who started speaking Belarusian, and also I was so sick with Russian, so now .. my social media is also either in English or in Belarusian even though I see Russians there and yah..I kind of did it myself at some point, I muted all the Russian language sources, I did it all my self .. it was... yeah.. I Feld the need to come back to the Belarusian language finally and to start it speaking in my life.

I: uhum

I: And if you would think about being Belarusian, Who is according to you Belarusian?

P: haha... uhm,...

I: What do you have to do for that? Or what do you have to be? Or where do you have to live?

P: uh,... right now I think, being Belarusian is I don't know.. I think.. be kind of society we did like completely changed our direction after 2020, because before that, what we saw during the protest and everything, Belarus was never like that. I was protesting since I was 17 and I'm 22. I was protesting before 2020. When I would come to the protests it would be like 30 people, 50 maybe. But max 100. It was more like that, so it was always easy to end this protest before it started. And after that, I saw that, people were ready to fight, because before that I never thought of Belarusian of people being ready for that, but now ya.....I think now.. Belarusian is someone who should fight, even though.. ok now we are not in [?] Stage for fighting for our freedom because most of the people left or are in prison and... all of the bad things happening, but .. uhm.. now we are just.. waiting is not the right word, but maybe learning and trying to find ways how to come back and how to finally make this Lukashenko leave. Ya because this is something we constantly talking about here.. even like drinking in the bar, or talking to Belarusians when ya... this is... like the constant topics, something ..

I: Like how to go back and how the reconstruct as we want it be..

P: Yes, so,. Yah now.. it's more like.. some revolutionary ideas and all of this..

I: Do you actively think about it? Or is it more in conversations?

P: uhm.. I cannot.. say about every Belarusian. But to me it is something constantly in my head, yeah.. I cannot get rid of it.

I: And you're also actively thinking about going back to Belarus?

P: Yah I would like to, but ... for me..

I: But that's also..I also hear from some people they made the discussion they stay abroad, and other people actively thinking I want to go back as soon as possible if it's possible.

P: Yeah.. for me it is not possible to go back and to visit my country right now, because yah I was protesting there and after I left to Vilnius, the police came after me, like after one week after I left.

I: You left right on time.

P: Yahh.. surprisingly .. it was also like a big existential crisis for me like should I leave or should I not or what should I do? Yah. But I kinda left at the right time and since the time I never came back and I don't think I..I don't think it is possible for me if Lukashenko is there. I would like to go back and to fight again, that's .. that's something I'm craving.. I don't know.. I hope it will happen.

I: Ya... And can you explain this idea where were you for example fighting for? Cause you said you already protested in 2017, was there a clear goal you working towards?

P: Uhhh.. not really, it was more something.. ok, we have this official independence day in Belarus which is some Lukashenkos celebration. Yeah,..., not something we really like, there was somethinh we called like.. day of the wheel, like it was our true independence day celebrating that the date that Belarus first time became some independent I don't know.. Not country, but there were some independent ideas, we wrote our.. like we declared that we are some separate government for the first time in history.

I: Was it the moment after the first world war?

P: No it was at 1918. 1918 yah..

I: So basically we celebrate this every year on the 25th of March and Lukahenko hates when people do that, so basically every year we were doing that and every year they were arresting people.. we were doing that, we were going our with our white-red-white flags. Also there were some smaller protest, some smaller things happening, like .. for example in Belarus we have this really big problem that our frug policy is really really bad, people even go to prison by smoking weed by time. You smoke weed one time, you go to prison for 5 years.

I: very strict

P: and it happened to a lot of young people, because young people try it and .. like imagine a lot of 18 and 19 years old in prison, just for trying weed. And in our law, it doesn't matter it's weed or cocaine, it doesn't matter if you're smoking it, or selling it..

I: drugs is drugs.. then you go to prison.

P: Yeah that's basically it, so there was some organization that was talking about this issue and they organized also some protests that I joined. Also, there was like before presidential elections, we had some actions for deputies kind of, and there was some youth organization that was trying to, also to become this local deputies and to change staff inside. And they were also organizing some protests and one of them is actually in prison right now, and the other is exaped the country, they had to, because since the beginning of the protests, everyone just [?] In prison immediately. So there was this small protests about things happening, but it was not really that big before. Before 2020, nothing was really happening.

I: But can you .. so there were like protests, so you were participating in that protests, what was the personal feeling the thing you want to see that had to be changed? For you personally.

P: mhhh...I mean of course, globally I just wanted Lukashnko to go away, that was always my thing. I think Belarus has a lot of work to, like really a lot of, and Lukashenko cannot get it done, but to me it was always he going away, because while he is there, we cannot change anything. Because we have a lot of problems like Eastern European countries do like.. this women rights, this LGBTQ rights, this drugs policies and everything. Army also, that's a separate topic. And it all cannot be change if Lukahsenko it there

I: aha, so you say the most fundamental change in society to have everything changed is first the government should be replaces and then we can have fundamentally work on other problems

P: Yeah, even when I was going to smaller portests, I was just hoping it will probably do something, it was just.. even though I know it would not change anything, it was a small protests, no-one even knew about it or anything. It was just something you just do, because there is nothing else you can do at the moment. There was no other protest or other things I felt I could do to somehow express my political stance and my political views and it was important for me when I was in Belarus to express ya.. I'm against Lukashenko and everyone should be.

I: But you were relatively young then when you participated in the protests

P: ya kind of ya ha ha

I: how did you get involved? How does something like that working? Did you had people around you with whom you shared ideas?

P: Ya I guess it was like... it started with having people around and then it's .. proceded with.. when I was 17, I started studying in the Belaurisan university, it's like state university, the main university and when I came there and I saw from inside how Belarusian education looks like and what it is, and how it .. ideologically and how they don't let you even speak about it?

I: how did you feel that? On for example daily base? Do you have an example?

P: Ya during lectures..Like uhm.. Ok ya I have a good example. Like at that time we also had elections with also some deputies, I don't know what was happening but it was some elections, not presidential, but something. They.. and in Belarus we have this thing that the government makes people to go to the all the elections earlier than elections date, just because it is very easy to [?] Your early elections

I: like the 2020 elections

P: Yah, they do that every elections actually, in 2020 it was just more obvious for everyone. So in the universities we were coming to our lectures and telling us.. He today you should all go vote, otherwise like people have to come to talk with the [?] of the faculty. And .. A lot of people actually went voting and I was very angry with that and I was angry with the voting system and that no-one having problems with that, and .. that was the point I realized first I'm not staying in this university and second we have to something, this is.. like this level of I don't know.. when they're just [?] People what other will just say to them, like [?] just comes and said go vote, and everyone just go voting.. umm..

I: But it feels like you were really like standing alone in this part, but would you think that other people have the same opinion but just were scared...

P: Yeah! There were people in the university who had similar opinions of course, but for example in my group where I just studies in the class, not that many. And I think at that time it helped for it like it was just like that...one person there and one person there... it was not that much, we were not formed as a group, we were not some movement about it .. even my friends who told me they wouldn't go vote, they did. They went. Because I believe one of friends, like.. she did not go voting.. and then in the evening when she was in the dorms, the faculty leader literally told her on the phone and told her: "He if you don't go vote tomorrow, you will not stay in the dorm anymore" and she just did. And I remembered at that time, I also tweeted something about it, how it's going and how it literally come to our lectures to do that, and some of the Belarusian independent media posted my screenshots about it and literally a lot of friends texted at the time and like "Omg delete it, delete it, delete it immediately, they will kick you out of university, what are you doing" and that when I saw how everyone is scared and everything, and how deep is this fear, hoe deep this fear is in the society and yah.. it was bad at the time.

I: But you didn't delete it?

P: But at that time I already kinda new that I'm not going to stay in university, so I didn't care if they kicked my out or not because I was going to leave myself. They actually didn't, maybe they didn't found me or something, or they didn't know who did this tweet ya I don't know, no-one told me anything about it ... but I did not delete it, and in the university we have also this system, if you study in Belarus in the university for free, and it is very hard to get to university for free, you literally have to work all your school, you have to work hard at your exams and anything.

I: You have to get the higshtest grades for getting the scholarships?

P: Yah, literally ya. Like it's not.. ya it's just state funded and if you get for free studies, you study like for four years bachelors, and after that you have to work for two years for any like governmental thing, because you have to stay for like 2 more years to work to kind of, work for your studies, because they paid for you and now you have to kind of get it back. And also when I realized it, when I realized I have to do that after my studies, I was like, no I'm not gonna do that, I'm not ready for that got do and yah I quoted university.

I: And I want go back a little bit to what you say about when you made the picture about your class and when you knew that some people wouldn't go to vote and some people say like "I'm not gonna vote" And they gonna vote as well.. how do you discuss such things among each other? Is it like you have to be a little bit more secretly? Or can you be more clear in the small group? How does it work?

P: no, we litterally discuss everything kinda directly. I guess our KGB is not really hearing everything haha but .. yeah it was always the same response when I was saying why would you doing that, why would you vote? Everybody was just saying that " You should understand" and it was just a response for everything and I did not really understand haha, maybe it was easy for me because I already knew that I'm going to leave university, I was brave enough to do that, I didn't have to keep this place in university no matter what, maybe that's why it was easier for me and not the easy for other people.

I: Then you can also be an example for others right?

P: Haha, I was not thinking of myself as an example, yeah I was just kinda of sick with everything happening at the time already.

I: And then the 2020 protests, the big protests... what was different in this protests?

P: I don't know, I did not expect us to protest like that, I really did not expect especially after, like previous history of pretest I knew.. I really did not expect this in this way, like umm.. actually.. When protests started, when it was the elections day, I was at that time I was traveling because the first restrictions after the covid time were lifted, and .. we were supposed to go back like to the election with my friend together, but our flight was canceled so we stayed a little bit longer in Istanbul at the time, we voted there, and the next day we were in Ukraine, so we were in Ukraine when we were looking at all the photos that was in the news about what was happening and for us it was .. like.. our apartment, our Airbnb at the time paid for another week in Ukraine, but we were like no no, we should go back immediately, we should back to Belarus, even though at the time there was no internet, we could't text our families, we couldn't check what was happening, I remember my friend was texting to me, she barely found internet somehow somewhere, got some connecting and I was asking her What's up? And she told me that even people in my home tome, and my home town is 13.000 people it's very small. Even people in my home town went protesting, and it was like 1000 people gathering, it was a huge protest for my town. And she told me, she saw my brother there also, and at that time I couldn't even call him or my mom so I just knew that my brother went protesting and now we have no information what happened. So ya me and my friend decided no matter what, we are going back. And we did, it was difficult to find the bus ticket, the bus going to Belarus at the time because all the tickets were sold out. I think all the Belarusians made the decision to go back and then we were in the bus and everybody was talking about the protests, everybody was talking about how we will go protesting right after we from the bus. There was some old there that was telling us that we are all stupid and that everything is fine and that Lukashenko is fine, but ok.. old lady..

I: A whole political discussion in the bus.

P: Ha ha ya, I remember she was fighting with some guy there, like this guy was kinda saying her that she is being stupid and that it's something happening, but the problem was that .. on the border it was still corona virus the time so they made us sign the papers that we should stay self-isolated for another two weeks

I: ahah..

P: And it was saying that if you don't stay self-isolated, you will get fined or even get arrested. And sign all this papers, and of course, I don't think that any people in the bus were staying self-isolated. I came back to my hometown, and I immediately went protesting, even though I was self-isolated and I knew that. They wouldn't even have to create a criminal case for me, because if they catch me at the protest, I was supposed to be self-isolated. They would arrest me without even thinking about anything, but ya.. it was just something I felt we all had to do

I: Aham.

P: Ya and.. haha I don't remember was the question.. Ah ya .. it was a huge protest. I guess it was the first time in my life when I really felt Ok there is some hope, maybe this time will change something, maybe .. I remember I was super excited. I know a lot of people were telling us if you were in the protesting.. like normally... we were not protesting in the right way, because we were not aggressive and anything, but before that, before 2020 when I was thinking about Belarus, I was always thinking about how we should do a revolution and something, I was always imagining it to be you know... to be [?] When we would set cars on fire and beat police and anything. But when I came there in 2020 I went for the protests, I don't know.. I felt like ... When you walk inside this I don't know 400.000 people crowd. I just felt so powerful, I didn't had to set cars on fire, or I didn't had to beat the shit out someone, I just felt so powerful at the time, I didn't want it be blight. I didn't want it to be a mess. I believed that we could win.

I: That's also your understanding of the Belarusian identity, the politeness.

P: At some point yes haha

I: If you think about it, would you have a different strategy?

P: You maybe, like our way didn't works haha so.. I guess yes we have to learn from our mistakes, but it's also very complicated, because what can we do as peaceful people against army and police? Of course, the first thing we tried to do was getting police and army on our sides. It didn't work and.. I don't know, we defiantly should do it the other way, but what way? It's really compacted? Yes, maybe we should be more violent, I don't know, but ... we are still this peaceful people against armed people and it's not really a fair fight. And also, it was like .. we were getting support form Europe in the way that they were let us escape to Europe whenever we need it, but it was not really that much of big support. For example with sanctions and everything, they still kept trading with Belarus, even though they didn't recognize Lukashenko as president. They kept trading with Lukashenko, they kept like.. ok, some sanctions, but they were not strict enough I believe. I think it should be, I would be fine if they would literally cut of Belarus from all the trade everything at the time. So no money from Europe would come to Luakshenko, because Putin was also financing a lot Luakshenko and all of those. And we just... don't have so much resources, ya we have people .. ya but.. we don't have the resources...

I: So the support is a bit too soft? So in the context of todays support, if it would be the opposite around, first the war and then the protests in Belarus, then the support would probably much more..

P: yeah yeah, I think so.

I: But that's always when you back in history right?

P: Haha

I: You always knows things better...

P: that's true, but we have hope that maybe after Russia loses the war, it will be easier for us to protest something, because it will.. like without Russia helping Belarus, maybe [?]

I: yeah.. financially yeah.. I think it would also be.. obviously the most likely reason the EU didn't support Belarus was probably the anxiety for Putin and it would end up in a war...

I: And if you go to such protest, you already mentioned before you had this white-red-white flag, can you explain to me, this flag? This symbols?

P: I think first time I actually saw it, like someone hold it when I was in high school. I was studying in Minsk, in some lyceum, like in Belarus we have this system that for high school, 10th and 11th grade you can go study in this lyceum, it's a kind of upper-level for study. So I went to Minsk and I was living in the dormitory and some guys in the dormitory literally had this flag. It's kind of interesting because in the room they had his flag white-red-white on the one wall and the Ukrainian flag on the other wall haha

I: Very actual image yeah!

P: Ha ha yea in the time, of course obviously it triggered a lot conversations about this flag and about everything, and it was .. I moved to Minsk, I moved out from my home town, I was .. more active about going to some paces, doing something. I started going to some local Belarusian band concerts, I started going to some things happening in Minsk and ... every time I was going somewhere, to some Belarusian festival, some Belarusian concerts, protest and everything, this flag was everywhere. It was always for me like...

I: Also like cultural events you mean?

P: Yeah yeah! Sometimes people would just bring it to the concerts and we would just being here. And yah to me it was always my real flag, because to all the great events that I choose the go, they always like under this flag. And all the governmental events that I'm forced to go to, they are under this Soviet flag.

I: Yah yah yah.. So you would say the flag really represents the real people of Belaurus instead of the government.

P: Yah yah I think so, Umm.. I mean I .. I don't know how people, who are not opposing to Lukashenko, how they would identify these flags, they would think in different perspective and they would say that our white-red-white flag is bloody and it's just bad... just destroys everything.. but to me it was always about ya.. about people I want to be surrounded with.

I: aham..Ya.. So that was a really good thing the flag massively showed up when you went to the protests?

P: Yah yah..That's actually very great that we have these two separate flags, maybe at some point. Because it kind of ... no... it kind of helps us identify better, because I know now Russian people had to create their own new flag for like [?] Four Movement of something.. just to get separated from the country they have now, which is also [?] topic and I.. maybe not a very good thing to do, but we had it from the very beginning, we had this independent Belarus flag and we had this Soviet occupation flag and it was easy to choose sides.

I: aham.. It can also be perceived as a new symbol of your national identity of course.

P: Yes.

I: I'd like to ask you one more question about the 2020 events, of course there was a very active political opposition's, specially around Tshichanovskaya, was it something that you really like.. did you really agree on all this topics or did you also actively as an individual had different ideas about what has to be changed or..

P: Yeah.. you know how Tsichanovskaya got elected, you now why she had to that because, yeah everyone else was elected so we literally didn't had any other choice. I mean.. I really respect her for what she has done, I.. I don't think that a lot of people would be able to do that but she did. And.. but..

I: I hear a but...

P: But.. haha, when we talk about the elections of 2020, there was no-one like representing my political view, but I was fine with that, because in the first place we needed someone for Lukshenko to leave.

I: How did that differ? Your political views with..

P: Uhm.. again.. all the people who wanted to run for presidency that year like Babaryka, Tsichnovski, they were kind of soft of where they stand with Russia. Because they were still into cooperating with Russia and everything and I didn't like that but I was like ok whatever, at least not Lukashenko again. Also.. we didn't get a chance to hear, but they really want to promote this ideas, because usually it goes after the candidate is registered, and none of them got to the point that they were registered

I: yeah..

P: As you memorized it, but ya I..I mostly like.. I identify as leftist and I'm more into lie some liberal European ideas like about women rights, LGBTQ rights, I really need that in Belarus and about how, how .. like... in my point of view Belarus should move more to the European side. So ya I didn't like where they stand about Russia and also of course they were not discussing topics like LGBTQ or something, it was just [?] At the time, so ya I don't think anyone of them did represent me and what I want form Belarus, but I also knew that these kind of conversations were too early to have in Belarus, because we don't really have any political thing happening there. We didn't have political parties, we didn't have anything.. people don't know if they are right or left because people don't talk about it. We don't study about it. So.. I was..

I: First things have to be done.. first the fair elections, and then we can talk about the institutions.

P: I was even saying that..like.. when we were at the protests, yes we were all protesting together, but in normal political field, like in normal political situations, me and like many of the other people, we could never even stand on the same protests, because like.. I'm leftist, some of them are right, like in normal in political field, we would even be together but..We had to unite, all of us, no matter which views we had, just against the..

I: But that's maybe also what you see happening right now right? When we are two years later, after the protests, we also see more diversity in the political opposition. Before it was very united I feel, also very pragmatic, like throwing out the dictatorship and now you also see some more different views and different opinions which are getting louder and louder.

P: ya ya, it's happening and I don't know.. I guess ya.. for us to fight with each other it's too early to fight with each other, before we fight with Lukashenko. Really this is the first thing to do, and after that we can..

I: Discuss about the details.

P: We can hate new other governments, just as long it is not a dictator government, just you know.. just this normal political process going on.

I: yeah yeah . Stay united, that's a very important thing. I'm making a bit of jump right now. So I do like to discuss the topic like why did you .. first of all when did you left to Lithuania?

P: Umm.. It happen in the end of November of 2020, so basically it was a time like.. the protests were still happening in Minsk, but at the time we started.. like if you know the first, we had this big protests every Sunday and also other days, but mostly Sunday was the main day of protest. And it start happening that less and less people would come, but more police would be there, because they would take police from all over Belarus to Minsk mostly. And it was the time that we started doing local protests. People would go out at the same time, but in different neighborhoods of Minsk so police wouldn't be able to take everyone at the same place. It was not working well.. I was kind of realizing that the protests is not doing so well anymore and people getting arrested every day and in my hometown it was also the [?] People getting arrested everyday even like.. Even when I was staying in my home, I would never come to answer the door, because it could be police, so my family always did that and I was expecting to see police basically any day even at this point.. and before that I applied to Vilnius University because they offered some scholarships for Belarusians and I was like ok... just to have a visa just in case I want to that, because also like... this bureaucracy processes.. quite weird. Because for example if I feel like .. for example in my hometown I know they started arresting everyone and I feel like I might be the next and I want to escape but without being beaten or actually arrested, or kin of having any proofs I cannot come and just say "hey hey I might be in danger". They would not let me in to any country, so kind of want it to have this visa thing at least, it would be a student visa but it is counting for me to escape whenever I need. And when I got my visa, my mom start saying that I should leave. I think she was sick from opening door ha ha and always waiting for police and ..

I: the stress...

P: And every Sunday I was always giving the instructions like where to call and what to do in case I do not come back home and the police departments, phone numbers, everything.. and um.. so she was telling me to leave, and I also had like.. maybe the right time, but I had this big crisis happening like should I leave or not do that, so I decided to let the university to decide kind of haha. I left, the day I left was Sunday, my bus was in

the evening, so I came to Minsk that day, in the afternoon I went for the protests and then I was like: "Ok if I'm getting arrested I'm not going anywhere obviously" but if I'm not, ok maybe it's a sign or something I don't know.. I don't really believe in that, but I was like....

I: Give it a last change

P: Give it a last change, and this was the day when I almost got arrested, like before I don't know but I was quite lucky at the protests, even when something was happening, like there were shooting at the people in the same protests as me, I was always kind of far from where it is happening. And.. I remember one time I went to the protest, where.. It got really violent and police was really violent to the people. Even more violent that unusual. And I couldn't get to the protest because the police, they were blocking all the roads that I would normally use, and I remember me and my friend would normally go through the parks, though the different places try to find a way to join the protests and we literally physically couldn't do that because the police blocked everything. And.. Yeah.. I always somehow escaped in the place where some violence and ... police brutality was happening. And that day I almost got arrested haha.. It was this local protest and we went to the neighborhood where my friend lived, and it's not a very lucky neighborhood because it is close to the city center and we also women marches there happening. So police knew the place and they know how to that, uhm.. and some point we were walking and we were protesting and the police came and they immediately started arresting, they started beating litterally everyone they saw, people started running to houses nearby to safe themselves, people from the houses they came out to let people in . And at that moment I was still my friends, and of them looked at me and she was like: "Hey, we have this new strategy, we don't run". They have this idea that police guys, they are like bulls and they can see only movement haha..

I: ahh.. haha so you ..

P: And we were like really walking slowly, like we are not in the middle of the protests right now. Maybe they would understand it, I mean they are stupid enough. So we could just walking and nothing was happening and they were starting to arrest literally everyone. At some point we stopped, we were not even walking anymore, we stopped near on the houses, we start smoking, like casually talking like nothing is happening. And they just didn't notice, they were arresting people around us, like beating them, or some reason they didn't arrest us. And... It was lucky, but even though, we were in the situation, we were like ok.. but still it was too fast, we decided to join the protest in the other neighborhood which was close to us and when we went there, I think it was like.. I don't know 30 meters between us and the protest. And it was the time when the police came and started arresting them. So also we were like very very close but we didn't get to the protest because the police came and ya.. It was the day when I was so close to be arrested, but ya it didn't happened and I came to Vilnius

I: Kinda lucky then

P: Ya I still don't believe what happened haha.

I: Do you, since you're here in Lithuania still protest?

P: Ya, I sometimes go to the protest that is organized by our diaspora but not that often. I don't know.. I don't know why.

I: Do you also see a difference in the protest, is it getting less active since ..

P: I think so ya, but maybe now they are more active because a lot Ukrainians join and now it's more like protest for Ukraine, but there is still organized by a lot of Belarusian and Ukrainian diaspora, they kinda united bit. But yah...

I: And how is it to be Belarusian in Lithuania?

P: Um.. I mean... um.. it's fine, I know that there are lot of things happening now, Belarusian propaganda for example says that everybody hates Belarusians now in Europe, like Ukrainians they hate everyone, but I never actually make a situation when someone would be mean to be because I am Belarusian, or that I had to excuse myself or had to explain because.. I guess people still remember what happened in 2020 and why I am here, and also even in like.. there are now also a lot of things in the internet about how Ukrainians hate Belarusians because our territory is used for bombing Ukraine and everything, but still all of that only in the internet, because when I am here, I am here also.. I have a lot Ukrainian friends, a lot of Ukrainian people live in my dorm and we all talk normally. I never had anyone to be.. to be mean to me because I am Belarusian. So far.. I wouldn't say anything is really happening to Belaurisans here.

I: ya.. Do you feel free here to express yourself?

P: Yes yes.

I: That's different than in Belarus

P: Yes!

I: And your feeling of Being Belarusian here.. do you feel proud to be Belarusian in Lithuania?

P: Maybe not proud, like I would never hiding our denying that.. I would always say yes I am Belarusian if people ask questions I would answer them, but ya it's not something to be ashamed of and it's not something to be proud of that I am Belarusian and here..

I: And If you have conversations with Ukrainians it's in English?

P: Umm... sometimes they speak to me..some of them speak in Russian to me and that's fine, with some of them I speak Belarusian and they speak Ukrainian.

I: Ow you can understand each other.

P: Ya that's kinda fun. But we completely understand each others languages. But ya sometimes we speak in English, but it happened to me only once and I think it was mostly because we were at the bar and I started talking with the girl and I think we both kept talking English because it gives an opportunity to other people to join our conversation, because of those foreign people.

I: Some more practical reason then.. Is that an important thing for you here to keep in touch with Belarusians?

P: Uhm.. it's not like important, but some of my friends are Belarusians because ya we all came together and kind of united from that day, but ... um.. maybe because you know, there are a lot of Belarusians here, I don't really have this need to be around my people, because I already have my friends here and I already like.. communicate with Belarusians here everyday. And uhm.. when I meet another Belarusian here it's not that I am super excited or something.. more like.. ow cool me too

I: You're not actively looking for

P: Mostly no.. but when I did my Erasmus in the last semester and I was in Greece and I think I was the only Belarusian in the whole city, I never met anyone from Belarus. And ya.. I kinda felt lonely at this point, because it was like big group of Spanish, big groups of Polish, big groups of France people and I was the literally only Belarusian. And everytime a new person meet me, they were like: "Ow, your [?]" and I was like no, and I was like.. ya haha

I: So to some extent it is important to have your own people around you.

P: Yeah it's um... it's just.. when you are from.. with someone from your own country you don't have to explain some things, it doesn't mean that you are the same people, but you have some really similar cultural background and you don't really have to explain some things that you don't want to explain or they would understand some things that no-one else would understand

I: yah..a common understanding

P: [?] without having that, but yah it was fine

I: Are you still in contact with friend and family in Belarus?

P: umm ya, not many of my friends stayed in Belarus, but ya some of them do

I: Is that kind of contact different than for example speak with your friends here in Lithuania? You have to be more careful or discuss different topics?

P: Um.. not really.. No I don't feel like I am more careful, like.. ok maybe when I am texting with my mom and I would write something that is forbidden, I would delete this.. like after she reads it I would delete it also for her, because I know in Minsk there is police randomly checks peoples phones. So yeah just for her safety I delete it.. but yeah.. I know my friends would delete whatever they don't want the police to see so it's fine.

I: ya yah.. you also have to ask sometime are you in a good place to speak or is it not that extreme?

P: Nah not really, I mean, usually I call only my mom. I am just texting with everyone else or voice messages, and my mom she usually works at home so ... it's fine haha.

I: Regarding the Belarusians in Lithuania and in Vilnius in particular... is there according to you an active community of Belaurisans in Lithuania?

P: yes I believe so. I can see there are a lot of same people going to the protest every week and organizing some events, and now they are helping Ukraine. And there is this place called Zanak. It's also some Belarusian house here, they do some ... they actually do all kinds of activities. They do Lithuanian classes, English classes, workshops for kids, workshops for something, writing letters to political prisoners. They are still like doing actively a lot of things.

I: aham.

I: Are you also participated in that different kind of activities?

P: Not much.. I do, but not much.

I: how come?

P: I don't know, I guess.

I: You have the time you said

P: haha yes, at some point I went for my Erasmus I guess.. and I got.. a bit .. like I was not here, kind of separated from everything happening here. And then when I came back, like I had to catch up with my studies because I missed one months of studies because of my Erasmus and also I was working at that time.. And ya...I just kind of.., you know when you speak something like one time, 2 times, 3 times, you do.. I don't know ... it's just kind of naturally happened. Maybe a good point, so maybe I should going haha. But yah before that I was working and studying mostly and just.. like .. kind of using it as an excuse for me to be lazy.

I: aha ok. So there was not really a need for you to be active in all these organizations or..

P: Ya i don't know even why. It was more like.. It felt .. kind of useless to do so, even though it is not useless.. It just feels like doping something here and doing something in Belarus, that's two different things.

I: But then you are more talking about the protesting thins right?

P: Yah.. So I don't know. I guess I just .. at some point I remember I kinda lost hope, I was depressed by what was happening and everything, but now ... but I should be going haha

I: Is there anything in the community wise, or event wise you're missing in Lithuania?

P: Okay interesting, it's really hard to think about it sometimes because it's my third year abroad already and I start forgetting what it is to be in Belarus actually.

I: Do you go back sometimes?

P: No.. I guess I miss some like Belarusian concerts, stand-ups like these kind of things, you know when you can go to any events, and I would now the language which there are speaking there. Because here in Lithuania I always have to check if the even is in Lithuanian or English or any other language. And in generally I miss this feeling when you're walking and you can understand what people talking about.

I: But then you speak about your local dialect, or do you speak about Belarusian or Russian?

P: yah..Belarusian and Russian sadly. Russian is the language that most of the Belarusian use. I just.. I don't know remember how it feels to understand like completely understand what people around you are speaking about.. I.. like I am here in Lithuania mostly, I went to Greece for Erasmus and ya.. I am always in some place where people are speaking ..

I: Even though there are quite some Russian speakers here in Lithuania

P: Yeah but..

I: If I walk around at least I hear quite a lot of...

P: Yeah that's true, but still it's not the same.. And mostly of course people speak Lithuanian.

I: Yeah. Still a lot of Aciu's and prasjoms

P: yeah yeah yeah haha

I: In this communities, you said it's related to protests but also the cultural events. What would you think.. who is responsible for this events? Is there like one organization or several?

P: Uhm... I think there is like one organization. I think like it's this Belarusian house here in Vilnius and people who are in charge there they are mostly doing things.

I: Is there something more you like to share?

P: Ok maybe about like Belarusian not identity, but something like Belarusian thing. I was having this conversation with my mom yesterday

I: About the national identity?

P: No no, just my normal call with my mom. She basically, like I come from a very small town, like a working class family, all of my family is basically just, working class in Belarus, like people who are far from politics and everything, yeah they just. Just want to have their job, live normally and not have to try to change anything because it is fine the way it is. And .. we were talking with her. And all this time while I am in Lithuania, before that I was telling what was happening in Belarus, how protests are going, they are arresting people and everything, and..I was telling her constantly, people are still being arrested in Belarus like every day. They still arrest people who were protesting in Belarus in 2020, they still do...

I: Does she have a different position in the political debate?

P: She doesn't, I mean she doesn't like Lukashenko, but she is not politically active. There was actually some great dull moment she told me that she would like to join protest

I: oww. That's a big step then.

P: It was a bit more than a year ago but I was already in Lithuania. I don't remember what triggered her, I guess she was just fat up with me not being able to come home, and like.. my brother at the time, he turned 18 at the time and he had to go to army and everything and she was just fed up with everything and she told me would like to join the protest, but at the time the protest already kind of stopped. So it was kind of too late for her, but I liked that she got to this idea at least. And we were talking, and she told me that some women from the village that is next to hers, because my mom now moved to the village next to my hometown, and in the village next to this one, one woman was arrested for the protests in 2020 and her husband was arrested too but he managed to escape and she was so shocked by it. Even though I was telling her this was happening like the whole time, but for her this.. she knew me and she knew how I was always was politically active so for her it was not surprising that something would happen to me and I had to escape But when she actually saw that the same, like work class people who live literally in the village next to hers, like the same people as her were also arrested, that was the time when she was like.. o.. o.. maybe something is happening actually. Because she was not really like understanding how bad it is and so she saw the example.. and.. it was kind of annoying to me because I was telling her all the time, but when she saw literally the example, she could understand it and ... that's also I guess the thing about like.. Belarusians, that until it comes to your house, our the house next to yours you just see how it's happening

I: Ya it's a different story. And you discussed this with her yesterday?

P: ya and my brother is now 19 and also the thing with army is freaking us out, so this is like slowly coming to our house, so maybe ya my mom is getting more and more intense about it.

I: ya...

I: Do you also think the war in Ukraine changed something in the mentality of Belarus? Is it a kind of .. maybe as an outside I would think it's a kind of motivation for people to unite..

P: I think so yes.. because in all this years, the propaganda from Lukashenko was like.. no matter what I do, but at least a war in Belarus would happen ever. His main point was, he would prevent any war to happen and anything.. but now.. people see that is was all.. just not true.. it's still a bit of annoying that it takes that extreme kind of actions for people to realize something, but ya I guess the realization came to people who were still out of politics. When it was like their husbands and sons and like.. this people, who need to go to army now and who needs to go to army now you don't know what happens. Like now, Belarusian army now doesn't participate in the war in Ukraine right now, but who knows..

I: Specially after last recent weeks..

P: I don't understand.. Lukashenko says a lot of stuff, but of course you cannot really trust all of that, but also it's ya.. you just never knows what happens. He says about this army thing, like uniting with Russia, it's .. ya.. I mean.. we cannot trust him, but also he would do whatever Putin says to him and...

Interview 6 transcription

Date: 19 Oktober 2022

Time: 15:00

Gender: Female

Age: 20

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: And the first question I always ask: If we talk about the Belarusian national identity, what does that mean for you?

P: Ow god haha., ok I mean for me it's definitely something personal I have and I think I did not really have it before 202. So actually I think I cannot give a general definition for everyone.

I: No no it's your personal idea.

P: It's like my personal part of me now, and I started feeling that I became really proud to say that I am Belarusian after the situation in Belarus. Not.. because before I was not proud, I just didn't think about it in general. But in 2020, when all the things happened, it's like my life changed like before and after and after it, overtime now like here, somewhere like with foreigners and I moved to Lithuania so I am constantly with foreigners and I am saying: "I am Belarusian, and I am so proud of it" So for me it's something personal which was born in me two years ago

I: aha

P: And ya, just some.. something like that, it's kinda abstract, but ya..I would say something I am proud of

I: And if you speak with foreigners, and you feeling proud about your being Belarusian, which things do you mention? Like ha I am from Belarus, and ...

P: Ya I am from Belarus, and actually ok, well actually but then after, it is not even me who mention, but usually people ask:"but o, btw, do you have the Belarusian language?" Is it different from Russian, so usually the second thing I mention like after this personality, yes we have our own language and it is rather different from Russian etc. So I believe this language thing is usually...

I: Do you speak it?

P: Um.. ya that's also an interesting one, because I have friends who are only speaking Belarusian and some of them decided to switch to Belarusian before the events in 2020, some of them did it in 2020 and some of them did it with the beginning of the war in Ukraine. So, i literally have some friends who don't, almost never use Russian and when I am with them I only use Belarusian as well or it's some random, like people from Belarus write me something and they write in Belarusian, I always write in Belarusian. But in generally I speak Russian mostly, with friends or other friends. But I started in Lyceum, it's like lyceum of Belarusian state university, it's like high school and we have a lot of Belarusian speaking students and teachers, it's kind of influenced by that.

I: And that was already before 2020?

P: Yes, in this place it's like high school, there were a lot of people already felt this frozen identity I would say, even before elections and everything, they were just proud. I did not felt it before but.

I: They were already feeling and sharing their stories?

P: Yah yah! They were like very interested in the history of Belarus, they were interested in the... they were speaking in Belarusian mostly, Belarusian literature, so ya.. even before like current events I would say, the elections and the arrests and everything, ya they were just like interested in Belarus.

I: Yeah..

P: Yeah so I was inspired, maybe ok.. Ok I finished school in 2020, so it was 2018 till 2020 my high school. I was inspired by this people, but I just honestly did not really think about it, I was not so interested. I was like: "O yah cool you speak Belarusian" but I'm like ok so... haha

I: And how did you learn the Belrusian language?

P: We have this subject, the Belarusian language, it's like separate subject and we have Belarusian literature as well on school.

I: Everybody has this?

P: Yes everybody, because in Belarus we have like two official languages, like Belarusian and Russian, so we all have to two lessons like Belarusian and Russian. And .. so ya..it's not like a foreign language, you cannot chose it, you just have it ya.. But it's also kind of problem...how it's called, how to say, it's not very inspiring...

I: It's more focussed on Russian?

P: Um.. teachers are.., I would say the problem is .. um.. teaching Belarusian at our schools, teachers do not really explain students why you need it because it's like ok.. "it's kinda similar as Russian, and no one speaks, why do we need to know?"

I: so the teachers themselves were not really motivated ?

P: They were just like: "Ok you have to do it, grammar grammar grammar" But this idea of the fact that language kind of determines our identity, this ideas are usually not presented to people, to students. And they just: "why do I need to do?" That's the question.

I: That's of course also how students think right? Why do we need it, why do we need it?

P: It's almost [?] like that, so if I heard some... [?] so why do we need it to study? So yes that's a problem

I: And at home? You spoke it at home?

P: No at home I also speak Russian, but my dad, it's like me and my mom who sometimes think ok let's speak Belarusian haha and we just like.. speak Belarusian, yea sometimes um.. yeah. But mostly Russian, 95%.

I: Yeah..It's also more practical probably

P: Yahhh and I'm also kinda used to it from childhood so ya..

I: yah.. and about this Belarusian identity, you just shared your insides, with whom do you generally discuss such things?

P: Ok well.. ok... I think all my friends, they are all kinda... we are very similar I would say. I mean all of my friends in Belarus participated in protests so to say so you definitely will discuss it. I also at the time had some foreign friends and .. It was the first time that I started feeling that foreign people are also kinda interested in it, because I had some kinda friends from the USA, at that time 2020, elections, and I remember during this horrible days we had extremely bad internet, I was sitting with my VPN calling my friend from the USA and just say..we have this protests right now next to my window and my friends in Belarus, there were some foreign friends who just personally worried what is going, are you alive? and do you know..

I: Yah.

P: And also, with family it's kinda difficult because it was mostly my mom and brother because they also participated. My mom participated a lot, like every protest I went to, I was with my mom. I never went alone or with friends, only my mom. And I and maybe some friends. But that's probably it, because other part.. part of family, like let's say the older generation, that is a problem, they were kinda angry and worried that me and my mom went to the protests. Because it is very dangerous and they were like.. my granddad screamed at my mom and say: "Why do you go?!" And with me like.. "Do you want your daughter to be in prison now?" Something like that.

I: Was it only worry or was it maybe also having some different standpoints?

P: Well they actually have different views.They have different views of course

I: that's usually the different generation..

P: Yes! They have different views of course, but at the time I think they were mostly thought about us like.. literally ... being like in safety, because usually it's like.. the police were very cruel so, ya, it was literally dangerous, physically haha. So yes I mean, but they also had different views, sometimes we were like arguing, and I was screaming, it's not something I would usually do, and I was screaming at like my grandparents. Yeah that was...

I: It gives a lot of tensions in families

P: Yeah yeah exactly, I mean, I would say, after that you started respecting some of your relatives much less and you think like: "Okay they are my relatives" I cannot really respect them after some things they have said, after like some political activists were arrested and some of my relatives would something like: "ok, well the deserved it" or something like. And you're like.. ok your my like relative, literally you cannot respect this person as you did before.

I: you are standing so much apart from each other in those kind of views that it's so hard to..

P: yes of course of course, so ya it's kind of difficult in the family.

I: I Believe

I: It's a bit different topic, but who could be according you Belarusian?

P: Who could be?

I: Belarusian

P: the person?

I: Yah..

P: Like how can I describe the person who is Belarusian?

I: I give you an example. If I will move to Belarus, can I be Belarusian according to you?

P: Hm.. this is interesting question..

I: It's probably a hard question, you maybe never thought about it

P: Yes I never thought about.. ok...

I: Are you a Belarusian?

P: Ha ha yes I am a Belarusian

I: You are a Belarusian. What makes you a Belarusian?

P: Haha ok maybe I think yes there is this kind of literal part of, like your relatives or your roots you have, but maybe there are more supportive things, and the second half is more like the spiritual thing if I can call it so, so that you feel this connection maybe with people, maybe with history events and that you're interested in it, that you feel that you can do something, that you can maybe change the history of this place. And then you.. because now it is a interesting question because of the fact that a lot people during this events, and even now, people are talking about their birth of new Belarus, and we actually even call it New Belarus. And sometimes you can read the news and in New Belarus we will have this and that let's say, so I think if there will be, there is new Belarus, there will be new Belarusians I think some people will be able to become, so maybe foreigners they will be able to become. Because now, I think this identity it's kinda in the process of being born, in this birth, so yes...I think a person can become like, it's difficult for me the answer who is this person I would say.

I: And what would then be the biggest distinction between the old and the new Belarusians?

P: Ow ok.. That we will not only now, and also feel and we will be able and we have rights, and we will not be scared of the fact that we are independent.

I: aham

P: That we are just not a post-soviet country, because it's also like, Belarus is post-soviet country, it was .. It's always like.. Belarus is Belarus

I: Not always as you mentioned the country and afterwards it's always the role of former soviet Union

P: haha ya from the past.. It's the neighbor of Russia, it's always something like... to help sometimes to help to people explain form other countries where Belarus is: "Well, you know, like Poland, Russia..." Because sometimes they don't know where Belarus is.

I: Is that Russia would they ask

P: Ow that they would ask a lot, like it's a region of Russia ha ha

I: But therefore you always mentioned the language, the importance of the language I guess?

P: Yes i mean, I actually had kind of lot of, not kind of, rather arguments and mostly with also foreigners also explaining that yeah sometimes like language can really like shows this identity, because you can see now in Ukraine, how people just starting using Ukrainian. Not because they will not understand Russian, it's not the fact of understanding, it's just the fact of showing that we are different, even though languages can be a kind of a lot in common, it's this kind of act of showing.. it's just performance I would saying, active showing that we are just different. So ya language is..

I: And are there more things you would think about it if you would saying you as Belarusian country is different than for example Russia. Like how do you differ more?

P: The point is that, somehow it happened that I literally don't now personally Russian people, I don't know, I don't have any friends of acquaintances so, it's kind of different to compare with Russian. I just know that Belarus is different and um.. but.. I don't know, I would maybe say that mm... yeah it's kinda different about what is different .. also kind of our history, because ..every country has it's own history, that is kind of the fact, and our only history believe, so that kind of tempting we should maybe going back to show this difference, because usually our propaganda does, it goes back to the history of the USSR, showing that we are united, but they never go like after, before even before, earlier earlier.

I: Like the Grand Duchy of Lithuania?

P: Yes, not the Russian empire, something that goes back, just in.. very rude the history of the place to show that is was different. They just go to the USSR: "Ok we want together, so we should be together now"

I: That's the tendency in the state propaganda?

P: Yeah yeah exactly that we should be together, now there is this, how is it called in English, probably united state, how like... I don't know how it's called in English but that they have with Russia this kind of document that we are not one country, but we have a lot similar...

I: Commonwealth of independent states?

P: Probably yes I believe, so...

I: So but if you would say that for example the state propaganda is very much active in trying to explain this narrative of being part of Russia, or at least having historical ties with Russia, but on the other hand you also said that in schools and in universities you are actively learning the Belarusian language..

P: aham well ..

I: That sounds a bit like..

P: I think because amm.. I mean propaganda, I mean it will not be directly say to our, that we are like one country, that we are Russians, no no no, they don't do it like directly. So officially we have the Belarusian language in school, Belarusians languages like official languages and even all our laws should be two languages, but it's like official level. I think that this kind of... they cannot say directly to people like ok we are Russia ha ha. I mean they should kind of show that we are independent country, so they give us...

I: So you think it's an act?

P: Yah, they should give us this kind of show that we are an independent country, so they give us this kind of lessons, it's not treated really seriously I would say, I once again, at my school, it's kind of exception, we had wonderful teachers and we had people who spoke Russian, o Belarusian I'm sorry haha, but in general teachers don't take it serious sometimes and especially students. So ya, officially they of course do things, but even in the program which we have to learn, to study, if teachers do not change it, the program is really boring. I mean I would say the ministry of education doesn't really care to make it more interesting to students to show we have our own history, we have our own literature, they just give like, literally not the best Belarusian example of literature and if you don't like it you have the teacher who create the own program to make you be interested in Belarusian literature, you'll be like: "omg, Belarusian literature is so boring". Because in the governmental level no-one cares about the Belarusian culture, because it is kinda underground culture haha

I: yeah yeah but it really sounds like an underground culture indeed..

P: Yes..

I: Like there is an official narrative and there is this peoples narrative, that was also for example classmates of you already were speaking about? Because you said some of them were already more interested in topics before 2020

P: Yeah yes I mean I had this kind of people around me who let's say went to some very local events where Belarusian songs were song or where maybe ...I have one very close friend and she is writing in Belarusian and they are so beautiful like... one of the most beautiful things I have ever like heard and read. And yes, it's mostly like local culture, not on this official level so to say. And maybe also some.. we actually had some shops, like bookstores where they sell books in Belarusian and there were like very cool books about like independent authors, but now these shops are mostly closed of course. And we have some official shops with some kind of classic Belarusian literature, but ow these kind of .. I forgot the word when something is forbidden.

I: Censored?

P: Yeah censorship, yes. So so strong. They already forbidden some books, so ya it's mostly like local culture of local artists and everything

I: And you became more interested in the Belarusian culture since 2020, and when was the time when you went to Lithuania actually?

P: to Lithuania, ok ya I went in.. ok I actually started studying in Vilnius University in October 2020, but it was a line completely so I was still in Belarus, but I moved in August 2021, so in a year after elections. I moved, but I applied to study here because Vilnius University suggested to study free for Belarusians. So I did it exactly after the elections applied, but moved after a year.

I: Did you in the time you lived in Belarus, did you also went to those Belarusian events? This cultural events?

P: When time went, most events were kind of forbidden and people became scared to gather together, because we.. when elections happened and everything, the part of culture which started developed was culture of courtyards, so basically people who lived in this houses, they just went to the courtyard, they were singing, just drinking tea, but what happened usually is that the police came and just started arresting people even if you were just standing and drinking tea. Next to your house, let's say 20 people. And they were just arresting people for being together ha ha. Becasue, yeah so I mean I went to all these events and .. Ok I went to protests, I went to protests maybe till October probably, because every protests became more dangerous and dangerous and dangerous.

I: And you started in August or already before?

P: No in June. In..my first protest was in June because it was the protest when...

I: Was that the one with the human chain? Because that was the first one I remember

P: um.. Actually I don't know, I think not, but I don't remember, but my first protest happened when Victor Babaryka was arrested. Yeah so, it was in June I believe, some months before elections. He was arrested and me and my mom went to the first protest and.. then we went went went and went on elections day and after, so ya the whole summer.

I: But why did you decided to go already in June?

P: Ok because actually.. that's how it happened, with Victor Babaryka everything started with him I would say, because I was just.. One day...maybe it was in May, I was reading about candidates for elections, actually I was not so interested in that time, but I was reading about him and I really liked his interview and then it started people writing things like o finally we have some interesting candidates, we have someone not from government, someone who is really cool. And I sent it to my mom, because at that time I was 17, so I would not be able to vote still, and I sent it to my mom and she's like I read I about him and my mom rad about him, and then she decided she become a volunteer in his kind of group to collect signatures from people. Because I also as I said, I wouldn't be able to volunteer because I was 17. So kind of..

I: you need to have the signatures to be candidate in the elections right?

P: Umm signatures yeah to support him yes, to be able to go to.. yah! In the time he was collecting signatures to become candidate yah. And um..

I: So you sent it to your mom and your mom participated in it?

P: Yeah!

I: Was it also something new for her?

P: Yes! At the time we discussed still with her, and she's like you just said it to me, and she shares it with some other friends who were now extremely interested in all these things I would say. So it somehow happened like that, started.

I: But did she already have some active ..

P: No no! She was also not very included at all I would say. Maybe she did not think about these things as well, then at some time, in this time she started reading more about the things, as I said she had maybe some more including friends who were also sharing information with her, and I kind of did it with her and I was sending like O they are looking for volunteers. And somehow my mom decided to become a volunteer, and I'm very grateful she was like that. And yes and of course..

I: something triggered her.

P: Yes yes yes, and... of course when he was arrested, by this time he was already very included, I mean I was already reading a lot of news, we were discussing it with all friends, because also like all my friends became kinda interested in it. Somehow like.. Because he was really good like um.. candidate, he was .. he was very close to youth I would say, because he created a lot of art spaces in Minsk. And he was maybe you know it, it was just something a tragedy of a lot of people about his personality, also that he was really caring about Belarusian culture, he was basically trying to buy a picture of works of Belarusian artists.

I: Yeah yeah

P: So he created a wonderful gallery. So, I mean a lot of people were like ok he is going to candidate, we will support him. It was probably the first time someone kind of really cool. Someone really I would say really decent for the candidates..

I: You would say that the appearance of him as the candidate of the next elections was your kind of trigger point to be more interested in politics and to..

P: I would say yes, like I said I was starting reading more news and there were like all these people's reaction like o, maybe something will really happen, or maybe something really will change. So people started feeling like ok something real would happen, not just elations as always, like they would just [?] as always and that's it. People starts.. there was this discussion in the air ha ha I would say, so it was difficult not starting to think about it. Or maybe it's real this time.

I: And if you like participate in those protests, what was for you the thing you were personally fighting for?

P: Am... ok I think I make in this question a divide in against and for. And that's kinda interesting to think about it because. Because.. ok..I started protesting when Victor Babryka was arrested, so it was mostly against these things, "how can you do it?" So it was more these emotions and then I remember after elections, I did ok.. so ... 9th of August it was this horrible protest, I did not participate in this one because it was in the evening and it was very cruel. But then I went next [?] Day for like women protest, like this peaceful one, so once again it was against cruelty, against their attitude towards people so for me it was mostly against them, and for just peace. And of course for .. for this kind of .. we felt that they would kind of as usual .. they lied, the results are not real and just like how can you do it.. So mostly... it was on emotions I would say.

I: Aham..

P: For me ..

I: So that was like against the unfairness, but did you already think about ideas where to go, as in politically.. was there already a kind of plan you wanted to achieve?

P: Ah.. I think it was just the moment, you felt, you were ... it was very important to unite with people, to feel you united. And you said about people in the Netherlands, like they met each other and they didn't even know each other before and they kind of connected and united and we had this wonderful song... which starts.. in Belarusian, which starts with the phrase: "We didn't know each other before this summer" And we were singing the song a lot because we basically met each other, like Belarusians met Belarusians. So it was more about moments we were all with this very very difficult emotions. We were.. So we had to unite to go through all these emotions.. I mean.. In our head we were constantly like.. "Ok we shall finish, this kind of.. Lukashenko will die, something will happen to him" and political prisoners will be free and the government changed or something will happen inside this system. Because he will not be able to resist or something. Of course we had these positive thoughts I would say during this period, but it was always like this, emotions up and down because we were like..you are going to the protests, you're very inspired, we will all do it. And then after the protest you read how they.. arrested some thousands of people and you are like "ok, maybe nothing will change"

I: And then the whole motivation ..

P: Yah yah yah!

I: How do you get connected with all these people? It feels like you met each other for the first time, you described how that feels, but how does that work out? You just go to the streets or is it online meetings or?

P: Basically there was a lot of a lot of chats, districts, cities, specific organizations, they were just all discussing ok like today let's say we meet at 2, somewhere somewhere and then from this place we go to like.. let's say some bigger place. And then in this place there were already groups of other let's say districts of the city. And then all this mess of people, let's say you .. this central.. square, or this central avenue.

I: That's a whole network.

P: Well yes yes, but ya also how we were connected I think it was not .. we just felt like the attitude towards people we were like .. everyone was talking to each other, even so they meet each other for the first time and it's not so common to Belarusians, well [?] Like Spanish just talk randomly, no. Everyone suggested "Do you want tea, do you want cookies" There were a lot of people with cars who just basically gave people coffee or something or because we are going for some hours maybe. People constantly helped each other with some small things

I: aham

P: so, it was about this connection

I: And also the reason why I ask you about this connection is, of course you live right now in Lithuania, was the connection you had in Belarus was it something that was really around this elections or do you still have some kind of strong network with other Belarusians here?

I: Uhm.. For me it was mostly around the time, because ok after, okay here let's say, I don't have a lot of Belarusians here with whom I am connected, but the last year I participated in some events in Belarusian house in Vilnius, and they are very strong organization and they are connected with each other, so I know now there are also a lot of organizations even in Lithuania or in other countries who are still connected and maybe the connection was created at the time and still together, working tougher, trying to do some somehow.

I: But for you personally? You're not very much in contact with a lot of Belarusians here?

P: Now not really
I: Is it on purpose?

P: No not on purpose, at that time I moved here and just like.. something just happened and I was like yeah I will participate in some events, I will help Belarusians but actually I was very scared to go to any type of protests here.

I: Why?

P: Because I knew I would go back to Belarus and you hear a lot of stories.. If let's say people will take picture of you here, it's fine here you will be safe. But that you go back to Belarus and they will see the picture and will you will be arrested

I: You scarred of the consequences

P: Yeah, and even my relatives, ok my grandma was always like "don't even think to go somewhere" but ok I know that ok want to have ability to go to Belarus maybe and I knew that I would be here like fine but then I go cross border and omg what is this picture, what is this..some picture of me, some protests, so I was scared actually yeah. During after some protests in 2020 I just became so scared. I basically had nightmares for like some weeks, almost the same nightmare. I think after time they started to go to people's house, like police started to go to people's house, started to arrest people

I: For posting online posts in Facebook for example

P: Ow yeah, i remember I was so brave during this august because I couldn't even imagine it so I posted a lot

I: You're in the big mass

P: And then in November let's say, October, then they started to arrest a lot of people, ya I just closed my social media I'd say and got scared because I know that now still arrest people who posted it 2 years ago something somewhere. They still arrest them so you never know

I: Yeah..

P: So yeah, I became actually very very scared

I: Is it also a reason for you why you in the beginning protested here and that you later decided to kind of go less to protests?

P: Yes became the protests became more cruel.

I: I mean here in Lithuania, cause you said you also went to some protests in the beginning

P: no it was not protests, I came to events but during the time there were some protests, but even let's say I remember I just went to some hiking with Belarusians here and women, they were all Belarusians, and woman who was like organizer, she said, she was like the main, she said: "May I take a picture of all of you in this forest?" And half of the people, including me said, no we will not be in this picture because we sometimes go to Belarus. So we were just like going the park, but it was like Belaurusian organization so we decided not to be with them in the picture, so there was actually a lot of them like.. ok we understand, usually people who agreed to be in pictures are those who know who now would not go to Belarus because they cannot go there. So ya, it's just kind of safety

I: Yes of course, with all the example you already have seen

P: Uhm examples?

I: No i mean like with all the examples you already have seen

P: Oh yeah yeah yeah of course haha

I: We will talk later a little bit about this community here in Vilnius, but first you said you got this scholarships from Vilnius University. But was it the only reason to go to Lithuania?

P: No actually for me with Lithuania. In my case it was just a question of time because I decided I want to study in Lithuania, maybe it was in the 8th grade or the 7th grade so many years ago, because I really love Vilnius so it is not connected with any kind of views, my political situation. It happened like many years ago, and I just decided that I really wanted to study here because I love the city, I loved how the university looked at the time and I started to look for a program. So my plan was actually, even in June 2020, I was planning to have a gap year and in a year I was planning to go Vilnius University.

I: aha

P: But just on my own. Just.. but then in August I saw it and basically it was such spontaneous decision because I wasn't planning to study in this year. And I said to my mom "look what my future university suggested" and she's like okay let's try this year then. So ya.. it was.. it would be Vilnius University still, but it just happened one year earlier, kind of thanked to this events, but I mean It's kind of very bad event to be thankful so..

I: And how is to with having contact with people who are still in Belarus, for example friends or your mother. Is it still on a regular base?

P: Now? Yah I mean a lot of my friends moved. A lot of them are .. and actually it is interesting a lot of them moved not in 2020 but basically when the war in Ukraine began because in Belarus the situation started also to be more difficult and they moved to like Germany, Poland. Then now I actually have my family right there, maybe like 2 friends literally. And I was basically just having a call with one of friends and we were discussing the fact that I'm not sure that I will come to Belarus in the upcoming future... because I don't know..And we were discussing it and she's just like [?] With visa and I said I don't how is the situation with visa for Belarusians now, because I have a resident permit now. My mom has a visa and she comes quite often to Vilnius like once a month

I: That's quite a lot!

P: Ya and she is kinda thinking trying to move here as well and my brother also moved from Belarus to Austria some months ago

I: Austria

P: Austria to study but also because of all the things. So... It's kind of my family there only. But even my mom is kind of trying to think now about the thing about the ways how she can maybe move as well.

I: Aham. Is it.. If you are speaking with her do you feel free to talk with her?

P: On the phone? We usually not really discuss it, we usually discuss it in person. Yajya. I even sometime saw some news about new rules for Belarusian going abroad, just there will be some difficulties and I was just looking and I wanted it to send to my mom but I was like ok.. no my mom is in Belarus, I will not send her this like news.. and even like I was discussing some telegram channel with her about, basically about life in Vilnius, not about political chat at all.. just about Vilnius, but this telegram channel is also like in Russian, it supports Ukraine, it supports Belarus and I was like: "Ow mom I saw some news in this channel about some museum here", something random. And it's like Vilnius history of Vilnius and she's like send me this channel. And I'm like no mama I will not send you any channel haha. You don't need any telegram channels on your phone haha

I: so you are really actively thinking about what you are sending to ..

P: yes, actually yes yes yes

I: And here in Vilnius you feel free to communicate?

P: Yes yes yes! Of course of course.. yeah here of course I can speak like for example here right now haha. If I would do this in Minsk in a cafe haha omg.. I would be so scared haha so yes..

I: You said that after the 2020 events you felt a proud Belarusian

P: Ya

I: Did anything change when you came to Lithuania? Did you maybe feel more proud?

P: No it did not change.. no no.. It's just the same, especially if you're in another country you feel it even more. So yes.. it's kind of the same, here there a lot of Belarusians so. Ya.. The same..

I: And how do you generally express your proudness? You express it in conversations for example with me.

P: OKay well.. I don't know actually to be honest. But what is interesting for me, maybe one of my personal case, that I have a close Ukrainian friends here, she moved even before the war here. But what we sometimes do with her, that I speak Belarusian to her and she speaks Ukrainian to me and we just understand each other very clearly and we are like.. talking like "how cool that we have this cultures and we are proud of cultures!" So I can say that we have this pride of our own culture and we discuss it: "Ow yes we have this culture!" And we understand the problem of each others countries well I would say.

I: It feels like a kind of brother or sister

P: Ow yes yes

I: The situations are different but you kind of have the same feeling.

P: Yes but now it became kind of more difficult, with Belarusian. With this Belarusian government supporting war and Belarusian people not supporting war so... Not supporting Russia so that is also difficult so.. But ya..

I: Do you also.. of course you said the government is supporting the war, but do you also sometimes want to explain that you are just a Belarusian and not government Belarusian? Like I'm not belonging to this government!

P: ya yah,.. fortunately I have never been in this situation yes so usually if I meet even with Ukrainians they understand this difference, this very important difference, they understand it and .. but yes.. now when I read all this news, even someone from Ukrainian government said that when this political prisoner in Belarus won the Nobel price and Ukrainian someone.. I don't remember the names, someone from Ukrainian government said how come .. how can you give the Nobel price to someone from Belarus, the country who supports Russia. And I was like... how can you say to the person who is in prison now? A political prisoner.. So it's just..For me it's insane. Me personally I never explain to someone, because no-one said it to me like ow you're from the county ..

I: You didn't had to explain.. and it never gives discussions in your personal environment?

P: Yes because people understand.. like foreigners, Ukrainians, maybe Belarusians.. they understand this difference

I: I also spoke with people who had different experience, they also had Ukrainian friends and they said hey .. there is not really much understanding.. so it also differs .

P: Ow ya.. because I mean it should be know there is even this kind of special group, this special Belarusian group participating in Ukraine and it supports Ukraine.. Kalinovsky. So ya I mean .. for me it didn't happen. I'm lucky

I: But it's good you don't have this discussions.

P: Ow but I will, I will if I am in such situation I will. For me it will be very emotional, but I will try to explain this..

I: I can imagine you will be very angry yeah. Now I want to switch to the Belarusian community. Is there according to you an active Belarusian community in Lithuania?

P: In Lithuania right now? I was at the events last year and I didn't go to any events this year because I think the focus kind of switches of course because now for example I am participating in one project. I will go here today as well, it's like a volunteering project, now it's kinda of.. we first have trainings and then we will help Ukrainians, it's some project for Ukrainians but..

I: Is it from a Belarusian organization?

P: It's not, but 90% of the participants there are Belarusians

I: Okay!

P: Those are students, students from.. okay.. young people here but they are from Belarus. So, it was..just.. organization created by I believe Lithuanians and Ukrainians and they said that we are looking for people to be volunteers and 90% of the volunteers are Belarusians, but we will help Ukrainians cause it is interesting.

I: Why is that?

P: Well I don't know.. I just wanted to participated... I just wanted to be volunteer for Ukrainians because I was trying it last year from my university but there were some strange things so.. I didn't happened. But when I came back to.. Ok this summer I was in Italy, I was saying when I came back to Lithuania it was in September, I came back to Lithuania this September, I just saw this advertisement and ok I wanted to help Ukrainians and then I came and there were all Belarusians. Because it's.. I don't know.. we don't have Lithuanians there, we are speaking Russian, for some reasons there are all Belarusians mostly.

I: So the language of course

P: ha ya it's kinda interesting..

I: Is there for you, like willingness to participate more in such events? Which are very much related to Belarus, or is it not really a need for you?

P: I think .. I want, I needed, that's why I actually went to this volunteering, the organization, because I feel I need to do something. So small small small things in this general social situation. So, for me it's a need, I need to do something like that right now.

I: Is there anything from Belarus you would particular miss right here? Like what is the first thing you would think about?

P: Well actually I remember.. My personal situation, I really love Lithuania and Vilnius and I would even say that apart from the political situation I in general feel better here. Just in general, just like personal.. Not like political situation, just like my place maybe. So I would say that I , I would miss much more things in Belarus to be honest even with the political situation which is important. Just personally I love Lithuania, so when I think about Belarus. I wouldn't say I would really miss something, but I just really want this place to be happy, and the people there. Because it just does not deserve two much pain it has, and people.. So i wouldn't say I would miss, cause that is the point. I think about old and new Belarus, new Belarus is still not created. I just want it to be a different place, I wouldn't say a country we miss something. And also still this political context it really covered everything. I mean as I said, so I mean as I said my life was kinda divided. So my memories were divided. So when I think about Belarus, I feel so many fear, anxiety which I had there the last time, so I basically cannot miss, because I just felt so bad there last this like months/year before I moved so it's difficult for me to miss it to be honest.

I: But this new Belarusian idea, this new Belarusianess, is it something you can do from abroad?

P: Well basically everything what is doing for it mostly doing from abroad, because even our political leaders who are not in prison are abroad

I: But I mean you personally

P: Ow people people... yeah I mean I think yes even when we are connected with Belarusian people and maybe we would create some projects.. maybe I don't really do it know, but Belarusians, normal people here they are trying to do some projects here and maybe they are able to come .. to create a new Belarus. But still they can do something from abroad, but it's not like this important part, something should happen back in the system, the political system that we would be able to come and create something new there. So that is something more serious I would say, some political process..

I: and you said that after the 2020 events you became more interested in the Belarusian culture and Belarusian identity..How do you experience that here in Lithuania? Is it something you are still actively working on?

P: I wouldn't say so, but first I just .. I don't know... I took some Belarusian book with me and I went to Belarusians events, because I just wanted to be sometimes with Belarusian people and they were.. A lot of them were speaking Belarusian so ... it's like this thing. So I think how was experiencing at that time, now I think I do I much less things, because at the beginning of the war, I would say.. this cultural, national thoughts so to

say kind of went behind.. like in the background, because you're basically thinking about people and everything... now I don't think a lot about culture I would say.. ya it just..mostly just with helping stuff, with volunteering, so it's more about not really cultural..

I: So if there would be an opportunity to participate you would do, like now for example in my interview. But as an individual you're not actively initiating something..

P: Yes, now I'm not so.. As I said in the beginning, now I have some friends .. who are more included, and even in news and some organizations and they know more Belarusians and they participated in more events, so I am not so included now here

Interview 7 transcription

Date: 19 Oktober 2022

Time: 15:00

Gender: Male

Age: 30

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: The first question, it's very broad, so my research is about the national identity of Belarusians, so what does it mean for you, national identity?

P: Actually a very good question haha, I was not prepared at all

I: That's good because I like to have your spontaneous thoughts and ideas. What is the first thing you think about if you think about the connection with your people?

P: Yeah maybe you said it correct, it's connection for majority of people with the same vision to like, with the same habits, language it's important.

I: Belarusian language?

P: Yeah, even though we, I mean the majority of the people speak Russian, unfortunately. The Belarusian language exists, we speak it, we speak it.

I: Do you speak it?

P: Not in the family, not on the regular bases, but I still consider it native for me. I can easily support any conversation, not any, but ok the majority of them. I have a hobby, I enjoy singing, I sing in Belarusian

I: Aha

P: Yeah so I like this language, and it's an important feature to consider that I'm a Belarusian as well. Okay maybe.. we started talking about Belarusian identity, but .. yeah ok let's continue haha

I: You mention the connection with other people,

P: The connection with other people, similar habits, everyday life.

I: How is that connection with other people? Of course language is one way to connect with others, but is there more for you?

P: Hard to say, maybe.. I don't know..

I: It's the abstract feeling you have to describe ha

P: Yeah because.. all my life I lived in Belarus and it was very natural for me to be there, so maybe now when I'm not in Belarus, it may be a very sharp feeling that I lost something here. And for that.. it's. I'm happy to be in this country and the main reason why I am here, because it .. it began to be important for me.

I: Can you describe the thing that you are missing?

P: Haha again.. haha... It's a level of feelings but I can't describe in words actually.

I: Well that's also an answer right

P: Yes..

I: It's a strong feeling, not always you can describe your feelings

P: The people who lives in the same territory, they feel like.. not a group but we are together, so this feeling... we are together and again this feeling was revealed after 2020 definitely.

I: How was that before?

P: It was yes, but... For example if you were going to speak Belarusian in Belarus before 2020, it was fine, but .. you seem like a pig.. It was unnatural to see speak Belarusian. The majority pays attention of that and it was pretty uncomfortable, it may be, it's main reason why I personally didn't speak it when I was in Belarus, well live in Belarus. But after 2020, it's dangerous actually to speak Belarusian in Belarus. Because it automatically means that you're not [?] The Belarusians government, someone I don't know.. with your vision, your intelligent maybe, so you're animi for government, ... ya you know that, our government is pressed by Moscow government and again, Russian language, even though it's state

language in Belarus and yeah.. a lot of people speak Russian, but at the same time we are different than Russians, we are different from Ukrainians, we are different from Russians

I: How?

P: Let me maybe use translator because some words... um... Okay I would say, we are not so impudent as Russians, we are more patient, more tolerant, we have habit to suffer from external circumstances and finally say that ... [?] and... we speak Belarusian, again it's the main difference.

I: But not on the large skill.

P: Okay. Hahah

I: But that is for you a big difference if you would describe the difference with for example Russia and Ukraine.

P: Okay we are not so.. again [takes phone]. Maybe we are not so united and compassionate as Ukrainians but we definitely stronger, I mean [?] that than Russians, cause Russians.. again.. it's on my mind.. They are independent. They try to be independent, rich, so .. distinguishable from other people

I: Aha so you mean independent also from individual to state? Or individual to individual?

P: individually from each other, again it comes from our common experience and from the USSR. Yah.. we were formal one country and ..this may come from here, but maybe it's even deeper, I mean all this habits, we are historically even deeper than one century ago, maybe 2/3 centuries.

I: But for me, maybe you are not so united as the Ukrainians, but to me you looked really united during the 2020 events.

P: Yes. 2020 makes us to be more united as we were, definitely yes.

I: Did you already felt some kind of unitedness before?

P: Here outside Belarus absolutely yes, in Belarus unfortunately no, cause as I said it's dangerous to show your unity yea...in Belarus, cause it's .. it could be .. it's prohibited to a professional level. It could be .. combine to speak Belarus, to make very regular and natural things..

I: Like singing in Belarusian language?

P: Yes, it's banned by the state, it's sound of protest

I: Or wearing the colors..

P: yeah..but now in Vilnius, and one month I lived in Warsaw before this summer ya.. actually in the beginning of the war, I see that Belarains outside Belarus, they're united, they try to help each other, a lot of communities, especially for some domestic services or for example... If I wanted to repair my car, first of all I will look for someone from Belarus

I: Serious? Because you get a discount or haha?

P: No..first of all it's attitude. The second reason it's quality I guess. It's really..

I: You just blindly trust in your?

P: Yeah I trust in my professionals yes. Actually ok, I was relocated months ago there it's still a big deal to find some [?] again for my domestic services. Ok I found my dentist again, I found my hairdresser and so on and so on, so you need to find all this professionals again here. Yeah.. and Belarains is the first one I'm looking for.

I: It feels trusted and haha

P: Amm ya.. just a habit, to be with the same as you are haha. To combine groups in Vilna, to discuss the situation again, like this

I: Yeah.. and what is .. who could according to you be Belarusian?

P: Mm the beginning of the sentence?

I: Who could be Belarusian according to you?

P: Who could be Belarusian?

I: What do you have to do or what do you have to be to be Belarusian? According to you? You are Belarusian?

P: Yes

I: Am I Belarusian?

P: Haha

I: If I would go to Belarus for example?

P: Maybe not haha

I: Why not?

P: Maybe different mentality we have, again everyday habits and.. this will differ us.

I: so this common feelings?

P: This common feelings, this common duties maybe or maybe very simple things if we.. again .. used to do and think.. for example .. I don't know haha.. again.. how frequently do you visit a store to get buyings for example? I mean how frequently do you purchase in the market? Once a week or.. [?]. So it's ok, again, it's not about big difference, I mean, the circumstances that are in Belarus dictates, how people behave living in this country, and for example a poorer economic situation, push for example the people in Belarus the cheapest prices in the market instead of I'm going to the shop just on something

I: aha

P: became all the basket.. it doesn't work in Belarus. You need to... ok.... The average salary is how much, maybe 400 dollar. And you have to find out the cheapest product on the market.

I: yes yes

P: And these maybe.. blocks people to have a proper rest, to have a chill after working day.. So imagine that people in for example Europe live different lives.

I: Different as in maybe a little bit spoiled?

P: No i don't think so, because I desire people in Belarus would live the same live as in Europe for example. It's really my.. my desire.. How your life may look like, because again living in Belarus... I was working in IT-sphere, so by default I have more income and I can afford for me and my family more than the absolute majority of the people in Belarus. For that reason I am maybe able to do this comparison. For example, I am going to abroad and I see how people live in Europe, in the USA, and it's completely different. And for example if I am going to visit Russia, Belarusians live better. And maybe even better than in Ukraine. Again based.. Im judging by.. how houses looks like, how road infrastructure is organized in the cities, it's different and in Belarus all this stuff looks better yeah.. Im comparison with Russia and Ukraine much worse than in Europe. Maybe it's again, one of the reason why I like Belarus haha cause it's not so awful as it could be haha

I: OKay but then you have 2 examples, you have Russian example and European example. You're in the middle

P: Not in the middle haha. Ok in the middle haha

I: How is it then to be in Vilnius? If you have all the things from Belarus you are used too... Is it much different?

P: No actually no.. [?] And practically everything is the same, ok there might be slight difference in some things, but not so big deal. You learned how it's going in the new country and ok, it's already natural for you, it's already a habit.

I: You say aciu in stead of spassiba, but that's..

P: Haha

I: And your Belarusian language here in Lithuania? Do you speak it much more after you came here?

P: No, because again, very natural explanation why, because, again Ukraine was a part of USSR before and there were a lot people here who speak Russian. So, it's... there's no sense to speak Belarusian here, because..

I: But also with other Belarusian?

P: Because Lithuanian people will not understand you

I: No I mean with other Belarusians.

P: With other Belarusians? Umm.. Friendly speaking no.. And I don't know why haha.

I: Because before you said it's maybe a little bit more strange to.. even dangerous to speak it after the 2020 events. So technically here you would have the possibility to speak it.

P: Frankly speaking I chatted with my friends in Belarusian speaking, not so many but.. maybe 4,5. Again not so big haha. But ya.. you pushed me to speak Belarusians with other Belarusians here haha thank you haha

I: And then later you can say there was some guy from Netherlands and he.. haha

P: Haha

I: You do not really have the urge, or the deep feeling to speak to everyone from Belarus the Belarusian language?

P: Yes, maybe.. again it's to prevent myself from any potential damage. When you're living in Belaurus more than 20 years, you are let's say not allowed to speak Belarusian, it's again..

I: Your whole brain is... I get it

P: Aham

I: I don't understand it, but I try to understand it how it feels

P: Yeah actually as for Lithuania, I was trying not to read but to see the text and for me it's much more easier to understand the overall context. It doesn't mean that I exactly know what is the text about, but I'm able to find some meaningful words for me, because they are all.. written the same way as Belarusian, as Polish. Because I speak Polish a bit and ya... again the language group is from another.. baltic one, but again it has some...

I: Simulations.. Probably due to history

P: yeah yeah

I: I'd like to make a bit of jump to the elections in 2020.

P: No problem.

I: Were you participating in protests in Belarus?

P: Yes

I: Can you explain what was for you the thing you were fighting for?

P: I.. ok.. It was a little bit unnatural for me to go to elections and put my vote yeah. It was a joke in Belarus, somewhere In May 2020, that we are going to have elections of new president of Belatars. Not just A president, but a new president haha

I: Yah..

P: And it maybe was a main goal, main focus why it was important for me, I believed that we were able to do, because frankly speaking I've seen proper candidates for this elections

I: Like whom?

P: Like Victor Babryka, who was in prison. And actually yah.. I put my signature for all of them except for Alexander nikovich

I: That was the signature for the new candidates right?

P: It's the signature for pre-elections, to be a candidate yeah.. I put my signature for all of them, for Svetlana, for Victor, Tsipkala and after that when Babaryka was arrested, Tsipkala was going outside Belarus, Svetlana was in relation with all people who believed like me. And then...

I: Can you explain?

P: That we as Belarusian people are able to change something in our life. And it was important, maybe.. the main focus for us, for me was [?] I didn't lost my feeling till maybe the middle of October 2020, so before that I do believe that something can change, something can be changed.

I: What was the reason why after a couple months you're believe changed?

P: Because I saw that the government tries to block all this activities in military way and it was physically dangerous to continue this. But before I took part in some marches we have in the streets. It's just a sign of [?] of course it's not.. like.. that doesn't change anything, but we just had the right, we are here and hear us

I: How did you decide to join the protests? Was it an easy decision?

P: You mean easy to join? Yes

I: How would you.. was it your own idea to join or did you have friends who also joined?

P: Frankly speaking, nobody from my close relatives, close friends, they were with the same vision. Even my grandfather who is 80-plus who spent all his life in Belarus living with Lukashenko, he was against. You understand right? Because my grandfather, he is 80, he saw a lot during his life. He remembered different periods who were not so.. definitely he believes Belarus and USSR. I mean the work he performed is a bit easier, not so physical for that reason mainly. But pensioen is not all people need for food, for live, so I mean.. regularly Lukashenko buys his votes for pensions, it was mentioned, because again the majority of people who eligible to vote, they are old. For that reason, they're old, they live their lives, they have their habits, they don't want to change something.

I: They want stability

P: Yeah. But I very pleased for my relatives and my grandparents that they support not actually me, but people of the same age like me, that we are trying to change something. Ok, they will end their lives soon, but we are just starting our way. And I am really.. I am pleased for them.. for that reason there was no really other reason except yes we support this activities.

I: Did you.. you said you also went to Warsaw, did you also participate in protests abroad?

P: No, it was ok... after 2020. 2 years I lived in Belarus luckily for me I was not on sanctions, for that reason, I mean.. technically it was fine to live in Belarus even after 2020

I: Becasue live goes on?

P: Yeah yeah, before February 2022. For that reason I escaped to Warsaw first.

I: Immediately?

P: Immediately on March 1st.

I: Like a week after

P: I saw the situation how it's going. The war started on 24st, we spend a week and made the decision to leave Belarus.

I: Difficult decision?

P: Yes, because.. like to broke all your life, to start it again in a new location, again we have sun and a lot of activities should be organized for him. Again, we speak English, he speaks not and it's main reason why we are here in Lithuania because we were able to go to kindergarten for him where children speak Russian and all education process is established in Russian. It's the main reason why we are here and not in Poland, because in Poland it maybe.. I mean.. judging by mentality, Belarusians are much more closer to Polish people than to Lithuaninan.. And here I am due too my son

I: But that's an important aspect

P: Yes. He is 4. He just starts his education and it's a major process and it's important to have stable results. So maybe, I was just thinking that he started to visit Polish kindergarten, actually he started in the beginning of March, so he refused. And I had not so much resources to support him, to persuade him, so that he would... it was unnatural for him, he refused it completely and I was not [?] Again, naturally and easier for us to switch back to Russian and we live in the environment where some people speak Russian, it's natural

I: Yah, but you would kind of expected that there are enough people in Poland who would speak the Russian language

P: not so many. Cause again Polish people are very united, they speak Polish

I: But also in the light of the Ukrainian refugees I mean

P: ahh you mean cause of a lot of Ukrainians in Poland?

I: Yeah I thought maybe there would be some schools for children with Russian language

P: Maybe, but I was not found.. so who knows it was the right decision or not

I: But you feel it's a good decision to go to Vilnius?

P: Yes, it's more closer to Minsk and technically we still have an ability to go home, to visit our relatives.

I: Do you do that?

P: I'm going to that in a week actually

I: You still keeping in touch with them

P: Sure sure

P: And I still have this believe that I will return to Belarus, who knows when but.. I still believe

I: It's temporary

P: Yeah it's definitely temporarily. I don't know how long temporary, but definitely temporarily. Just maybe to proof my words: in the beginning of March, we are going to start our own house in Belarus and contract with repairments was almost signed so, the war froze the process in my previous life I mean haha, not a rented flat, but an own house. I see my life like this

I: So your body here but your soul is there

P: definitely, yeah and it's difficult to accept actually.

I: What do you do in year daily life to accept such things?

P: Well I still work in IT-sphere, I located within the same country so nothing changed from job perspective as for hobbies, I liked constructing wood furniture in Belarus, now I can't because I didn't find such places in Lithuania. Again I miss very much this activity, so trying to feel all the available time with walking, exploring, side-seeing.

I: You're a tourist

P: Yes yes, again trying to compare how it's in Belaur, how it's here. Like this

I: Do you feel that you can be Belarusian in Lithuania?

P: Yes, it's difficult to imagine, not to imagine, it's difficult to image how... cause you don't know how long you are going to be there, I am trying not to built something haha, something stable, not temporary, even being in Vilnius haha. So it's..

I: So you want to feel at home but also not too much..

P: yes yes like this

I: so thaht's why you're also looking actively for Belarusians in your network here

P: Yes yes

I: Like you also said before with your hairdresser and very practical things or example

P: yeah yeah, actually our neighborhood are the same people who were our neighborhood in Minsk.

I: O serious! Is that accidentally?

P: It's accidentally yeah, not so close, but they live in the close quarter, in Minsk they just lived across

I: Still close

P: Not so close but still close haha. It's fine actually. We still.. we talk to each other, we have conversations, it's little bit supporting.

I: Where do you talk about if you have such conversations?

P: Actually not about Belarus and the situation there. It damages actually. We are trying to discuss everything except this, because I tend to agree that people a bit.. [one minute, takes translator] get tired a bit of all this situation. Because it's difficult to live your life, I mean being Belarusian and not in Belarus

I: Yeah yeah

P: It doesn't mean that you should like break all the connections with Belarus, but psychologists says that you should land yourself, start doing any routines, some everyday activities, just to not to just think about all this awful situations.

I: Talking about all the events..

P: Yeah

I: Are you in participating in Belarusian events? Because you have the contacts here in Vilnius

P: You mean .. participating in some.. I mean visited some exhibitions, I visited a lecture of Svetlana Alexeijvich, she is an [?]. Not so many actually. Again, we need to admit that even people from Belarus who live here, they have different vision. How Belarus should escape the situation. So again, two groups of us, I mean some people think that this fight could only be done in military way, another group think that no we should not to like this, we should continue like we did before, in polite and diplomatic way.

I: Is this giving stress in communities?

P: No I guess

I: How do you for example know there two such groups?

P: Because I am following telegram channels, where they discuss... again it's announced from inducement media, do you know [?] which was previously tutby media?

I: Ahh I know this tutby ya

P: ok so this tutby was transformed to this so-called mirror. And they continue to mention all the events that happen in Belarus, in Ukraine, in Russia. And yeah.. it's.. it's natural that such things happen, I mean this deviation to this groups, it was not a surprise for me personally from what I've heard from the beginning actually. There are a lot of us and all us may have different thoughts

I: Many people, many ideas

P: Many people, many ideas exactly

I: Would you say there is some kind of events you miss and you would like to do here in Lithuania?

P: I tend to say no, unfortunately. Because maybe, I accept this challenge to take some positive opportunities for this situation. "Ok, I'm in Vilnius." Try to explore new countries, new directions. Again, I like travel, I do like travel and it was technically a bit difficult to do this from Belarus because we have just one national airline. It costs really much.. If you travel in Belarus you have definitely flight from Minsk 3 airport, it's Vilnius actually. Our national airport is called Minsk 2 haha. And Minsk 3 is Vilnius haha.

P: A lot of my friends are outside Belarus, somebody.. my good friend is in Dubai right now. My next plan is to Irish visa and .. visit him haha.

I: Is that complicated for you?

P: Should not be an issue I guess, because I legally live here, have resident permit, should not be an issue. Even with Belarusian passport haha. Frankly spoken all the events that were happen in Belarus, I would say they were very local, not so attracting for international tourists. As for my point of view. We have a lot of nice places, and very maybe I would say... I mean this places, these events are not so .. announced again .. in the [?]

I: I've been once in Minsk. 5 years ago. No 4 years ago, cause back then I was in Vilnius, and I was with a friend and we could have this mini-visa.. we could visit for max 5 days I think.

P: No it's prolonged. It's still working actually.

I: Yeah and you get this paper, and you give it to your hotel and they give it to the police station or so

P: Ow ok haha

I: It was a bit interesting experience haha

P: Interesting haha. The same as Europeans go to some Balkan countries like Croatia, Albania, it's the same interesting experience in different way

I: Yeah cause... for me it was like.. I knew a little bit about the history and the society of Belarus so back then I thought it would be interesting to see it with my own eyes. But if I think about it right know I would probably not make the decision. It's

P: Really?

I: Yeah.. I think like.. you are going there but you are tourists and this money is probably used by the regime so.. what are you doing there? It's this kind of complicated feelings, you want to discover things but on the other hands..

P: Frankly speaking I was not thinking about this before haha. But yea it's true

I: The thing I remembered it was a Saturday evening and we had an hotel close the center of the city. And it was like 11 and I went for a little walk in town and it, and some of the old Soviet buildings were protected by soldiers. It did not really felt safe there, you feel the pressure.

P: Actually It was the same feeling I had, cause every day you walk in this road, walk In this streets, it goes.. it was fearful

I: and this became even more fearful after the events of course

P: yeah

I: If you would talk with people who are not from Belarus, and if that persons says ow I didn't know that country, what would you explain?

P: First of all trying to explain the location. Because the majority of people mix Russia and Belarus. So, I would trying to explain that this is between Poland and Russia. But again, people do not always now where is Poland haha

I: Haha it happened.

P: Ok, but actually it was easier to explain who we are and where we are after 2020. Because there is one thing in my mind, in 2020 we were able to travel to Albania. And we have a hiking tour to some waterfall and we met some people from Brasil and the question where are you from, from Belarus, they were surprised but they were knowledge about the situation in Belarus. They so easily joined the conversation, they indeed were interested how it's going in Belarus. It was pleasant to see actually. Casue before.. my previous experience, fore 2020, people don't know where is Belarus and who we are

I: So it's said that it happened but it also places Belarus on the map?

P: Yes, first of all..

I: It's a bit contradiction

P: haha

I: People in the Netherlands also know where is Belarus and what's going on

P: It's good that they know, I was a little bit surprised because I thought ok people from Europe will know where Belarus,.. but Brasil.. it surprised me a lot. My friends visited Mexico, 4 years ago and again they had to rest with a couple of friends from Russia and again people in some countries have stereotype that all people from Russia have a gun for exmaple haha

I: They drink vodka..

P: They drink vodka.. Haha so my friend admit that it was a strange feeling that .. ok we are tighter but. Ok we have friends from Russia, but ok they are Russians and we are not. Don't mix us together. Like this

I: The Belarusian kitchen, is it similar to the Lithuanian one?

P: It's a bit similar, but again it's .. some dishes could be cooked from same precuts, but the style is a bit different. You may cook 500 dishes from potatoes, but they are different.

I: here they have zappelins

P: Ok they used to cook Zeppelin, in Belarus we call them Kaldunai.

I: Ok, but it's the same?

P: It's absolutely the same. For example in Belarus we cook draniki from potato, and [?] they call [?] because you're trying to.. Chop the potato. The main comes from the style of cooking.

I: Very similar

P: Very similar.

Interview 8 transcription

Date: 25 Oktober 2022

Time: 19:00

Gender: Female
Age: 30

Interviewer (I)
Participant (p)

I: What do you think about when talking about the Belarusian national identity? What is the first thing coming up in your mind?

P: Maybe the first thing is, the biggest problem of the Belarusian identity is language.

I: A problem

P: yah. I think it is one of the milestones that should be presented in Belarusian identity of every Belarusian but like it's kind of forbidden language in Belarus. Everyone who speaks it.. it's something weird unrespected.. maybe unreliable person for the government

I: Have you experienced that yourself in Belarus?

P: No because usually I start talking in Belarusian when I see, when somebody talk in Belarusian with me.

I: Aha, so you never start in?

P: Sometimes I tried, when I was in political organization we speak it a lot, in Belarusian and then I came to shops and try speaking Belarusian with sellers of that shop and they looked at me sometimes suspicious and sometimes opposite friendly. [interruption]

I: So when you spoke it on the streets you had a little bit strange reactions?

P: Yeah yeah, sometimes I had strange, but anyway it is a unusual reaction. Friendly or opposite you know haha

I: Is it also that people can be positively surprised?

P: yah yah

I: You mentioned you were in a political organization? In Belarus?

P: Yah yah

I: Can you explain some more about it?

P: Yeah when I trained my speaking in Belarusian and I maybe there, I understood that I am a Belarusian and I can I don't know.. I want to do something for my country so I it was a social democratic youth organization. A lot of friends, some of my friends participated and they suggested me.. I was a bit suspicious and I didn't want to participate but then I went to their events and I liked what they discussed and how

I: What kind of events and discussions did you had?

P: The first event was like seminar for newcomers and then about social democracy at all and different political Ideologies. And I understood that is something I already follow in my life, but I don't know, maybe some details haha. And I liked to know more and then I went to the summer camp. It was maybe in a couple of months after the first event, after the first event for newcomers and this summer camp was for two weeks and it was very .. you know... diving deeper to different aspects of the ideology and I saw people who supported and I liked very much this company with those people are very active. So unusual many Belarusian speaking people and I understand that it's some alternative reality you know haha

I: Yeah different then what you use to. Is it also like you said that many people spoke Belarusian. Was it also a popular topic to talk about for example Belarusian culture? And Belarusian identity?

P: What is exactly the question?

I: Because you said that many people spoke in Belarusian language, was it also a topic to discuss with other people, the Belarusian culture or about national identity?

P: About people from this organisation?

I: Yah!

P: Yeh sure, it was one of our goals, like value you know.. To support Belarusian language and history cause we talked about history very much. People will start fighting for Belarusian independency, we are social democrats so haha

I: But that sounds like it's a little bit dangerous to be member of this organization.

P: Ya it's dangerous but what this organization gave me was like... I felt like they give me more than the danger I had you know haha. Because I can't avoid this danger, but I can take a lot with this just.... Being content with good people, good friends. Being in really good company, because it is not so easy in your life to find something that is really close to your feeling of life and how the world should be and be on the same page.

I: With like-minded people

P: Yeah yeah, maybe that's why I took this risk

I: Ahum

P: And everybody was in the same situation so I was not alone haha.

I: How long were you in this organization?

P: About 5 years. Since.. after the elections in 2010.

I: Was it also a reason to be more active, to be for example more with the same people like after this 2010 elections? Was it a trigger to join the organization?

P: Yah, a kind of. Maybe because I was a student, it was my first election I participated in and yah there were a lot of stories who is on the right page and who is not and ..

I: In university?

P: Ya in university, and I saw this pressure how we were pushed to the previous voting you know, this main day and the days before, when it's a lot of changes to specify. So and all the students, I was living in the

I: The dorm?

P: Student... what did you say?

I: The dorm, the dormitory? Student apartment?

P: Ya student apartment, and many students pushed the previous elections, but our responsible person for this apartment allowed me not to go to the previous voting but go on the main day. So I was permitted, because he knew about my values, about I am .. fighting for freedom

I: And this person was helping you?

P: Yeah we just, I participated in some cultural activism, like I was singing in the vocal ensemble that his wife was head of the ensemble

I: ahh.. ok

P: That's why he knew about my values so he allowed not to come to the previous elections.

I: Was it also Belarusian songs you were singing then?

P: Not exactly. Yes some Belarusian songs, some Ukrainian songs because his wife was Ukrainian, she is Ukrainian, we sing in Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian, different...

I: You mentioned that language is an important thing for you if you think about national identity. But are there more things you think is important for the Belarusian national identity for you?

P: I don't know who make me feel like a Belarusian, but maybe I was living all my life in Belarus, before I came to Lithuania. And I knew many Belarusians and I knew many Belarusians and I was growing up between them, with them haha. Umm.. but I can say that I felt all the time that I am a Belarusian you know.. I just lived and I never thought about my identity till I started this being politically involved

I: How did that change you in thinking about it?

P: Yeah yeah

I: But how?

P: I understood that it's so big way to fight for this independency, and fight for we called Belarusian, not Belarusian of Russian I don't know. To make people feel from other countries know that is Belarus and that it's something separate, not a part of Russia.

I: That's what you mean with independence. Independence from Russia

P: yeah yeah yeah. And how it's hard and how many lives were wasted. How many people sacrificed with their freedom, because they did a lot in fighting for indepeny, fighting for this identity maybe. To speak Belarusian, to know Belarusian history, but our history not starts from USSR, before we lighted for our freedom, our..

I: how did you personally fighting for this independence?

P: I can say I am a fighter for identity in Belarus. My speaking, trying to speak Belarusian and I started exactly with my friends from organization and...

I: Thath's also a way to expressing your identity

P: Ya you know I also tried to speak when I came to my first workplace after university, I graduated university and then I went to the governmental power plant, and then on Tuesday, in Belarusian it is Autork, this work contains a letter that is very... unique

I: In Belarusian language?

P: In Belarusian language, a unique letter that almost no languages have this letter, so then I decided that Autork, Tuesday is the day of the Belarusian language and it's trying to speak and.. first I'm trying to speak in Belarusian all day and I got it that it's too hard and I'm doing it in completely Russian speaking surrounding so I decided just to say hello every Tuesday in Belarusian. Say Hello and something in the morning and then I started

saying hello in Belarusian every time I come and everybody used to this. Everybody was waiting already that I was saying in Belarusian and they had a small, I saw that people are really friendly to this. It's something maybe that I tried to put hahah

I: Were there more things? Cause you can talk about it, but for example you could organize events or joining protests for example

P: Yeah of course I joined some celebrations and some I don't know, not gromentol holidays, protest holidays we had it, this celebrations, they're usually like.. a lot of police. I participated and I was like an observer in elections, I don't know how it was about identity, but maybe a little bit about justice and changing the system a little bit because it is something for my country. I want that to be.. I want Belarus to be on it's own way, not to be under dictatorship and not to be under Russia haha. Rusisan influence, yeah I'd like to.. people who grown here, and who care about other people, who can think about other people be in power. I tried to observe in the elections, maybe connected to this.. haha

I: I think so ya

P: Yeah and I organized some events in my social democratic organization. I was just an organizer and sometimes a trainer for feminism, we talked about feminism in different regions, regional centers in Belarus, we had clubs, like local clubs yeah and I organized some events about feminism, about LGBT tolerance.

I: Is that also a way to get more freedom for citizens?

P: Yeah I think

I: Also a change in the political system

P: Yeah of course, it starts, first it starts on the mind of our participants, of our events, of our organizations. So it's good when you have at least this area of influence you know.

I: aham. So you just do the thing you can do

P: Yeah I did the things I was able to do

I: Yeah exactly. If you think about the question: who can be Belarusian?

P: Who?

I: Is it.. everybody...

P: I don't get the accent haha

I: I can help you a bit. Is it for example everybody who lives in Belarus or is everyone with a Belarusian passport or is someone with Belarusian parents, or is it maybe someone who is just feeling Belarusian?

P: haha um.. maybe feeling yeah .. that the person maybe should ..know that Belarusian are different and want to have their own way and their own home... yeah and to name exactly Belarusian and not everybody else, who have this separate home, this separate country, separate language and to.. do something for the country, at least to live there and to pay .. um... to work there, to live there, to have this aim. But for me, I don't feel like, maybe yah I am Belariusian, but now maybe I'm losing it a bit of identity when I came here.

I: You think so?

P: Yah I'm not sure that I will go back, who knows.. because this country brought a lot of.. fear, pain, I don't know..all of these, not all the. Political system, but also some private stories you know.

I: Like personal stories

P: Yah personal, I don't have deep roots there. Like I don't have this strong supportive family I would like to have. Ya I have friends, but I think the time I will spent here I will lose all or most of the contacts so I can grow it here I think

I: Ok ya..

P: But I don't want to lose this identity of course. And I want to, still I want to Belarus be independent. Belarus is not the same as Russia and Ukraine haha. I want to peaceful and welfare to the country at all.

I: How do you work on the Belarusian identity here in Lithuania?

P: Now I can say I already work in .. for this identity haha. Because um.. I don't know.. wearing this [showing white/red ribbons on the backpack] makes me, reminds me that I am Belarusian and that Belarus still ... there are still problems. I have a flag on my window regarding.. all this maybe our problem that people to remind.

I: Do you speak Belarusian with other people here or is it more Russian? I mean with other Belarusian?

P: I speak Belarusian mostly with Belarusian here.

I: You speak here more Belarusian than in Belarus?

P: Yeah I can say that, because many Belarusian here, because they chose Lithuania because of their identifying I don't know.. and they know that we have a lot of common history and they came here, a lot of Belarusian speaking Belarusians because .. because we really have this .. Vilnius is our capital of Belariusian cultural history.

I: Why is that Vilnius?

P: Yeah really, because really a lot of historical places are still here and many famous I don't know. Sculptures of famous people, Belarusian people too. And Belarusian was very popular, Belarusian language I mean, was very spread a century ago.

I: In Vilnius?

P: Here is was the Belarusian language city. Yeah so I think many Belarusians who really understand this how much we have in common from here.

I: So you are also a little bit rooted here in Vilnius?

P: Yeah, because I think it is more close and more friendly for Belarusians exactly. Because of this common history.

I: Was this the reason why you moved to Vilnius too?

P: Yes Including this too

I: aha what else?

P: I understood that my social democratic thinking doesn't let me to the country, Poland. Because there are abortions forbidden and I understand that it is too much and it is one of the indicators. But commonly, generally it's just the sign of something bad that is happening in the country.

I: So it doesn't match with your personal and political values. In Poland.. and in Lithuania it does?

P: Yes it was .. usually Belarus when they choose where to go Poland or Lithuania usually. Because Latvia is something I really haven't ever been before.

I: Is that normal for Belarusians? Too far away?

P: It's not so far away, like on the map you know.. geographically we are very close..

I: But mentally haha?

P: Mentally yeah I don't know much about Latvia, I don't know and I haven't heard, haven't ever been. But I've been in Vilnius already many times.

I: Before already?

P: yeah

I: When did you make the decision to go here?

P: When.. like... you need dates or?

I: Not exactly

P: It was one year ago, last November.

I: and why was that the moment to leave Belarus and going to Lithuania?

P: It was a hard decision and if I didn't get letter about ... year first I was like called to the department about .. I forgot the word.

I: You can use translator no worry ha

P: um.. yeah like tax department, they wanted to know me, where I... from where I know human right center haha. Because I was volunteering for human right center several years and yeah.. they wanted to know how I know them and what did I do for them, because yeah.. they, the human rights center, sent me to Ukraine, To Charkov in 2015. And i was working as an volunteer for a couple of weeks and got their... a little salary, just for living there and I didn't pay tax haha in Belarus for salary. It was very little. And they say: so... it was too many years ago and I just have to pay this tax and I pay and that's all.. no fines or something like this. And I paid it, but then I received a letter from the research comity, they wanted to .. I don't know what they wanted to.. First letter was in the address I haven't been living for two years. And this address was my old address and it was .. in the department that.. under the responsibility of my ex-workplace. So people of this workplace said you received a letter haha from this comity. So please do something and maybe you should go away... And yeah I decided to go away because to many interested governmental organizations and I know what can it bring to. So i had to safe my psychological state.

I: Yeah... the governmental institutions they were actually looking for you.. they wanted to start investigating on you, what are you working on?

P: Yeah and i didn't know what to say

I: so then you made the decision to relocate to Vilnius. Are you still in touch with friends and relatives in Belarus?

P: Yeah sure, maybe when I lived in Minsk, I spoke with my relatives not so frequently haha like I do know.. like now..

I: Now more ya?

P: Ya, I don't see them at all, so that's maybe why I call them more often

I: And what kind of things do you discuss? Is it also about the political situation or your life in Vilnius?

P: Usually life in Vilnius, we speak about political situation mostly with local Belarusians but when I just call my friends or relatives we just discuss the ordinary life and some news and family life, because I have many relatives in Belarus and mostly they live in one town, my hometown a lot of them. So they are worried about what everything, we have a lot of things to discuss, and of course they are interested in how I am here and about my views.

I: do you feel free to talk with them on the phone?

P: m... we don't talk on the phone, we talk through messenger. I don't know how .. WhatsApp or Viber haha, but with granny for example we discuss political situation at all, sometimes he asks something and I try to explain and O shit, maybe she maybe... viber is not the most safe channel to speak

I: ya ok..

P: But then I am here and my granny have ever been interested in other organizations, I'm not sure they listen to her, they investigate some of her phonecalls of messenger calls. I don't think I am on so.. careful [?] .. from the other departments. Because I understand I am not so important person, but if they have a change, they use it usually gully because now it's something crazy happening. Crazy I mean, detaining and pushing people and trying to [?] Down anything that is not right by their ..

I: More than maybe in 2020?

P: yeah yeah! Even more. More I mean, some people who not [?] to it all, in anything. They didn't do anything, but you never know what they have about you.

I: Yeah, casus the process is not fair.

P: Yaeh yeah, they can like... take anything from other people who did something but haven't done something haha

I: Yeah. So you would think that.. like have you been to Belarus after you left?

P: No.

I: Because you think that if you would go back they could still..

P: yah yah.. I think that it's too dangerous we cannot know what is in their hear and what they are going to, because we have so many stories when Belarusians go back and then in the news we see that he or she was detained by the police, but usually people cross the border freely, like.. it's no problem, with that and they come home and everything is ok and in a couple of days they are detained by the police.

I: aham.. You not gonna take the risk then

P: yeah yeah casus I want to be on the safe side

I: yeah exactly. Have you participated in the 2020 protests?

P: Yes, but not exactly on the 9th of august.

I: before already?

P: Yeah before I participated in the pre-election meetings and yeah.. I was an observer in my hometown so I was waiting for the results in my hometown, cause I was an observer.. we have a lot of.. like an observer team there, different and different locations.

I: Could you just do you work as an observer?

P: It was hard, but we did everything that was in our.. like possibility because we were afraid that commission can call the police or something like that, so we were very loyal, silent haha

I: Very careful

P: Very careful and .. we yeah.. like. Spend all this time and reached the results haha successfully. So I say much work was done, many things were shown haha. And we saw may thing and we could ..

I: like what have you seen for example?

P: Like observers, official observers, who observed there, we spoke with them, we spoke with the head of the commission and we saw the results, they invited us to see the results and we .. you know.. we said that they were criminals. Because you know we saw the results, that they were falsified exactly because yeah they were.. obvious difference between previous protocols and main protocols. And the number were, the constant numbers that have to be same as all the numbers of all the protocols, it was different, it was increased in 1/3 part so haha. We understood that something was wrong and we called them criminals and I even.. so I stayed in my hometown, I was afraid to go to minsk and I wrote a protocol, not protocol but a complain to the court. Haha ...

I: That's very brave

P: Haha it was a crazy decision but we thought we are winner you know. We are on the right side, well we are right...

I: Did you also write in Belarusian language?

P: Um.. I don't exactly remember .

I: Maybe too much

P: Haha yay maybe too much, but then to understand that we are simple usual people that not weird Belarusians haha.. Yeah.. and when I came to give this complain, they had just.. ooo again.. another complain.. no sense with it. So I don't know, maybe there was something useful but now I'm not sure at all and I [?] That they didn't payed much attention to this because if so... I would be in prison already haha

I: aha, so they put it aside and they didn't payed any attention to is you think?

P: yeah, maybe .. it's better for me

I: Right now if you think about it.

I: Can you explain to me, when you were participating in the protests, where were you fighting for? You already explained a little bit about being independence? But was it.. did you had different things to fight for in this 2020 protests?

P: Yeah. The main point was to get rid of this dictatorship and get to get our democracy again haha. Yeah maybe in our history we didn't had it enough, enough democracy and freedom. People don't remember much about ti. But I saw how people wanted to be .. this freedom and democracy, freedom of speech and freedom of meetings outside on the streets. And i don't know.. to do something. You know a lot of people, and active people thought about to do something useful for the country, they faced this [?] That don't let them to do as much as they want. And it was so many active people that [?] To trust and everybody already, we could trust anybody just to.. to have a change, just to have a change to try something else.

I: Was it back then, did you fully supported the political opposition at that time?

P: Yeah we were all united for this goal, this main goal. Even now, I don't want to fight between the different parts of the opposition you know, I don't want to participate in it and see it, and be angry on everybody who..

I: You're don with it?

P: Yeah yeah, i don't want to, I still see this goal and I don't understand why people don't see it and they blame each other but that time..

I: I hear it a lot actually. That there are many frictions and different ideas between the different opposition members

P: Aham.. yeah in that time, I do everything I can, maybe I was not so deeply involved in the political movement, but I thought this time is for people who are new in this topic, because I saw so many lights in their eyes you know.

I: Yeah

P: Comparing with me. I didn't hope much.

I: No?

P: No, for people who would go outside and to .. but people like repeat again that nobody will be interested much and then I saw this lines when people give their signs for the presidential candidates and I was so surprised. I didn't .. maybe cause it started a lot of time ago and we didn't see each other, and then people started to see each other and started to understand that . What is the system it is. Because it is really.. not humuanic ...it's so... cruel to people and the life of the person is not into account. It's not important

I: It's just the autocratic system.. You said people started to see each other. Do you have an explanation for this? Why 2020 for example?

P: Why? Yeah.. because.. I don't know.. my idea. You mean why people did it?

I: Why was it new in 2020?

P: Because people saw a change, I don't know... maybe.. they understood that they have an alternative way and they want to change because this system doesn't safe them, doesn't defend them anymore. And .. like this.. advantage of this system is too , too little with this advantages you know. I gave us too little comparing to .. what it let us, maybe suffering.. to forget good future, we really couldn't imagined how we spend this system for next 5 years. I think this was for people the main point haha

I: And that was different than the years before?

P: Yeah, the years before it was the war in Ukraine and before it was the ... more or less stable economic situation, there was no covid haha.

I: aham

P: Yeah maybe, Russia.. this money of Russia helped Belarusian system and economically it was more or less good and people didn't feel like lack of freedom in business. Every business was not so suppressed. And when this.. many factories were collected together during several main.. problems... like economical problems, covid problems and then political problems when people saw how the system fight against simple people

I: All together it came to a kind of explosion in 2020?

P: How?

I: Like all the situations together, it all came together and led a massive protest

P: yeah and it was heated by you know attitude from big government to this gathering people. They saw how.. again their favorite candidates were in prisons. And this time I think people were angry about this haha. After this business process, covid initiatives and then from day to day they started watch the news, read information, they stopped governmental informational sources. I think it's implemented in people very much.

I: So it was this whole process like you explained.

P: Yeah i think mostly I explained hah...

I: When you came to Lithuania, did you still participated in the protest?

P: Yeah sometimes I still went to participated, on some squares, people still go, I don't know.. I don't have enough energy to this, I don't know.. I don't have a company here, I am here quite alone.

I: Different then in Belarus?

P: Yeah, like in Belarus I had many people I saw when I went to the protests after the elections and everyday like.. Many of my friends wrote me before: let's meet and let's meet before and go together. And here, I don't have such contacts, I don't know haha. And I feel a bit alone here, but once when a guy from my company saw my attributes, and he asked, pls come to our meetings on Sundays and every time I forget about it. Because every Sunday Belarusians have in Lithuania meetings for Belarus, like..

I: I didn't know that, in subgroups or in one big group? Like smaller communities?

P: I'm not sure about it. It's optional information, you can found it on special channels, telegram channels that we share still our news and announcements. And.. so.. they are announced that the meeting will happen, but there are too many channels now, to many informations about Ukraine and some Belarusian news, so every time I forget, if not I will visit them. And if I have company and some friends that remind me, would remind me about those I would visit it. I think it's a good idea.

I: To have a small group of friends

P: Yeah maybe to have a change again to find your sociacitves.

I: That's quite important if you move to another place of course. One more question about the 2020 protests. Did something changed in your idea about your identity after the 2020 events?

P: umm.. ideas of protests?

I: Like after the protests. Did something changed in your personal idea of Belarusian identity

P: You know I don't think much about my own identity, I can say that if I discuss it now with you about my identity, maybe somewhere and I dream about, I feel myself at home here. So, who would I be if I learn Lithuanian and Lithuania would not differ me from other Belarusians but .. I don't know with this occupation in Belarus I don't feel like I belong to this country much. Like I feel I am separate, I don't want to identify with the system. And Belarusians who are still there are suprressed, you know they are under the floor.. Like in the underground

I: After the, did you for example use more your Belarusian language? Like you said I don't really think about identity, but was there no change in that people were speaking more with you about

P: A Belarusian identity of the other people?

I: Nyaa. For exmaple, would you use more the language or is more a topic of discussion with your friends or ..

P: Yeah, what about this. Because I am still participating in the Belarusian yard chat you know, like Minsk chat. And it's very closed. I have many familiar people there and they open to speak try Belarusian language there. And speak about Belarusian history much. And I observe a lot of insides you know, about what is Belarus, and how many people were fighting for it's freedom in every part of their lives. But if see know how people sacrifice with their freedom and I don't know. and to this consciously with all the [?] And the opportunities and some danger for their health to stay in Belarus. And it so hard to say is it really useful for Belarus now or not. I am not the person who want to have a political career in Belarus. And I agree that it's important to maybe stay in Belarus and be in prison to save this position and continue fighting till it's finished. And becoming politician in a new Belarus and you will be respected, but for people who don't have such aims for Belarus, it's strange for... for example for me yah, I .. umm.. yeah I will never be a Lithuanian from inside, I want to be just happy, to save my health, to save my feeling of belonging to the place I live. The one I live in future so.. I don't think I will lose my identity and I like speaking in Belarusian language.

I: I think once you're born there and you speak the language and you very familiar with people you will never lose it.

P: Aham

I: But it sounds also like it's a bit of crisp for you in between the places.

P: M.. ya ya. Between because it is hard to think all the time about Belarus, to go deeper in this culture and city.

I: you said before you feel a little bit alone here, but do you know a lot of Belarusians here?

P: Hm.. I have some contacts and we sometimes see each other and some people I know from this .. my period of active of one I was student. But I don't know, they are still in activism you know, they made activism like careers we can say there. There are some new people who work in Belarusian non-governmental structures, like they are now out of Belarus in Lithuania of Poland. Some are working about volunteering.

I: Like more activity working for political opposition?

P: Yeah for political opposition or volunteering for human rights, because human rights they [?] themselves, they are from political organizations. I feel like.. I'm just worker of IT-company, they relocated me and I socialized with other co-workers that live next to me and we speak every week at least. We meet with them.

I: But these people are more from the company who you meet.

P: Yeah

I: Because last time it was the neighborhood meeting? It was the special chat for the neighborhood I believe

P: Aham yes mostly yes

I: Is it important for you to be in contact with Belarusians?

P: Uhm.. Of course it is easier to stay in touch with Belarusians, because we live next to each other, our offices are here and that's why we live and work on the same place. So...it's hard to.. I don't know.. in touch with Lithuanians. Because what exact groups can bring you to Lithuanian company and it's hard to speak with them because of course it is more comfortable for them to speak in Lithuanian but Belarusians don't understand. And sometimes they are of course friendly try to.. as much as possible involve us in discussions but finally they switch to Lithuanian. It's more comfortable to continue haha

I: It's more practice ya

P: To go deeper in the discussions. But I try, you know. I started dancing classes and I .. there are..

I: Belarusian dancing class or?

P: No it's just Lithuanian dancing class

I: Because I know there are also Belarusian dancing classes

P: Yeah we have such folk dancing groups here

I: Do you do such Belarusian activities here in Lithuania?

P: Yeah I would like maybe to sing or to dance. But in the end I understand that it's what I like to sing. Not my kind of singing haha. Or something that I'm used to do in Belarus and then in Belarus I didn't song folk and folk dancing haha

I: So you don't do any Belarusian activities here?

P: Yeah except our local meetings with Belarusians?

I: How do you get in such community together?

P: One guy started all this chat..But it started before you heard the story. That he ran away from his house and shouted to my balcony. But before they started their chat maybe a year ago.

I: OK

P At least. Because it was a tradition in Belarus and they continued it here

I: Since 2020 it was a tradition?

P: Yeah yeah.

I: So they copied the idea of the local idea of the chat from Belarus and they brought it to here to connect people?

P: Aham

I: what kind of talks do you have in such chats?

P: Sometimes about politics, sometimes just news from the company, you know some.. about adaptation of course, everybody has their own stories about the adaptation. Yeah and life stories too, sometimes we chat with our girls haha we meet and have fun in some clubs, pubs or bars just to talk about our private lives and it's so fun.

I: your own people would make it also more easy to talk than with Lithuanians for example.

P: Yeah it's good you have some similar company. It's something that is similar with my previous life because in this chat, that Belarusian chat, there are people who are still in Belarus. Um.. we had like women club haha.. We spoke much about some private life stuff and politics too and many different things, with whom we have fun and it's good to the same here, that gives me the feeling I have still home a little bit haha

I: I can imagine that yes

P: It's to think about such things like identity and.. Am I such a person who want to travel all live and trying different places like this.. It's better for me to stay and to grow deeper and to make myself at home here. Of course I would never, will never reach this aim. But at the moment I feel comfortable and not to be on the [?]

Interview 9 transcription

Date: 05 November 2022

Time: 11:00

Gender: Male

Age: 28

Interviewer (I)
Participant (p)

I: The first question, if we talk about Belarusian national identity, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

P: Aham.. For me the Belarusian identity in our .. modest. Humble people, we are humble people, Belarusians are humble people from my perspectives. We love a lot of potatoes. And of course for me Belarus is connected with the grand duchy of Lithuania and that answers the question why I am here for example. So it's people from East Europe, and we every Belarusians have piece of land in Belarus were we can plant tomatoes or potatoes, cultivation of plants, even in Minsk in the city in Minsk, every Belarusian has some land outside the city of Minsk. It's about our culture for me, and of course we are Eastern European people which have language, culture and history.

I: And with language you mean?

P: The Belarusian language

I: You speak it?

P: Yes, I speak of course. More I read like newspaper in Belarusian language. I prefer Belarusian language in my life. In my social media life haha

I: You using it a lot in social media in your post?

P: Yes yes, a lot of my posts in Belarusian language of course

I: Have you used the language all your life?

P: We.. in my life with my wife we use Russian language, but in my home, in Belarus in of course we use the Belarusian language. Because I was born in small city in north of Belarus. So ya, we use the Belarusian language.

I: Is it normal that if you're born in a small city you use the Belarusian language?

P: Actually people didn't think it was the Belarusian language, but I understand a lot of Belarusian words in this language. It's like Trasjanka, a mix of Belarusian and Russian language, but as I see it is more Belarusian language than Russian language. It's not only about words, it's about intonation, construction of sentences. So for me it's more Belarusian language than Russian.

I: Is it that everybody in the surrounding speak it? Or are there also people who only speak Russian?

P: Um.. all people understand Russian and they can speak Russian, but usually people use like Trasjanka maybe, but for it's Belarusian language, it's not Trasjanka. According to my small research. So I think when we will have free country and we will have free television or something else, we will study in Belarusian language. This process will not so long to switch our languages.

I: Because?

P: Because now we don't have a good example of literature language. Literature.. yes of course we have literature of [?] and literature of Kupala and so on [?], but In our life, we don't have television in Belarusian language. Publications.. we have articles in newspaper but it's mixed in Belarusian and Russian language, like article in Belarusian and Russian. But all people understand Belarusian language and Russian language. Because everybody studied in the school.

I: Only the language or did you also learn about Belarusian history?

P: In my school? Yes of course, we studied Belarusian language and history and Russian language and Russian literature. I don't understand we don't studies Belarusian literature. Of course it's like obligation for every people in Belarus.

I: Because I hear a lot of people saying: ya.. but maybe 10 percent speak Belarusian and everybody speak Russian and.. And on the other hand everybody learns the language in school

P: Yes everybody learns the language in school. And maybe 10% speak Belarusian in literature language. Like language from the book. But usually people outside of Minsk, outside of big city, speak Trasjanka. But it's my perspective. I see it's more Belarusian language than Russian.

I: And if you go to the big city Minsk, everybody speaks Russian?

P: Yes everybody speak Russian. Russian or literature.. literary language.

I: You mean just in public readings?

P: Yes yes

I: So it's more common if you read something, to have it in Russian than in Belarusian

P: Yeah yeah. Because a lot of people from democracy movement think that Belarusian language is from newspaper, from books. But people that leave in the village, they still speak more Belarusian language than Russian. Like my grandmother... but maybe they from democracy society think it is trasjanka, but for me it is more Belarusian language than Russian.

I: You just mentioned what is your association with the Belarusian identity. How would you say you would learn such things? Do you learn such things in school or do you discuss it with parents?

P: I think no, we didn't discuss it in my school. But it was for me try to understand it, I like history, geography. I am geographer and I like history. So for me, Belarusian identity it's like mix of our culture, our food, who we are, how feeling in all the world. And for me Belarusian is like, I will

repeat, Humble people who lives in Eastern Europe between Ukraine and Lithuania. If associations with Belarusian, it's of course about potatoes. I don't know why.

I: But you say for example, humble people and they are from Eastern Europe and having your own land or potatoes. But there could also be people from Ukraine saying ya...we are humble people, we are in Eastern Europe and we also have our farm land with potatoes. How do you differ from them?

P: Maybe it's about language and our culture... even our holidays. For example we will celebrate two eastern. Katholiek eastern and Orthodox Eastern. It's three days in Belarus

I: Is it 2 weeks later?

P: yeah. 7 Januari and 25th December. So and I think that Belarusian people also very tolerant people to ... not opinion. To different religions.

I: To different religions.

P: It's like tolerant to different religions. Not an opinion. For example. Unfortunately we still want to have one leader, who will lead our country and know everything and everywhere and everything. It's unfortunately. Maybe we need to teach democracy.

I: But you say tolerant to religion. Why do you think?

P: Because we have for example a lot of people, even in my Eastern.. I live West.. Eastern north of Belarus, near Vitebsk. So even there, we have like.. Catholic church and orthodox church and for example in work collective, if we have for example catholic and orthodox we will celebrate Easter and Christmas haha

I so it doesn't matter if you're from different religions, you just celebrate it together

P: Yes for example if we have Easter, I will bring my eggs to all and share it and after that we celebrate Easter, like orthodox Easter together, it's also like.. like that..

I: No tensions, no stress.

P: Yes it's only about religion, not opinion.

I: Aha.. how do you experience it with opinions?

P: For example even in democracy society, we see that people want to be, want to have one leader, some Tsichanovskaya, or something else. She or he will lead our country, will do everything for us. Maybe it's about.. it's like result of politics of dictatorships

I: Ya it's a long history of the strong leader.

P: yeah maybe, and before that the Soviet Union, so maybe it's about this so.. but even when we will discuss about something interesting. For example: is Trasjanka Belarusian langue or Russian, we will have like... like rubic one between people and we don't each other for this opinion. Like.. for example he or she will like Lukashenko, No I don't like it, this people, cause she or he likes Lukashenko

I: And then there is no discussion, there's just separation?

P: Yeah yes.. unfortunately yes. I see that Belarusian don't like different option. Don't like hard strong .. difficult construction. For example, we don't have a clear answer for this why... we just need a very simple answer. This is why and this is why

I: Ah i see, if it gets complicated then...

P: We don't like complicated

I: Have you personal things in discussion with friends or family?

P: Yes yes cause even in my family we have like two different opinions about the situation in Belarus and we stoped to converse, having conversation between us.

I: And then the conversation is between Lukashenko and Tsichanovskaya?

P: Yes between Lukashenko and democracy.

I: Yeah.. must be difficult

P: For me?

I: It can be difficult if you have your family and you love your family

P: Look I am Belarusian and for me it's not difficult because I think Lukashenko should be in the Hague. So for me it's a very clear answer, but for people who don't share this opinion with me, for me this people. I don't like this people.

I: Even if it is your family?

P: Even if it's family yeah, like my uncle. So, maybe it's not about Belarusian identity, because I think it is about results of politics about dictatorship, politics of reign of horizontal relationship between us.

I: You can also understand why do you think like that.

P: Yes yes. I don't understand. And even more I don't understand democratic movement when we would like to build new Belarus and we start from this mistake: we need one leader, we need one clear answers and we need to.. very simple decision. But it doesn't work like in science.

I: Do you discuss this ideas with friends?

P: Yes yes I have .. we will organize debate club about how Belarusian will teach to, to.. respect. To respect different opinions. We see this problem

I: Debate club in Vilnius?

P: Yes of course

I: Aha

P: offline, even here. So because we have like organization with people with different opinion, left right, it's about politics. And we want to teach, to learn how we can respect different opinion In different cases and vision. It's very important in democracy but unfortunately Belarusians are bad examples in this case

I: I spoke with some people, they say like: before in 2020 everybody was together, everyone was united. And now we are two years later and we already see groups with this ideas, groups with that ideas and that gives a lot of tensions between.

P: Yes, but I think it's not about identity. I think it is about history. For me identity it's like from more deep [?] even maybe one century, maybe not, maybe not. Unfortunately, if we talk about identity, Belarusians like.. Belarusians were the best in Soviet Union. We wanted to be the first in Soviet Union. We were like.. county of .. first country in USSR.

I: Yeah economically.

P: Economically and unfortunately we .. a lot of charges. And main buildings were destroyed by soviet regimes. And we have a lot of Lenin monuments. Its also an answer why we had chosen.. Why we chose Lukashenko in 20... before.,

I: Yeah 1994

P: A lot of years before ya. Because we wanted to restore this life, which we lost. It's about our parents.

I: Ya ok, you think Lukashenko was chosen because he bring some stability?

P: Yes yes, in the 90's. So it was like symbol of restoration, restoration of good life because in USSR Belarusians don't have like Ukrainians Holodomor. And so on

I: But there were also some issues I think in the 1930s right, which was maybe not compared to Ukraine. It was not only the good life in the Soviet Union

P: Yes of course, of course

I: But compared to other countries?

P: But now we see that Belarus lose time with Lukashenko.

I: Have you protested in 2020? In Belarus?

P: Yes of course, of course, more over.. I was .. three times a candidate for deputy in my region. Lepin district, tjasnitki district and Besjenko district. It was before, so I was very active in politics, in Belarusian politics. It's since 2015, since [?] Company. And after that in 2020 I collected signatures for Babaryka and coordinated for observers in Minsk [?] District in Minsk. And after that, of course I needed to move to Vilnius.

I: You were too close to politics?

P: Yes yes I tried to be, because I understand that we need to change something. In our mentality and in our.. it's like the big goal to change the mentality of Belarusian people, to remove soviet mentality. But yes.. of course I like politics I can do from Lithuania. I can, but it is not very, very effective.

I: What was the main goal when you enter politics? And in the protests

P: Protests of?

I: You said you come in to politics in 2015, what was your main aim?

P: My main aim of my previous politics career haha it was to change my region, because it is a very depressive region. Like we have a few industries, a lot of grandmothers and grandfathers, so ya it was my goal to change this region, to be a voice for this people. People from this region. But Belarusian regime didn't think so.

I: Did you already had problems back in 2015 with doing your work?

P: Before?

I: Yeah before 2020

P: No I haven't a problem, it was like.. yes of course I had problem during my campaign. My campaigns from authorities. But after that no, even more I worked in Ministry of environment and I developed .. it's also a answer of identity: Belarusians like nature, like forest, like Lithuanians. So and I developed...

I: Mushrooms..

P: Yeah mushroom. I don't know why I don't like it. My wife for example very like to.. I don't know in English..

I: Hiking?

P: Hunting of mushrooms haha

I: hahaha like going with your backpack into the forest

P: Yes and I developed water protected zones in my region. So I worked in ministry of environment, after my contract was ended, I decided to move to Vilnius and study PhD.

I: And that was in?

P: 2021. I was a year before.

I: And why to Vilnius?

P: It's a good question because I don't.. have an opinion I am abroad.

I: Here?

P: Yes because in Vilnius I can see place where Kalinowski was died for example or I can see church with cemetery with [Sapega] for me it's my crush haha. From Grand-duchy of Lithuania. So feel this connection, it was our land, lot of people, a lot Belarusians worked here for example in this building worked [?] It's like inventer of rocket fuel, in Apollo. He is from Belarus. And he studies in this building.

I: That's interesting.

P: that's very interesting, and for me it's a connection with my previous Belarusians. It's not.. they didn't understand that they were Belarusian, they were Lithins, not Lithuanians, even [?] also from Vilnius University. So I chose this university because I feel this connection with my ancestors.

I: Hard to proncoune haha

P: haha

I: But you said you went in 2021, but was it also that you had to move from Belarus because of safety reasons?

P: I'm a lucky boy, after my move to Vilnius, 10 days after, I had a search in my apartment, in my mothers apartment.

I: You were right on time

P: I am really a lucky boy haha in this case. But we understand, we will... we can be next. We could be next yeah..

I: I am making a bit stap back and we were talking about this presidential elections and you said you participated, also in protests. Was it also that you had more topics, more discussions with friends, relatives, about things like identity, for example the white-red-white flag or the Belarusian language? Was it more a topic of discussion?

P: Umm you like I would propose more topic of discussion?

I: was it in this time you were more talking about this with friends or family?

P: Uhhh.. I think in my family, unfortunately we didn't talk about identity. After this interview I will talk about it haha. Especially with my grandmother, it's interesting. But maybe it's like symbols of identity. Red-white-white flag it's of course, pagonja, like .. do you know pagonja? Cote of arms. Yes of course and language, Christianity because we have a lot of .. orthodox.. and tolerance and so.. and it's also about we ... I talked with my wife this discussion about: what is Belarusians? For it's like, even if we have a three hours ride, we need to stop and to eat.

I: Haha to stop and eat. You don't eat in the car?

P: No no we can eat in the car, but we need to have something for eating. Because three ours it's not very long.. distinction for eating. You can eat in the end of the destination. No you need to have a break, in the middle of the destination. It's also about our .. umm.. not hobbies, it's like habit. To eat on the road. It's our observation with our wife

I: It's funny to be not really aware of it what it is to be Belarusian, but if you start thinking about it and have a discos and then you realize it.

P: Yes it's funny. What else.. umm.. it's also like.. connection with land, because we need to.. I said about it. About potatoes, dig potatoes

I: Yah in your own land.

P: It's our.. maybe 5 years before, my grandmother had pig, a pig. So it also was like family tradition to kill the pig and eat very fresh meat.

I: Like a ceremony?

P: haha it's not a ceremony haha because it's like.. reason to meet every family, for example my family.. my grandmother has two daughters, it's like two families, family of my mother and family of my aunt. And all people to meet together for killing this pig haha

I: It's a good reason for meeting each other

P: And after that, I remember my feeling, after that pig. And our grandmother to meet us, a big table with food. It's like after something big, like after the war haha

I: Yes like a jubilee. So family is also very important in that case

P: Yes family is also very important, but unfortunately it's also about soviet history. We don't know more than.. for example my grandmother don't know her grandmother. So I don't know also my grand grandmother because a lot of people were suppressed, for example my grandmother was from fathers side, was from Russia, from north of Russia. And her father was like officer from Tsar army and it was reason of suppression of this family and they moved all Russia, They lived in Moscow, even in Kazakhstan. Maybe it's an answer why family it's important, we don't know a lot of things about our family. And also if we talk about identity. It's not about Italy family, they live and they have a house and this house was shared with different ... a lot of generations. We don't have this tradition. For example we have just one house, and this house was build like.. 50, not maybe 60 years ago and we still have dreams, Belarusian dreams to have apartment in Minsk.

I: haha is that the big goal?

P: It's... for me and my wife it was really a big goal. We can't imagine how we can to collect this money.. to earn this money for apartment in Minsk. But..

I: Why is that?

P: I don't know.. it seems like a big price, but after moving to Lithuania I understand it's very cheap. Haha. We did it, we build it, apartment in Minsk. But now understand it's a very cheap apartment ..

I: Compared to the prices in Lithuania

P: In Vilnius specially. Not only in Vilnius. Not in Barcelona for example or Rome. But in Minsk.. yea I don't know why, but it's also about Soviet mentality. Because to be in village, to have like.. farm it was like a very dangerous thing from holodomor time. Becase communist..

I: You had to give your..

P: Yeah yea, so it was soviet [?] this connection between us and the land, our land. I like it, I really like my grandmothers background, I really miss the backyard and I start to think that I need to buy maybe very cheap house in Lithuania or even near the border with Belarus and having a pease of land and dig.. haha potatoes and tomatoes

I: So the attraction to the city is not only cause it is nice to live in an apartment but it was also because the Soviet history cause you were more safe in the cities due to the development of the country with the industrialisation.

P: Yah and for example in Belarus 25% lives in villages. Like a quarter lives in a village, but for exmaple in my town, it's a town but.

I: How many people live there?

P: 6000. But it's also like .. not about city live, of course .. yes we have one marsjrut of public trnasport, only one

I: To minsk?

P: Not not in the city, just one line haha. But of course every people have a backyard, a lot of people work in agriculture sector so it's not about city life, town life, it's about village life.

I: A big village

P: But it's people from the town, so it's not village people in official statistics

I: Rather a bit village than a small town

P: and also if we talk about identity, I also thought about especially in Vilnius, when I started to live in Vilnius, in understand how it works. I mean how different communities can live together, for example we are Russian speakers in Vilnius and we have Lithuanian speakers in Vilnius. And it's not.., we don't cross, it's like different society, it's like different universe.

I: Different bubble, is that so ya? So you for example have only Russian speaking people around you?

P: Yes, no, I have of course, because I work in university, but when I imagine... for example yes.. we buy food in the shop and that people also, Lithuanian people, but it's not too different. Two bulbs in one place. And especially in Belarus we had a lot of jewish people before the second world war. And then I understand they also live in a different society with different problems. For exmaple my problems for Lithuanian is like what... it's like legalization here or about.. and so on..

I: You think it's nothing compared to your problems?

P: Yes yes of course. And it's very interesting because in my town in Belarus, before the second world war we had half of the population of Jewish. Half a population. We had 5 synagogues, now we have zero.

I: ya ya

P: And zero Jewish population. Just a cemetery. So and very interesting how the society lived tighter in Belarus and I understand it how it works in Lithuanian, abroad. It's like different bubbles. So I need to study Lithuanian.

I: That's an important thing to integrate

P: Yes it is important.

I: How do you feel living here? Because you said it feels a bit like at home

P: Yes I do feel like at home. Lithuanian people are really good people.

I: But do you also feel free to say what you want?

P: Yes of course I feel free, I can say Lukashenko go away aha, go to hell, it is an important thing. And I can read the news, any news what I want, but unfortunately, I understand and I feel like migrants and I understand why migrant life is not easy life so I need to have a check in migration office for my resident permit and it's a lot of paper work. I can't work because I haven't resident permit and it's very.. not easy.

I: It feels a little bit like at home but not..

P: Yes yes

I: What is the biggest different to live here?

P: In Lithuania and in Minsk?

I: Yeah?

P: Um.. if we talk about identity?

I: Nono what is you biggest..

P: First of all in Vilnius it's a lot of events. More than in Minsk. Even in Minsk, but Minsk is a big city. More than 2 million people in Minsk, but in Vilnius we have a lot of events and not only for Belarusian diaspora, in total.. and I see that here civil society works, even I here a lot of more..bird voices than in Belarus and I can see more animals when I drive. I don't know why but it's very interesting observation. And yes.. life here more expensive than in Belarus, especially if we talk about hairdresser. It's very expensive here, or nail service, so much more expensive than in Belarus but it's more quality life here than in Belarus.

I: Do you still have contact with people in Belarus?

P: Of course! Of course!

I: Do you discuss everything?

P: Of course and btw, I was in Warsaw last night and we with my wife and .. observed all Ukrainians people on telephone, like we also on telephone because we talked with our families in our countries. So yes of course I talk with my .. I had connection with my family, with my friends and btw we tried to find some solutions, some program for geographers in Belarus to maybe someone want to move from Belarus to Lithuania.

I: In corporation with the university?

P: Yes of course, we try to find to help them

I: Do you have like a lot of contact with Belarusian here in Lithuania?

P: In Lithuania?

I: Yes

P: Not a lot of, but I have of course. I have an organization here

I: And the organization is the debate club here?

P: Yes yes it's like, it's organization of democracy network, European democracy network and we try to do something but we have problems with our funds but maybe next year, we will maybe something

I: Problems with the fund you mean?

P: yes, but it's like bureaucracy collision here so..

I: Is it also connected to political movement?

P: Yes it's especially political and we try to find young politicians because we have to improve this young politicians before relocation to Belarus

I: do you also pay attention to identity question?

P: No it's about politicians, not to..

I: don't you think it's a bit related to each other?

P: Maybe we will have this topic but I don't think about it Maybe yeah. We need to.. speak about identity. If you want we can invite you in this debate.

I: haha for this debate I can make a presentation.

P: yes yes but of course it is people from Belarus, young activists. They usually, half of this people speak Belarusian for example

I: But in the debate you discuss in Russian?

P: But we can do this debate in English if you want.

I: That would be interesting.

I: Is it important for you to have Belarusians around you?

P: it's not important but it's easy to connect. I don't know a lot of words form Lithuanian language so yes of course .. btw when I meet Belarusian people abroad it's of course like my friend from the start. And we see me and my wife, we observe Belarusian people are really warm people and it's like.. for example, we really like Belarusian people, especially abroad. We understand that it's better than Ukrainians, I can say that because it is anonymous haha so ya I really think Belarusians is better people in the world from my perspective. Because I can work with Belarusian people, they very humble and very friendly so..

I: Do you also feel proud as Belarusian abroad?

P: Of course of course! I really proud

I: More proud here in Lithuania than before?

P: Yes from 2020. But honestly when I was a candidate it was also very exiting experience to me, to meet a lot people, for example if I need to be a candidate I need to collect one thousand signatures. And I do it myself, for me, so I met thousands of people and a lot of hand shaking, so yeah... and I like my people and I believe we will live better and we will live in freedom country and our.. even if we talk about our history. We had like European laws before, in 16th century so.. I think we will be free and we will be better and our country..

I: Is it only discussing here in the organization? Or do you also actively .. have some active participation in Belarus somehow?

P: Talking about my organization?

I: yeah

P: It's like.. it's organization of young political leaders and it's about how we can improve this leaders. This leaders have retrospective of activism. For example, me I was a candidate, I have [?] he was also a candidate deputy, so yah.. some people for example from my ogranization fight for Ukrain, in Ukraine right now. So it's like young activists.

I: You started it on your own?

P: Yes yes, I am a leader of this organization

I: You started it in Lithuania?

P: No no we started in 2018

I: aha ok.

P: 4 years ago, but of course after my relocation to Lithuania, I restore my leadership and I can be more free. Now for example we invite people in our organization and proposed them to support in education, support for their ideas. So... I think.. it's like labour reunion. I hope after., we will in parliament.

I: That's good goal I would say

P: Being in parlement?

I: Yeah.

P: Yeah but, but unfortunately we can't say [?] for our parlement in Belarus right now.

I: You said there were more events for Belarusian here in Lithuania. Do you also participate in that?

P: Yes of course, for example I participate in events of Tsichanovskaya. I hope I will participate Monday, it's not about Belarusians, it's about Tibet. I see a lot of connection of how Tibet people. Do you know about it?

I: I don't know about it.

P: It's like the situation after in 1950. It was 1950 and the tibet people, a lot of people were also exiled.

I: aham

P: So it's very connected with the Belarusian situation. So, but.. yes from dopamoga organization. Like help.

I: Dapamoga?

P: Dapamoga, it's from a Belarusian organization here.

I: Is it like Belarusian help?

P: It's like help. So they organize psychologists. My wife participated also from this organization. So also I studied Lithuanian in Dopamogo. Yes. And of course protests here. I participated. For example referendum, near consulate, Belarusian embassy. Dien vodie, freedom day in Belarus. In the march ya...

I: Are there still protests going on here?

P: Here? Yes yes

I: I saw last Sunday I think..

P: But it's like small protest unfortunately, I didn't participated in this weekly protests. But yeah.. I have a flag in my home.

I: On the balcony?

P: no no

I: I see sometimes the flag on the balconies

P: yes yes yes it's also about identity because we in the opposition, are afraid that people after victory, we can say this word, after victory think will we use Soviet flag or will we use white red white flag or we will invent new flag. But in 2020 I am really happy to see that people had the change and choose the historical flag, it's a very important thing. And it's connection with our colors. For example when my wife wore red and white clothes it looks very beautiful and I understand why because it's in my brain. White and red colors.

I: What do you mean it's in your brain?

P: I like this.

I: What do you think is the meaning of white red white flag? Not the historical meaning, but as the..

P: For me?

I: Yeah in the protests, why was it so important?

P: It's like.. Historical meaning about ..? This protest is like way though pain. White like our life, pain and our new life. It's a very interesting thing. It's a very exiting flag, exiting colors, like we, our souls lived before and red peace is our life in the earth and a lot of meanings.. and for me it's also if you talk about 2020 protests, it's like restore the flag. Because after.. through the pain, through the pain.. red band. Red band on flag is our pain. I like this flag.

I: specially because in the use of the protests and then also the meaning

P: Yes yes. But for example in the start of the protests, we can see two flags. People used two flags.

I: Which flags?

P: Lukashenko's flag.

I: Ah.. they also used it in the protest?

P: Yes yes. Not me, but I see people who use

I: From the opposition they use..?

P: Yes in the opposition. The start of the protests. And maybe.. I can find in my laptop images, because I like it in the start. It was very interesting people use two flags it's about union. Unification. Because we have people.. but after that Lukashenko started to use this flag on cars and after that you can't use it. So he destroyed it, it's the flag of fascism, it's flag of murders.

I: And then the opposition came and they have their own flag

P: Yes, but It as interesting, but only in the start. Maybe before August, maybe before this brutal or maybe.. ya

P: so what I really like that the situation was in Belarus, if we talk about revolution, the worst way to live like we lived before, to have like fake elections and protests on this so I liked it, this situation was [?] it's our way and I believe that we will live in Belarus as soon as possible, maybe next year. Maybe even more we will celebrate new year in Minsk. So especially if talking about identity, it's our identity to celebrate new year more than Christmas. We celebrate Christmas, maybe in catholic society more celebrated. Here for example, here in Vilnius in Lithuania. Christmas is more celebrated or equal as new year. In Belarus not, in Belarus new year is main holiday, main dishes.. haha. For example in my family in orthodox Christmas we usually have dinner with dishes from new year haha.

I: Left overs..

P: Yes haha. It's not very celebrated holiday in Belarus. From religious Easter is more. If we talk about religions. And for example here in Vilnius in Lithuania we had that holiday, in November ..

I: A ya.. All saints day and all Souls day

P: In Belarus it's not very

I: It's catholic thing I think right

P: Yes yes, also we have in orthodox, but two weeks after, it may be this Sunday, today we have. My grandmother will go the cemetery.

I: it's a big thing here.

P: No in Belarus not. Here a lot of candles, why? I don't know. In Belarus more in spring, [?] it's orthodox.

I: Kind of thanksgiving day?

P: Yes yes. So it's not.... Usually we don't celebrate this. We don't have this cult like [?]. so any question haha?

P: what is about differences in our life? We have less cars, even in Minsk a big city, less cards than in Vilnius.

I: It's better for the climate.

P: It's about level of life

I: Ya aham.

P: For example if we talk about how our cities and villages are built, in east of Belarus we have broad prospects, broad streets, a lot of places. In the West of Belarus we will like see in Lithuania, more houses, more closer to each other than in east.

I: Mentality differences?

P: Yes and different mentality of course. West was .. if we talk about inside of Belarus. I don't like people from West Belarus. Because especially from Mogilov, it's very very easy, because they like Russians, they like to live Carpe Diem, to live today. To have the big car, to have a lot of gold

I: A bit selfish?

P: Yes haha it's about Mogilov region. It's like people more humble in the West and like center. And also we have ... I heard about study, Marriage? Marriage between Belarusians, but for example north of Belarusians in the north of Belarus and in the south, Polesia and [?] We marry between each other. For example from near neighboring district

I: But why is it?

P: It's like my district and her district [points to the table]. We are neighbors

I: But that's normal that...

P: It's more normal in the north of Belarus, because we choose our wife and our husbands from our region. And Polesia, in the south also. But center of Belarus like Brest, Minsk and [?] they chose from different sides. It works because for example in my family also. We are from our region. But it's like observation also. But when we ask people who you are, usually people say we are Belarusians and our native language is Belarusian.

I: Have you also met people in Lithuania who are pro Lukashenko?

P: In Lithuania? No haha. Would you like to meet this people?

I: But I can imagine that also Belarusians who live here and they are not from the opposition.

P: But it's very.. small amount of people who stand for Lukashenko. And usually people from administrations. Nomenclature, system of Lukashenko.

I: governmental jobs?

P: But honestly from my.. in my environment, in my community, I don't have any people who like Lukas.. no we have one, but we stopped to connect with him. But from my course mates, from university, yeah... So some people of my course are in jail for example but before.. when we studied, he was pro Lukashenko, but now he is in jail. So it's very interesting. So yes of course we have this people and believe that in New Belarus we will not punish people who support Lukashenko or want to be in USSR. Please you are free to think, but it is unfortunately .. it's too easy to say, it's hard to realize it. Specially I am afraid we have a new Lukashenko in Belarus.

I: If you give too much freedom?

P: Yes yes yes because power is very dangerous thing. We need to have a good system with checks and balances. So but it's not about identity.

I: I think that more things are related to identity than you sometimes think. It's also about how do you feel connected with other Belarusians, in traditions or in language, but it can also be in expression. How many Belarusians do you have around you and how are you connected with this people, it's also a way of national identity. Some people say not so much has changed after the 2020 events, we still speak Russian and we don't really talk about the identity questions.

P: if we talk about my family for example, we used to speak much more in Belarusian language. We try to in our conversation, but I think we .. I talk about my family, we don't think we need to speak Belarusian. We .. if we want we can speak in Belarusian language. We can read the news in Belarusian language. It's easy to say about it we will do it, but it's very hard to start and to continue. For example I will work in one organization and I am really happy that there we will speak Belarusian language. Because my boss want Belarusian speakers and I really like that and I am happy to speak Belarusian in my job so it's good for me, and with my wife for example when we will have a child we will speak Belarusian, because we want to have Belarusian speakers. Like from .. the start. Unfortunately my .. my family in my childhood didn't speak Belarusian, even more my grandmother was Russian. She was Russian. And she Russian from the north of Russia, it's very clear Russian language. After my parents divorced I lived with my other grandmother and she speaks more Belarusian than Russian. When I came to my grandmother from Russia, usually asks me do you say buba, why not kartoffel. Why did you say... haha so she lives in the village but very clearly speaks Russian language. But it's also about.. this war in Ukraine, like to give inputs to Belarusian society to speak more Belarusian and I am also happy to see it and I am happy to see it in my society. But if we talk about my Belarusian language, I know Belarusian very well and I can speak, I even defend my Bachelor diploma in Belarusian. So my way to Belarusian language was from school, not from my family. In my family we speak more Trasjanka. And unfortunately, .. about identity, why people talk less. Because it's like a dangerous thing, you can talk about soviet Belarusian republic. And you will have.. you will very successful especially [?] If you talk about soviet identity and soviet mentality. But unfortunately, it was like our way. I am happy to see that our people are ready to change. But it also depends on future government.

I: There will be a change sometimes

P: I think people from village don't think about identity, who they are... maybe they know, that they know and they connected that we are Belarusian, why..

I: Just normal...

P: I don't know why.. cause it's in my passport. Thank you for your research and I feel that Belarus will have a good potential in Europe and I know my people and I think we will faster in European Union than Ukraine, than Moldova, than Russia. If we will want it. And if we will have the freedom because we .. we are like.. we like to work, it's our religion, we have our backyard to plant potatoes. It's our region, especially for my grandmother haha. Maybe church is not very important in Belarus, ok you can go to church, but.. and in my family for example if you talk about LGBT or politics. For my grandmother, if people.. if some man or woman is not alcoholic it's a good person. Even.. it's like.. for example.. grandmother.. if he or she is gay or lesbian woman and my grandmother and my grandmother can say it's ok, if you're not alcoholic haha

Interview 10 transcription

Date: 05 November 2022

Time: 14:00

Gender: Male

Age: 38

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: I always start with a very broad and abstract question and that is: we discuss the Belarusian national identity. What is the first thing you think about?

P: i think.. am.. let's say my identity is based on, on .. mm.. on my name. Because my parents, they are from Soviet Union origins so they don't consider themselves as Russian or Ukrainain. My mother is from Ukraine and my father is from Russia. They are very Soviet people, but I consider myself as Belarusian first because of the name because as you know we have two languages in Bealrus, Russian and Belarusian. And my name in Belarusian is spelled not the same way as in Russian, so it differs a lot and in my childhood I saw my name two ways spelled and I was very curious why because I was interesting for me. The next is .. How to saw... I have many relatives in Russia and during my childhood I have a picture of Belarus, the picture of towns, the ancient castles or.. how the medieval town look like and then I came to Russia to my relatives and I had another picture and I see the difference and it was very hard for myself to explain but I noticed that and for me it was very interesting because when my relatives came to visit us in Belarus, they also noted the difference. It was like.. mmm more like we have anything you don't have, it was very like.. a basement of the national identity because

I: Which examples?

P: For example, in Belarus we have city halls. Ratoesjas..like here in Vilnius, it became from the medieval times, some cite get, get.. liberal.. rights.. rights of freedom to be autonomous, but in Russia, the cities didn't have such autonomy so they don't have this city halls..another example is, in Belarus we have orthodox churches and Catholic churches, in Russia it's hard to find Catholic Church, they exist but not so many Like this.. we have this medieval castles in many places in Belarus and in Russia they don't have because they have.. had antlers history. So something difference. And that was.. obvious for me. But in my childhood or before I entered university, it was not so easy to example or to name myself Belarus. I know I was a citizen of Belarus, but not I would say you are Russian and I am Belarusian. But .. now I would say I am Bealruian. It's like a case of evolution of this term for me.

I: The evolution as in..is it also a social process for yourself?

P: It's a process of reflection, self-reflection, the process of changes around me. The process..

I: Like?

P: For example nowadays a lot of media, original from Belarus, they represent themselves as Belarusian independent media and sometimes they use Belarusian language, they invite Belarusian expert speakers. Previously it was not so obviously because they were focused on Russian celebrity speakers, it was the same information, we call it information of field, spheres. So, it's a case of my surrounding. I see this title Belarusian, web internet surfaces I use, my friends more frequently say Belarus in different context so it's .. like more and more around me and it influenced me. I hope it is clear haha

I: And again it's also important you explain from you own perceive. And what way.., how does language play a role in your identity?

P: Yeah it's an interesting .. with languages. As I said, my family is Russian speaking, but I had my studies in university, mostly in Belarusian language, but it was the language of like academy studies. It's not a language like... I can speak English but I do not say it's may my native language. The same with Belarusian language

I: You spoke it in university?

P: Yeah, so my.. I read textbooks in Belarusian languages and during my studies I produced my knowledge in Belarusian, but It's like a tour instrument. But when I moved to Moscow, we .. had some friends with whom I start to speak Belarusian, only Belarusian. And it was very interesting to me because it was the language to .. communicate in different topics, not like in history books but topics to.. when you meet your friends in the car, or you go outside fro hiking. You take any .. for example when you go hiking, like [?] Sleeping bag and this issues. And when you, you take it.. I don't know how to say in Belarusian, you.. starting to go deeper in the language. And it's not the case of one word, it's case of like.. sphere. You go deeper, you understand that .. you get richer by calling names by it's Belarusian names. So in Moscow it was the period where I have a lot of communication in Belarusian and it's helped me to first improve, and second to understand that around me there are people who are Belarusians. Not by their passports, or .. but by their attitude, by their self-reflections.

I: Ya is that the thing what makes them Belarusian? Not just the pasport but a matter of self-identification?

P: Probably it's a matter of like.. distance. You are far from your country and are kind of home-sick or something like that. The second is Russian culture, which is very dominating. So, I think it's impossible and be not Russian. Because it's very like.. imperial culture. It's trying to .. how to say.. trying to like encompass to get anything around you inside. It was a kind of strategy to stay not Russian, but near and not inside.

I: So you really felt like you were from Belarus and Russia and you went there but you still have your own identity.

P: ya ya ya, because me and my friends we didn't have plans to stay in Russia for a ling period. Because frankly speaking Moscow is a great city, a lot of opportunities especially to earn money, but it's not the city where to have kids, make family and so forth. We do not have plans to stay, we do not have plans to Russian culture and to be part of it.

I: And if you talk about Belarusian culture. It's again the language and history plays an important role in it..

P: For me history is important because I am an historian by my education, but what else.. mm... I think some , it's a case of feeling but not a fact, in Belarus it's quite calm atmosphere, the people are not .. very noisy. They are not very emotional, like Lithuanians.

I: Calm and.. different than what you experienced in Moscow probably?

P: ya ya ha and .. it's like a feeling that in this area, this should be this way and that area should it could be another way, it's hard to describe because for me it's .. it's easier to.. I am fan of bike touring for several days, for me it's easier to have such bike tour in Belarus because it's more relaxing atmosphere, I know when we go to an unknown city we can talk to people, unknown people and it's easier to communicate because in Russia they are more.. "What are you doing here?" It's not so relaxing atmosphere.

I: If you are abroad, are you more aware you Belarusian identity?

P: Ya for sure, here in Lithuania haha

I: how do you feel that?

[little food break]

I: I think it was about the Belarusian language and being abroad, being more aware of your national identity

P: I think it's also a kind of homesick. Being abroad I am trying to make connection with community from Belarus, it's easier, not easier, but for me it's important because I have ... it's more profitable to have friends from Belarus, you have the connections, you have to transfer money, you have to ask something to bring to bring here or to bring there so it's like.. the next case it's important because I want to .. support Belarusian civil society, that's why I am in contact with different projects, based in Vilnius, so I help this volunteers and so forth, and another thing, here in Vilnius like in Moscow, I do not want to be incorporate in another culture, I have no plans to live here, to stay here. So i want to keep this connection with people..

I: So you're ready to go back actually?

P: I'm not ready, I want to.

I: Yeah exactly.

P: And the language...

I: How is it here with Belarusians? If you speak with Belarusians?

P: The only one person, actually he is my campaigner, friend with whom we have bike trips so during the Saturdays, we have one day trips outside and the whole day we speak Belarusian. And with other people I speak Russian, because here is the first .. not all people who came from Belarusian can easily speak Belarusian. The same thing that.. sometimes in community there are. Lot of people from Ukraine and Russia and it impossible to ask every person: Which language you want to? So we speak Russian.

I: haha ya. But is it important for you if you speak Belarusian language? Is it something yo really want to...

P: With this friend, with whom I have bike tours it's important, so I insisted: Let's speak Belarusians so we started. With he other person it's not so important, first I have practice, I have media with information I consume in Belarusian, so it's like.. for me it's enough, enough language around me.

I: But it's not that you have some principles that you only want to speak Belarusian?

P: no no for sure not. And one more case that still I am working on a project focusing on activist in Russia. So a share closer related to Russia, for me it's ok to be in this Russian information sphere, so it's ok.

I: Is it.. After let's say.. Your ideas about the national identity, is that something you discuss with family or friends?

P: With family not, because it's very interesting with my family. Because previously, before let's say before 2020, I consider my parents very conservative, pro Soviet. but surprisingly, my mother supported priests movement, at that time I lived in Moscow. My communication was not so frequent, let's say once in three months, so it was not so often. My father is still very conservative and when the war started, my mother.. I said my mother is originally from Ukraine so so was against the war for sure, but my father not.. I wouldn't say he supports but he is very pro-Russian in this case. I think he is against war, killing people, but choosing the sides, he would choose the Russian side. So in this context, it's very hard to speak about national identity, because important issues around. I think that.. my father don't operate such categories and national identity, he speaks Russian, he ...

I: He feels Russian?

P: Probably feels.. I don't know, exactly Russian. It's a mixture of Soviet and Russian. It's this .. culture of Russki mir of course My mother, I think she, I didn't ask her, but I am trying to figure out. Probably she feels not like Ukrainian, she feels like she is from Ukraine. She likes to her origins, she spends a lot of time there in childhood and we have relatives there. She consider herself from Ukraine, but do not.. I never said.. I never heard she said I am Ukrainian this way

I: Aha. And ..

P: probably my parents heard from me I am Belarusian. Because it's not .. case of communication. Not a [?] I am Belarusians and he is not...

I: But you speak Belarusian and your parents don't.

P: No, no they do not speak. But I don't speak Belarusian with my parents.

I: No no but it can be that they heard you speaking Belarusian

P: Did they hear... probably they hear... ya probably they hear for sure. But we do not discuss this

I: Ya that's interesting.

P: So.. let's say these national identity it's my personal choice, case, it's not family... it's interesting.

I: And in school. What were more important things in school? Was it..

P: In school. A lot depends on the teacher.

I: I hear that lot actually.

P: I don't know how it works in Netherlands, but in Belarus let's say, in post-Soviet countries, it's.. we have very strong ties with teachers. Because they do not see people only in classes. On weekends they have this... common activities and so forth.

I: Kind of second parent.

P: ya ya probably. I have in my.. how to say... class. When you're not.

I: Teenager

P: Ah ya when I was teenager, and it was something.. And I figured out which discipline to choose in the university, I was under the influence of my teacher in history. She was very pro-Belarusian, I was under her influence.

I: So she motivated the students actively to learn more about Belarusian?

P: Ya, we had .. so in that time... the teacher could choose which way to give classes in history: more conservative, more tremendous. More pro-Belarusian, more pro-Russian. So our teacher choose the way like.. pro-Belarusian. We had a lot of activities, we went on school tours, to different cities, visited different places, picture that Belarus exist, that we have much differences from our neighbors. And she had lighted this different and explained from historical point of view. So ya...

I: A lot of responsibilities from teachers which way they should emphasize on more Russian ties or the independent Belarusian..

P: That's why a lot of teachers nowadays in Belarus, they are under pressure, and they do not accept this state-program of teaching, they have to leave schools. This is impossible to work. I think the same is in Russia.

I: Ya.. um. You moved from Russia to Lithuania right? I usually have the question did you participated in the 2020-events, but you were in Russia.

P: Twice, I came to.. in 2020 we had pandemic restrictions. It was not so easy to move even from Moscow to Minsk, because of the quarantine restrictions to cross the border, but still I have twice I visited Minsk and took part in this Sunday protests. And yeah it's one of the point I feel risky to come back haha because I can have this administrative prosecution or something

I: aham. Was it the first time for you that you participated in?

P: No! Previously in 2006, we had presidential election and the first .. We call it Ploschad, square and there was a protest in the center of Minsk. That was my first experience. I was a student

I: It was a couple days right?

P: Yeah it was couple days, and after our classes, me and my university mates, friends, we came to this square in the city and supported the protesters but after words, let's say the dean of our department, so he gathered us: you can choose you go to the square but you have to leave university. But we were young, it was very.. for us.. we were afraid, we stopped visiting protests and..

I: Do you remember why you chose to join these protests?

P: First it was very interesting, it was like unusually active for Minsk, Belarus. A lot of people were there. It was .. and I said. I would say, in department of history in my university there were a lot of students who were engaged in political activities, so a lot of my friends, they took part in this protest and I had to join them

I: So it was more that your surrounding was joining as well...

P: yeah yeah i think

I: that's a logical reason usually right

P: We were very young, I was 18 probably, let's say my first experience in such activity for Belarus it's very unusual. And in some cases it was very beautiful, a lot of flag, a lot of people, people during these protests, they were very .. not serious angry or.. they are 18

I: The white-red-white flag you mean? What does this flag mean?

P: it's interesting because as an historian I knew about this flag, I didn't .. get in touch with that flag when it was official from 1991 till 1994. Because I was very young, I do not remember. In my university, I know this flag exist and some of my political engaged friends they used that, but for me it is not like a sign, or a symbol, and I didn't have any flag with me.. for sure at the time. But for me let's say the rejection of red-green flag, official flag was faster than accepting this white-red-white flag. So it was a process not adapted this flag, it was rejection.. refuse of this flag and then you take another one.

I: So like an oppositional flag. And in 2020 when you were join in this massive protest, do you remember what was your main thing you were fighting for?

P: Uhm.. it was a case of, case of supporting people who are previously suffered from regime, I mean suffered in this way. I know.. some of my relatives or friends, they were very let's say suspicious about this protest, that people are paid by Western countries and so forth. So.. joining this protests, I wanted to show that I do it by myself, it's my choice, I support people. Like support and solidarity. It was two times, not in August, not in September, it was in the end of October and the beginning of November, because of this covid restrictions I couldn't come earlier. The protests were not so massive as in August of September so I wanted to be there to be counted to say: a lot of people came here...

I: Did you discuss it with your parents?

P: No no, i was very afraid that will be.. will be caught by police and probably my parents would say: do not go. Trying to give less information for my parents, so went there with my close friends and because.. I trust him and he trust me.

I: That's important in such things. Is it.. you came specially back for the protests?

P: It was one the reasons I came, but not the only reason. Because during this year it was a long period when I didn't come to Belarus, it was about one year, so I missed my parents, I missed friends I was eager to come to Belarus.

I: You combined the one thing with the other

P: yeah because in August and September we had with a Belarusian community protests in Moscow, in front of Belarusian embassy in Moscow. It was not so massive, but it was .. everyday activity when we gathered after our work, when we standing in front of this embassy building and ... screaming and shouting, we proclaimed our.. haha so we were standing with this flags, with this signs. But still.. it was very important for us to take part in Belarus, in Minsk protest, because we understand that in Moscow it's not so important when you take part in protest. It's very important to take part in Minsk

I: It's a whole different dynamic probably.

P: Different dynamic, different feeling and different impact, because standing... btw first the embassy of Belarus is situated in the heart of Moscow and a lot of traffic goes by, a lot of pedestrians and a lot of cars. In August when we had our small protests, so a lot of Russians approached us and they want to speak, to talk about Belarus. Why we don't support Lukashenko, because Lukashenko is a god, why we support the opposition, why we don't like the situation in the country because Belarus is the best country in the world and so forth and it was very interesting to talk to people, I am not sure we convinced anybody, but still the communication in person it's ..

I: Was it a lot of normal talks or also aggression?

P: In most cases it was normal talks, sometimes there were people who try to interrupt us, who interfere .. not me personally, but general.. there were such cases and there were a lot of police in this area around this embassy building. I think in the first week, police men had an order to protect us, because the Russian authorities didn't had a position towards this opposition in Belarus, and we didn't have any unpleasant situation with the police at the time.

I: The first weeks..

P: Yeah the first week, at the end of October probably, earlier, it was forbidden, banned for us to occupy this area in the city.

I: No protests.. How did you think about the political opposition in that time? In 2020. Did you fully agree?

P: With whom? It's interesting in the Belarusian opposition, because let's say we had old leaders in the opposition, they are not very popular, they are not very famous. And let's say for me personally. Their activity was very not useless, but not so impactful, not so.. not the way I wanted to be, but nowadays I understand .. that they could not do anything another way, because of the repression, because they didn't have support from people, they didn't have money. It was not so prestigious to be politicians of opposition at the time so I think they played their role the best way they could. Me now sitting in Vilnius, today I think they did their best

I: In the perspective of..

P: ya ya.. regarding new opposition. These candidates for new opposition, it was very interesting for me because you see it was the first time for me with friend discussed people, these candidates, whether they are good or bad, which program they have. It was very unusual for me, for us, because previously we didn't have any opportunity to discuss because nothing to discuss. That's why it was interesting to observe, how a lot of people step by step became engaged in this election process. This observed remotely, because I was in Moscow, everything was in Minsk. But when we text with my friends, we had phone calls, it was very interesting. I was so impressed by this.. So you asked about how I like the opposition.. I liked not the person, I liked enjoyed these process, this mutation of democracy. And I enjoyed the evolution of people, I didn't pay any attention to elections, but trying to be involved, to be engaged, it was interesting.

I: yah.. different than the elections before.

I: How is that actually.. like why did you chose to go the Lithuania?

P: Two points, first I had studied in Lithuania, in this European humanity university, so not all.. but a lot was familiar with me, it's not an unknown country, it was a familiar country, and second I had two options where to go, proposed by my work, by my employer, Poland or Lithuania so I chose Lithuania because it's familiar for me and it's very close to Belarus. I had plans to go back to Belarus but now that's impossible.

I: You said it's like very important to have Belarusian people around you here in Lithuania.

P: Yeah for sure, first is point of having a community, you can have familiar people around you and the second as I said, I wanted to be engaged in Belarus to help the people there and it's easier to live .. to settle in any country when you have familiar people.

I: And these activities. You said you said participated in some activities, can you explain some more about it?

P: We have meetings, meetings outside in the city center. We had a couple days ago, there was day of commemoration of people who died, and we visited cemeteries to go to graves, people with Belarusian origins. We had one week ago this night of literary it's called: Night of the killed poets. It's in 1937, during the repression of the Soviet Union, a lot of representatives of Belarusian culture they were killed in one night, so it's day of commemoration of these people and we had... like it was .. a stage, different kind of speeches, songs, gatherings, meeting that we had.

I: And who organizes such events?

P: It's a community, here a lot of people who were active in the Belarus, they had to move to another country, they came to Vilnius, they stayed active.

I: How is communication for example? How do you know such events?

P: it's telegram chat, of people who are in NGO-sector. And then we have different channels to promote announcements to Belarusians living in Lithuania. IT-guys and so.. it's a close small community who produce such events and then we promote to let's say ordinary people, so political active, civil active

I: Yeah.. is also the question of identity, is it also topic in these communities? Language curses?

P: Belarusian language curses you mean?

I: Talking about Belarusian history, about Belarusian culture, about ..

P: I think some topics are related to it, but not topic to discuss your personal identity or your.... It's topics, it's the project you implement. For example you .. the last question in this chat, was do you have map of Belarus in the beginning of 20th century. I know there was this question because somebody is producing video content and needs this map so it's asking for he or his work, but not as a question to: hey people, how do you identify yourself. Most people in this chat, they communicate in Russian. As i noticed if you ask in Belarusian language, you get the response in Belarusian language. But still most people ask in Russian because it's a case of utility, case of habits.

I: Yeah probably if you speak it all your life it's more easier to ...

I: When you were in... like do you miss any specific Belarusian actives here in Lithuania? Or events?

P: You see .. for a long time I lived in Moscow so I missed a lot. First I missed places and cities I like, people I know, I don't mean personally.. I read books, I listen music, but most of them are in Vilnius now

I: So makes it a bit easier.

P: I see them on the streets, it's very interesting.

I: Is that a strong community, Belarusians here

P: I wouldn't say it's one community here, it's some overlapping communities, cause you know there are a lot of politicians in Vilnius, they have their separate community, I am not engaged in it, so I never met tsichanovskaya in person I don't know why, it's a small city in Vilnius and I never met her. So i.. let's say within this community of NGO-activists, but there are a lot of communities with Belarusian parents with kids, IT-Belarusian specialists, It's not one, it's not very close. So i am also part of communities of people who bike bikes haha

I: So there are so many smaller communities

P: For me it's like in Minks, I am not part of one community. I have a rich life and that's why different interest and different people around.

I: So it's not that because you're from Belarus and you live in Lithuania, you all kind of belong to the same community

P: ya ya for not..

I: Do you feel free to express yourself in Lithuania?

P: Generally i do not express.. what you mean, what example?

I: Can you say whatever what you want to say, without thinking mm maybe I should not say that.

P: Let's say I think I can, but I didn't use this opportunity because nobody cares about me, I can speak to friends and... I feel safe here, we have this meetings outside the center of Vilnius, I see no police, it's very comfortable. I don't feel any pressure. I din't have any cases of discrimination

I: Ow that's good

P: When I speak Russian or Belarusian. For me it's very new situation. Because in Moscow you have self censorship let's say.

I: you speak Russian in public?

P: When you go for example see colleges, it's .. I wouldn't say it's risky in public places like bars, but still when you discuss something you just watch around.

I: that's not the case here?

P: Nothing had happened, but still it's general context. In Lithuania I feel free to speak. Probably because nobody cares.

I: Does communities you participate. What is for you the most important goals of the communities?

P: Connection, connection with people. I think there will be time when I go back to Belarus and I have to keep this connections for my personal use, for professional use. Beach people who are in this telegram chats, they are very cool, very active. That's the people I want to stay in touch with

I: And that's something that is very new since 2020 in Belarusian context? Or was it also before?

P: It was before, but I joined it 6 month ago when I came to Vilnius sho I was not aware of the past. But I joined and it was already 100 people in this chat so for me it's huge.

P: thank you for asking the questions, I never asked myself

Interview 11 transcription

Date: 11 November 2022

Time: 11:00

Gender: Male

Age: 31

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: What is the first thing you think about when talking about the Belarusian national identity?

P: I think about the book which is called national identity. It was issued in 2021 and I never read it because I wanted tot get it, but it is prohibited in our country. But some people had this book and I was in the queue for reading it, and then I move to Lithuania.

I: So you didn't had the change to read it? Was it written in Belarusian language?

P: Probably yes

I: Why do you think it was forbidden in Belarus.

P: Well it's easy to forbid something for them, they don't need reason for that.

I: What do you think was in the book for them ..?

P: I have no idea, I heard that the main conclusion of the book our identity is still forming. So..

I: And what does it mean for you the national identity? You said the book, but if you would describe yourself as Belarusian, where do you think about?

P: Well now I think it's something that makes our nation slightly different from our neighbors.

I: And how?

P: Russians, Ukrainians etc. And it's very subtle difference actually, for example Lithuanian people are very similar, they almost feel Russians, by their habits and behavior. But for example if I see someone from Moscow, I can identify it.

I: How?

P: They have different language, we both speak Russian but they have certain intonation, some words which are common for Belarusian nation. Like .. for example the word Buska, which means kids. I think it comes from Polish or Lithuanian language and Russians do not understand it.

I: That's interesting.

P: There are such words, and.. we have different mindset, so for example, we don't have this feeling that we are a big empire and we must be super powerful, we are more like local people who loves their land. The [?] of Belarusians will not have this difference, but maybe older generation relates themselves to the Soviet Union

I: so you think there is also a difference between the different generations and how they think about their identity?

P: Well in the older germination there are more people who think themselves, they like..they are part of the Soviet nation. And they just lost their country. And the younger generations don't have this experience, but I can't say that for example our language is our national identity, or our hair color or maybe our clothes, there is nothing special about it.

I: But what makes it then your national identity?

P: Yeah you.. but honestly I think that nationalism is outdated, the idea we should abounded because if you think about it how it comes to this religion, it's originally when kings and dukes dividing the territory in war and other enemies, they own this countries and there could be very different people in one country, I .. it depends for whom you serve, not for which tribes you belong, at that time. And then the people got more power, more democracy, and they started to feel their national need, like ancestors and some tribe, but if you look at it, you realize that they are trying the borders that are already existed and they would build by other kings, not by people and that's the problem.

I: But I would also say there is bit difference between the national identity and nationalism, because for example mean that feel really connected to other people which belong to the same nation. Nationalism in my opinion has a very bad connotation ..

P: Yes maybe bad, but for example Ukrainians nationalism is important. Nationalism is like you love your nation and you want to separate from your neighbor and that's what it is about. Political values.. but I think the part of connection that exist with Belarus is .. what you want for our country to be, and it mainly was cerated during the protests. Now I feel connected to other people by our common pain and our common goals. That's it. I was the question with my friends and for myself: what is Belarus? And my conclusion was it's Belarusian nation is the set of people living in this borders.

I: Ok.

P: But now I sometimes feel a certain connection, we have some common feelings and this creates empathy between people

I: And the feeling is because of same pain, the same suffering you had during this.?

P: Yes, the same pain, the same desires we have our country to become

I: What is an example of one of those desires for you?

P: For me, I want this free and more democracy and more safety. I think current government, I don't know how it even happened in this reality..

I: And before you said you have the same language in like for example in Moscow. But what about the Belarusian language?

P: Well.. Belarusian language isn't use commonly.

I: And you, do you use it?

P: Sometimes I use it, it became more popular.

I: Since when?

P: Since 2021 I think, because in the beginning of the protest, there was.. we are not against Russia, and .. even some red and green flag was used. It wasn't nationalistic protest and that's why I actually participated. I don't like nationalism, I have big history of being discriminated, because I look like, for someone I am gypsy, for someone I am jewish. And i was called like that, and later when I became 15, people started call me Chechen, like from Chechen Russia, and now people think that I am Ukrainian.

I: ok..

P: Because of my black hair. I actually had this grown eye brows.. And I used electrical [?] 6 times, to separate my eyebrows cause it was such a big disadvantage.

I: So.. now I do understand your studies about this ethnic characteristicists.

P: and also, I was discriminated even by teachers in school or teachers in university.

I: Just because they thought you are from a different nation or..

P: They were mocking me, I remember actually .. there was week against discrimination in 2019, and I published my story and I have this letter and if you are interested I can send you

I: yeah yea of course.

P: So, and this is the problem with nationalism, because the people decline your desires with Belarusians so..

I: And after the protests it was bit different?

P: Yes and in the beginning of the protests, the previous opposition was very nationalistic, the new generation became much less nationalistic, they started the Russian language and this was part of the process of the protests. But later when the protests started to decline and .. people didn't know what to do next, they started to pay more attention for language, was not only the way to distinguish for Russia but also the way to distinguish from people who support Lukashenko.

I: So you started to use it more?

P: Yeah and even I started using more, in the migration it helped us to keep our connection..

I: Like abroad you mean?

P: Abroad, many Belarusian people are abroad.

I: And then you speak Belarusian language?

P: sometimes, we have for example bicycle rides, and when we go for a ride, we only speak in Belarusian. Maybe I see someone who speaks in Belarusian, I also.. me and my friends started to use Belarusian in social networks.

I: Did you learn the language after protests or did you already spoke it?

P: No we mostly speak Belarusian language, because we learn it in school and actually it's somehow you forgot and never use it, you understand it. You just need to practice

I: Did you use it in for example with friends or family before the protests?

P: No, I really didn't. The only times when I used it was in school and when somebody talks to me in Belarusian then I reply in Belarusian. Reading in Belarusian language, some media, when you see you can read without problems. But I didn't use it because I understand that more people speak Russian. It's more practical, bigger audience, more people understand you

I: so it became more normal to use after the protests? As an opposition towards Lukashenko

P: yes, but what I think about Russia, I don't think that language can stop them. Because Ukrainians speak their language much more than we do, this didn't save them from war so I don't think...you know there is another problem with nationalism, international law, I read it because we had debates on this. There is, I don't remember which article but I think it's united nations organization, which gives a right for nations to self-identify and it's used for [?] Which language do you speak gives the right for them to say that you are separate country or you are part of another country. There are several definitions that this comment uses, it uses ethnical identity, it's like cultural, religions, language and ..

P: So it's an important fact for a nation to exist?

P: yes, formal facts but, actually I think there is another problems with nations because it's.

I: What would be a solution?

P: i think eventually we will come to a new society, when the borders is even easier, even more transparent and I think selecting your identity is as easy as you joined some groups on Facebook, just open your phone, maybe some regions group, I like it an it want to be part of it: you select it and you could be accepted and you don't even have to change your location. For example you can be Japanese, in any part of the world and in this digital..

I:so the identity is not really deepening on the location or how you are as a person, it's just connect to people.

P: And people may have multiple identities, they just for example, you can.. I don't know... give you a part of something of anarchist group and at the same time some national identity and so on

I: It's very fluent yea

P: Maybe it will happen later, when actually people start to move and realize that an identity start to blend in lives more and we naturally will come to this new society.

I: Don't you think that your territory is anyhow connected to your identity?

P: Well, i have thoughts, usually people say it's my land, land of my ancestors, but if you think about what you have on this land, it's often, you don't even have an apartment, you just rented. So it's not your land.

I: Maybe the landscape? Because I am from the Netherlands and we a bit different landscape there and we are below sea level, so I think that's also somehow for me a connection for me with my country.

P: I don't know if landscape is so important, because I traveled to Lithuania and there is a different landscape, but it's interesting and it's.. there is not much difference

P: when you have mountains you should be some special human for that. The landscape is actually a primitive argument, when you travel a lot you understand that for example, another funny thing is that Russian think that birch is native trees, but it's one of the most common trees around the world.

I: But it depends on how you make the story haha. If you believe the birch is so important then it's your own..

P: But it's a dangerous thinking, because whichever country has birches..It's a heavy change of getting occupied by Russia. Also speaking of Russia, they have very different landscapes.

I: That would be making the argument of having a singular landscape in the whole nation even more difficult because since there is so much variation everybody has their own interpretation.

I: how do you see Belarusian people, what is according to you Belarusian? Can anybody be Belarusian?

P: I think to be Belarusian you should care about Belarus and you should somehow be related, you should.. because it's hard to explain, you should have this explanation why Belarus is important for you, live there or you were born there, maybe if you want to become Belarusian and you say I love this country for example, I'm gonna to live there.

I: so that's possible? If I move for example to Belarus, and I would live the country then I can be Belarusian,.

P: Yes if you can be recognized

I: that's important to?

P:That's how I can guess.

I: I'm asking for your personal opinion.

P: Because you know.. not everyone want to be Belarusian, so if you claim that you will be Belarusian at least it is a little bit strange

I: I can imagine yeah, but you see yourself as Belarusian?

P: Yes i do.

I: Is it important to be Belarusian that your family is also from Belarus?

P: Well i think if you have Belarusian id, that's enough, but .. the more connection you have the more likely you will be recognized and you can brag about it that you're not from Russia

I: you do?

P: Actually not, because my mother is from Russia, Siberia and actually it's interesting the national question. Her ancestors were forcibly moved to that place and don't know even from where. So .. and my father is from Belarus, but his mother is from that part of Belarus which is more Polish. In my example I see how many different nationalities can blend.

I: Background doesn't really matter, if you feel Belarusian you are Belarusian?

P: Yeah why not. But another question is, do other people recognize you? When they see you in a crowd

I: You had different experiences before

P: Well now I think I am mostly recognized as Belarusian, and I can understand that people are from Belarus here in Lithuania by some subtle markers. Which I don't even understand completely

I: But you see that someone is from Belarus.

P: You see it from distance even

I: I want to discuss that a little bit later actually, first I want to go.. you said you participate in the 2020 events right? Can you explain the main reason to join the protests?

P: It was difficult because the protest were about to start like a year before the election, you had this understanding that there will be protests, the main reason for me was to realize that there is a high chance of success this time. And I had my personal ambitions for example, we would build a better society and all the lights will be removed, and then when I started to protest, to participate and I realize that I just like the protests. The motivation was pretty sick yes haha

I: So you just like the crowd and activities

P: not just the crowd, you also have friends with similar views and everyday chilling and so on

I: Did you make friends?

P: Yes i did.

I: And do you think that.. was it also when you make friends, became it a more important topic to discuss the identity question?

P: Identity? Well actually, we have absolutely spectate meetings. Some people say: Ow I am not ethnical Belarusian, that's why I am protesting. Real Belarusian they're not protesting! For example one woman in my neighborhood, she has German roots. Germans wouldn't withstand something like Lukashenko, that's how it's put. And I also don't quite relate ethnical group as Belarus, I don't think I have Belarusian blood for example. Maybe I have Belarusian culture, so.. I was't really underlying the fact that I am Belarusian this protests, I was more focusing on the facts that I was thinking different, maybe more progressive, maybe more prone to change and maybe more focused on personal than on national, cause acutely people, if you take many people on both sides, they have pretty the same nationality and.... The really differences are mostly ideological. People who support

Lukashenko, they want this crazy military order so everything is controlled and they like marches, they like authorities, they like talking about military power and something like that

I: Completely different views... And the political opposition, was it something you agreed with or did you have completely different views on them?

P: Well, it was internal opposition, it was represented by different people, different views and Svetlana Tsichanovskaya was just a mediator between them and it was a good choice to support the big group of people, my choice was Babaryka. You know?

I: ya he was arrested and then all the protests actually emerged right..

P: He was one of the candidates for president and I really was thinking that he would make a good change. But not everyone loves Victor Babaryka, he is connected to Russia and people say that was really national protest, very many views and social groups were represented there, for example I never communicated with someone who was in jail for 10 years for drugs, and there were very many people from business to teachers

I: All kinds of people

P: Young people, old people. That's a good strategy selected by the opposition and that's one of the reasons why I joined the protest because I started to believe in the success

I: all the different people you see

P: yes yes it's a clear strategy, it's very inclusive, we have more changes because before for example I have another conversation about a portrait about average protests and it was a very narrow set of people, it's usually some person who listens to some Belarusian rock music or example, has long hair, has very good changes.. he will speak Belarusian language. You see this person from big distance and it's bad because if you can explain this group in this way it means it's a very small group

I: Do you think that those people maybe also had different interests. Because you mention the Belarusian music, the language, so maybe it's more focused on the Belarusian identity?

P: They were focussed on Belarusian identity, you know pazinak? It's first leader of Belarusian opposition. It's a very important person in our history. He was fighting the Soviets, and then became leader of opposition when after Soviet Union was split. And .. he is true nationalist, or hate Russians. Pushes that we should speak Belarusian and that was a narrative for previous opposition, another narrative was that we should join the European Union for example. We should create more liberal economy, but this time opposition was focused on our activity on the government and the efficiency, and democracy, reforms and economy. The market and of course [?]

I: But you wouldn't say that the national identity was not really the focus in the 2020 protests?

P: Completely no, when it started, before the protests, I wasn't actually associated with this white-red-white flag.

I: Not at all. Why not?

P: Because I thought it was a national flag of our history.

I: and you are more looking towards the future?

P: Yeah but I didn't think that different flag is so important, but now it became symbol of protest. It wasn't symbol of the protest in the beginning, it was white ribbons, and then became the symbol of protest.

I: As for you?

P: Also for me, it became the way how we identify the opposition. It's interesting how things can change

I: How the meaning of a flag can change overtime. Were you also politically active in any way before 2020?

P: Well I was slightly active, I was in protest once. I never actually trusted the protest because I see it changed nothing, just walking on the streets, having chance to be arrested and nothing change. I was waiting for some military fight something like that, I actually was thinking how we could change this situation, it's a difficult question, but once I participated in the protests just to ... from curiosity and ..in 2010 I was thinking about joining the protests, but I didn't. At least I voted for the opposition.

I: That was also a pretty big protest.

P: everybody understands we can't change anything by voting. And.. I had my political views, they are focussed on democracy and efficiency of the government and the lack of reason of the current government. I have some social networks explaining my position but it wasn't the mainstream opposition. And actually no-one likes Lukashenko, at least from my surrounding. So it was pretty common, people don't support the government but they were not politically active because they know ..

I: With all the repression of course. Making a bit of a step. When did you move to Lithuania?

P: In July this year.

I: What was the reason for changing to Lithuania?

P: Sanctions, because they affected my work. The freelance platform called [?] banned all Russians and Belarusian very early.

I: So why did you choose for Lithuania?

P: It was the only possible way to move to Europe. Another choice was Georgia, Turkey, these countries are open for Belarusians. But I realized that if I move somewhere, that it's a high chance that I will stay there some time because you never have to expect in this process and it's difficult to move constantly so I decided to move closer to Europe. Polish visa was very hard to get, it was very long queues for them. Pay a lot of money just to get to the visa center and then you need to wait for the visa. But Lithuania was making this visa for Belarusians. Not for all, but I had some records showing that I was prosecuted in Belarus. I've been in jail and I had the documents and they helped me to get this visa free. That's why Lithuania, not really a difficult choice

I: And how is it so far living here?

P: More or less ok. I had this impression that Lithuania is actually not much better than Belarus.

I: Not much better?

P: In terms of economy and in terms of social life. And it should probably encourage Belarusian people, and believing us much more because we can build a greater country. Like our country is actually pretty big. It's interesting that I don't feel safe in Lithuania, because I do expect like some attacks from Russia or Belarus. And I have a feeling that a lot of Russians hate us here because people of Lithuania not clearly support the protests. Many people, especially older generation, going to Belarus to buy cheaper gas or..

I: Still you mean

P: Still! I was talking with several people and they say I was working in Belarus and it was good and they don't realize that ... our feelings. They don't have empathy, because when you see these protests from the side. Oh, the stupidest thing I have heard is that we have a mini-revolution in Belarus haha.

I: mini

P: One Lithuanian girl said this. So they see it from the side and oh.. there are some explosions.. but how many people in jail. 1000 is that a lot or..

I: So you don't feel much empathy from Lithuanians?

P: Well actually this current political situation... you should really move from the Russian borders. It's very obvious .. that how fast this war will end in Ukraine and how can it develop. And another problem is that here in Lithuania I have not much opportunity for work because I want to build my own business and I was a freelancer and here... you can't get for example national ID, like permit to live here. If you go to Poland you can, but .. so I think I eventually I would go for Polish.

I: There is no special program because you're from Belarus?

P: There is, but it's like.. in order to get this program, you should be really prosecuted, you should be in danger a lot, but I am not like.. I was .. I have 15 days in jail

I: After protests?

P: Yes during the protests and I like.. released from the jail. If you have 3 or 5 years of jail and you somehow escaped Belarus, then you will have much more help. But here I think they are willing to provide me, these national ID by humanitarian regime. I don't know why, but I don't think it's too reliable. Because I don't feel like I am controlling the situation.

I: Are you scared they will send you back?

P: Maybe even so.. Well I always can find a job, a regular job in some company and they will give me this ID for working reasons. But this is not what I wanted, and I had such plans for my own business and I actually lost 2 years during the protest because I was working less and I lost even a big client, he was supporting them in the beginning, he was from the UK I think, maybe the US. But then he said you have to choose either work or Belarus because he also has his own interest, he wants this work should be done and I ... I don't work so much and have less performance because I participated in the protests and was just disturbed by this situation and I have another problem in Lithuania with help for example. Now I'm slightly ill. I have breath shortage and some dizziness, I don't have temperature so I can go for emergency for example, but I don't have probably [?] Yesterday I paid for test and it costs me 17 euro because I don't have social insurance here.

I: You don't have the medical insurance?

P: Yes, and in order to get it I need the national ID..

I: So you live a little bit in between here. You live here but not really live here

P: yes, I have this one year visa.

P: I see that's a difficult situation which is very common if you move to another country.

I: Since you live in Lithuania, you still are in contact with friends and family in Belarus?

P: Yeh I have contact and maybe less than I wanted because I don't have so much time and I have friends here.

I: You already made some friends here, from Belarus?

P: From Belarus and some from Russia. There are many Russians.

I: Do you also discuss politics?

P: Yes we do. Mostly like Russians who are here, journalists etc.

I: the same visions?

P: Similar but they are not the same.

I: you feel that in conversation?

P: Yes, it's quite easy to say because when I see Belarusian people it's completely understandable on which side they are and we have like only two sides

I: And they have more than 2 sides

P: They have more than 2 side, a very complex opposition and politics and they don't trust each other and this is a problem they can't unite.

I: You personally don't feel safe here you said. But do you feel free to express yourself, to talk about your opinions?

P: Yes of course, not completely because I don't share information that can harm some people in Belarus.

I: Cause you never really trust?

P: Yes of course. In Belarus it was somehow simpler

I: It was even simpler? Beach you knew that someone was on the good or bad side?

P: Yes and for example, my local policeman always protected me when for exmample.. when I had flag on my window. He just hear and just say you should put it away. Instead of putting me in jail, so he was like on our side. And..

I: Do you have here any expression of your identity? Your flag?

P: Yes i have flag, I have identity of my street. We have local community of Belarus and I am very patriotic of my own district. And I have for example in my window, a cup with the name of my street, my Belarusian life.

I: You still in this community?

P: We are connected yes, it's I think good friends and the connection will exist for a long time. Actually most of my friends who escaped Belarus, they are in Poland. And in the beginning when I didn't had any friends here, it was a problem and I was thinking maybe I can better go to Poland. But now I have friends here

I: Was it hard to get in contact with Belarusians?

P: We have communities, you have some interest like biking, playing volleyball or whatever and you can find something like chat.

I: How did you find it?

P: There is some organization that help you when you came to Lithuania if you need this this this. They show you the direction where you should connect and usually there are some help for people in the streets for example, they help them in School if you need some clothes or food you can also find some support and if you just need to ... psychological help if you are a victim. There are very many small like organizations that solve some small real problems. One of that organizations are just for your everyday life and some for... we discuss how to live in Vilnius, we discuss places and the way you can buy this, I don't know..m how you can get a bank card here and so fort. There you found people.

I: Do you have contact with a lot of those communities?

P: Yes, I currently have like.. 5 maybe communities. Just Belarusians in Vilnius for example, and another community which is about trade and free markets, and a community about bicycles and there are two communities about bicycles because the conflict between the leaders of this communities.

I: Ow serious haha and now there are two groups

P: yes

I: And protests? Hvae you joined protests in Lithuania?

P:i don't like this protest, once I visited the graveyard where many Belarusians rest and it was .. November first, and this was organized. But I don't like the protests with the flags in the center of Vilnius or in front of the embassy because I don't think it can really change something. It's such .. [?] In Belarus if you protest, even show of with the flag, some short time... has a huge effect, it encouraged people and everybody will talk about it and police will be pissed of completely, but in Lithuania it just.. it has not such effect, you do what is legal and just.. show the importance, some problem. And I've seen such protests, like 20 people.. they are super unpopular nowadays.

I: So you think it's not really helping?

P: Well i think it is some helpful because the media should post articles about them, then our leaders, European leaders, you see we have this Lithuanians and Belarus. So Lithuania is more likely to support Belarus, Belarus protest to take some actions.. it's important but not encouraging. I don't even feel this drive, why will I protest if it isn't in Belarus?

I: That's understandable. Is it important to have Belarusians around you here in Lithuania?

P: Yes i think it is important, but also I think it is.. a problem, we communicate mostly in our local communities. I don't have for example much connection with Lithuanians. Have some friends or have some friends we came from Belarus to Lithuania, who are actually Lithuanians, and that actually connects me.

I: So you would say it would also be difficult to get in contact?

P: Yes but it would actually be better if we communities more with Ukrainians, Russians, even with Lithuanians. Because when we closing our local community, we not solve problems as good... because for example Ukrainian and Belarus people sometimes have common problems for example where is the kids.. in which school they will go. It's like a common problem so it's better to solve common problems and we have problems with Russians also. And I think it would be interesting to connect with Ukrainians

I: yeah yaeah

P: But currently for example I see about communities in social media. Russians and Belarusians have different communities, almost the same I think. But they just duplicated.

I: it's also important to not only have contact in your bubble but also to break your bubble. And right now.. feels it more like bubble for you?

P: Really because for example we have software development meet-ups and they are pretty open, so everyone can come there, but only Russians and Belarusians came there. But I don't even know how to advertise it between Lithuanians.

I: You don't know how to reach them?

P: Yes because I think Lithuanian community is completely in Facebook, Facebook has it's own algorithm, And also language is a problem, but for software development we usually use English so I think I need to find some group and then we need to share.

Interview 12 transcription

Date: 11 November 2022

Time: 13:30

Gender: Female

Age: 27

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: the first question is a very broad one, since my research is about the Belarusian national identity, what is the first thing you think about when you think about the national identity?

P: Like as a general idea of Belarusian..?

I: For you personally

P: Belonging.

I: To?

P: I guess community, it can be communities but this is a huge community. But still, there living the together, the feeling of bleeding and the community. Mm.. something I can call like a cultural code maybe. This doesn't only work, like there can be regional cultural variety, linguistic and some other ones. But this is definitely something that pops up. And i can elaborate on that if needed. So ya it's basically if I think of the cultural code it means I more or less know how to interpretate people's actions, gestures, words, facial expressions, and so forth. It's some common shared knowledge. Thats some kind of separate thing as well about the historical situation, about daily life, about pop culture, about food and crops and whatever. So it's some knowledge based and we can share and we can rely on. That causes less doubts I would say, or less confusion, comparing to someone else who identifies themselves as some other nationality.

I: the connection you said before, how do you feel it?

P: Um.. something I just mentioned too.. First of all there is this idea that we share some knowledge about some thins in the world in the broadest sense. So I can allow myself and be more or less confident that people will understand me, even if they won't laugh but they just will understand me right. I guess with all the latest development and it's an infortunate part of connection, but it's being connected in some sorrow, in some uncertainty... And even though like.. I have lots of foreign friends, which some of them are more engaged into Belarus things for ages, others are not. Even if people are extremely sensitive, extremely emphatic, very politically or like socially culturally engaged, I can always feel the difference when I talk about things related to Belarus. It's just this emotional level of engagement, it's different and fortunately we were united, were forced in some very powerful negative emotions. In fear, in uncertainty, in hate too

I: You mean specifically the period of 2020 or do you mean the period before as well?

P: yeah, I .. that was.. before as well, but I think before 2020, this kind of community was narrower, so it was mostly people who worked in NGO's, cultural, education, non-formal education let's say. Who kind of share this feelings, anyway, even though we did, it was never like this big of an emotional thing

I: And you were involved in this?

P: Yeah i worked with NGO's. So I'm like with one foot in cultural projects and cultural activism and another one in non-profit.. so ya for me it wasn't an surprise like: wOw actually people are tortured in Belarusian prison, ow people get in prison for having some different views. Like it wasn't anything new for me. But ya.. I think it's a lot of shared emotions, powerful emotions. But also.. I've only mentioned some down emotions soar, but there are also the whole opposite scale of them, the feeling of unity, solidarity

I: Strongly influenced by 2020?

P: This was highlighted. And I think it was the most highlighted moment was.. id' say from June 2020 to late autumn 2020. Yeah it would say this half a year, ut still even now, ow ya that's actually an interesting point, that I fee it, we discussed with some people I know, it became some kind of easy, even for highly introverted people. It became much easier to, not even to.. not open up, to connect in many ways. From letting a stranger into your place for a couple of nights cause they have just escaped. Belarusian procescution, the war in Ukraine or yeah.. or both. So this astiance with helping things.

I: So this connection was not only like on a kind of shared feeling, shred emotion, shared grieve but also it became more practical.

P: Yes and of course there was some kind of connection and actions as well, and I guess for each and every person this works differently. For some this was mostly about going to the big protests, you know feeling a part of the people, of the mass. For others those were some help initiatives, for others those were political and close to political organizations and projects. And like.. or me I got acquainted, I share some activities and actions with people I wouldn't probably ever met if it wasn't for the situations.

I: So you met new people

P: From like completely different spheres, from like professionals circles and this was, this was and has been quite beautiful I think, though difficult in many many levels of course.

I: Are you some in contact with those people?

P: With some, with others those were just like some common actions we were doing, some common actives, that finished and.. not anymore., but btw, it's funny I just today I received a message of one the people I think about when I tell you this, he got to know I am in Vilnius and he is Vilnius too. So he was like: O ya we should meet. Though it's the person from completely professional circle and ..

I: But connected by all these events..

P: yeah

I: How sadly it was, it was also an opportunity to unite

P: mm ya!

I: And language, which part is language? How does it play a role in connecting with others?

P: I haven't managed this on purpose.

I: On purpose?

P: Of course I would have come to it, or rather I definitely thought about it. Because language is a very sensitive topic to Belarusians. And I know people who share the opinion that.. I mean of course language is a uniting instrument. The easiest one actually and I do believe in .. yeah again.. just the like the power of encoding messages using a particular language as you want. I do believe that there can be several language that unites people and that's ok. I do believe that in national identity, language plays quite a huge role, but I think this attitude has been changing and still like.. it's kind of evolving in me. Just there was a time when I was around 17, early 20. When I would say I felt much more nationalistic than I do right now. And i think then I was strongly, I strongly shared the idea that like.. if we want to survive as a country, as a I don't know.. any identity..

I: To be independent..

P: Yes, there must be a language that unites us in our identity.

I: To be independent of ..

P: Yea there should be, there must be language that unites, that is different from al the others around. Mm... But then.. well first of all. There are examples of countries, of course .. countries with very vivid national identity that don't have a completely unique like think of th US right.. like privileges to the flag, omg. Yeah they're like crazy about this identity and everything, they haven't invented the language that is most commonly speak there right, or like.. they haven' yah... even though it's US-English, it's still English. So what I think.. language is a big part, but I like to be honest, my choice to speak Belarusian is not just like there are many many, what's the word, like it is to show my identity, it is to show my political view, it is to show, it is just for me cause I like it, but actually I enjoy this bi-linguistics. Because i think it just enriched the way of expressing your ideas even.

I: you became less active to this national idea of the language as very important?

P: As the key and the most important one. Though of course, maybe it's in top 5 features or anyways, it's quite high.

I: But you grew up with the Belarusian language?

P: No no

I: How you got to know the language?

P: umm.. I would say I just .. I mean from school as a starting point, and then it's a snowball you know. As soon as I learned something it was easier to consume some other information in the language so..

I: And did you use it with family or friends

P: No, i speak Russian with my family. My father is from Kamchatka. It's the furthest most eastern part of Russia. So we speak Russian with my family. But I do get sometime, like I can say something in Belarusian, they would understand. But I mostly use it now with friends, but I would say, with me, now these days, it's really kind of 50/50

I: do you start conversation in Belarusian?

P: Since quite recently yah. I do.

I: And what is recently?

P: Let's say half a year, but even more so last month. Like I never ..

I: Do you know why?

P: No, that's the thing, I haven't really planned like: o from tomorrow I'm switching to 50% Belarusian in my life, no it was just like gradually growing growing growing and then.. and then this is it haha

I: And how did the year 2020 had an influence on this?

P: In the language thing?

I: Ya

P: It defiantly had it, because in 2020 and later when I was in Belarus, I tended to use Belarusian in some public places like especially .. you know just like this hops or when I was buying a ticket in the metro or some thing.. because I could defiantly sometimes see confusion in the eyes of the people who I was addressing. Sometimes some surprise, but sometimes there were very opposite feelings, like I could see their like.. I don't know excitement about it. And this was actually quite marker as well, to even check what used people have. How people react by using the language. So of course it became much more of the political statement maybe.

I: Much more association with the political opposition.

P: yeh yah. But also what is important for me here, when I call it a political statement or something, I don't necessary mean supporting a particular person or a particular group of people, it's just the way to expres, a way to express high here it's me. I have my needs, my feelings.

I: And the right..

P: Ya and the right to do what I want to do

I: ya yah

P: And.. to yeah.. just kind of .. to provoke some though process, even as easy as: why do we actually speak Russian if we live in Belarus? And as I say like.. on the one hand, I don't think it's let's say so, I don't think it's the biggest problem right now and I defiantly don't support those ones who reacted aggressively on people speaking Russian and kind of aggressively encourage everyone to switch to Belarusian, just because I don't think it's only way to measure the value of the particular persons actions and so on. And if someone is doing amazing things but prefers to speak Russia, well let them be, perfect, that's amazing that they are doing it. But on the other hand form just the point of view, just turning on the political thinking: ok let's just raise the question, this thought.. to think about it. Why we live in this country and speak Russian. And then ideally..

I: Was it also related to your work in NGO's?

P: It's difficult to say, I mean yes and no. But I think both of these, these are rather the results of my values and .. things I believe in and so on. But of course in a way of course, it is easier to speak Belarusian in this circles than if you are a factory worker and everyone speaks Russian around you.. yah.. though I know some people and they like.. yea I do know people who speak Belarusian basically one hundred project Belarusian speaking and speaking everywhere including their works which are not always cultural institutions. So yah.. it's definitely easier, but it's not the only influence of..

I: Do you speak more Belarusian since you're in Vilnius or is it..

P: Comparing to when in Belarus? Yeah.. I don't know, when I left Belarus, Vilnius wasn't the first place where I came. I first went to .. Ukraine. I spent first three months in Odessa, Ukraine. And then over a year in Georgia. So I came here.. I was thinking for a while like. Whether to.. so basically I came here in July. So since July I'm kind of settled here

I: So you left in the beginning of 2021?

P: In January 2021 yeah

I: And what was the reason for you to leave Belarus?

P: M.. there were several of them. But I was .. well after the conversation with the investigation comity that I had about an event that I organized for foreign initiative that was created to help those who faced some kind of persecution and repressions. We were doing..

I: That's dangerous to do in Belarus..

P: haha ya.. so yeah that was one point, one of the events got let's say visible and I was organizing it. So..

I: Not the best position to be in Belarus

P: ya yah... this magical word: organizer for the Belarusian authorities because they really use it a lot. They love these two words: curators and organizers, and coordinator as well, those three words. I fell under the organizer category. So this, then there was another accident connected to documents, some documents that were opened on a persons laptop after they got, after the house got searched, they got temporary arrested and all the devices were taken and.. yeah so that was anther kind of risk. And there were a couple of miners situation connected to the NGO I worked as well, they got liquidated and also some of the people's places got searched.

I: But the most .. reason is related to your safety I would guess.

P: yeah.

I: Why did you decided to go after Ukraine and Georgia to move to Lithuania?

P: This was a combination of practical and personal reasons: piratical, very [?] to politics as well because since early spring this year, renting prices became much much higher cause lots of people from the three countries Belarus, Ukraine, Russia were coming there and of course it increased massively since recently after the ...

I: After the mobilization.

P: Yeah.. but anyways, so already in spring prices have increased, I got kicked out from my apartment and then .. I just .. like I didn't feel I just want to pay this much money in Georgia. I have lots of gratitude to this place, to the country but also there are lots of difficulties and a lot of things I don't like and I find difficult.

I: Was it related to your background as Belarusian?

P: not really no, it's mostly about things in the culture, about how people communicate, how people work.

I: Is it so much different than in Lithuania?

P: It is so much different, of course like the price of living is higher than in Georgie even now, but it's difference got a bit less after the spring.

I: And salary is higher I would say

P: yah of course. So I decided I would rather pay a little bit more, but receive a very different level of infrastructure, services and everything. And on a personal reasons is that my partner lives in Oslo Norway. So logistically it's much much easier. Unfortunately I couldn't move to Norway easily and quickly let's say

I: Is it because it's hard to get a visa for you?

P: Yeah casus I.

I: Despite you can proof you have background in NGO and might face danger in Belarus?

P: Umm.. it might work, it might not. It was the same time I knew it would be much easier to settle here, to receive all the legal things here. So I decided to go for it and just you know calm down and then Norway is something I was counting on in the beginning, but it didn't work for me, exactly because of my citizenship, because of the Belarusian passport that I hold. So some of the options of receiving a resident permit for example are not open for me.

I: And in Lithiua is a bit more open?

P: A little bit ya. Especially now, well I actually, as for Lithuania I do have lots of gratitude as well to people, to government even. Cause they do do things, they do interact, like have dialogue, like listen to people and accommodate in some means and...

I: So it was good decision?

P: Yeah, i am very happy, I love Vilnius since my childhood

I: You already came here before?

P: yaya, I've been here plenty of times. And of course culturally, Lithuania feels much closer to home than Georgia. Climate as well, nature.. everything looks and feels much sillier.

I: The caucasus is in that sense a big difference, also the mentality right

P: It's a great experience, it's great to sometimes challenge [?] on this, at least for me it feels good. I stayed there for a bit more than a year and it's kinda.. that's enough haha

I: How do you see, how would you say.. who could be Belarusian according to you? What is it to be Belarusian?

P: Um.. that's a good question. And I think the easiest answer, but also needs some elaboration. So the one who identifies themselves as a Belarusian is a Belarusian, though of course like.. let's call it validation, some sort of validation is needed cause like if you suddenly say so and like..

I: If I say like..

P: haha.. well..

I: That's usually the next question if I would maybe relocate in Belarus and I would identify as Belarusian, would that make me a Belarusian according to you?

P: Okay, I think I will come to it. So I think, calling someone a Belarusian, requires sometime to live live, I don't think to be born there is the only way to get this identity. Or just having a passport, I don't think those are the criteria. But at least to leave there, and it's also hard to say for how long, but definitely more than a year I guess, a year or two. Cause this requires this blending in, this requires some more time. I think it's.. just the way I see it, you know... like.. a way to work with targeted audiences right, like a way I see portraits of how people and one case this can be someone who was

born and raised in Belarus, speaks at least one of the two languages, but ideally at least some of both, who .. who has this like knowledge of the current situation in different spheres.

I: So this is related to this cultural code?

P: Exactly, so somehow who knows a bit about history, a bit about geography, a bit about economic situation, political situation. So someone who can provide like at first .. first hand, first person overview about the life in the country in development. And that's what makes it different from a tourist right, who could come and say like: well I saw the life in Belarus, but kind of in development.

Then there could be another person who was born in Belarus, was raised in Belarus then maybe moved and lives abroad for many many years now, but reads Belarusian news, keeps in touch with other Belarus.

I: And And if you're born abroad? For example your parents moved from Belarus to let's say France and you're born in France and get raised up and you speak some of the Belarusian or Russian language, you are familiar with the cultural code, the history and the current situation in the country in progress, would you say that person is also Belarusian.

P: I personally could say, I think what this set of characteristics, this is when person identifying becomes very important, cause here if the person says: I am Belarusian.. and they can also say I am French or something else at the same time, so if they do say so, they are Even with all this set of things, they say not really no.. I think in this case this is very important. So coming back to like you.. I think it falls, I would say your situation would fall and all the things we started with, to me, let's imagine if you spend like from around 4 years in the country, you spoke at least one of the languages, you worked or had some other activities with some Belarusian whoever organization. Not just the remote worker for some foreign country that just hands out. So it means socially active, socially integrated, but if you participated in events, maybe even contributed to some of them, if you knew some of the names of very little town and this wouldn't come like : oww what are they saying to me. I think then, I mean.. I am quite flexible with this I think if also.. also I think all right, there is another thing, when someone, if it becomes a, like if someone has some evil intentions then I think it is a problem, if claim gin that you're Belarusian in order to achieve some you know.. some privileges.. though I don't know what kind of privileges this identity can give you haha but ok

I: you mean like in a way you would abuse the identity

P: I guess so ya, so in this case I personally would have a problem, but if it's like.. genuine desire ..

I: So if I could summaries it you are Belarusian if you identity yourself as Belarusian but also being perceived by Belarusians as you are Belarusian.

P: ya ya, and another thing that comes to my mind, it's like very.. classic dual, like in the word.. I think about responsibility and agency. If you could say, If you contribute to the society and you yourself make yourself responsible for the actions, then this is a very bold criterium for me as well.. so ya.. being engaged ok I said it haha

I: But you really thought about this questions before I think

P: mm.. it's kind of someway in the background, but also like another personal thing is that if you track my ancestry, it's maybe.. I think it's 1/8 max of me Belarusian by ya like roots.. So if it was even a question by myself, am I Belarusian? Like what makes me Belarsian, just the fact that I was born there and I have a Belarusian passport or something else. So ya.. I figured it's not enough but I also figured I am Belarusian, I am very very very Belarusian because of like all the things I have said.

I: And your parents, are they Belarusian?

P: My dad was born in Kamchatka, he is half, he is 1/4th Latvian, 1/4th Russian and half Ukrainian. On my mom side 1/8 polish, 1/8th Kazachi, the Cubaan region, it's the southern mixture of let's say Ukrainains and Russians but also the ones developed a very strong identity actually, very diffetn from the rest, and then 1/8th Belarusian

I: It's also interesting that you know this, many people mention this like I am 1/8th Belarusian, that somehow remains an important factor, despite it's not really for influencing on how to measure the identity, it's always a point that is mentioned. I am Belarusian, buy my mom is from there and my father is from there..

P: But I think it's just.. very.. one of the defining things of the region. And a lot of people are mixed at least within the three countries but also I mean take Russia.. there are so many different ethnicities and

I: But that's interesting for me to hear because of course it makes sense from that perspective. It's less common to hear in for example the Netherlands

P: yah.. mm ok,

I: but how would you distinguish Belarus form the nations around like Ukraine, Russian, is it only by this cultural code or would you say wow this is how we significantly would differ, this would make me different from a Russian, or this would make me different from an Lithuanian person.

P: um.. I think.. a part from all the things I've mentioned including the cultural code, like shared knowledge and shared emotions, including language. This is also some let's call them: reactions. Like reactions to the world and the kind of position from which we think about things, or react to things. And i think, I think Belarusians, of course like.. there are different people, but just as some general impression, my impression of this group of people who I identify with, it's quite a careful attitude to expressing ourself, to reacting to things, because... and to me. If I'm asked to, I think I could explain this because of this lots of historical events that wearer happening and because Belarusian was for ages and ages, for centuries kind of this in the middle this two worlds like the big West and the big East. And it's like.. you rally need tot kind of choose carefully and it's not just because of some profit right get or not, but sometimes you just can get literally get like killed even, like sometimes there can be consequences

I: But do you have to choose still?

P: um.. well yeah.. but also, when I talk about, I don't only mean this choose between pro-Western and pro-Russia, its about many many things. Like I don't think, of course as I say there are personal characteristics as well, but in a group full of people from many many countries, Belarusians are less likely to be loudest in the room, Belarusians are most likely not to be the first one to go to the dance floor, or to even give a speech. To anyhow stand out I would say. And in all of this I could combine this to saying, narrowing down to just this kind of careful, thoughtful attitudes, these two things. I

think., yeah like.. for example my general impression is that they are much more reactive. Like something happens and they do something straight next kind of second.

I: You mean in the political context/

P: umm.. In different things, social as well. Like something happens, whatever like you got kicked out from your apartment and ok, the next day I'm looking for another one

I: A bit more active compared to passive ..?

P: Maybe, I wouldn't call it passively, I would call it just like.. ok, I just need some time to think and plan and.. maybe the.. the general feeling which has changed with many people, who still had it, has changed in 2020, like this feeling of being kind of not enough in many many ways, like.. not that cool of a country, like not that interesting, whatever. And.. i think I definitely had it as well in like.. some years .. when I was a teenager and so this.. and I think this comes from living under the very dominant cultural influence of Russia. It does create some feeling like, we are a bit smaller, a bit less important

I: It also sounds you were in search of a certain identity.

P: Maybe.. kind of in search what makes us cool, like let's find something, let's make this our thing haha.

I: So you would say that you have always been in this kind of suppressed position and maybe also identify as a nation. Always a little bit smaller than the neighbor because historically..

P: I guess so, yeah I think, yeah.. I agree. So, kind of this of course again it's generalized, but this lack of pride in the best sense of it.

I: And this specific part, the lack of pride, did it changed after 2020?

P: I think so

I: So can you explain me what are you proud of, in terms of the 2020 protests? What makes you proud as a Belarusian?

P: I'm proud we came together, I'm proud we got out of our homes on the streets and saw each other, I'm proud that there are so many initiative people who just have been coming up with great ideas, have been engaging themselves and other people involved. I'm proud of the fact that it's not, like it's something we talk a lot about it as well. We have this term, maybe you have heard about it, to turn the page. Do you know what it means? This one has quite a negative meaning, to turn the page it means to some sort of forget what was there, to start like.. if I said ow, I turned the page when I moved from Belarus, that would probably mean that I'm not engaged in any activities anymore, I'm super happy to live abroad, like the problem of Belarus don't touch me anymore and like.. I've turned the page. In this way, so I'm happy it didn't happen in this way on a general scale, that people, even if they move out, even if they are not anymore or haven't even been in affiliated with any of this organizations/activities, but for example took part for example in streetprotest, it's still .. like they don't forgive the state, they don't forget the thing and they.. whenever there is an opportunity to kind of . To add to the good, people do it

I: Despite they're being abroad, they still are ready to be active again to ..

P: Ya! And this has changed a lot actually.

I: It feels like a little break maybe

P: Yeah, but of course people run out, people face issues, I mean if I don't know if I'm, if it will be legal for me to stay here tomorrow, then my activism goes to the second or the third place if I face some basic survival issues right. And of course a lot of people who are abroad right now face this, but also people who are in Belarus face this because of the economical things, because of many many other things, because their friends and family members are in prison, or left, or something else, So everyone I think with this.. pyramid of needs, unfortunately we lowered a little bit due to many many factors..

I: That's understandable after two years

P: yeah.

I: Can you explain what you were during this 2020 events personally fighting for?

P: ummm

I: Why did you decided to join the protests?

P: I mean.. for me.. I .. like this is of course this was a choice, but this wasn't a decision for me, it was like.. this was how things should be in my opinion. I mean it's just like.. starting to go the way I always wanted to see. So it was never a choice or an consideration. The level of engagement and involvement could be an consideration sometimes, but not the fact that not choosing the sight or something, this wasn't a question. And i thin one of the things I was fighting for, even before 2020, was actually this, kind of showing people, making people that they are worthy. Making people feel that they are great, they're amazing, if nothing else they have some basic human rights, some rights. And the fact the people realized it, to me the so called Belarusian revolution hasn't lost at least with this thing, that people finally have realized that they are people, and this is.. this happen, of course like.. I was fitting the you know humiliating state of Belarus, just like the constant feeling of being suppressed by the big dominant neighbor, by your own state. This feeling that you're always under some restrictions, under some surveillance, under like some .. not always in the direct meaning, you need to be considerate always in what you're doing, in what you're saying. So i think this I was fighting for, fighting for freedom in this meaning that people just you know, don't have to..

I: Expressing themselves how they want.

P: yah. But because, of course everything ghat happened was and is still a surprise for me, but I didn't think we would just go out on the street and next day Lukashenko would resign or something. I was not.. so.. and because of this, my personal main thing was the first thing that I mentioned, so

just that people come together, people develop this solidarity, people become more .. get more agency. And I kind of .. of course I couldn't imagine the scale of the persecution but I defiantly could think about some arrestments, some prisons

I: that the regime would fight back

P: Yes, I could imagine that some people would leave, I could never image this would be so many people.

I: If you would imagine this a year before, the big events.. I think no one could really expect this outcomes

P: yeah yeah

I: Did you continue the protests abroad?

P: Do you mean the street actions or?

I: Yaeh it could be street protest, or actions online social media use or..

P: yeah I, so first of all my work is indirectly and directly connected

I: You still work for NGO's?

P: Ya, and i work with .. and in one part of my work for NGO's basically. For a while after I left, I was directly participating in one initiative. But then I quited, and after a while it stopped almost completely, just the request and demand wasn't there anymore. And that was absolutely fine, like some organizations they should be temporarily, just a response to some request. As for streets sections and stuff. I didn't take part in many of them, I am really happy that there are some people there are there doing it, I just don't see myself there if I was in Belarus, if would be in Belarus myself I would see more reason kind of to do so. I've been a couple times when I was in Georgia, I took part in some actions happening next to the Belarusian embassy. Case this, yeah I think it's a matter of location and the message I would say, to be honest as I said I think it's great and this should happen, I just don't think this is the best way of how I personally can use my time.

I: You mean it's also less effective here?

P: I do see like, making something in front of the offices of huge International institutions, from UN to some foundations and some stuff. I do see sense of this, I do see sense in making in front of embassies, in front of the Belarusian embassy, Russian embassy as well, because this is one of the connecting points in another countries, but I see a little less about this kind of meaning of gathering in a central square or something, but I see another important function this gathering do. And it's community building, so that people don't feel alone, especially those who maybe don't have that much of strong connections if they moved away, so this is great, this should happen, but I personally don't see myself there.

I: It's always multi purpose, it's not only the message you want to share.

P: yeah. So again, if this helps people to feel worth, to feel you know.. to be proud of themselves, then go ahead. Amazing way

I: And how do you express it for example?

P: Well one thing actually I kinda took up as ... there's another issue actually, I will briefly.. if you want to know we can talk about it more, but there's this constant guilt of Belarusians which can be internal, external, but we even have meme joke: a Belarusian person is always guilty for something. Always.

I: Not specifically related tot a certain topic right now but this could be internal.

P: Currently this could be guilty for because the regime is still on, it's we didn't do something, we didn't do enough, guilty for Ukraine..

I: It's a bit related to what you said before

P: yeah guilty for like.. if people leave the country they feel guilty they did so, if people don't leave the country they feel they still financially contributed to the state, so it's a trap, I've been there haha. I felt this when I left, I felt extremely guilty and especially in this always rising numbers of political prisoner and I keep thinking of them and then I feel guilty that I am free and.. this is not a healthy feeling, I understand that and that also comes from traumatizing events and a lot of things. Cause this is still a lot of people feel. So i lost my thought can you repeat the question haha?

I: It started with how do you express

P: hmm right! I think at first it came from that point, that apart from the things I was doing, I was also adopted self-adopted emission like ok, since I am abroad, I am gonna use every possibility to talk about Belarus, to tell people

I: Like this?

P: like this haha. To.. it's not that I would just chaise every random person hey... do you want to talk about Belarus, not that extremely, but still like.. And I was still systematically doing it when I was in som international groups, projects, communities, so I .. well first of all I am very happy and proud to say that I am Belarusian. I'm very happy to talk about it, even though there can be some difficult question to talk about it and I am very aware of it sometimes, I can be like a zoo animal for someone: ow you're from Belarus, ok now tell me everything..” I do get this feeling, but even if I talk to such a person, I still do see some sense in it, it's anyways knowing what I can say or any other person from Belarus about Belarus. It's better than not knowing it. So this.. like I successfully got completely, completely rid of these idea of being a secondary like, coming from a second world country, though of course I... checking my privileges, I understand that I have much less of them than some other people having a Lithuanian passport for example. But this is the legal point of the issue, and then there is a personal and human point. And as a human, I like.. I finally got this pride let's say: Ok this is who I am, this is my background, this is my story.

I: So participating in the possibility you have to share your story

P: yea yeah so yeah another thing I just thought about, being actually and getting to be empowered to raise, to actually raise issues. When I see to be critical of I don't know tax people right, statements they make and so on, especially international crowd. From comments on Facebook to idk, articles in some big media. I do when I feel have time and energy, I reach out and I do say

I: to use your agency

P: Yeah exactly, this wasn't like this. Like for example since I was a part of some discussion where USSR was brought a lot, and then some people in stead of USSR were saying Russia. And every time I was like pointing out and saying, well this wasn't Russia, please don't erase agency and responsibility of the rest that were there if you want to address like Russian Soviet republic, if you want to say the huge country, then this is the Soviet Union or USSR, not Russia, so things like this and this is just like a tiny example, but sometimes they are getting a bit more of there are a lot of issues right now when people talk and write about the war in Ukraine for example. Just like I am kinda pointing out, things encouraging people to call by their names to sue the correct terms and so on. So yeah this is another way to show like hi I am here and this is not right

I: Since you're in Lithuania, do you feel free to express yourself? Do you feel safe to stand up?

P: um.. yes.. mostly yes..

I: You have to think about it..

P: I am mostly thinking, I'm trying to recall when I didn't feel safe to say something or to do something and I can't remember. The only.. but actually there is something and I mentioned this as well and this comes from kind of the opposite part, it's kind of receiving all the documents and stuff, just yeah.. to kind of comply with all the legal rules, the resident permit and so on. Sometimes this is .. this has been the major factor of insecurity of not feeling safe, just because.. like.. like if my visa expires then what..It's rather this issues than .. but these are very important issues because they are .. just what I mentioned like.. If I can't .. if this is my biggest issue, I can not acitivim, no time, no energy or place for activism so it's rather this and .. but this is connected with many many things as well, like a place to live, an income, medicine, healthcare and stuff, so it's safety on more basic levels than just like.. safety of expression.

I: Is it important for you to have Belarusians around you in Lithuania?

P: It appears so

I: How come?

P: Uhm.. I think first of all it's this emotional support, when something happen we don't have to tell each other what happened, we just sure directly our feelings and our emotions. If we like.. there has been plenty of situations and you meet someone and you ask the person how they are, and then they reply something like: Ah well it's fine but all the thins you know.. . And then I know a ya shit all the things, and you know what this means.

I: You don't have to explain the whole context

P: So i think it's this feeling of being like kind of completely on the same page. Then,

I: Are you actively looking for Belarusians?

P: No not really, and even the opposite sometimes when I first.. it's kind of a.. yeah this is quite a difficult question for me, cause on the one hand I am very happy to hang out with people I know and there are a lot of people who moved from Belarus who I know personally, some of them are friends, some of them are just acquaintances, plenty of people in all the key countries where Belarusians are moving now. But I don't, I find it a little bit intimidation a little bit for myself to like.. get engaged in so called Belarusian expat communities

I: So you don't really actively participate in such communities?

P: No no no, because I think.. well first of all, due to the nature of my work, both paid work and volunteer work I communicate with people a lot and this is something I really like, but this is also something that takes away a lot of energy and I just needs some time to recharge and then let's say I have this limited amount of communication capacity then I rather want to spend it, use it with close people who I know, who I know share some values and believes. And like I don't have this false impression, but if Belarusians.. we are comrades of life like, nothing can make us apart, cause this is false, even though we are united. This plan, we might have completely different views and values in many other points. So yeah. Just the fact of belonging to the Belarusian community in the broadest sense, I rather want to the belong to people with the same values on the first hand.

I: But that could also be people without Belarusian identity?

P: Yeah this could be some other people, I am lucky as I said to have the Belarusian community who shares more or less the same things as I do, outside of views of the political and social events, cause there are many other things. So I am happy I have this, because of this emotional support, actions support support as well. Like I don't feel the need to gt involved in communities I don't know just because they are Belarusian.

I: So it's for example not a big common topics with your Belarusian friends to talk about like .. identity or certain events going on, it's just your personal group of friends with whom you share some values

P: unless this is connected with some actives I am doing, if it's like a public something and we need to reach out people, but if it's not this, then it's a little narrower circle.

I: Is there anything you'd like to share more? You can use your agency haha

P: haha it's not related to any particular question, but it is one thing I keep thinking about, is that I think we face.. well first of all we live in very interesting times haha. I think we face, cause before 2020 and 2021, everything that followed, I was very interested in this phenomenon of like cultures surviving without a territory, either temporary somewhere else or spread around or...

I: Like diasporas?

P: Well ya, but very precisely like Jewish people, like Roma people for example, like even Armenian people for example as well, they do have a territory, but with Armenia, fun fact about Armenia is that more Armenians live abroad than within Armenia and they still.. but they are.. when Armenians talk about Armenia they kinda include this people as well living abroad. So this was always seems quite interesting and challenging, and I think this is what we are facing now, with Belarus as an example, that this identity now is much less, starts to get much less linked to the territory, even though very very very linked in some meaning as well. But with how many people spread around and this is another thing I was thinking about some times, of course the more times goes, the less people will return. Because they get settles down, they start their business, they fall in love with people from other countries, they get children and so on.. And yeah.. I don't have the illusion if something changes to the better, like the next day everyone will return. And that's .. I think it's a very interesting process.

I: interesting but not particularly negative?

P: yeah, interesting from the research point of view. Like from this matter position, like ow cool something is happening

I: So despite people spread around the world, they still feel connected to Belarus and they're still actively teach children learning languages.

P: Casue I mean my idol world does't have countries and borders and everything. But because we are very very far from it, it's like.. the thing with democracy right. Democracy is very bad, but we haven't come up everything better at the moment. So the same thing here like.. my ideal world is so.. so we are living where we live this is important to have some sort of identity, cause it is important to show your independence and so on.. so ya this is very kind of situation it kind of moves as closer to this ideal world in a way. So that's yeah... interesting haha

I: i think many people share this idea about the lack of borders and so on..

Interview 13 transcription

Date: 15 November 2022

Time: 15:30

Gender: Female

Age: 33

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: Since the research is mainly focused on the Belarusian national identity, what is the first thing you think about when thinking about the Belarusian national identity?

P: Like my first association? I don't have any emotional association, because this is the topic I wash thinking about it a lot, but concerned some thoughts about: I like the conclusion about one research, doe maybe 4 or 5 years ago, about national identity based on interviews.

I: A bit similar as what I am doing right now?

P: Umm it was inside Belarus and the main idea was to learn how people in Belarus feel on this meaning and most popular answer was: it means local

I: They feel locals?

P: aha, i could talk a lot about historical roots of that notion. But actually, personally that also works

I: Do you have the same feeling if thinking about the national identity?

P: Yeah more or less yes, because as everywhere has some regional diversity inside the country and sometimes I feel the difference with people from different cities, regions on the meaning of language and behavior. Even behavior.

I: Even within the country there is many different regions with different behavior?

P: In Netherlands?

I: No in Belarus

P: As for me, I can see the difference yes. Maybe it ... it's not just the same as everybody but for me yes, I can see differences.. Like you want to know more about it right? As native language, like I am bi-lingual. And my first one is.. it could be named Belarus, it's not really Belarusian but it's a local language on which were based some dictionaries 100 years ago. But this local language itself preserved as on the same.. view as it was before. So not everyone has this language, I have it because of my parents, maybe.. it's clearly one the particularities of this region. On the north-West of Belarus, to the border with Lithuania, Latvia. And concerning behavior, for me it was surprising that I come there in Lithuania, some local people said I should feel difference on how they building this social connections, but I felt..

I: People said that to you?

P: Ya Lithuanian people. But me personally felt for me here is cultural difference is much smaller than it was in Minsk. And I was born in the small city of, small town, right between Minsk and Vilnius, so in this direction, way of connection with people is more understandable than in Minsk. That was surprising.

I: if you say that your national identity is very local, but is it also that you feel connected to other Belarusians in whole Belarus?

P: Um.. I feel it on .. the reaction of civil rights and .. being a citizen of a country, on this meaning I feel a connection with other people and on our .. like .. civil rights and human rights, building something on the adminstrational level, on the political level, of course I do. If we concern some more personal things, it's different.

I: Can you explain how you feel this connection?

P: um... I can .. I am very involved on my job, I am a workaholic and I am very involved on NGO's and I discuss many related topics with friends or family. And all things are usually very.. universal. It can be discussed with everybody, it does't matter from where people are. It can be related more to their personal values. But if concern behavior or language, it is connected with region.

I: What makes you as a citizen of Belarus different from citizens from Russia or Ukraine.

P: I have never been actually. I never had the different citizenship, but no idea.. We are different but..

I: It's not only the passport right?

P: Um.. It comes to the conception of the national state you know, are states national or before it was on religion based and I don't remember the last the conception of citizenship. I don't know. I could tell that. How to connect with people, how to understand each other, again it's not only about citizenship, but in general I could say I know some particular characteristics from people from Ukraine or Russia, in general, mostly expected from them but it's not always working, not everybody

I: Experience?

P: Kind of, Ukrainians will be more noisy and ready to contact. But the same time, inside the country they have problems with corruption and had before and that's all .. is also away visible. Now they are of course, I don't .. kind of angry. The society is very polarized and it maybe seen on each person. They are ready to be burned by any conflicts, anything that touch them. With Russians that's a bit different. Ukrainians love to discuss out loud, Russians like to express themselves out loud. That's a different one. It's also about interaction, but for them it's more about themselves, their opinions, their region.. and they maybe also angry but on a different way. They can be .. you know it feels for them old one stuff, not fresh like.. done by this recent war, but done a lot of years ago but they don't even feel emotional about it

I: So would say within the three countries there are completely different mentalities?

P: Not completely, but you feel some differences

I: How would you then describe Belarusians?

P: no idea, I am one of them. Never seen Belarusian from outside haha

I: No idea? But you are one of them and you had a lot of contact with them

P: We are not ready to discuss so much maybe, maybe people are ready to wait longer to thing will come down by itself. Not with their, not because of their actions.

I: Less wiling to stand up for themselves?

P: I'm not sure, again it was before 2020, I left Belarus one year ago and I have no idea what happens there now. On 2020, things were completely different, everybody worried to everything. Now.. what I am trying to say, that such events have a huge impact on mentality.

I: How did you experience that? What changed in your mentality?

P: Um.. I cannot distinguish my mentality and my behavior, I don't understand your question. I can tell in generally from my work, I worked as journalist with a lot of people. So personally it's a whole different story.

I: I am interested in your personal story

P: Ok .. till.. you know I am also kinda chose the thoughts for not being too , that's why I am not always words.. ok till 2020, for me was easier to work or being .. or having some social activism, and don't pay attention on the main problems. As a human right situation, like I was concerned and we were do with all my friends concerts without asking any permission of authorities, just to move forward the idea of freedom of .. but now the difference is.. I was writing about ecology a lot of years, maybe 9, and it was also really important for me. Now I am not writing about the same stuff without talking about .. about some trash, about some very crucial things. Thaht's what for me looks the most important. Before I was able to live my personal live and I can't even tell the difference exactly between that. The difference before I was able to write about ecology. Now the most interesting things for me are some .. things connected with suppression. Thaht's the difference. I was't silence before, but I became such person who was able to avoid some stuff, who was able to avoid to be main actor of solving problems, because of some persecution I had on 2007. And 2006.

I: Related to?

P: To political activism. So I just supposed that's how it work with all other people, if you get repressed too far, you are trying to survive and found the way of living what will let you such opportunity. So now I am looking for that way of living, just doing what I want to do.

I: And you can do that in Lithuania?

I: You feel the freedom to do what you want? The freedom to express yourself..

P: yah

I: And you just explained your ideas about the national identity, what about the language? The Belarusian language, do you speak it?

P: With parents, some friends. With my brother, he grow up suddenly, he is 17 years old and yah.. we speak Belarusian language as well with parents and relatives. Sometimes with friends

I: Did it changed after 2020?

P: no i don't think so

I: You already spoke it before?

P: yeah, i used it almost with.. let's say 70% I was using it since 2006 and until let's say 2012 kind of that. Now this is more 60% of Russian, and 40%

I: What was the reason in that period?

P: Just had a boyfriend who was using more Russian, he was from the east of Ukraine and was living in Belarus and like we were living together and it was more a comfortable way of living to use Russian.

I: You said you started to use the Belarusian language more in 2006. What was the reason?

P: Just having friends who started using it with me. Wondering it would be cool to be able, to use, it, to learn the Belarusian language from literature not only from local, and I found some friends.. of course I was using our local language, with parents and on school I am not sure. I even though remember, because I was speaking Russian at school, when I came to university, I discovered that actually speak Russian clearly. I was surprising for me

I: Your level of Russian you mean?

P: Kind of that, now of course I was able to write correctly and to read. My oral language, I discovered that I used to not speak Russian, or not clearly, more even not Russian. Because, I didn't know before, but everybody was telling each other "we don't speak Belarusian" and actually it appeared we were haha strange.

I: But how come everybody says we don't speak it?

P: Because I consider our local language as Belarusian, as well as Belarusian language from books. They not. This is the self-estimation of this language, what is produced by some political staff. People consider local language as more .. as less good

I: Less value?

P: Maybe less valued than Belarusian from literature. The truth is that those local languages are not Russian. This is the truth, what older people are not ready to.. for me this is the fact, for a lot of people this is the topic of discussions. That's it. It's connected with our circle of things, Belarusian was always a language of locals, and we had a lot of changes of authorities on 20th century, in my region at least 4, I did not count but there was a lot. And always there was a different official language, Russian after.. Polish, Russian, Polish, for 20 years, after that was the war, after that was the Russian again, on Soviet Union. After was Belarusian in the 90's, after it was getting more of Russian. And the centers of this officially was the cities, and the people on the cities were considered was better. And their language is more considered as better languages. And the people on the villages was considered as worse, didn't have a lot of work, a of money. And a lot of education. And this is what provoked the relation with people to their local languages. They were.. the situation was: let them be preserved more on the villages, like being from the village it had the meaning that you were defected. Not so educated, not so good, not so rich and the same estimation was also projected on language. Confusing story, complicated.

I: But did you studied in Minsk? To go the big city?

P: I didn't like it, I prefer to stay in my hometown all my life, use the same roots, talk with same people on that time. So I didn't like lit, it was complicated to find friends, find places, find my place, in my city, in my hometown I knew exactly what should I do to make this place being better, why and for whom. And in Minsk, I just came and I was useless. And it took a lot of time to find points to on.. which I could work on to have some changes around me. And for me it was critically important to make some changes on the world around me.

I: Not only in Belarus?

P: Around me. Some of my colleges said me that, the best option is to make some things for yourself, because you cannot ever hit up the universe. You can make done around you and for you, so that was the idea.

I: So the better world start with yourself?

P: Kind of that, you should do all what you're doing for yourself, on the meaning of social things, working with people, working on NGO's, working on journalism and that's it.

I: And you did that?

P: Yes and I always do, and it works.

I: It's a bit of a jump of a question. But who can be Belarusian according to you? Do you need to have a Belarusian passport, living in Belarus...?

P: What does it mean to be Belarusian? Um.. For me it just means self-identification for which you can choose any criteria you can like most. It could be passport, place of living, feeling inside of you, any.. that's it.

I: So I could also identify myself as Belarusian?

P: If you like it haha

I: Would you see me as a Belarusian then?

P: For sure I'll ask you why, but if you will have some reasons for you ok.. haha. It would be strange, but ok. It's the part of the region of different people you know. In Lithuania, a lot of people, I know one family, woman from my friend. She was born here, her parents move there after the second world war and stayed there to live, and she is considering herself as Russian. For me that's strange, because it's normal like.. it's a bit weird also. Like it happened often, if people move there and after some years begin to tell I am Belaurisan, I live here, I love my family, I worked for that country..

I: Even if you're born outside?

P: Yeah. That doesn't look weird, it might be a bit, but this is an ordinary practice what I am trying to say. [?] To live with one Russian business man who moved here, his friends give him birthday presents: ticket for a flight to Minsk and back. From I don't remember, Moscow, Saint Petersburg. And he went there, and meet a good girl and after he came back, they married, have kids, business, he was IT-business man. After 5 years he moved to Belarus, he said: you know, actually I see me as a Belarusian. I live here, my family is here, my business is here and I'd love to live here after.. and I thought. Ahh.. that's.. even that is possible.

I: Feels a bit strange...

P: But even that happens on a local.. I am from [?], this is a town of 13k people, and we had a strong community, and in that community we had some active people, one local historic, a man who was born on Ukraine. He had strong Ukrainian pronunciation, and was huge patriot of our city and of our country. Or we had one human right defender, a man who was also born in Ukraine. He was trying to speak Belarusian, he didn't succeed at all, but he was for sure interesting in local people, and we were doing a website with a small team, and our website admin, it was a guy, who were... I am not sure Russian or Ukrainian, or I had friend, his mother was local, but his father was he is Russian soldier. This guy was considering himself as a Belarusian

I: It's interesting. Do you think it is easy for people to feel Belarusian?

P: I have no idea, I am completely local, I cannot even imagine haha

I: Because you mentioned a couple examples. I never heard that for example in different countries.

P: You never heard similar things?

I: yeah, in my own country or you mentioned Lithuania, you know the person who had Russian parents and who felt Russian. But do you think that this example you give from Belarus, do you think that is something what is special in Belarus?

P: I have no idea, it looks like for people it is really not so difficult to feel Belarusian, umm.. I don't know why. My former editor in chief, my former job, she is Ukrainian. We were talking about migration and she said: I have nothing here, except my husband, all my relatives .. liken the biggest part of her relatives and all her like.. graves are in Ukraine. But she staying there till now in Belarus. I have no idea why. She could live, she was thinking about it but she didn't

I: When did you decided to move to Lithuania?

P: In August 2021, my purpose to be honest was just take some rest.

I: Of your activities?

P: Of my work, I had problems with sleeping, some things about ability to work, with concentration, some cognitive stuff, just had a talk with psychologist and decided that I just needed to find some more help. Find it, applied, they accepted me.

I: You mean you applied for a job here in Lithuania?

P: No, applied for help in Georgie, to take some rest, that's it. And I came there, and told myself ok.. and now we can think a bit about what happened during the last year Because I didn't want to talk about it all the year, because it wasn't finished. And then in Georgie I stopped and I started to think about it haha and it was difficult to see look at the whole picture, it wasn't good. Just felt very stressed about that, was just thinking about to leave, had family, cat, house, rented house, but anyway. But after almost one month, my editor and chief had a search in their home and one of our colleges also had.

I: A year after the protest?

P: Yeah, actually for now reason, most people were searched because authorities were trying to find some financing source of protests. Maybe that was their idea, and sure they didn't find anything of course. And it was needed to have someone abroad to precede the website work, change passport, more of this people .. work with team until somebody else also came abroad. So we decided it will be me for some time, and that we also decide that the situation is also too dangerous for people or workers, staff and contractors to move abroad. And I was involved in that process, to helping .. and after, I didn't came back because I felt that it might be dangerous, I was wondering that I will wait till the end of the winter and I will see how the situation will get better, and in the beginning of the winter I decided that's it, I will not came back because it is dangerous, I cannot work there, I don't have any future perspective as a journalist haha and .. maybe that's it. On February 24 the war started, of course it was clear that .. it was my actual time to think about when .. and then the war started.

I: It was even more easy to decide to not go back?

P: I didn't even decide that I am.. everything was already decided. But yes..

I: Then you went to ..

P: I went to Lithuania just after Georgia. On 31 August I went there to just see some friends and I stayed here. I had a visa.

I: Why Lithuania?

P: I love it, I was dreaming to live in city what I love, I don't mean Minsk. I love my hometown, Vilnius and Lviv. Ukraine., Those are my loved cities, but Ukraine there was a war already since 2014. It wasn't finished, and I felt no.. a bad option for someone who run from dictatorship. Run to the country where is a war. Poland is too conservative, on the political I mean.. And Lithuania it is ok. Language is not familiar with anything, but alright. And the whether..

I: But that's the some probably as in Belarus right?

P: not so much. Sometimes I talk with friends and they say it's good whether, there is sun, I take a walk. And I look at my window and thinking shit.. haha .. but all the rest is good actually. Also for Lithuania for Belarus has a cultural and historical meaning. That was vey important for me, and also it was important that .. it is the same distance to my hometown as well as from Minsk. Just the same nature, same river

I: So it feels..

P: More or less at home. I know my grandparents came here to sold forests on the river, towards the river..

I: So your family has roots here?

P: Not roots but like work connection mostly.

I: Do you still have contact with friends and family?

P: Yes of course I do. I have some friends., like I am ok with friendship when you don't see each other. This is why I have my best friend, a girl from Minsk, and she is living in Minsk, one Belarusian guy living in Boston, USA, and a third guy is from Ukraine, who lives in Germany right now. Those are my best friends. No-one of them is here.

I: Do you know a lot of Belarusians here in Vilnius?

P: Yeah

I: So is it important for you to have Belarusians around you?

P: Because I work with Belarusians, yes of course it is important.

I: what kind of things do you discuss with them on a personal level?

P: On the first month it was migration, and all topics related.

I: Do you also have this discussion what we discussed for example like identity, or being Belarusian?

P: We might discuss, I am not sure. Maybe about mentality. What did we do on 2020, or before but I don't like this conversations, I feel bad. It's not working, like history does't have such option, like what could we do, now we did what we can do, that's it. So i don't participate on it, so I cannot tell you.. I am trying to be in contact with this current live. Ask my friends from Belarus, how you ... what can you see around? Like what do you mean? I tell: I am not there, I write about it and for me it's important to just look at that through your eyes: what can you see, what has changed recently, what about shops, what about prices, neighbors, what people are talking about. That's more important for me. Here about, how people feel here, what are their plans for future, how they build their live here.

I: Are you planing to go back if it is possible?

P: Hm.. yes

I: Or didn't you though about the question?

P: I thought, but it's again the same question as with history. I could go, but it still don't exist it could.. can or cannot. Now.. I don't see any opportunity to go back, it could be also .. like you know.. your personal opinion like can you go back or no, because I also know some of my colleges going back, even lot's of people who have dangerous work. Ok.. if situation will change, it's possible I will come back, but it very depends on when and how it will be.

I: Have you yourself participated in the 2020 events?

P: More or less. Because I am a freelance journalist and I've always been. Like I had this editor part time job, on the rest of the time I was freelance journalist. So I was trying to how to get involved on protests itself, like walking around, talking with people, making some pictures, I don't like to shout, to wear some flags of papers. I didn't like it personally so it's really good .. this is also good from the point of view of journalist ethics, so I am completely ok. But at the same time.

I: You wanted tot be neutral?

P: I can't be completely, but when I can, I do. But it's half of tough actually, because there was one more part of my let's say my 2020. I was singing on the streets as a musician, in a choir, it was with wearing mask, completely hided. So I was sure that I won't be in pictures recognized as a journalist. For me it was very strange, because I was sure I should't do that, I shouldn't be an active, but at the same time, all my life I was also a musician, and I cannot switch into two accounts of me. So all that life that was part of me. And i felt like ok, I don't write about music, I can't do that and it's hidden. So i was doing that for a while, like maybe for 8 months. We had on this choir a lot of arrests, but not me, not my friends. It's a big choir. Now I am not there and now.. after 2020, um.. as a journalist I got not so neutral, it's still on the limit of journalist ethics. I asked my employers, like my former employers like what are the limits of like.. requirements.. it's all me, so it is ok, I am not in a political party and on any religious movement and don't write about such things when I participate in. But.. I don't think this is good for journalists, but also I can't see my life without it. I talked my other colleges, if I compare with them I am still be enough neutral. They were or example walking with flags, I never did that one meetings when I was walking.

I: But imagine if you were not a journalist. You didn't felt the urge to do that?

P: No idea, I do that all my life. Since I was 16. I can't imagine what role could I have if not being journalist. As one of my friends.. she is doctor, she said that for some people, she says like I am not such a person because I am doctor, I am doctor because I am such a person. That works also for me I think.

I: It's hard to imagine. If you wouldn't be a journalist.

P: could happen, but didn't

I: What about activities and community in Lithuania? Is there according to you an active Belarusian community or communities?

P: sure there are, there are a lot of them. I'm on a few, NGO community, one sport community and with my neighbor we are trying to build some neighbors community, but it wasn't really successful?

I: It wasn't?

P: We didn't pay a lot of time in that. So .. and journalist community. Maybe 4 of them.

I: And they are full of Belarusians, for example doing sports, and you discuss things about journalism.

P: About journalism and about sports, about living here. There was a research and it was written that there are 40.000 of Belarusians came there because I am remember because of political persecution after 2020, so there is plenty of Belarusians.

I: Is that important for you to be in such communities?

P: I like communities in general, not necessarily in that part

I: But you're not in Lithuanian communities?

P: I am also meet people of Lithuania and I know also one community what I love to participate in but just.. don't have enough time. No actually I do in of the communities and this is.. not sure, let's say I know a couple of them, enough to participate but I don't have enough time. For example there is a community of people who make concerts, I love to take pictures for them but I don't have the time.

I: this kind of communities... you said you have tried this neighbor community, is that also something of the 2020 results?

P: yeah! It gets popular there. Just people trying to do the same things. But also as I know a lot of my Lithuanian neighbors, I have some friends from here, Lithuanians, I have one Iranian for example.

I: Do you know the situation? Because I saw in the news all this communities after 2020 events became very popular in for example Minsk neighborhoods

P: aham

I: It wasn't before?

P: No, the scale was different. There was a few of them but not so much

I: aham.

P: I didn't know any of them so I have no idea.

I: you were just journalist?

P: No I was in musical community, I created one.

I: Also Belarusian music?

P: In Minsk it was about mostly small concerts, of Belarusian, Russians and Ukrainian musicians. And my hometown it was a community not created by me, but I loved it very much. It was like civil society community with some human right defenders, politicians, musicians, historians and so on. Different people.

I: Do you think that there are still.. before you said we don't really discussed what we could have don in 2020 and we did what we do, but do you think that... have you ever had this discussions about what you would have done different in 2020?

P: Ya and I don't consider myself as a part of those changes, because my time, when I was willing to changes, it was 2006. And so on, and around.

I: 2006, the election time?

P: Yah

I: Did you participated in the protests then?

P: I was in my hometown, we were active in political organization, it's called [/] and after this, maybe more about regional development and stop this language and music. But I came once in Minsk. But not on them, it was later elections, a few months after elections. And in 2020, i didn't believe we will succeed.

I: You didn't. Why not?

P: why yes? There was a lot of actions before and we didn't

I: Wasn't there a different scale in 2020?

P: At first, no after people came on the streets for a few days, I thought maybe it might work and sure.. I'm not sure, but it's not my time, not my choice and the best I can do is just support all the people.

I: What do you mean with like it's not my time and not my choice?

P: It was before, when I was ready, I was sure all changes on my country depends on each person personally, concerning and including me. In 2020, till that time I was just sure I should everything I want to choose life around me, but if somebody, if that would be who decide which will be [?] On this country, it would be already changed. It's not in my power to change also the strategies. I cannot do that on my own at least. And yeah.. for me that's it. But I was doing that not only for me, also for people around and if they came outside to protests and to change something, the best I can do is support them. It was the only one reason why I came there. I didn't believe, actually, sometimes, not really .. not strongly.

I: You already had this past that things should be changed way before

P: yeah.. and i wasn't the only one. There's always such people,

I: In your surrounding?

P: Maybe yeah, umm.. much less it's got after 2020 but at least on 2020, I didn't feel anymore lonely in the society. It means, I didn't feel I am the only one, almost the only one with such an experience.

I: And before you had

P: I didn't tell anyone my address. To friends, but no any.. paper signs with government when was written my address for example, only doctor and post. I never wrote my real name when I ordered some .. kind of Barbara here, not my real name, Gosh no. It wasn't secure. I never paid tax. It felt strange, but I didn't felt insecure, trying to imagine that I come to tax service and I'll tell: I work for radio liberty guys, I'd love to pay taxes. When looking from, that's weird. People started to that on 2020. A lot of them, [?] paid taxes to [?] Power to Lukashenko to Lukashenko's system, and they just became similar to me, it happened suddenly. For now, in the very beginning, I was scared to go to any protest because since 2006, police came to my home more or less regularly, not so often, but the last time was on 2017. 11 years. And it was very scary for me to go to any protests of course. But people did that, I was trying to be like them, I succeed in that and .. but now I can see a few days ago, there was a protest near to Belarussian embassy. And some .. I came there with one friend and she looked scared but the same way as was me this time. But I felt .. I know this feeling, I had it before actually, before the last time, just now.. everybody has that. This is said, but I feel much more understood than before.

I: And you do understand the others?

P: Hope so haha.

I: That's a very said thing you went through, but it basically also connects you

P: yeah.. before me and people like me, we were freaks.

I: Did people say that to you?

P: Just it was visible. We weren't ready to work.. I decided that I'll never work for government when I was at school. I am 33 years old now so.. 2006 was when I was 16 .. I had some pictures published there, on state financed press, maybe a few pictures maybe .. during this 16 years. For people now it's obvious, that work for government is not a good thing, before it wasn't like that for them, but it was for me. It was visible on many things, not only on that. Let me remember, and I was trying to never have on my close circle of friends people with different political opinion. Cause they are just not trustable, they can be undercover authorities, they can give them my personal data and I could be persecuted again and police come to my home before independence day, elections.. I didn't want that so I didn't have any political opponents in my circle. So for me it was impossible to having [?] With person who like.. voted for Lukashenko. Never

I: It will be dangerous for you.

P: Just it won't be trusted, that's it. Before for people it wasn't like that, now it is.

I: So it's like a whole new society

P: yeah.

I: Yeah yeah. I think it's hard to understand such situation if you never went through such situation as an outsider

P: On the one hand yes, on the other, all such situations are similar I think. Those are universal things, you can compare it with any huge trauma. When person can't be as he or she was before. That's it. And there are much more such people as we can imagine. From different country, I told you about my Iranian friend, we are completely different, but we are very similar on one thing, he has a similar relationship with their authorities in Iran as I do with mine. I was once spoken with a guy from Iraq, and it was the same. We can completely understand each other on the topic, those are very universal things, very common. I wouldn't even imagine that.

I: So you don't have to be from Belarus to understand this

P: Any dictatorship is similar, more or less. In Iran it's much harder.

I: Right now yes..

P: And before too, it was more surveillance, more participation of authorities on personal life. In general. Like. It's not so bad actually, it's hard to go through that, but as a result it's not so bad. It helps to be subject, not object.

I: It's very hard to really feel how it is

P: i think what you talking about, it's the same what you had in country. If somebody wasn't there, for them it might be the same or similar or hard to understand

I: You mean before the 2020?

P: Before, and I am not sure about now because not everybody was there actually. I don't know.. no idea. But before 2020 for sure, for people to understand or I don't write my full name on.. it was shop delivery. Kind of paranoia.

I: you can get very suspicious on every situation I guess..

P: haha yes, you can.. for example it was a good thing to connect with people who are on cyber security. We always had a common language, because I always was googling very new people who I know recently. I am checking their profiles and social media, their name and surname on google. Always, If someone didn't recommend this person to me If I do now.. if it's not a friend of my friend. For most people it's too much of suspicious.

Interview 14 transcription

Date: 22 November 2022

Time: 14:00

Gender: Male

Age: 45

Interviewer (I)

Participant (p)

I: If you think about the Belarusian identity, what is the first think that comes to your mind?

P: First thing for me is the colors, red and white now, because it is symbols of new Belarus, and as I mentioned before, I am russian. My mother thong is Russian, I was born in the family of nomads, my father was military server, and my mother is just nurse. Typical soviet family and I was born in Minsk, a military small city, it's city of troops position in Minsk. I could be not to learn Belarusian language in school, but my father said: you live in Belarus and you should study this language.

I: you could choose this in school?

P: Yes i could choose because I was from military servant family, it was some .. chosen. And then I very early started study art, child school and then some lyceum, art lyceum and then art academy

I: All in Minsk?

P: In Minsk yeah. I have studied design, and it's not nationalistic department in our academy, but a lot of people around was with very nationalistic view, and a lot of [?] and some artists who studied, who taught us in academy, was very nationalistic

I: How cold you see that for example? Nationalism?

P: Um..using Belarusian language, knowing Belarusian language, because in school

I: Was it something special in Belarus in that time? Being nationalistic, knowing your Belarusian language and history?

- Interruption

I: you said a lot of people in art academy were very focus on nationalism, I asked how could you see that?

P: The first one was Belarusian language, most of them using it in regular life and a lot of people were very keen of the right history, the right history, not from the books of school.. it was soviet type of history, it was history that was written by who was leading in that time. It was very interesting for, because I am Russian, by my blood, by my relatives. Most of them are from the middle of the Volga,

I: The volga river

P: Samara.. it's Tarar region. And my mom from the region that was sometimes as part of the territory of the grand duchy of Lithuania. It was [?] and [?] It's a small town Bolgov. It's near Moscow. Because my mom use in regular life some Belarusian words, but she counted that she is Russian, exactly. And ok. For me Belarusian language was in school very normal, a little difficult because our family language was Russian. It was the only 4 mark. Belarusian language, highest mark was 5, and the Belarusian language was 4

I: Did you speak it with friends?

P: Not so much, mostly speaking in Russian, including all of my Belarusian friends who were nationalist. In soil and.. I have a lot of friends with very famous family. It's like jasinski, it was in the past very noble family in the grand duchy of Lithuania. If you know.. Lithuania was little Belarusian state. And the state language in this Lithuanian kingdom was Belarusian, not Lithuanian. The institution was written in Belarusian language. And that period, that time I have learned a lot of facts, a lot of the right history of my country, cause for me it was ridiculous and awful how it was before, in Soviet time, it was a little conflict with my parents as it felt.

I: you discussed it ya? Cause they were of course very..

P: Soviet people yes! They are now still Soviet people too

I: Ok.

P: it's very ridiculous because my father was voted against Lukashenko, my mother voted for Tsichanovskaya, my mother was voting for the new way, the new choice, not for Tsichanovskaya. It was our advice for her, because she didn't know what she should do. Because she wanted to help and she was against Lukashenko. It's a very strange situation, but now she is watching Youtube, watching some channels and exactly know what happens. It's a different view.

I: She is not only watching the state media but also the independent..

P: But they are Soviet people, and it's very difficult to change this mind

I: But you said you actually, your ideas about Belarus is already started in

P: In youth yes, but it was not exactly for me, it was filter on me, some people who speak in Belarusian, who talk in Belarusian, who using this in regular life, not all time but some time, yes it was normal for me and I partly step my step discovered for me Belarus and maybe, not exactly in 2020, it was ore earlier. I realized that I am not Russian, I am Belarusian.

I: But before you said I am Russian in my blood and in family.

P: Yes, I still say that because I am Russian in my blood, from my parents, because Russian is not a nation I suppose, Russian it's some mix of a lot of nations, it's not pure nation, it's a collection of a lot of nationas, groups of people, nationalities, we sometimes joking when we have big meeting with our relatives in the middle of Volga, this region. Who we are: maybe tartarian, maybe [?], maybe mordwa, mordabor, it's a lot of small national groups in this region. And my father was born in the village that was called the place who was settled by tartarian, when they were taking over some city. I don't know exactly in English, Visilki. My father lost his father when very young, maybe 5 years. Then he should go the military, then military high school, [history names and]

I: in this time a lot of people were developing the national identity in the empire.

P: It was forbidden in this groups, savarov was against this movement, and they won this battle.

I: Is it important to know your roots if you are talking about your identity?

P: sometimes I though about it but it is vey difficult to find my exactly roots, in the village, in the middle of the Volga, I have a lot of relatives, but it's all some of some settlers., Christianity, who just lived from the ground, small villages. But my mother was from a very small city, not village, but it's a very small city, like middle class, maybe some.. because her mom was some accountant and my grandfather was Taylor and it's not settlers, citizens. I have my full name, name and surname, my sure-name is very famous but very usual for a lot of guys, it's like Sweden Peterson, the same in Russian [].

I: Were there a lot of people in Belarus with a typical Russian familyname?

P: yeah

I: So you were not the only one there?

P: no.. But you know masjerov. He was from communist party, it was head of this communist party and like Lukashenko now, but in communist time, and Masjerov wanted to make Minsk the very big city with metro. And if you want to build a metro, the city should be above 1 million. And Masjerov: comon... a lot of people from district and another regions from the Soviet Union, and Minsk have metro haha. In Minsk, a few Belarusian, a lot of Russian, that's the reason. And because it was a lot of deportation in the 30's, 40's and 50's and 60's

I: that's true..

P: And.. because I was grown in professional field with people who were nationalistic view, it was for me like.. step by step understand what is this country.

I: Just by the stories you heard from the people around you

P: yeah yeah.

I: How do you differ, how Belarus is different from other countries according to you?

P: haha it's very questing, and people they spend a lot of time for decision, but if they decided something they do yes.

I: Not impulsive.

P: Not impulsieve, it's very clever people. Not all of them, but new generation.. it's very ridiculous. More than two generations have been living under Lukashenko, but our protests it's existing. Because a lot of people... didn't know something else about it.

I: A long them yeah. 94..

P: Yes 96, 26 years is Lukashenko. It's like Soviet Union 2.0

I: It's literally like that. And if you have discussions with your parents about you being Belarusian that give a little bit of discussions.

P: I am not [?] from my parents, my position, because it is a little bit hard for it and they are both old guys, they can't choose their life.. and I understand... I can't change their mind. Quickly without some problems. They love me and that's enough I suppose. I am here and they are there in Belarus.

I: How is contact with them?

P: Halleluja we have internet

I: ya..

P: Yes.. maybe you have another question.

I: I was wondering have you participated in the 2020 protest?

P: yes yes, more than 2 years I was in the march and it was.. I am not a brave guy, it was very difficult for me to go out, with other people. We made a lot of hidden work, like a graphic design study so we helped something.

I: So you used your skills to.

P: yes and .. honestly I was vey afraid to be detained, being beaten, I was the best guy in school, it's not the happy guys in school, it was guys who were in the end of the chain if you understand what I mean. And I am not.. now I am big and masculine, but before I was in school and it not helps not you to be brave and my partners friends were too not brave and it was some paranoia, about being detained.

I: How did you make the discussion to go the protest?

P: it was very difficult to be home a just watching what happened, a lot of blood, a lot of friend, a lot of friends who were detained. And you should fight it.. transfer to the jail, some clothes, some first needs, it's very very awful and I exactly remember the second night when was the most violet days, maybe the 10th of 11th of August. There were a lot of friends, and one house.. and internet doesn't work properly, we all had VPN channels and we just looking for some situation in the streets, by Telegram channels, and phone to our friends on the streets for help, some guys with black uniforms. Yes, it was awful, but the first day, the second day there was [?] With medicine and we make traffic jam for some military guys and it was like... I don't know.. expression, some feelings..

I: You just see so many people around you and you just want to help

P: [emotional interruption]

I: You want to skip that part?

P: It's ok, but I understand that nothing happens, and you live in hope for two years and that's it, it's very difficult. I have a business partner in Belarus, and they are still in Belarus, it's very ridiculous, he has three daughters, two of them were detained, and he was detained. But they are still in Belarus. Ok but..now I am free and I can help, I can do something

I: You can also help from here you mean?

P: yes, then from Belarus, because I suppose I was just under pressure with my frightness, I exactly couldn't be able to do something. Psychologists.. ok... now I just go sometimes to the psychologists, but it sometimes helps haha sometimes now.. haha

I: Maybe it also helps to talk about it like now?

P: It's ok, but a lot of people from my .. [?] It was how, I have heard some interview with [?] you know? It's political, this guy, scientist, he helped Lukahsnko into power the first, and we was his command interest, and now he is against Lukashenko and just analyzed him like person, like politician, and a lot of helps other people to understand what happened with this guy. Sergej Charly. He mentioned the beginning of the protest, and our feeling, our common feeling, astonishment, about how much people think the same, how much people are against this dictator, how much people can stop power in the streets, and how much power Belarus who just against this situation in the country. It was the first common feeling I suppose, because I remember 2010. And 2006, i remember this awful situation. But I didn't take part in this..

I: But the first time for you was in 2020?

P: No no, when I was student I was little bit braver. And in 1996, it was when Lukashenko made military. He gave power, not.. it was some demonstration in April, a lot of people, it was about Tsjernobyl and it was a very very big demonstration this fitting, thing this militia, this police and I remember exactly that march, was a lot of people from Belarus came to [?], it was radical guys, not good for us, because even in that time, Belarusian society was not violence protesting.

I: ya that was what I head vey often actually, if I ask how is it to be Belarusian, and many people say, Belarusians are very calm and brave people, and it there is a protest there is never violence for example in different countries.

P: I suppose it is a problem sometime, but it is now our achievement, because it's really.. it was not a revolution of workers, it was a revolution of IT-guys haha. It was a revolution of intelligence.

I: that's a big difference if you think about it.

P: we were all waiting all the time, when the workers join us.. it was ..but it's like a museum, like Lukashenko made a museum of the Soviet Union and in the big plans, with a lot of workers, all of them are paid a little bit more money and exactly in time, and a lot of credits, a lot of child, a lot of credits for auto's, accommodation, players..

I: So you mean .. Lukashenko with his plans, he give them a stability?

P: yeah it was illusion, but the children of this guys, of these workers, was [?] too and faced this violence in the streets and after that, some workers joined. But not of economical reasons, not of some society reasons, only just violence was reason to join for worker people.

I: What was your reason, like what was your fight in the 2020 protests?

P: Maybe not a fight haha, but it was maybe the last drop.. the covid situation and a lot of .. unions that people without our government can make a lot of for our doctors, for our medicine, for our situation. With covid it's.. some deals.. we made a lot for our doctors without government. Our

government said: Covid doesn't exist. Ok, we can make it without it. And after that I understand that this government is not for me, and it was an illusion that some election will be .. but ..

I: I remember that people were making face masks and bringing it to the hospitals for the doctors yeah..

P: Yes i have the second business, some craft master.. craft

I: Hand craft?

P: Something like this, we have some laser and some rotor, and we made from the plastic some part for the mask to hold it tight. We made some holders for the masks not to use the ears, because if you..

I: Ahh you could use it behind your head

P: yes for the doctors.

I: Like a 3d printer

P: No it was like laser Carter

I: What did.. did your feeling with other Belarusians change after the protests? Maybe the connection you had

P: I suppose exactly. Now I suppose most Belarusian are not in love with Lukashenko haha, not to be with this .. ok most of people in Belarus I suppose are against Lukashenko, very afraid, I have a brother in Minsk with family, if I was in oppositional side all the time, my brother had a lot of products and work with Russian .. as for me it was very strange, but he woke up and suddenly understand that he should fight against Lukashenko and suddenly understand that Belarusian is ok. It was very awful in my childhood, when I was in vacation at my relatives, in the Samara region and they asked: what is interesting in Belarus? I have no idea, the most interesting in Saint-Petersburg, in Leningrad, in Moscow, maybe Samara, but what is it in Belarus? It's nothing. And after I have read a lot of literature about history and understand that we more than one hundred castles, a lot of big palaces, a lot of noble families. It's very .. honestly.. Belarusian noble family and dukes, it's rules for all monarch families in Europe. Jugaila, [?] ... it's Belarusian. Yes from Polatsk, was lovely wives for Danish kingdom. It was part o Europe, but Soviet school and Soviet history destroyed all of that.

I: It was called the grand duchy of Lithuania, but of course it was also..

P: Now just Lithuania takes this name. Because if we took a look at the map, little Lithuania, it was the first step of country Lithuania was partly on modern Lithuania and big part on modern Belarus. Yes. In the middle Vilnius. It's the middle of this district. It's just common history for our guys of Lithuania and Belarus. And Polish too, Polish too. But it's funny, Polish guys are a little bit arrogant and I don't like this in the Polish nation, because Polish part of Grand duke of Lithuania and Polish noble families was the reason that Ukrainian guys of [?] Joined Russia. Because the Polish noble family didn't want to give equal rights to Nobel families from Ukraine part of Grand Duke of Lithuania. And this was then..

I: Already back then very nationalistic.

P: It was a problem for the Belarusian noble family too, there are polish government.. was like a Russian empire too. Polish language is the most.. should be government and only one.. it was reason that we had [?] and Lithuania too. And as for me, the polish guys have still the empire mind, like Russian, it's a problem too

I: The proudness.

P: Proudness is oke, but the empire mind if you understand what I mean, empire mind it's some.. and some educated guys from Moscow can say: Belarusian is a part of Russia. It's a province, it was not good, it was all time...

I: it's grown like that. When did you go to Lithuania?

P: Two years ago, 2 year and 3 days haha

I: Why Lithuania?

P: It was eventually. I have a friend, expats, one from Belarus and one from Saint-Petersburg, from Russia and they were very long period of family there, and.. they just proposed us to help, to try to change place of living. November of 2020. I thought, just for one or two months, just to try,

I: But you stayed here, how is to be here in Lithuania as Belarusian?

P: The first year it was a little bit lonely. It was down.. not a lot of Belarusian people, people from your field, your roots. But in the end of the winter a lot of people moved and we just connected.

I: Is it important to be connected with Belarusian people?

P: yes, yes, not only Belarusian, all of smart guys who understand the situation, who can named what happened with real names, with real world. It's not [?], it's real world

I: So it doesn't matter if it's Belarussian or Russian?

P: I guess. My girlfriend is a little bit radicalist, because she is very emotional, like in childhood some.. Russian is bad, because a lot of problems from the Russian empire, prisons and.. and but I have a lot of Russia and I should speak with them and sometime I try to explain but they are leaving with the big pressure of the propaganda and a lot of people around them, they should do something, there should be life sometimes

I: It can also be very difficult

P: Yes I understand, I was in Belarus and sometimes I.. once in my history, I vote for Lukashenko, because I have small business and I was afraid from business expansion, Russian business expansion in Belarus and Lukashenko was against this and for me I understand all rules in that country that I am... Lukashenko wasn't very awful for me at the time maybe, maybe it was some .. I have some partners who have some opinions and just... supports them.

I: If you think about from your own perspective and you have your own business it's kinda understandable I think

P: yeah yes. It's, I am not suffering about it, but it was.. haha I understand exactly if I vote against Lukashenko, I suppose the action was the same

I: Yeah.. do you know a lot of Belarusian here in Lithuania?

P: Yeah yeah I have a lot of acquaintances and friends from Belarus there are now there and we keep together

I: Do you also talk about things in Belarus with people from Belarus?

P: Fixing our pain haha. Yes all the time, we thinking and make something about it and help for Ukraine

I: Is that a common topic to discuss, the same pain you have?

P: About Ukraine?

I: No about your experience in Belarus?

P: Experiences? Hmm..

I: Or is that something you discuss privately with your psychologist?

P: Ummm... my acquaintances from the field, most of them were suppressed and most of them should be left to Lithuania, just for being alive and being in freedom and we don't talk about experiences a lot, it's awful experiences for a lot people. We just trying to do something, try to live. Yes. With some guys we just brew beer haha. Why not. It was very nice experience and just keep trying to do some micro brewery or something like that

I: Is that.. do you participate in a lot of actives? Because I know there are a lot of Belarusian activities.

P: yes yes, maybe have you heard about poets night? The 29th of October was some evens for memory of 100s peoples were killed, it was '37, very awful night for Belarusian intelligence, Belarusian scientists and a lot of poets were killed.

I: Killing the Belarusian culture

P: yes and lots of memory and we made this together with some active guys

I: is it important to have activities which are related to Belarusian culture?

P: yes yes exactly, we made some events for children, not children, support Ukraine from Belarus and that's a lot events

I: Is it also maybe to feel more Belarusian in Lithuania?

P: My life partner just try to speak Belarusian in public places and she don't like when being recognized as Russian because she wants to be different. Russian language... Okay some Ukrainian guys, if hear our pronunciation of Russian, they almost understand that we are Russian. We have different pronunciation. Sometimes it was in Lviv, we just were boys trip with friends, it was after 2014, after Crimea, and we were a little bit afraid of how we attended for Russian speaking in Lviv on the streets and we just excused for speaking Russian but ow.. some old guy on the street, Ukrainian, calm guys I hear your pronunciation, you are from Belarus haha.

I: haha that's good.

P: But in Lithuania a few people understands this pronunciation but in Vilnius a lot of Belarusians, a lot of Polish guys, Ukrainian, it's a multi-national city, Russian speaking too.. I haven't faced with discrimination in this field

I: Is it important to feel more Belarusian when you are abroad?

P: as for me, no. I support to show another people that we are Belarusian and support Belarusian culture, support Belarusian scientists, support all Belarusian abroad and accumulate in all places and make some events and support all Russian, cause there should be on the top of the news, there should be.. it's very important to be on eyes, on ears cause I hope that our revolution will be ended and will be successful.

I: And not only in Belarus

P: yes yes, and if the first time I am just looking for friendly guys, now I understand how much our [?] and we just can help each other and support each other and now we make business unions for Belarusian business and I take part like organization in this and a lot of movings we make. I am .. as for me I am a man of world, it's more important for me, but now I really understand that you show that we are Belarusian, yes it's important.

I: After 2020?

P: yeah

I: And most Belarusians around you feel that as well

P: yeah

Summary

The year 2020 in Belarus was marked by the massive anti-government protests. Although the anti-regime protests are not unique phenomena during election time, the 2020 events stand out because of the massive scale, the emergence of the protests before the elections and the social uprising with the emergence of a large numbers of bottom-up communities and activities. Candidates for the presidential elections have been arrested and thousands of protested have been beaten tortured or incarcerated. Since the 2020 events, many Belarusians have left the country.

Scholars in the past have examined the Belarusian national identity after the end of the Soviet Union. Comparative studies with Ukraine's national identity emphasizes on the different paths of development of the post Soviet countries. In Belarus, the Russian language is dominant and the in the 1990s, the sentiments towards the Soviet Union remained strong.

In my research I examine the Belarusian national identity in the light of the 2020 protests by conducting semi-structural interviews with Belarusians who participated in the events and who do now live in Lithuania. Therefore, the research question of my thesis is: If and how did the 2020 protests in Belarus had an influence on the national identity of Belarusians living in Lithuania?

Seven men and seven women have been interviewed in the age category between nineteen and forty-five, and the interviewees have been asked questions related to the next four categories: the perceptions and ideas of the national identity, the 2020 protests, moving to Lithuania and living in Lithuania.

The research data has been analyzed with two different approaches in understanding the national identity in what I call: the traditional approach, which is divided in primordialist and modernist theories, and the new approach. The traditional approaches have in common to understand the national identity as homogeneous ethnocultural groups and the theorists emphasize on structural and top-down approaches. The new approaches, which emerged in the late 20th century, are characterized by analyzing the national identity with an intersectional approach, having more attention for human agency and have more understanding for the nation to be multicultural society.

The three approaches, primordialist, modernist and the new approaches, have been the guideline for analyzing my research data in understanding the national identity. In the first chapter, the primordialist approaches, the interview data has been analyzed with primordialist theories

which argues the nation emerged from ethnic groups and hence the implication in this approach is that nations are bond by ethnic ties which are unchangeable. None of the participants's narratives are in line with perceiving the Belarusian nation as a primordialist nation since all participants argue the possibility of becoming Belarusian instead of arguing Belarusianess is based on racial characteristics.

In the second chapter, modernist approach, modernist theorists argue the rapid societal transformation as cause for the construction of a common cultural identity. The 2020 protests and the emergence of a bottom-up network can be understood with the modernist approach, but the participant's narratives, actions and expressions regarding the national identity do not show that the Belarusian nation after the 2020 protests moves or should move in the the direction of a ethnic homogenous culture.

The last chapter is the new approach, in which two intersectional theories combine the studies of a collective identity with the studies of collective memory and trauma. Analyzing the data with the new approach theories shows how the national identity has directly and indirectly been influenced by the 2020 protests. The 2020 events have generated a collective memory for a large number of Belarusians being part of the protests by participating in protests or online communities. A collective memory with every individual having its own expressions, thoughts, perspectives and experiences related to these protests, which makes this memory distinct from other groups's or nation's collective memories.

By analyzing the data with the traditional approach theories, there is no evidence that the 2020 protests had a direct or indirect influence on the participant's narratives, actions and expressions of the national identity in terms of a homogenous ethnocultural group. With elaborating on the emergence of the bottom-up communities and the process of coping with the traumatic events with other Belarusians, the new approach theories give a clear understanding of how, directly and indirectly, the 2020 protests have influenced the Belarusian national identity for some of the interviewed Belarusians.