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Unfinished transformations

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The Phenomenon of Nationalism and Political Elites in Belarus after 1991

Fenomen nacjonalizmu i elity polityczne na Białorusi po 1991 r.

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The Phenomenon of Nationalism and Political Elites in Belarus after 1991

This article explores the relationship between the phenomenon of nationalism and the postcolonial condition of the Belarusian elite. It examines various forms of consolidation strategies employed by different political elites in their efforts to construct their version of the sacred and to articulate a postcolonial conception of the nation. This condition is further shaped by the authoritarian character of the state and the instrumental use of identity politics by the Lukashenka regime on the one hand, and by competing political forces that promote alternative visions of national existence on the other. The analysis covers the entire period of Belarusian independence since 1991. In addition, the article systematises the understanding of the distinctiveness and diversity of the Belarusian national project within the regional context, particularly in relation to the former metropolis. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on the challenges to conventional interpretations of nationalism in the Belarusian case.

Fenomen nacjonalizmu i elity polityczne na Białorusi po 1991 r.

Artykuł bada relację między fenomenem nacjonalizmu a postkolonialną kondycją białoruskich elit. Przedstawia różne formy strategii konsolidacyjnych, które rozmaite elity polityczne stosują w wysiłkach na rzecz skonstruowania własnego *sacrum* i artykułowaniu postkolonialnej koncepcji narodu. Na kondycję tę wpływają z jednej strony autorytarny charakter państwa i instrumentalne wykorzystywanie polityki tożsamości przez reżim Łukaszenki, z drugiej zaś – konkurujące siły polityczne, które promują alternatywne wizje egzystencji narodowej. Analiza obejmuje chronologicznie cały okres niepodległości Białorusi od 1991 r. Artykuł systematyzuje ponadto rozumienie odrębności i różnorodności białoruskiego projektu narodowego w kontekście regionalnym, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do dawnej metropolii. W ten sposób przyczynia się do szerszej debaty nad wyzwaniami wobec konwencjonalnych interpretacji nacjonalizmu w przypadku białoruskim.

Introduction

In Eastern Europe, nationalism holds an ambivalent meaning. This stems largely from the legacy of Soviet colonialism, which distorted national discourses across the former USSR. Soviet historiography equated nationalism with fascism or bourgeois extremism, leading to its social perception as a radical, even dangerous, ideology. As a result, nationalism, despite its potential as an anti-colonial foundation, was politically delegitimised in post-Soviet contexts.

Western epistemology, relying on area studies and enter-periphery understandings of the region, responded to the USSR's collapse without adequately grasping the specificities of local areas (former Soviet republics). Until 1991, knowledge about Soviet republics was largely shaped by a process of knowledge exchange between centres, whereby the Russian colonial one was integrated into Western ethnographic and political-science terminologies. Although a more nuanced view of, for example, Belarus began emerging after 1991, it remained epistemologically limited. By the early 2000s, Belarus was mostly portrayed through descriptive and comparative narratives, often lacking strong empirical grounding and shaped by reactions to geopolitical events.

This narrative framework significantly distorted understandings of nationalism and community in Belarus, both intellectually and politically. A key example was the repeated thesis of an unfinished identity and the portrayal of Belarus as a country "in-between,"[1] which persisted until the 2020 protests revealed a different cultural and political reality. The 2020 protests became a turning point in academic debate. The event highlighted the diversity of grassroots identity strategies and exposed a gap between elite discourses and broader social identification needs. At the same time, the intense and rapid unfolding of the protests, with their processual and dynamic character over a short period,

1 For example: G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2003, vol. 55, No. 8, p. 1241–1272; R. Allison, S. White, M. Light, *Belarus between East and West*, "Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics" 2005, vol. 21, No. 4, p. 487–511; G. Ioffe, *Unfinished Nation-Building in Belarus and the 2006 Presidential Election*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics" 2007, vol. 48, No. 1, p. 37–58; O. Manaev, N. Manayeva, D. Yuran, *More State than Nation: Lukashenko's Belarus*, "Journal of International Affairs" 2011, vol. 65, No. 1, p. 93–113.

created a surprise effect in academic circles and led to new interpretations of Belarusian identity and community formation.

This text will attempt a broader view of the phenomenon of nationalism in the context of post-Soviet Belarus. Special attention will be paid to the beginnings, specifically the period when Belarusian elites consolidated into political camps and constructed collective consolidation strategies based on nationalism. The proposed synthesis of various concepts about Belarusian identity will consider both the current state of research and the substantive update to dynamic geopolitical and regional events in the period 2020–2025.

In the Belarusian context, and for this text, elites can be understood as a relatively narrow stratum with privileged access to state resources, administrative authority, and channels of symbolic representation, whose legitimacy derives either from control over institutions or from oppositional mobilisation. This binary division is rooted in the genealogy and further development of the uncivil society in late Soviet and post-Soviet periods,[2] within which two mutually interacting camps crystallised: the elites of power and the elites of opposition.

Elites here are considered in a processual rather than finalised manner, in the same way as the concepts of national identity or nationalism. They are approached not as a closed and static definition but as an evolving process. For this reason, the analysis pays less attention to personalist accounts and instead emphasises the contextual and processual dimensions of elite formation and transformation. The political elites of Belarus are thus presented because of this genealogy: a post-Soviet elite, originating from Soviet uncivil society, which filled the key institutions of the 1990s and later constituted the foundation of the regime elite after 1994. On the other side, originating from the anti-Soviet intelligentsia as well as segments of the uncivil society itself, partly including dissident circles, there emerged actors who became the main carriers of revivalist nationalism and who later provided the foundation for the opposition elites to the Belarusian regime in the 21st century.

2 Following the definition and concept presented by Stephen Kotkin: S. Kotkin, *Uncivil Society. 1989 and the Implosion of the Communist Establishment*, Modern Library, New York 2009.

Between Soviet colonialism and Belarusian autonomism

The debate on identity in early independent Belarus remained grounded in unreformed Western post-Soviet area studies and entangled in the epistemological traps of Western ethnography. Meanwhile, Belarusian intellectuals in the early 1990s sought to articulate a nation-centred framework, echoing broader post-Soviet anti-communist euphoria. The national movement peaked during the first three years of independence, when asserting sovereignty was linked to reckoning with communism, especially Stalinist-era repressions and the destruction of the 1930s intelligentsia. At the same time, ex-Soviet nomenklatura elites, consolidating power in parliament, pushed to preserve the *status quo*. This included limited opposition participation,[3] which paradoxically enabled a revivalist, Eurocentric nationalist discourse later adopted by anti-Lukashenka elites. The *status quo* also involved the strategic appropriation of Soviet memory practices in the post-Soviet Belarusian context.

The political formation of independent Belarus during the first three years following the collapse of the USSR effectively shaped the structural model of the Belarusian political elite, as well as its mobilisation strategies and modes of political communication, for the subsequent decades up to 2020. Within the framework of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus of the 12th convocation, which functioned from 1990 to 1996 – spanning three political conditions (Soviet, independent-parliamentary, and independent-presidential) – a political elite emerged that, for at least two decades of independence, served as the primary source of personnel for both the ruling establishment and the opposition.[4]

A central paradox of the early independence period lies in the fact that, in 1991, most of the Belarusian society expressed support for remaining within the USSR, with over 82% voting in favour in a national referendum. Although this figure decreased to just above 20% two years later,[5] the general societal inclination toward reactionism was soon reevaluated

3 А. Екадумаў, В. Сіліцкі, П. Натчык, *Палітычная сцэна Беларусі паміж 1990–1996*, [in:] *Палітычная гісторыя незалежнай Беларусі*, рэд. В. Булгакаў, Інстытут беларусістыкі, Vilnius 2006, p. 10–11.

4 Ibidem, p. 9.

5 O. Manaev, N. Manayeva, D. Yuran, *More…*, p. 96.

in practice. In 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka rose to power, transforming the former Soviet nomenklatura into a new formation of populist post-Sovietism within the framework of a nominally independent national and political entity.

The conservatism of the old nomenklatura and its restructuring under the political convention of the then-young Lukashenka model largely determined the future strategies of collective identities and concepts of national survival amid the resurgence of Russian neo-imperialism. This was, to a large extent, a consequence of independence *par excellence* – a form of statehood not achieved through a protracted anti-colonial struggle or a formal decolonisation process involving a clear rupture with the former imperial centre.[6]

In the *longue durée* perspectives, the absence of an anti-colonial phase – understood as a hard-won exit from empire – contributed to the political inefficacy of the so-called democratic opposition elites. Up until 2020, the opposition movement remained in a transitional state, positioned between a consolidated intellectual elite shaped by a largely hypothetical anti-colonial departure and a political alternative operating under conditions of authoritarian rule, with no access to the public sphere and power.

From the post-Soviet model of ethnicity to the consolidated patriotism of the nomenklatura

The nationalism of the 1990s can be understood as an algorithmic behaviour of postcolonial elites. This included both the anti-Soviet and consequently pro-independence groups, as well as the old ruling elites – the former Soviet nomenklatura. Similar to what Fabian Baumann has described in the Ukrainian case,[7] nationalism in its banal form, Soviet Belarusianness, became a conceptually important political foundation for the post-Soviet ruling elites. Under Lukashenka, in the second half of the 1990s, this later

6 See. V. Karbalevich, *The Belarusian Model of Transformation: Alaksandr Lukashenka's Regime and the Nostalgia for the Soviet Past*, "International Journal of Sociology" 2001, vol. 31, No. 4, p. 10.

7 F. Baumann, *"Well-Known and Sincerely Loved": Banal Nationalism, Republican Pride, and Symbolic Ethnicity in Late Soviet Ukraine*, "Slavic Review" 2025, vol. 84, No. 1, p. 115–137.

transformed into a Russophone nationalism of the power elites.[8] The second, ethno-national version of nationalism can be regarded as a natural reaction of postcolonial elites, who were still in a phase of consolidation and in the process of narrativising the anti-colonial discourse.

Those processes were a logical consequence of exiting or liberating oneself from an empire. However, in regions shaped by Western colonialism, this was a process that, in its anti-colonial phase, actively mobilised the masses. By contrast, in the case of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the anti-colonial phase was skipped altogether and unfolded only in the former Soviet republics during the period of independence.[9] These processes initiated a future dichotomy: on the one hand, the acceptance of the colonial background as the central version of political being for the ruling elites[10]; on the other, the imitation of the European (more precisely, Central European) model of nationalism[11], in a post-Soviet version – a form of anti-colonial declaration of belonging to the so-called Western civilisation.

A key task of the old soviet nomenklatura in Belarus was to preserve the *status quo* between society and power, balancing the institutionalisation of independence with continued ties to the former metropole. The early post-Soviet years, shaped by revivalist sentiment and a reassessment of the Soviet

8 Ibidem, p. 137; M. Fabrykant, *Russian-Speaking Belarusian Nationalism: An Ethnolinguistic Identity without a Language?*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2019, vol. 71, No. 1, p. 117–136.

9 For more on the consequences of the absence of an anti-colonial phase (based on the Ukrainian and Belarusian examples), see: A. Saifullayeu, *Is the Decolonization of Eastern Europe Possible? The Cases of Ukraine and Belarus*, [in:] *The End of the Soviet World? Essays on Post-Communist Political and Social Change*, ed. G. Mink, I. Reichardt, Ibidem Verlag, Hannover 2025, p. 239–266.

10 In reference to the thesis on so-called Eastern nationalism as characteristic of postcolonial societies, see also: P. Chatterjee, *Nacjonalizm jako problem w historii myśli politycznej*, tłum. D. Kołodziejczyk, "Literatura na Świecie" 2008, nr 1–2, p. 280–328.

11 In reference to the thesis on modelling after the European tradition's generalisation of the concept of nationalism, see more: D. Woolf, *Of Nations, Nationalism, and National Identity: Reflections on the Historiographic Organization of the Past*, [in:] *The Many Faces of Clio. Cross-Cultural Approaches to Historiography. Essays in Honor of George G. Iggers*, ed. Q. E. Wang, F. L. Fillafer, New York–Oxford 2007, p. 75.

past,[12] forced elites to adapt to the new reality, navigating both reserved sympathy for national narratives and the social apathy that followed the fall of the empire. Belarus's case during the parliamentary phase (until the 1996 crisis)[13] was distinctive. The early 1990s nomenklatura remained deeply tied to the former metropole – economically, as seen in the 1994 electoral campaigns of all major candidates, but also politically and culturally.[14]

A more flexible understanding of ethnicity as an aspect of social relations,[15] embedded within a supra-ethnic (colonial) project, enables us to argue that, even immediately after the collapse of the USSR, the highly Sovietised Belarusian society could rebuild its own national consciousness based on its ethnicity of colonial origin. It follows from understanding that cultural ethnicity[16] in the post-Soviet period was a result of colonial engineering during the Bolshevik and Stalinist eras, in which administrative borders were shaped according to ethnographic expertise within the framework of a colonial discourse applied to Belarus since empire time.[17]

How do these aspects translate into the political elites' understanding of nation- and community-building processes in early 1990s Belarus? Firstly, it is important to note that the old party nomenklatura of the Belarusian SSR quickly transformed itself into a party of power, uniting lower-tier nomenklatura (including a young Lukashenka) with the former higher party elite.[18] As a result of this process, following the 1990 elections, it

12 As for example so-called the Retroproject of Lukashenka's regime: A. Sahm, *Political Culture and National Symbols: Their Impact on the Belarusian Nation-Building Process*, "Nationalities Papers" 1999, vol. 27, No. 4, p. 653–654.

13 А. Казакевіч, *Беларускі парламент эпохі незалежнасці: эвалюцыя дэпутацкага корпусу, 1990–2010 гады*, "Палітычная сфера. Часопіс палітычных даследаванняў" 2010, № 15, p. 44–70.

14 *Białoruś w przededniu wyborów prezydenckich*, red. A. Engelking, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, Warszawa 1994.

15 Which can be multicultural as well as multilingual: Th. H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*, 3rd ed., Pluto Press, New York 2010, p. 1–22.

16 From a terminological perspective on: ibidem, p. 43–35.

17 Several notable figures in Russian ethnography can be cited in relation to this: Yefim Karski, Pavel Bobrovsky, Alexander Hilferding, Ivan Nosovich etc.

18 R. Czachor, *Transformacja systemu politycznego Białorusi w latach 1988–2001*, Wydawnictwo Uczelni Jana Wyżykowskiego, Polkowice 2016, p. 102; А. Екадумаў, В. Сіліцкі, П. Натчык, *Палітычная…*, p. 13–24.

was possible to politically sustain a progressive-opportunistic construct for the ideological organisation of socio-political life. In other words, the colonial construct of Belarusian ethnicity became a legal format for community identification under the conditions of independence *par excellence*, carefully maintained by the party of power.

This allowed for the maintenance of a socially safe context of ethnicity for the elite, based on the acceptance of the colonial experience – i.e., a subordinate yet autonomous status to the former metropole. For instance, the percentage of people identifying as Belarusian increased from 77% in 1989 to 81% in 1999, despite a population decrease of approximately 106 500 people during the same period.[19]

Therefore, the widely accepted claim at the end of 20th and early 21st century that Belarusian society lacked a clearly defined national identity is not entirely accurate. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes, while often overlapping, these definitions (ethnicity and nationalism) involve different forms of consolidation – nationalism, for instance, can exist without defining itself through ethnicity. Citing Mauritian nationalism, Eriksen describes a supra-ethnic national community formed not by suppressing ethnicity but by transcending it.[20]

The Belarusian case of post-Soviet nationalism reflects similar processes. A key to understanding the old nomenklatura's community-building lies in its separation from the supra-ethnic Soviet project. Belarus's territorially defined space, legitimised through colonial cultural-historical discourse, became central to a mimetic strategy of uniting society around an ethnicity that accepted its colonial roots. In this context, ethnicity was a cultural aspect of the social relation (even as part of the colonial project still), which provided the basis for the construction of a post-imperial version of the nation. This enabled a basic consensus between elites and an amorphous national identity, while even correlated with anti-Soviet, Central European nation-building models. It also explains how, after the 1994–1996 crisis and under an emerging autocracy, nationalism assumed its own banal, egalitarian form.

19 Л. П. Шахотько, Д. Н. Куделка, *Этноязыковый состав населения Белоруссии*, "Вопросы статистики" 2002, № 11, p. 30–37.

20 Th. H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity…*, p. 140–146.

The strategy of egalitarianism and banal nationalism in the Belarusian political regime

The choice of Lukashenka as president, as well as the establishment's desire to perform a political reset after unpopular leadership (e.g., Viachaslau Kebich, who lost to the younger Lukashenka in the second round of the 1994 elections), stemmed both from Lukashenka's presentation of himself as a technocratic figure with a capable team and from the electorate's perception of him as a representative of collective values rooted in the ideological constructs of the Soviet Union.

Natalia Leshchenko wrote in her article that Lukashenka's national mobilisation went largely unnoticed, as it did not rely on traditional ethnic markers such as language or culture.[21] She emphasised that Lukashenka represents a form of collectivist identity tied to the sovereignty of the state. In turn, David Marples rightly pointed out that Lukashenka is not anti-Belarusian; rather, he embodies a Russophile version of Belarusian identity.[22] This identity aligns with a supra-ethnic, centre–periphery national optic that dominated in early post-Soviet Belarus.

The political crisis initiated by Lukashenka's inner circle between 1994 and 1996 led to the establishment of a refreshed power structure – one that significantly enabled the nomenklatura's consolidation of authority. The brief period of parliamentary republic, which had facilitated the emergence of multiple political camps (albeit with certain imbalances), was replaced by a unified and compact presidential system. Most importantly, this allowed for the organisation of the bureaucracy and elite structures into a centralised and obedient apparatus, resulting later in a bipolar political polarisation.

The preservation of political "achievements" during the 1994–1996 transformation–purges, political repression, a blend of late-Soviet technocrats and the old nomenklatura – was possible due to a specific ideological matrix. This matrix supported a unique form of post-Soviet ideocracy

21 N. Leshchenko, *The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2008, vol. 60, No. 8, p. 1420.

22 D. R. Marples, *National Awakening and National Consciousness in Belarus*, "Nationalities Papers" 1999, vol. 27, No. 4, p. 570.

that lasted until 2006, when the regime began forming what Vitali Silitski would later describe as preemptive authoritarianism.[23]

What characterises Lukashenka's ideocracy? Leshchenko identifies a symbiotic relationship between egalitarian nationalism and Lukashenka's authoritarian system.[24] This form of collective identity strategy arose, to some extent, from the natural state of affairs. The regime's initial egalitarianism was rooted in two key dimensions – internal and external.

Internally, Belarusian society in the mid-1990s was still in a state of post-Soviet uncertainty. This meant an inability to fully accept independence and a continued dominance of identity forms framed within the Soviet colonial project (which is synonymous with Russian). Secondly, from the onset of political rivalry in late 1993, Lukashenka constructed his political and ideological identity in direct opposition to revivalist nationalism (both cultural and ethnic). Populist slogans emphasising the threat posed by nationalists, framed semantically in the Soviet tradition as near-fascists, remain an ideological cornerstone of the regime during the whole period of existence.[25]

Externally, the political reality of the 1990s revealed that a strong attachment to the former metropole, Russia, was socially acceptable and practically inevitable. There was no full political or cultural disintegration from the empire during the post-Soviet era. This factor severely limited political manoeuvring toward ethnic nationalism grounded in postcolonial revivalist strategies – something all political actors in the 1994 elections fully understood.[26]

23 For example, here: V. Silitski, *Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus*, "Journal of Democracy" 2005, vol. 16, No. 4, p. 83–97.

24 N. Leshchenko, *The National…*, p. 1421–1422.

25 "Moreover, they wanted to abandon the Russian language – our Russian language – pledge allegiance to extremist symbols and organise mass demolitions of monuments. The result was the incitement of civil unrest and a surge of nationalism. This occurred in the mid-1990s, as you may recall, beginning with the renaming of streets. It was only the election of the first President that put an end to it." *Послание Президента Беларуси к белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию: полный текст выступления*, "Официальный сайт Постоянного комитета Союзного государства" [online], 1 II 2022 [accessed: 10 III 2025]: <https://посткомсг.рф/culture/230893/>.

26 *Białoruś w przededniu…*

At the time of the USSR's collapse, Belarus, like other post-Soviet republics, had a sizeable Russian minority. In a heavily Russified society, this group felt at ease. In 1989, Russians made up over 13% of the population,[27] and by 1992, 82% did not see themselves as a minority in independent Belarus. Lukashenka, opposing re-Belarusianisation, relied on their support in the 1994 election.

During the 1990s, nationalism as a strategy of consolidation within the system of power was only beginning to take shape. By the early 21st century, it had evolved from post-Soviet forms of postcolonial autonomism and colonial notions of ethnicity into a more complex and consolidated nationalist model. What is particularly noteworthy is how Lukashenka's egalitarian post-Soviet ideocracy of the 1990s quickly developed into a standalone model of state nationalism. This model combined colonial and partly national-revival (anti-colonial) understandings of ethnicity, community, and identity.

The consolidation of the regime into a stable authoritarian model in the second decade of the 21st century can be seen as a consequence of Silitski's concept of preemptive authoritarianism – a response to the first real attempts at democratic transformation in the post-Soviet space during the period of the colour revolutions. It may be defined as the ability to endure by adopting protective measures to counter the democratic contagion. Regime elites spent the next fifteen years perfecting prevention strategies, striking a balance between regime efficiency and responsiveness to social needs.[28]

Within these preventive strategies – and with full control over institutional life – a unique experiment was developed: constructing a cohesive national community based on a colonial version of Belarusian ethnicity, complete with its own symbolic foundation and identity proposition. This model of state nationalism, drawing on colonial heritage and incorporating elements of postcolonial revivalist nationalism, created its sacred sphere,

27 *Всесоюзная перепись населения 1989 года. Национальный состав населения по республикам СССР*, "Демоскоп Weekly" [online], 29 IX 2007 [accessed: 10 III 2025]: <https://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/sng_nac_89.php?reg=3>.

28 E. Korosteleva, *Questioning Democracy Promotion: Belarus' Response to the "Colour revolutions"*, "Democratization" 2012, vol. 19, No. 1, p. 43.

directly opposing the ethnocultural nationalism promoted by opposition elites, which the regime had politically marginalised.[29]

The regime's state nationalism, grounded in egalitarian ideology, promoted political disengagement or personal loyalty to the state. It permitted limited economic freedom, mobility, constrained speech, and a foreign policy based on a country "in-between" way. After the 2010 elections, a social contract emerged – an informal deal with the younger, economically active population, especially in regional centres and the capital. It applied mainly to the middle class and tolerated large businesses: in return for loyalty or apoliticism, the state granted relative freedom and income opportunities within the system.[30]

A crucial element of this strategy was the increased permeability of the elite (within the ruling party, parliament, and various levels of administration), generational renewal through youth organisations (notably the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, or BRSM), and a more technocratic character of loyal local and national elites. The egalitarian nature of this model also lay in its appropriation of the concept of Belarusian statehood while simultaneously delegitimising alternative visions of political organisation. Some scholars have observed that this delegitimisation was made possible by seizing control over two fundamental terms – nation (in the understanding of the people of Belarus) and sovereignty.[31]

29 "It is not our fault – it was history that decided it this way – that from a common spiritual Orthodox cradle, from Holy Rus', three fraternal and distinct nations emerged. Each of them today is building its own state, creating its own statehood. We are not pro-Russian, not pro-Ukrainian, and not pro-Polish – we are not Russians, we are Belarusians! Our country is White Rus. A country where – I repeat – Russians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Poles, Jews, Tatars, and many, many others live. These are the children of White Rus, citizens of one country – Belarus." *Послание Президента белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию*, "Президент Республики Беларусь" [online], 22 IV 2014 [accessed: 10 III 2025]: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/aleksandr-lukashenko-obraschaetsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-i-natsionalnomu-sobraniju-8549>.

30 O. Manaev, N. Manayeva, D. Yuran, *More…*, p. 97–98; E. Bindman, T. Chulitskaya, *Explaining the Mass Protests in Belarus in 2020: What Role Did Civil Society Play?*, "Democratization" 2025, vol. 32, No. 6, p. 1411–1431.

31 See for example: N. Leshchenko, *The National…*, p. 1421–1422; D. R. Marples, *The Lukashenka Phenomenon. Elections, Propaganda, and the Foundations of Political Authority in Belarus*, Program on East European Cultures and Societies, Trondheim

At the centre of this ideological monopoly stood Lukashenka himself, stylised as the father of the nation (Bel. *bac'ka*) – a status that became his political brand. This is a common feature of post-Soviet authoritarian systems (cf. Saparmurat Niyazov as *Turkmenbashi*, Nursultan Nazarbayev as *Elbasy*, Emomali Rahmon as *Peshvoi millat*). Still, it is unique within the Eastern European context.

This egalitarian model of nationalism in Belarus relied on specific social practices – what Michael Billig termed the ideological habits that reproduce nations.[32] His concept of banal nationalism, as a set of everyday cultural and political practices sustaining collective identity, found algorithmic form in Belarus in the 2010s. Rooted in a colonial legacy, this nationalism increasingly incorporated revivalist elements that were once oppositional, reflecting the regime's pursuit of autonomy from Russia's neo-colonial discourse, as manifested, among other things, in the policy of soft Belarusianisation.[33]

However, the system's relatively liberal approach to political loyalty and its generationally outdated ideology pushed society toward alternative identity formations. The first major rupture came with the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke the social contract and undermined the nationalist model. As the regime abandoned reciprocal arrangements, a technocratic, globalised generation – especially in urban centres – rejected its paternalistic authority (as a father of the nation). This disillusionment culminated in the 2020 protests.

2007 (Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies, 21); E. Koroste-leva, *Questioning…*

32 M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage, London 1995.

33 See for example: P. Rudkouski, *Soft Belarusianisation. The Ideology of Belarus in the Era of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict*, Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, 3 XI 2017 (OSW Commentary, 253); I. Posokhin, *Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or "Border Reinforcement"*, "Coloquia Humanistica" 2019, vol. 8, p. 57–78; M. J. Frear, *Belarus under Lukashenka. Adaptive Authoritarianism*, Routledge, London 2019; A. Marin, *Belarusian Nationalism in the 2010s: A Case of Anti--Colonialism? Origins, Features and Outcomes of Ongoing "Soft Belarusianisation"*, "Journal of Belarusian Studies" 2020, vol. 9, No. 1, p. 27–50; N. Bekus, M. Gabowitsch, *Introduction to the Special Issue on Protest and Authoritarian Reaction in Belarus: New Subjectivities and Beyond*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies" 2023, vol. 56, No. 3, p. 1–21.

The strategy of egalitarian nationalism pursued by the ruling elites of Belarus's preemptive authoritarianism resulted from a socio-cultural post--imperial longing and a natural counter-reaction of the power elites of the 1990s to the anti-colonial nationalism of the so-called revivalist elites. In turn, a crucial factor in shaping post-Soviet national identity in Belarus was the binary opposition – emerging at the turn of the century – between political and national being: on one side, loyalty to Lukashenka's regime; on the other, identification with a so-called pro-democratic opposition.

The emergence and development of imitative (revival) nationalism

A natural reaction during a crisis of the empire or post-imperial conditions is for elites to adopt anti-colonial nationalism, forming the political foundation of postcolonial states. In theory, this nationalism – meant to unify the community against the oppressor – should collapse as new elites begin collaborating with the former metropolis. Yet in many post-Soviet states, including Belarus, this process reversed: the empire collapsed from above due to a crisis within the centre. This is crucial for understanding land--based colonialisms. The lack of a bottom-up liberation phase meant anti--colonial (or anti-Soviet) elites failed to form strong ideological or political ties and did not build grassroots structures. Thus, in 1991, with independence not earned through struggle, they remained a politically unformed intellectual milieu, facing an unequal contest with the old nomenklatura and a new ruling party.

Initial nationalist enthusiasm after the empire's collapse, especially in Minsk, briefly sparked political mobilisation. However, as Nelly Bekus observes, from the mid-1990s onward, nationalist rhetoric began to alienate parts of society who, while supportive of independence or democratisation, rejected hardline anti-Soviet revivalism due to its political ineffectiveness. This was evident during the 1994 elections, when both leading candidates, Kebich and Lukashenka, grounded their programmatic visions on the Soviet discursive legacy.[34] The anti-Soviet (can be understood as an anti-colonial) candidate Zianon Pazniak, by contrast, finished third with just over 12%, drawing support mainly from central and western regions.

34 N. Bekus, *Nationalism and Socialism: "Phase D" in the Belarusian Nation-Building*, "Nationalities Papers" 2010, vol. 38, No. 6, p. 843–844.

The anti-colonial character of revival nationalism lost its political and, to some extent, symbolic capital, and the strategy itself became an alternative ideological platform for the so-called democratic or simply anti-Lukashenka opposition. In other words, the initially intellectually conceptualised anti-Soviet model of cultural-ethnic nationalism with decolonial potential was transformed into a socio-political model, more ideologically flexible, of anti-systemic nationalism. This model appropriated ethnocultural identity markers, placing them in opposition to the egalitarian nationalism of the ruling elites, which was based on the Soviet past.

It is also important to understand that this model of nationalism never had an institutional foundation, either domestically or abroad. In other words, there were no institutional bonds linking the proponents of this version of nationalism to society, because such conditions had never existed in the modern history of Belarus.

Therefore, the thesis of the nation "in-between", nation failure, or the relatively popular concept in Western academia of the denationalised nation are not entirely relevant, since nationalism as a strategy of consolidation had, since the early 20th century, functioned as a rival to the colonial communality of Belarusians. It had never constituted a dominant identity, nor did it have institutional control over the distribution of identity. The revivalist nationalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s should be seen as a natural attempt at the political consolidation of intellectual elites under the conditions of a totalitarian empire. This attempt did not survive the so-called independence-without-struggle, since it was politically impossible to ground anti-Soviet nationalism in a still-Soviet society.[35]

During the period when the political system in Belarus began to consolidate into the model of preemptive authoritarianism, revivalist nationalism became the discursive foundation of the opposition elites. At the same time, the ideological base of the opposition elites was shaped during the colour revolutions of the early 2000s. This base consisted of a specific form of transformational, Euro-positive democratism, which positioned itself as a hypothetical socio-political – and to some extent geopolitical – alternative. This gave rise to discursive labels such as "democratic/pro-European opposition" or "pro-independence elites." Interestingly, this entire arrange-

35 Eadem, *Struggle over Identity. The Official and the Alternative "Belarussianness"*, Central European University Press, Budapest–New York 2010, p. 81–82.

ment was largely satisfactory to the ruling regime, which could continue to reproduce and politically instrumentalise Soviet and post-Soviet clichés about protecting the nation from dangerous nationalists.[36]

The post-election protests of 2006 revealed, for the first time, the growing *asynchrony* between the ideological needs of an increasingly youthful society and the political-cultural offer formulated by both the pro-government and opposition elites.[37] After 2006, the emerging dichotomy in Belarusian socio-political discourse effectively politicised the two strategies of postcolonial nationalism: that of acceptance (of the colonial legacy) and that of imitation (referring to the European heritage and the nation-building, transformational model of post-communist nationalism). Another important factor that contributed to the consolidation of the elite dichotomy and social asynchrony was the fact that the former revivalist nationalism – characterised by its references to historical conceptions of symbols and community – lacked a stable institutional foundation and thus was realised largely through performative acts. These were manifested in moments of social mobilisation, street protests, and later in digital space.

As a result, the non-institutional performativity of ethnic nationalism (understood as revivalist or imitative) became a key element of resistance strategies against the political regime on the one hand, and a mode of *guerrilla* survival within the intellectual and cultural opposition on the other. This form of nationalism cyclically reappeared in Belarus during successive election cycles in 2010, 2015, and 2020.

A tragic paradox of Belarusian ethnocultural nationalism lies in the fact that, as it gradually stabilised into a political and identity project for parts of the elite, it began to resemble a kind of separatist project, both concerning Russia's neo-imperial ideologies and the consolidation strategies

36 *Выступление Президента Беларуси на торжественном собрании, посвященном Дню Независимости*, "Президент Республики Беларусь" [online], 2 VII 2012 [accessed: 15 III 2025]: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vystuplenie-prezidenta-belarusi-na-torzhestvennom-sobranii-posvjaschennom-dnju-nezavisimosti-5796>; *Послание Президента Республики Беларусь А. Г. Лукашенко белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию Республики Беларусь "Благополучие родной земли – дело всех и каждого"*, "Pravo" [online], 23 IV 2009 [accessed: 15 III 2025]: <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P009p0001>.

37 For more, see: A. Saifullayeu, *Is Decolonization...*

of the Belarusian power elites.[38] Referring to Eriksen, one can draw an analogy with Breton nationalism within the French egalitarian national model.[39] Like the Breton case, with its political aspirations, Belarusian ethnic nationalism is closely tied to efforts to revive language, traditional culture, and political rights. Naturally, one must account for the specific context of a post-Soviet state and the influence of aggressive Russian neo-colonialism.

The performative eruption of 2020 and its consequences

The events of 2020 significantly altered the Belarusian regime's strategy toward society, particularly in terms of constructing a coherent sense of communal identity. The socio-political crisis that unfolded in the second half of 2020 revealed a high level of social consolidation and, at the same time, the ideological inefficiency of the regime during a moment of crisis, specifically one exacerbated by neglect of social policy. Notably, this period coincided with the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, the 2020 protests marked the breakdown of the previously discussed social contract. The state effectively ceased to perform its protective functions – failing, for instance, to respond adequately to the pandemic – and this generated a solidarity-based reaction and grassroots consolidation. These new communal relationships transcended institutional limitations and actively developed within the digital sphere.[40]

38 It is important to note here that different strategies of nationalism produce a model of dichotomous national identity. The political potential of revivalist nationalism is a direct effect of the elites' opposition first to the Soviet system, and later to the authoritarian system, while the egalitarian nationalism of the authorities often drew upon it for its cultural autonomism and even for a discursive ethnic separatism (see, for example, above mentioned the phenomenon of soft Belarusianisation) vis-à-vis the former metropole, with the aim of further political self-assertion and the preservation of subjectivity in relation to Russia.

39 Th. H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity…*, p. 132–133.

40 See: M. Rust, *Białoruski protest z 2020 r. w sieci. Przegrały elity, wygrało społeczeństwo?*, "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 2021, t. 74, nr 2, p. 65–87: <https://doi.org/10.35757/SM.2021.74.2.06> [accessed: 15 III 2025]; A. Saifullayeu, *Strategy of Language Resistance in Telegram during the Belarusian Civic Movement (Summer 2020 – Winter 2021)*, "Digital Icons" 2023, vol. 22, p. 45–63; A. Oumanova, *Analogue Dictatorship against Digital Multitude*, "Digital Icons" 2023, vol. 22, p. 1–22; О. Шпарага, *У революции женское лицо. Случай Беларуси*, Erste Stiftung, Vienna 2021;

The protests were preceded by the gradual collapse, under the pressure of pandemic-induced crisis, of the normative social order regulating the relationship between society and the state. This triggered various forms of grassroots social mobilisation – digital as well as performative. The 2020 protests constituted a profound manifestation of the existing asynchrony between the elites – both governmental and opposition – and society, which revealed not only its political agency but also its flexibility in terms of identity and information practices.[41] This was particularly pronounced in the first two phases of the protest.

The phase of mass post-election protests (August 9–11, 2020) became a catalyst for a prolonged performative phase, not only in terms of physical mobilisation but also in shaping the language of protest, both online and in the real world. The performative phase (August–December 2020) was characterised by grassroots, inclusive forms of communal identity that were not fully rooted in the ethnocultural nationalism of opposition elites. Instead, they absorbed and refracted diverse horizontal declarations of belonging – equitable, participatory, and non-hierarchical. The protest's language and strategies were founded on a horizontal structure of solidarity-based relationships and performative practices.[42]

The final stage – one that continues to shape identity politics today – was the counterrevolutionary phase (September 2020 to the present). This involved a comprehensive set of repressive strategies aimed at suppressing all manifestations of protest. The result of the regime's counterrevolution was the collapse of the egalitarian nationalist project that had once functioned as part of preventive authoritarianism. By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, this form of governance had gradually mutated into

A. Rudnik, *Co-Option of Technology: Digital Repression and Legitimation Strategies of the Belarusian Regime*, "Communist and Post-Communist Studies" 2024, vol. 57, No. 4, p. 28–55.

41 For more, see: N. Douglas, *Belarus: From the Old Social Contract to a New Social Identity*, Zentrum für Osteuropa- und internationale Studien, Berlin 2020 (ZOiS Report, 6): <https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/3-Publikationen/ZOiS_Reports/2020/ZOiS_Report_6_2020.pdf> [accessed: 10 VI 2025].

42 A. Astapova [et al.], *Authoritarian Cooptation of Civil Society: The Case of Belarus*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2022, vol. 74, No. 1, p. 1–30; M. Gabowitsch, *Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination*, "Slavic Review" 2021, vol. 80, No. 1, p. 27–37.

electoral autocracy[43] – a system that, rather than requiring citizens to accept the regime's ideological conventions, merely demanded political disengagement or apoliticism. In other words, an individual was not required to adopt the regime's ideological conventions to be considered part of the community; apoliticism or non-engagement was sufficient.[44]

The Belarusian revolution and subsequent counterrevolution reflect a growing disconnect (asynchrony) between society and the nation-building strategies of both ruling and opposition elites. The counterrevolution marked a shift in the regime's approach to inclusive identities. Formerly egalitarian nationalism gave way to a narrowly defined ideological framework, which – three decades after the USSR's collapse – has taken on a distinctly reactionary character. After the war in Ukraine began, internal identity pluralism was further replaced by a neo-colonial discourse aligning Belarus with imperial narratives.

The post-national character of the 2020 protests embodied a performative expression of Belarusian society's fragmented identity.[45] However, this post-national adaptability largely existed and developed partially autonomously concerning the dichotomy of Belarusianness embedded in the concepts of political elites even before the 2020 crisis. It was manifested, for example, in the semiotic flexibility of Belarusian society during political crises, as Maryia Rohava noted in 2019.[46]

Regardless, it is worth stressing once more that political elites, including the opposition, failed to understand or engage with this postcolonial awakening, which went beyond the traditional binary political and cultural frameworks in Belarus. Political leaders (during the performative phase already situated abroad)[47] were unable to respond institutionally or struc-

43 More about using the term, see: P. Stykow, *Der lange Abschied vom Bac'ka. Lukašenkas Popularität und ihr Niedergang*, "Osteuropa" 2020, Jg. 70, H. 10/11, p. 107–125.

44 A. Astapova [et al.], *Authoritarian…*

45 A. Engelking, *O białoruskiej rewolucji z perspektywy antropolożki wsi*, [in:] *Odkrywając Białoruś… 65-lecie białorutenistyki na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim*, red. R. Kaleta, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2023, p. 185.

46 M. Rohava, *The Politics of State Celebrations in Belarus*, "Nations and Nationalism" 2020, vol. 26, p. 883–890.

47 This statement does not consider politicians who were preemptively imprisoned by the regime before or immediately after the elections.

turally to these pluralist identity declarations. The reason was the accelerated need to finalise the consolidation, institutionalisation, and bureaucratisation of the opposition,[48] which in the long run was disproportionate to the domestic political challenges and the geopolitical situation surrounding Belarus and the region.

Although it should be noted, one of the key achievements of the protests was the intensive institutionalisation of the civil society sector, which largely reflects a post-national social convention. Both older and newer civil society initiatives, though perceived by the authorities as part of the opposition, proved during the 2020 protests to be largely chaotic and unsystematic.[49] However, in the counter-revolutionary phase, this symbiosis gradually underwent bureaucratisation, contributing to a reduction of asynchrony, as these civic organisations continued to operate actively at the grassroots level.

Nevertheless, in the *longue durée*, it is still premature to assert that opposition elites at various levels will be able to fully articulate a coherent response to the strong post-national declaration expressed by society in 2020. After many years of counterrevolutionary repression, this emerging post-national pluralism is once again being politically marginalised within the prevailing narratives of collective cultural or national construction of the discourse. At the same time, however, the symbolic potential laid down in 2020 continues to serve as political capital for Belarusian elites on both sides of the barricades.

Conclusion and hypotheses

The concepts of nation, nationalism, and ethnicity in Belarus have long been shaped by two dominant epistemological traps. Western narratives have portrayed Belarus as an unfinished nation lacking modernity, while Russian perspectives have reduced it to an ethnographic variant of Russianness. To move beyond these limitations, nationalism and

48 On the accelerated mobilisation of opposition elites in the phases of coalescence and bureaucratisation, see: T. Kulakevich, J. Kubik, *Anti-Authoritarian Learning: Prospects for Democratization in Belarus Based on a Study of Polish Solidarity*, "Nationalities Papers" 2023, vol. 51, No. 4, p. 823–837.

49 E. Bindman, T. Chulitskaya, *Explaining...*

ethnicity must be understood more broadly. This requires accounting for colonial legacies, elite authoritarian strategies, and fragmented postcolonial identities.

Analysing Belarusian nation-building through a postcolonial lens involves several key components. First comes the role of the autocratic regime, including its historical origins, elite motivations, generational dynamics, and geopolitical positioning. The ruling elites in Belarus have shown a greater capacity to read and adapt to social conditions. They respond not only by adjusting policies but also by deploying repressive measures when long-term societal changes threaten the regime's legitimacy. This challenges typical postcolonial assumptions about nation-building and points to a more complex model of political control and adaptation tied to nation and ethnicity formation.

Second is the oppositional identity discourse, shaped largely by anti-Soviet narratives and promoted by opposition elites. While intended to offer an alternative national vision, this revivalist nationalism has become rigid and conservative over the last 30 years. It lacks strong institutional support and sustainable frameworks, weakening its ability to maintain a consistent national identity.

Third is the ambivalent nature of postcolonial identity itself, visible in both institutional and grassroots expressions. This identity follows an acceptance or imitation logic and is influenced by ongoing neo-colonial dynamics, global cultural trends, and macro-regional affiliations. The interplay of these forces creates a fragmented and unstable foundation for national identity formation in Belarus.

Therefore, by way of conclusion, this text proposes three hypotheses, all of which require more precise empirical validation in the future:

1. Belarusian nationalism can be seen as a product of elite strategies shaped by two postcolonial approaches to ethnicity and nation – acceptance of colonial origins and imitation of Western ethnonational models. The ruling elites developed an egalitarian, colonial-rooted nationalism with a strategy of autonomous ethnicity. After 2020, this shifted toward a reactionary form demanding loyalty. In contrast, the opposition promotes ethnocultural nationalism grounded in anti-Soviet discourse, increasingly detached from real identity conditions both domestically and in exile.

2. Both official and oppositional elite strategies are largely asynchronous with the evolving political, cultural, and intellectual needs of soci-

ety. The state has replaced earlier pluralism with imposed traditionalism, while revivalist nationalism remains bound to a narrow ethnocultural vision that fails to resonate with diverse identities.

3. The identity awakening of 2020 exposed the limits of both state-led banal nationalism and oppositional revivalism. New post-national, performative, and pluralistic forms of community emerged, undermining the foundational narratives of both camps. This rupture led to the formation of a decentralised, non-discursive Belarusian communal identity, expressed through feminist, digital, regional, solidaristic, and performative modes.[50]

In conclusion, nationalism in post-Soviet Belarus is best understood as a layered, multifaced phenomenon shaped by Soviet colonial legacies, authoritarian adaptation, and discontinuous identity trajectories. The Belarusian nation exists, but in a contested form, where ethnicity, ideology, and sovereignty remain deeply entangled in postcolonial ambivalence.

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50 See: A. Kazharski, *Belarus' New Political Nation? 2020 Anti-Authoritarian Protests as Identity Building*, "New Perspectives" 2021, vol. 29, No. 1, p. 69–79.

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