

A fine instrument: two nation-building strategies in post-Soviet Belarusn

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ABSTRACT. This article pursues two aims. On the empirical level, it challenges the view of Belarus as a 'denationalised', or 'failed' nation, and exposes the country as an area of intensive nation-building. The article demonstrates that, unlike most post-communist states, two versions of national identity have been advanced in Belarus since 1989, with divergent results for their proponents. On the theoretical level, such an atypical experience places qualifications on the instrumentalist approach, that regards nation-building as a political tool. The analysis of identity creation in Belarus suggests that nation-building as a political strategy may be limited by the existing attitudes in the society in question, the socio-economic structures, as well as by the influence of foreign actors.

Introduction

The unexpected rise of nationalism as a principal obstacle to democratisation of many post-Soviet societies in the early 1990s strengthened the perception of nationalism as a formidable uncontrollable force. Although this image was later mitigated, most notably by Brubaker (Brubaker 1998), the spotlight of nationalism studies in contemporary Europe remains on ethnicities, minorities and violent conflicts - in short, on claims to a state by national groups. A reverse situation, in which a nation is established in an already existing state, is usually associated with the advancement of modernity and the early age of the 'old' European nations. Yet, it may be too early to dismiss nation-building within an already existing state as a past artifact.

One country in contemporary Eastern Europe has been an arena of intensive nation-building induced by the state. In distinction to other post-Soviet states, the country's population has been subjected to *two* competing versions of national identity. This is despite the fact that the country had long ago achieved high levels of industrialisation, urbanisation and

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universal education - the factors which are named as main incentives for nation-building. Such a paradox urges analysis. It augurs new insights into the imperatives of nation-building and national identity creation under present-day conditions.

The focus of this article is Belarus; an unexpected choice, given the few known facts about the country. Namely, its population struggles to comprehend itself as a sovereign people, that the national-democratic forces are in retreat, that Belarusian-speaking persons form a virtual ghetto among the Russian-speaking majority, and that the country is apparently on the brink of reifying its sovereignty for the sake of integration with the Russian Federation. If anything, the Belarusian experience seems to testify that nationalist ideology may wither, and the appeal of nationalist policies may dwindle. Indeed, Belarus has been described as a 'denationalised nation' (Marple 1999). This article, however, argues that Belarus has witnessed both a failed and a (so far) successful nation-building project. Analysis of the causes of failure of one nation-building strategy and the success of the other, within the same society, offers a deeper understanding of the strengths and limitations of nation-building as a political instrument.

The article seeks to establish the limits of nation-building as a political tool. It also aims to prevent hardening of the perception of Belarus as a country without a nation. The argument is organised by contrasting two nation-building projects advanced in Belarus during the post-Soviet years. These projects are defined as 'national' and 'Soviet' and analysed in part I. Part II scrutinises a most recent twist in the 'Soviet' project (since 2001), which aims to reconcile Soviet values and adherence to Belarusian sovereignty. The conclusion suggests some theoretical implications of the Belarusian experience.

I. National identity: Belarusian or Soviet?

In contrast to other post-Soviet states, two versions of national identity have been advanced in Belarus. The initial ('national') version went hand in hand with the nation-building policies throughout the post-Soviet area. The 'national' version was challenged by the Belarusian president, who promoted the national identity based on Soviet ideological tenets ('Soviet' version). The first part of the article analyses the main elements and measures within each of these nation-building strategies.

Belarusian identity-building (1990-1994)

The set of nation-building policies implemented in the early years of Belarusian independence fell within the classical repertoire of identity-creating measures for countries recently liberated from imperial domination. It comprised a change of state symbols, enhancement of the national language, introduction of 'authentic' myths and traditions, and a new interpretation of

history. The main proponent of this 'national' version was the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), a wide civic movement for democracy and national revival, formed in the late 1980s. Although the BPF did not hold a majority of seats in the 1990-1995 parliament, it managed to implement a large part of its cultural agenda at the state policy level.

The change of state symbols took place rather smoothly. The BSSR red-green flag and state emblem were replaced with the white-red-white flag and *Pahonia* (mounted knight) coat of arms of the Great Duchy of Lithuania (GDL);¹ the new symbols were claimed to be more authentic and historically rooted. The official name of the state was rid of the terms 'Soviet' and 'socialist', and was spelt according to Belarusian grammar.² The October (Bolshevik) revolution day was replaced with Independence Day as a major public holiday, together with the introduction of religious holidays (both Orthodox and Catholic) and the traditional equivalent of All Saints' Day (*Dziady*).

The language policy became the most evident sign of change. The law on languages, and a tailored state programme, stipulated replacing Russian with Belarusian as the language of state administration and the public sphere within 10 years (Supreme Council 1990). Provisions of the programme included compulsory study of Belarusian in secondary and higher education establishments, language qualification exams for state employees, and abolition of usage of Russian in the media, education and administration. Belarusian-language schools and classes were opened throughout the country.

Implementation of the language programme exposed problems of both a theoretical and a practical kind. Among the theoretical problems was the deficit of Belarusian terminology. (Since the 1930s, Russian increasingly dominated the scientific and public sphere in Belarus.) Belarusian terms were being hastily invented, in particular in natural sciences; more often than not they sounded awkward and laughable. Apart from terminological difficulties, a dispute grew over the grammar system: the state organs endorsed *Narkomayka*, the version of grammar Russified and simplified in the 1930s, while the BPF advocated and widely observed the pre-1930s more complicated version called *Tarashkevica*. Unresolved linguistic problems caused incorrect usage of Belarusian grammar and vocabulary on a mass scale and endorsed the Soviet-era image of Belarusian as an 'inferior rural vernacular' (Goujon 1999: 667) among the prevailing Russian-speaking urban population. Knowledge of Belarusian became a career asset, and this changed the hierarchies of authority in public administration and education. The disadvantaged (urban) Russian-speaking specialists looked down upon (rural) Belarusian speakers as opportunists availing themselves of language policies to reach professional positions for which they might otherwise not qualify. Hence, the language programme bore grave negative effects, such as discrediting the Belarusian language as insufficiently developed, creating social tensions on the grounds of language expertise, and a certain social reluctance to participate in what was seen as an expensive and pointless exercise.

Alongside language studies, research in Belarusian history and culture was encouraged. Several major information publications were launched: a six-volume encyclopaedia of the history of Belarus, an eighteen-volume universal Belarusian encyclopaedia, single-volume encyclopaedias of the Belarusian language, Belarusian thinkers, an illustrated chronology of the history of Belarus, and several others (Zaprudnik 2002: 121). There even appeared a 230-page book with a detailed description of the physical type of Belarusians.³ A course in Belarusian history became compulsory in schools and universities. This required new textbooks and more research. Two interpretations of the Belarusian history were available in the early 1990s. The Soviet version treated Belarusians as a branch of the Russian nation, and BSSR as the culmination of Belarusian historical development. This approach denied rather than supported independent Belarusian identity. An alternative to the Soviet was the nationalist (BPF's) interpretation of the Belarusian history, which upheld Belarusians as a European nation and projected the image of the enemy and the cause of all the nation's sufferings on Russia and, to a lesser degree, Poland. In the BPF leader's catch-phrase, Belarus was the victim of 'Russian imperial ambitions', persistent through out the tsarist and communist period. The BPF pointedly celebrated victory over Russia in the battle of *Vorsha (Orsha)* in 1514 during the wars between the GDL and the Muscovy, the GDL army under the command of a Belarusian magnate Astozhksi reversed the onslaught of the twice stronger troops of the Muscovy prince. The idea of taking pride in this massacre of Russians appeared immoral to many Belarusians. The nationalist version of history was widely popularised - one of its central accounts ('100 questions and answers on the Belarusian history') was serialised in the national newspaper (*Zviazda*), as well as being published as a separate book. The academic community was wary of adopting the radical nationalist version. Instead, it claims to have produced an objective and impartial account of Belarusian history for state educational establishments (Kahanovsky 2000). Although indeed hardly judgemental, the academic account was closer to the nationalist than the Soviet interpretation. For example, if the BPF upheld the Great Duchy of Lithuania as a Belarusian state, and the Soviet historiography argued that Belarusians were oppressed by the Poles, academics described the GDL as a poly-ethnic state, in which Belarusian culture thrived. Such a similarity between the academic interpretation and the nationalist account of the Belarusian history led to their association in popular mentality. Thus, incorrectly, BPF's radical and sometimes extreme postulates came to be attributed to the state-promoted views.

The perceived association of the BPF ideology with official state views proved detrimental to both the BPF and the state nation-building policies. While BPF's cultural programme was almost fully supported and implemented at the state level, the economic development of the country remained within the discretion of the communist elite, which valued social stability more than reform. As living standards kept falling throughout the early 1990s, the new Belarusian identity came to be associated with an insecure and unstable life.

The tactical mistakes of the BPF are apparent in retrospect: a take-it-or-leave-it approach to negotiations with the communist nomenclature, vehement animosity to Russia and programmatic incongruence.⁴ The spectacular failure of the BPF at the presidential and especially parliamentary elections⁵ is attributed to an array of reasons, both within and beyond the party's discretion. Yet identity politics was arguably one of the gravest mistakes BPF made; the party failed to account for the historical and social context of the country to which they applied their theoretically⁶ feasible policies.

'The [BPF] measures to bring about changes in the political environment were hardly warranted by the level of national consciousness in the country' (Marples 2002: 28). That consciousness was of a Soviet character, because Belarus entered modernity as a Soviet state. During the Soviet period, Belarus was transformed from a nameless province of the Russian Empire, with ninety-seven percent of peasants among the native population (Titarenko 1999: 161) into an advanced industrial state with universal education (Mihalisko 1997: 235). The price paid for the rapid modernisation was the traditional Belarusian culture. Repressions against the national intelligentsia under Stalin, devastating losses in the Second World War and the arrival of Russian-speaking professionals into the leading administrative positions after the war (Eke and Kuzio 2000: 531) all contributed to the perception that Soviet identity was a natural consequence of modernisation.⁷ By the 1990s, Belarus became 'the shop-window of the Soviet system' (Eke and Kuzio 2000: 537), a republic with the highest standard of living in the USSR (Novik and Tsyaplova 1996, vol. II: 371). It was known as the most 'Soviet' of the USSR republics (Khaduko 1999: 10), meaning that the Soviet economic and social principles were most fully observed in the BSSR. To a society with such a background, the BPF advertised 'rural' ways of life and the language which had been looked down upon by the 'advanced' urban population. It referred to the glory of a distant age, with which little personal connection could be felt. By dismissing the Soviet period as a tragic mistake, the BPF implicitly suggested that people should dismiss large parts of their own lives. Thus, instead of streamlining its version of national identity into the existing social outlook, the BPF inflicted a clash in popular mentality.

The nation-building measures implemented in Belarus in the early years of its independence ignored the recent experience of Belarusian society - and they failed. The Belarusian national identity-building policies were perceived within the society as coercive and, as a by-product, created fertile ground for political advancement on the grounds of upholding the Soviet ways of life. This opportunity was deftly availed of by member of parliament Lukashenka to gain the Belarusian presidency.

Soviet identity-building (1995-2000)

'Lukashenka's crimes against the Belarusian culture are blood-chilling, and their list would produce a substantial volume' (Kaval 2000), laments one of

the leaders of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), the party which pioneered the idea of national revival and still holds it as the main aim. The BPF has its reasons to grieve against Lukashenka. Soon after his election, Lukashenka set out to revert the nation-building achievements of his predecessors (and his rivals). This was done within the framework of rejuvenating the Soviet identity.

Return to the Soviet identity was swift and all-encompassing. The Soviet state symbols were reinstalled in a slightly amended form following a referendum in May 1995. These symbols were audaciously pushed into everyday life. A presidential decree required compulsory display of the resurrected Soviet flag and emblem in state institutions. Passports with the *Pahonia* emblem were declared void and replaced from December 1996 with the Soviet insignia. Car owners were obliged to attach the Soviet emblem upon *Pahonia* on vehicle number plates. In 1996, Independence Day was transferred from date of declaring sovereignty (27 July) to the date of liberation of Minsk from Nazi occupants (3 July). *Dziady* (day of commemoration of ancestors) lost its status as a public holiday, and the day of the October (Bolshevik) revolution was restored.

A 'poor language, in which one cannot express great thoughts'⁸ - this president's verdict on the Belarusian language sealed its fate. On the eve of the 1995 referendum deciding on the state languages, a documentary was shown by the state TV making parallels between nationalists and Nazis (Goujon 1999: 667). The referendum vote was to equalise the languages, and the law on languages was amended to permit usage of *either*, but not *both*, Russian and Belarusian in state and legal documents (Supreme Council 1995). During 1995-1998, the proportion of books printed in Belarusian decreased from 20.5 percent to 13.2 percent, while the share of Belarusian-language newspapers diminished from 42 percent to 34 percent (SSY 1999: 104). The number of schools with Russian as the language of instruction has grown from 594 to 1076 over the same period (SY 1999: 157).

Schools and universities were subjected to a new interpretation of history. Textbooks published between 1992 and 1994 were declared 'politicised' and were taken out of circulation. Soviet-era schoolbooks were brought back from archives. A 'new' textbook published in 1996 did not differ much from its Soviet predecessor. It organised phases of history into feudalism, capitalism and socialism (Novik and Tsyaplova 1996: 1). This was in distinction to the 'nationalist' division of Belarusian history on the basis of which state Belarus was part of (e.g. Great Duchy of Lithuania, Rzech Pospolita). A history guide for university applicants, approved by the ministry of education, established the origins of the Belarusians as a part of the triunite Slav family (Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians), deplored the Uniat Church⁹ a 'means of Catholicisation', and regarded the partition of Poland as conducive to the enrichment of cultures (Novik and Martsul 1998, vol. 1: 258). Another history guide argued: 'the white-red-white flag and *Pahonia* coat of arms cannot be defined as historic national symbols, for which purpose the Soviet flag and

Table 1. *Main elements of 'national' and 'Soviet' identity-building policies.*

	'National' (<i>Belarusian Popular Front</i>)	'Soviet' (<i>Lukashenka</i>)
<i>Foundation myths Focus of historical myths</i>	Mixture of Balts and Slavs Polotsk Principality, Great Duchy of Lithuania	Part of the Slavic family Kievan Rus
<i>Culminating moment in history</i>	Battles of Grunvald 1410 (v crusaders), Vorsha 1514 (v Russia)	Great Patriotic War (Second World War)
<i>Projections of the enemy Language</i>	'Russian imperial ambitions' Belarusian (old grammar system)	Capitalist West Russian
<i>Moral qualities endorsed</i>	Wisdom, devotion, independence Observance of	Hard work, endurance, patience
<i>Practices</i>	popular traditions, elements of dress, speaking Belarusian, ethnographic studies West- oriented development,	Celebration of agricultural heydays, sport competitions, Slav festivities
<i>Vision of the future</i>	membership in the EU Liberal economic reforms	'Family' of Slavic people with Russia as its head
<i>Economic orientation</i>		Preservation of state governed economy
<i>Social basis</i>	National intelligentsia, urban middle class, small town residents	Rural population, Chernobyl refugees in cities

emblem are more suitable' (Smiatannikau 1998: 112). Table 1. contrasts the main elements of the two identity-building policies in Belarus.

'National' vs 'Soviet' strategies: assessment

The comparison of the BPF and Lukashenka's identity policies reveals that the former advanced a new model of social and political relations, while the latter sustained the already existing relations. The main objective of the BPF was an independent state, based on the Belarusian language and culture. Lukashenka never formulated a clear vision of state development, variously mentioning Slavic unity and sovereignty. The BPF advocated profound economic reforms and, consequently, social changes; Lukashenka pledged to preserve and improve the Soviet system and maintain social equality. The BPF programme demanded a transfer to Belarusian in all spheres of public life, while Lukashenka opposed this measure. The BPF's foreign policy orientation was on equal partnership with all states, which implied severing links with Russia. Lukashenka's distinct orientation towards Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) promised restoration of old

economic links and cheap Russian energy resources. If the BPF perspective was the 'bright future', Lukashenka offered the 'golden past'. Psychologically, the BPF's project entailed uncertainty and ambiguity, while Lukashenka offered Soviet-type stability and security. Lukashenka's policies corresponded to the economic and social structures formed during the modernisation and industrialisation of Belarus. The BPF failed to ensure the emergence of new social strata (most essentially of private owners) which would appropriate the identity it advanced. The ability to sustain relevant socio-economic conditions may thus be named as an imperative of successful nation-building.

The prevailing explanation of the BPF failure is that their measures, especially in the field of language revival, were too hasty and coercive for the tolerant-minded Belarusian population. However, Lukashenka has demonstrated much stronger coercion, including resort to physical violence to repress the popular demonstrations in 1996 and 1997, and has remained politically unscathed. The issue, therefore, is not coercion as such. Rather, Lukashenka built his regime on the Soviet tenets (such as reverence for authorities, avoidance of responsibility, reliance on the state rather than on the self). They resonated better within the society formed on Soviet principles than individualism and self-esteem advocated by the nationalists. Thus, correspondence with the values and attitudes prevailing in the society in question is another imperative for nation-building projects.

The first part of this paper has demonstrated that upholding the established Soviet identity proved more politically beneficial in post-Soviet Belarus than introducing a new national identity. The Soviet identity yielded to its proponent Lukashenka stable country presidentship. By his second presidential term, however, Lukashenka faced the task of reconciling Soviet identity with Belarusian sovereignty.

II. Sovereignty politics as a counterweight to integration with the Russian Federation

Until 2000, the competition between two nation-building strategies in Belarus had been rather straightforward. They utilised opposing rhetoric and emphasised disparate values. Yet, a more sophisticated twist emerged in 2001, when the proponent of the Soviet identity was forced to embrace appreciation of Belarusian statehood. This development has so far been largely unnoticed in the political and academic communities, and is intended as the empirical core of this article. By demonstrating the flexibility with which identity-building policies can be adjusted to the interests of their proponents, it validates the argument about national identity as a political tool.

The second part of the article explains the rationale for the merging of Soviet identity and Belarusian statehood. It draws on observations from everyday life in Belarus to illustrate the content and intensity of the identity

strengthening effort, and ponders on its perspectives and implications for democratisation in Belarus.

Reconciliation of sovereignty and Soviet identity (2001-)

Soon after his inauguration, the Belarusian president instigated a union with the Russian Federation. This initiative perplexed many observers. Suggested explanations fell within three categories. One strand held that integration was a logical continuation of the Soviet identity policies, which were most comfortable for the Belarusian president personally: 'Ideological dogmas, which [Lukashenka] learned during his comsomol youth, are heaving the country into the "happy" Soviet past like boulders' (Maisenia 1997: 216). The second explanation pointed to the economic benefits for Belarus in the form of preferential prices for importing Russian gas and oil. The third argued about the personal ambitions of Lukashenka to achieve Russian presidency, which required abolition of Belarusian sovereignty. The driving logic of integration, however, is not essential to grasp any more.

Whatever the Belarusian president's reasons for integration policies were, they clearly backfired. Instead of promoting Lukashenka's figure in the Russian political arena and ensuring stability at home, the integration policies threatened his domestic supremacy. In summer 2002, Russian president Putin proclaimed that incorporation of Belarus into Russia was the only feasible route for integration. In autumn 2002, Russia suspended gas supplies to Belarus for several days. The January 2003 summit meeting healed the wound, as both presidents reiterated the familiar integration rhetoric. But the message for Lukashenka was clear and confirmed. His own power would be severely limited should Belarus become a Russian region, as the Kremlin demanded. Suddenly, Belarusian sovereignty became a safe heaven for Lukashenka, a guarantee of his power and security. 'Gradually the government's rhetoric began to emphasise the need to maintain Belarusian statehood and sovereignty, no matter how advanced the integration process became' (Rozanov quoted in Zaprudnik 2002: 123). Previously a feeble background melody, sovereignty was brought forward as the dominant motive on the Belarusian political scene.

The claim about Lukashenka's sovereignty reinforcement is supported by evidence of governmental measures in various areas of social and political life. In summer 2002, a long-standing gap in the array of state symbols, caused by the absence of a national anthem, was finally covered. A public competition brought victory to the revised version of the BSSR anthem. New words were put to the music familiar since Soviet times. The anthem's message is mixed, as is Lukashenka's rhetoric itself. It contains references to the 'brotherhood union of nations'. Yet, the refrain holds: 'Our favourite motherland, may you always thrive, Belarus'. In December 2002, 3000 people were gathered in Freedom Square in Minsk to record the singing of this anthem. That 'popular' singing was shown on New Year's (2003) night and, since then, every day at

the start and end of the Belarusian TV transmission. The record switches between panoramic views to groups of 5-6, representing 'typical' Belarusian families of three generations: the elderly, middle-aged and the youth. To the words 'nations are strengthened by friendship between them', the camera goes to people in the national dress of former Soviet republics. The record, shot according to the canons of Soviet propaganda, sends a strong message of a happy nation.

The state flag and coat of arms have made their way into more mundane aspects of life. They appear at the beginning of the evening news on Belarusian TV and on the front pages of state newspapers. It has become a practice for directors of state-owned enterprises to exhibit the Belarusian flag and a portrait of the president in their offices. Stemming either from sincere support or from a demonstration of loyalty, Lukashenka and the state flag are associated together. Of particular importance is the placement of the state flag, emblem and map on the front cover of school diaries, which all pupils are obliged to carry.

The usage of the state map is particularly impressive during the weather forecast on Belarusian TV (BelTV). A three-dimensional map of Belarus slowly rotates on the screen, with close-ups to all its six regions, depicting smaller towns and sights in the regional centres. Given that the weather forecast is consistently 'partly cloudy', and the map is on the screen for at least a minute, it is plausible to argue that the educational and identity-creating value of the weather forecast is no less than its informational worth.

Other examples of a 'slow institutionalisation of nationhood' (Zaprudnik 2002: 162) are furnished by the changed names of key state and cultural institutions. The Academy of Sciences, Central Historical Archive, airport Minsk-II - all acquired status and the name of 'National'. The parliament has been transformed from the 'Supreme Council' to the 'National Assembly'. The construction of a new building for the National Library, to which the population was requested to donate, was proclaimed as an 'evident symbol of sovereign and highly educated Belarus' (Lukashenka 2002a). In summer 2003, a replica of a nineteenth century city tower was built in Minsk. In August 2002, a council of heraldic affairs was established at the presidential administration with the purpose of formulating a single policy in the sphere of creation of heraldic symbols and medals, and to register them. By the autumn, a coat of arms had been registered for 97 towns, testifying that acquisition of identity has spilled over the bounds of governmental policy to become a fashion.

Yet the most palpable evidence of the sovereignty-building is the reference to the country itself. A textual analysis of some key presidential speeches and state evening news exemplifies this fact. In his parliamentary address in 2002 (Lukashenka 2002b), Lukashenka used the word 'state' fourteen times, 'motherland' three times, and referred to 'people and traditions' on five occasions. In the Address to the Nation on Independence Day in 2002 (Lukashenka 2002c), Lukashenka declared that 'the notions of Independence, Sovereignty, Freedom are and will always remain sacred to us' (capitalisation

is in the official text). He pointed to the roots of Belarusian statehood in the medieval countries (Polosk Principality and the Great Duchy of Lithuania), but declared the BSSR as the 'first real national Belarusian state', thus trying to link medieval glory with the Soviet heritage. His New Year (2003) speech contained eleven references to Belarusian people and state, reiterated adherence to sovereignty, and called on people to be 'worthwhile children of our native beloved Belarus, for it is our most precious asset'. The 'worth', the president said, can be achieved through 'hard work and hard work only' - again, an idea familiar since Soviet times. The media reinforces the message of sovereignty and statehood. The half-hour evening news programme on BelTV may contain up to 32 references to statehood - more than one per minute.

The policies with regard to the Belarusian language seem to indicate another change in Lukashenka's mood. The presidential address on Independence Day in 2002 was delivered in Belarusian. The chairman of the upper house of parliament suggested that the legislation be published in both languages. BelTV ran reports demonstrating concern for the negligence of Belarusian among school children. The minister of education declared an increase in bilingual education as the main policy priority (RFE/RL 5/2). In August 2002, the ministry of education adopted a programme of Belarusisation, which foresaw teaching several school subjects (such as Belarusian geography and history) in Belarusian, publishing Belarusian textbooks on other subjects as an alternative to Russian-language ones, encouragement of running school administration in Belarusian, and further development of Belarusian grammar. In 2002, the Minsk city council changed one of the central schools into a Belarusian lyceum.

The non-governmental organisations 'Friends of Belarusian School' (TBSh) and 'Friends of Belarusian Language' (TBM) claim these developments as their victory in persuading the bureaucracy to act against official policy. 'Without publicity, without advertising such decisions at all, many bureaucrats endorse our proposals' - says the executive secretary of TBSh (Sadriika 2002). He attributes the absence of publicity for Belarusian-endorsing measures to the caution of state servants. This could be an extremely rare example of successful lobbying by independent NGOs - or the bureaucrats might not in fact be risking much for they sensed a change of attitude at the top. In March 2003, the press covered a forthcoming reform of the Belarusian language. The purpose is clear: to increase its usage; what remains to be seen is the method. On the one hand, it should underline the difference between Russian and Belarusian; on the other, the change should be minute enough so as not to avert the Russian-speaking majority. Therefore, it is plausible to expect further development of the terminology rather than amendment of orthography. In any case, language reform is a wide-scale endeavour, and a primary example of nation-building.

A further testimony to the change in government attitude is the publication of yet another (fourth) set of school history textbooks in 2002. Their message

is astoundingly different from Soviet historiography. The textbook for 15-year-old pupils establishes the roots of Belarusian statehood in the first Belarusian principalities, the largest of which, the Polotsk principality, is named as 'the main rival of the Kievan state'. The book argues for the independence of the Great Duchy of Lithuania within the common state with Poland¹⁰ and holds that the Belarusian nation emerged as early as between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The treatment of the relationship with Russia is a far cry from the 'Slav unity' rhetoric. 'The Moscow principality was the main threat to the Great Duchy. During the wars of the early sixteenth century, initiated by Moscow, the Duchy lost the larger part of its eastern territories'(HB10 2002). The partitions of Poland are said to have 'deprived Rzecz Pospolita of the historical perspective of civic development', while the Russian imperial rule in Belarus is presented as a blow to national development:

The Belarusian cities were deprived of their old coats of arms, the Magdeburg right to cities' self-governance, which had existed on the Belarusian lands for 4 centuries, was abolished, compulsory recruit service of 25 years was introduced, and the Orthodox Church received state status, while the Catholic Church lost its previous advantages. After the subduing of the national liberation uprising of 1830, the Russian emperor prohibited usage of the terms 'Belarus' and 'Lithuania', and church services in Belarusian were forbidden. (HB10 2002)

The textbook for final year pupils (HB11 2002) presents 'revival of the national culture and return to the historic roots holds' as the major challenge for post-communist Belarus. Of all the previous interpretations of Belarusian history, the new 2002 version is the closest to the 'independent' version of 1990-1994. There is one important exception, however. While praising acquisition of Belarusian statehood in 1990, the latest historiography condemns attempts at economic reforms: 'transition to the market economy resulted in destruction of the economic system, low competitiveness of the Belarusian products and imbalance of the monetary and financial systems'(HB11 2002). This is yet another example of an attempt to reconcile Belarusian sovereignty with Soviet structures.¹¹

Finally, the Belarusian government is taking an increasingly separate foreign policy stance. It pointedly did not align with the Russian position on Iraq. In February 2003, Lukashenka accepted the credentials of the first Iraqi ambassador to Belarus, sympathised with Hussain as a victim of the West, and offered him refuge in Belarus. 'Such a position endorses the Soviet attitude, in which the West was accepted as an enemy and the Third World as being exploited and friendly', concluded Belarusian analyst Karbalevitch (RFE/RL 5/3). In the same tradition a Belarusian delegation took part in the congress of the Non-Alignment movement. While a Belarusian foreign policy may well be of the Soviet type, it is becoming more distinct, which is again a sign of a sovereign state.

The fact that the Belarusian president's identity-building programme utilises an almost unlimited amount of resources is also of importance.

Intergovernmental organisations (OSCE, Council of Europe) and international NGOs (Article 19, Amnesty International) have argued consistently about limitations of human rights and freedoms in Belarus, most notably of the right to information. Unfavourable conditions for independent media have made them incomparably weaker than the state media.¹² The Lukashenka regime, usually denoted the authoritarian sultanistic type (Chehabi and Linz 1998; Eke and Kuzio 2000), places state organs under his full command. This is to argue that the Belarusian president enjoys much more freedom of manoeuvre and has stronger levers of influence than his counterparts in democratic countries. Thus the president, as the listed examples demonstrate, is able to advance his policies in an audacious style. The Belarusian population is exposed to the national symbols and elements in numerous aspects of their everyday lives: at their work places,¹³ in the media, even in the streets where Belarusian flags are a customary decoration.

How successful has the Belarusian president been in his sovereignty politics? A nation-wide poll in December 2002 demonstrated that whereas fifty-three percent of the population still favours some form of a union with Russia, almost three-quarters of the respondents claimed they would not support any form of a Russia - Belarus union that would involve the loss of Belarusian sovereignty and independence (RFE/RL Poland 13.02.03). A study by another organisation in Minsk yielded an almost identical result: fifty-four percent of those questioned were in favour of integration, while nearly three-quarters were opposed to Belarus losing its independence altogether (BRS 2003). Support for independence by three-quarters of those polled is comparable to the results of the census in 1999, when around seventy percent of the population declared Belarusian as their native tongue, and some thirty-five percent said they used it in their everyday lives. The Belarusian opposition claimed such a response, which obviously refuted the real state of affairs, as a political stance and a declaration of popular support for Belarusian independence. Indeed, in early 1999, when the census was conducted, the integration theme dominated Lukashenka's rhetoric; moreover, his opposition to the Belarusian language was also apparent. It appears most plausible to suggest that both the opposition and Lukashenka have been contributing to Belarusian identity, which is by all signs gaining strength. The content of their nation-building policies, however, remains as different as ever.

Perspectives and implications

The character of Soviet identity-creating policy is revealed by the measures and the spheres it omits. Promotion of Belarusian music and national traditions remains the domain of the opposition. In large part, the same is true with regard to the development of and propaganda for Belarusian literature and language. There is substantial evidence for the argument that the 'leadership of the country' does not recognise any distinctive Belarusian traits' (Marples 2002: 29). In the 'nation-state' phrase, Lukashenka's

emphasis is undoubtedly on the 'state'. The reasons for state- rather than nation-building may be twofold. One is that the 'Belarusian national' ground is already taken by the opposition and associated with anti-presidential propaganda. Second is that Lukashenka still needs to sustain Soviet values and experiences - for the sake of consistency and, most crucially, for his own benefit. The Soviet identity upholds the unchallenged authority of the leadership and domination of the state in most spheres of social life, evasion of responsibility and discouragement of independent initiative - principles which make Lukashenka's rule possible. A budget-financed youth organisation was established to articulate the voices of young people; a presidential trustee moved into the leadership of hitherto rebellious trade unions. All these are measures to rejuvenate corporatist social structures of the Soviet type. They are complemented by rigorous presidential support for the Orthodox church (implying a single religion for the country), and further limitations of access to information by obstruction of Russian TV channels' transmissions.¹⁴ These policies are officially justified as a 'strengthening of the state', which became an official policy goal in 2002. Hence, further penetration by the state into social life, and appropriation of civil society, is attributed to strengthening of sovereignty. Thus sovereignty politics is used to create a defensive outer shell for Belarus, while Soviet identity is used as an aide to strengthen authoritarianism within the country.

The sustainability of Lukashenka's identity policies is yet unresolved. Sovereignty may be a fruitful but expensive game for Lukashenka to play, and his scope of action is limited. The sheer propaganda of Belarusian statehood may not suffice to bring Lukashenka the desired security. Sovereignty needs to be not only acknowledged, but also appreciated by the people. The president constantly stresses relative security and absence of conflicts as blessings of living in Belarus (Lukashenka 2002b). These claims acquired higher resonance against the background of the terrorist act in Moscow in October 2002, and the spread of insecurity generated by the 'war of terrorism' campaign. However, the feeling of security may not suffice to outweigh the falling standards of living. Although Belarusians (to the annoyance of much of the opposition) have demonstrated high tolerance of poor economic conditions, there remains a limit to their patience.¹⁵ Development of a market economy and civil society emancipates individuals; it is detrimental to Lukashenka's regime. Hence, the government cannot let people improve their lives by their own effort and has to provide for them. Its ability to do this depends on economic benefits from Russia. Despite attempts to establish economic links with the Asian and Middle Eastern countries, and even some improvement of relations with the West,¹⁶ the Russian Federation remains the key source of economic sustainability for Lukashenka's regime, and thus can place limits on it. A vicious circle indeed: strengthening of sovereignty requires economic improvement, and this is dependent on giving up sovereignty to Russia. Yet, incorporation of Belarus is a costly enterprise even for Russia and may not be imminent. More likely, the Russian leadership would prefer to

appropriate Belarusian industrial 'gems' and ensure the allegiance of the Belarusian government. As Lukashenka is evidently not their favourite, he is cautious to prevent the rise of a feasible opponent from the ranks of the pro-Russian liberal opposition, and has been successful so far.

Another limit to Lukashenka's identity policies is his own opportunism. There are sufficient reasons to suppose that devotion to sovereignty is a pragmatic choice rather than a matter of personal commitment for Lukashenka. After all, the ability to predict and play up opportunities is one of his key personal traits (Koroleva 2002). In a rarely mentioned fact, it was Lukashenka who brought the white-red-white ('historic') Belarusian flag into the Parliament hall on the day of Declaration of Independence (Maisenia 1997) - only to claim (incorrectly) later to have been the only person to vote against the CIS agreements which brought the Soviet Union to an end. 'The dilemma of 'authoritarian but sovereign Belarus' vs 'reforms within the Russian Federation' is a false dilemma' - argues a leading Belarusian analyst.

As soon as Lukashenka loses the presidential status, he will have to face charges on the disappearance of his prominent political opponents. Therefore, should his leadership be feasibly challenged within the country, Lukashenka will give up Belarusian sovereignty without delay and run into Russia's embrace. (Karbalevitch 2002)

Strengthening Belarusian statehood, therefore, might be the best strategy for Lukashenka in the current circumstances, but his ability to do so is not without its limits.

The precarious position of the Belarusian president widens opportunities for the national-democratic opposition. The proponents of national culture could avail themselves of the opportunity and provide the content of the framework of statehood which Lukashenka is creating. He upholds Soviet values and attitudes, while the basis of myths, traditions, culture, self-image remains the weakest aspect of the presidential propaganda; its list of descriptions of the Belarusians seems to be exhausted by the adjectives 'hard-working', 'enduring' and 'tolerant'. Should the pro-Belarusian groups come up with further self-praise definitions, such as 'highly-educated' or 'good humoured', the chance that they would be accepted is high. Further, these groups could fill the space for the popularisation of history, for the glorification of Belarusian key historical figures and celebration of Belarusian achievements, practices and products. If similarities between the Belarusian and Soviet identity-building programmes are stressed instead of differences (e.g. glorification of Dr Skaryna who printed the first book for the Eastern Slavs rather than of the *Vorsha* battle against Muscovy), Belarusian identity elements can be merged into the state programme, and be advanced with all the resources and audacity of a governmental policy.¹⁷ Once nationhood is widely appreciated, it would be possible to stress the democratic character of Belarusian national practices, for which there is no shortage of examples.¹⁸

Eventually, nation-building could serve as a vehicle for channelling appreciation of democracy and democratic principles into the Belarusian society.

Yet the chances for both the Russian and national-democratic scenarios are not high. Political scientist and long-standing activist of the opposition, Rovda (2002) laments that 'there is no understanding of the emergent opportunities among the opposition whatsoever'. The Russia-led scenario is problematic because of the absence of a suitable candidate and Lukashenka himself.¹⁹ Moreover, the Russian political and economic elite are likely to divert their attention from the Belarusian issue during the parliamentary and presidential elections in the country. Therefore, continuation of Lukashenka's rule can be expected in Belarus in the coming years. This means fostering another generation with the Soviet mentality. Yet their allegiance will be Belarusian. Appreciation of sovereignty is a sign of growing dignity and self-awareness, which are in turn preconditions of democratic development. In the long-term perspective, the current presidential policies may cultivate the essential bedrock of national democratic emancipation in the future. The tale of Belarusian nation-building may be far from finished.

The station halls on the Moscow line of the Minsk underground display billboards with pictures of country landscapes. A simple message in a hand written style reads: 'My Belarus'. The paradox of glorification of Belarus while on the Moscow line illustrates the game of the country's government. When its president Lukashenka had to embrace appreciation of sovereignty, he matched it with Soviet identity which had already proven to serve his regime best. At the moment, Soviet identity politics contribute to promoting and strengthening authoritarianism in Belarus. Still, they may prove to be a Trojan horse for the Belarusian president by creating a basis for a democratic Belarusian nation-state. 'Lukashenka's time is a difficult but not a lost time for Belarus. The harshness of his authoritarian regime leads to appreciation of democracy, and the builds up tenets of the future "normal" democratic Belarus' (Furman 1998: 9).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that nationalism and identity politics remain an essential political tool in present-day circumstances. The country held to be 'denationalised' is exposed as an arena of intensive nation-building. The reason this process has remained largely overlooked so far is perhaps its unexpected content: it upholds the Soviet past and contradicts the country's declared goal of integration with Russia. A cut through the integration rhetoric attempted in this paper demonstrates that strengthening of Belarusian sovereignty and Soviet identity are the main instruments of augmenting the present authoritarian regime in Belarus.

Within the limits of an article, it is hardly possible to provide a thorough comparative analysis of the different versions of nation-building in Belarus; or

to balance the integration and nation-building rhetoric of the Belarusian president. It appears more important to draw attention to the current nation-building effort at the presidential level so as to prevent the hardening of the stereotype of Lukashenka as the 'Russian puppet' and 'betrayer of sovereignty'. For an adherence to that stereotype seems to blind academics to the current developments and the Belarusian political community to the emergent possibilities.

The experience of Belarus as a modern-day laboratory of nation-building furnishes several theoretical insights. It confirms the diversity of content nation-building policies may take and the wide array of values they may be used to promote. It exemplifies the argument about the 'wanton character of nationalism' (Pridham and Vanhanen 1994; Offe 1996; Bunce 2000; Pridnam 2000): which can be used for both pro-democratic and anti-democratic ends. The main theoretical proposition of this paper is that national identity is a political instrument, which can be adjusted to the needs of the player. A proper performance, it is essential to notice, can only be expected if the instrument of identity is tuned to the society in question. The paper suggested three limits to the nation-building projects: (1) a project should be relevant to the values, practices and attitudes already present within the society; (2) nation-building efforts need to be supported by corresponding economic and social change; (3) support of influential foreign actors is important. Thinking further, there may be another qualification to the instrumentalist approach. The Belarusian evidence refutes the argument about the purely contingent and voluntarist nature of nation-building projects. The advocates of both nation-building programmes in the country have firmly held on to their agenda throughout the post-Soviet years. (Lukashenka changed the *intensity* and *object* but not the *content* of his programme.) Such actors' devotedness to their ideas arguably does not stem from their short-sightedness or slowness to manoeuvre, as the instrumentalist approach would hold. Arguably, it is more attributable to their particular understanding of the social situation and personal conviction in the rightfulness of their agenda. In other words, the vision of the imperatives and the conduct of political actors are not contingent, but rather products of their upbringing and socialisation. The question about the relationship of social structures and actions of elites is something of a chicken-and-egg problem, which it is not the purpose of the article to solve. The analysis of the Belarusian experience suggests advancing the studies of nationalism into the direction of the sociology of values and attitudes.

Although the Belarusian development is atypical of post-Soviet transition,²⁰ the conclusions reached in the paper are arguably widely applicable. After all, the Belarusian elites are not unique in their striving to entrench a national identity into the society, and the Belarusian population has not been the only subject of such an endeavour. Although Belarusians are experiencing identity formation at a rather late stage, Belarus is certainly not the last case ever. Quite the opposite, with the advent of post-modernity and globalisation,

the importance of identity issues and, consequently, their political utilisation, can be expected to mount. Understanding of both the flexibility and limitations of national identity-building effort is therefore essential to explain identity-related developments in the future.

Notes

1 This medieval state emerged around the Belarusian town of Navagrydak. The name 'Lithuania' reflects the origin of its first ruling dynasty, while the majority of the aristocracy, the core territory and the state language in the Duchy were Belarusian.

2 Belarus', not 'Byelorussia' as the Russian term holds. Both are accepted in the Russian vocabulary and the usage of 'Byelorussia' may be seen as implying *Belarus's* inferior position to Russia, as it was during the Soviet era.

3 Samvon (1994).

4 The economic part of the BPF programme appealed to the urban population, while the cultural part praised the rural population. As a result, the urban Russian-speaking supporters of economic reform loathed the domination of Belarusianness, whereas the country people who embodied it were alarmed by the prospect of privatisation of land and dissemination of collective farms. Thus the BPF could not establish itself with a particular section of the electorate.

5 The BPF candidate received 12.9 percent of votes at the 1994 presidential elections, and the party did not acquire a single parliamentary seat at the 1995 parliamentary elections.

6 Almost identical policies yielded the nationalists their desired result in the former soviet Baltic states.

7 In the 1980s, there were no Belarusian-language schools in any urban area of the republic (Mihalisko 1997: 235).

8 This well-known phrase is quoted, among others, by Eke and Kuzio (2000: 525). Lukashenka's own Belarusian is markedly poor (Shushkevich 2000).

9 A unique arrangement merging Orthodox practices with subjugation to the Pope in Rome. The Uniat Church was the dominant confession on the Belarusian territories between its establishment in 1596 and abolition by the Russian government in 1839.

10 'The Lublin Union cannot be interpreted as incorporation of Great Duchy by Poland' (HB10).

11 The list of new publications on Belarusian history is not exhausted with school textbooks. In 2002, at least eight volumes were published. Among them, *Belarus at the Brink of Millenniums*, Minsk: Encyclopaedia; *History of Belarus in Tables and Schemes*, Minsk: Unipress; *Belarus in the 20th Century*, Minsk: Vodolej; *Short History of Belarus*, Minsk: Unipress; *Flag and Emblem of the Belarusian State* Minsk: Unatstva, *Materials on Belarusian History*, Minsk: Aversev. The fact that many of them came from commercial publishers testifies that popular demand for books on Belarusian history is growing.

12 Circulation of the largest independent newspaper, *Narodnaya Volia* (People's Will), is 30,000, compared to the 300,000 circulation of the largest state newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussia* (Soviet Belarus) (Tamkovich 2002).

13 Eighty percent of the Belarusian workforce are employed by state-governed enterprises (Karbalevitch 2002).

14 The Russian NTV channel was deprived of accreditation and its correspondent extradited from Belarus in June 2003 for an alleged 'incorrect depiction of the facts and disgracing the Belarusian government'.

15 In 1990, protests against the liberation of prices in Belarus were the largest in the USSR.

16 In February 2003, after two years of debate, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised the Belarusian parliament by giving it a seat.

17 An interesting example is Minsk TV, which constantly features stories on Minsk history, architecture, famous residents-it even ran a competition for a Minsk anthem!

18 E.g. the Statute of the Great Duchy of Lithuania of 1588, which was recognised as one of the most progressive constitutions of its time in Europe. Apart from pioneering several constitutional norms and containing some of the most advanced legislative ideas of the time, the Statute also attested to the rich judicial culture of the Belarusian people, as it was written in Belarusian (Juxo 1992: 172).

19 In October 2002, the deputy chairman of the Russian parliament Khakamada and a leader of the Russian right Nemtsov were extradited from Belarus to prevent their meeting with Belarusian liberals.

20 Both terms 'typical' and 'transition' may be contested with regard to developments in the post-Soviet era.

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