

ABOUT THE BELARUSIANS AND RUSSIANS IN BELARUS – REFLECTIONS ON THE BELARUSIAN SOCIETY

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This article presents contemporary Belarusian society and focuses on the Russian minority and their place in Belarus today. The author's reflections are based on current Polish, Belarusian and Russian literature on the subject as well as on ethnographic material collected during ethnographic research conducted in Minsk and surrounding areas between 1997 and 2000.

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Artykuł poświęcony jest współczesnemu społeczeństwu białoruskiemu. Zawiera również odpowiedź na pytanie o miejsce Rosjan w tym społeczeństwie. Podstawę do refleksji stanowi współczesna literatura polsko, białorusko i rosyjskojęzyczna oraz wypowiedzi rozmówców, zebrane podczas badań etnologicznych, prowadzonych w Mińsku i okolicach w latach 1997–2000.

Key words: Belarusians, ethnic minority, power relations, the Republic of Belarus, Russians, society, Belarus-Russia relations

The changes in Central and Eastern Europe¹ brought about by the collapse of the USSR resulted in the emergence of the former republics as sovereign and independent states. Among them was the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR); recognised as sovereign in 1990², although it was not until a year later that it was granted the status of an independent and sovereign state, the Republic of Belarus (RB). Its political status was confirmed by its recognition by Western countries³ and by its first presidential elections (1994), resulting in Alexander Lukashenka becoming head of state.

¹ I apply the concept of Central and Eastern Europe, as historians do, to the areas of Europe which for a number of centuries belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to the historic kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary, as well as to Prussia and Livonia (Kłoczowski 2000, 7–13).

² In June 1990, the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was adopted, which forced the Supreme Council of Belarus to follow suit (Szybieka 2002, 426).

³ Poland was the first state to recognize the independence of Belarus (Szybieka 2002, 430).

Belarusians were however, with the exception of a small group of intellectuals, not prepared for the fundamental changes which accompanied the political, economic and social transformation. This was reflected, for instance, in their indifference to Lukashenka's campaign against national symbols and the Belarusian language. Belarusian national ideas were perceived as having been imposed on them, as had the previously promoted Soviet way of life. The difference, however, lay in the fact that the adoption of the Russian language and culture meant prestige, while the Belarusian language carried the stigma of rusticity and of smacking of hostility to the authorities. A complicating factor was the deteriorating economic situation, as a result of which the primary challenge facing the Belarusian people was their struggle for physical survival. Nonetheless, a new chapter had been opened in the history of Belarus.

In this context, it is interesting to take a closer look at Belarusian society and its characteristics, as well as to examine the position occupied by Russians in it. Reflections on this topic will be based on contemporary literature in Polish, Belarusian and Russian⁴, and analysis of ethnographic data collected during my fieldwork conducted in Minsk and its surrounding area in the years 1997–2000⁵.

When describing Belarusian society, my interviewees emphasized first of all its diversification. They took into account criteria such as: ethnic – it was pointed out that it is not only Belarusians who live in Belarus (more on this below); linguistic – that there are in fact many Belarusians who do not speak the Belarusian language; religious – that there are believers and nonbelievers as well as Orthodox and non-Orthodox believers; location – there are rural and urban inhabitants; political and social stance – there are those influenced by or independent of Communist ideology. They also pointed out the distinctions that exist between the elite and the so-called non-elite average, 'ordinary' Belarusian. This last distinction usually provided the starting point for their assessment of Belarusian society. When describing the elite, the interviewees commented on their small number, which they put down to the tragic course of history resulting in the extermination of many of their representatives. Attention was also drawn to the process of denationalization, resulting from being educated in the Russian language and the promotion of Russian culture. On the topic of

⁴ Some of the authors quoted, such as Nelli Bekus, Valery Bulhakau, Jury Lichtarovič, or Zachar Szybieka (Šybieka) might be known to Western readers, as they publish in English.

⁵ The field research was conducted by the author within the framework of the research project "Białoruskość Białorusinów końca XX w." [The 'Belarusianness' of the Belarusians at the end of the 20th century]. The results were used in her doctoral dissertation entitled: *Postaci tożsamości narodowej. Wizerunek Białorusinów końca XX wieku, na podstawie badań z Mińska i okolic* [Examples of national identity. How Belarusians were perceived at the end of the 20th century. On the basis of research conducted in Minsk and its surroundings], written under the supervision of Prof. Lech Mróz. It was presented and defended at the Warsaw University in 2004. Although over fifteen years have passed since the research was conducted, the data is still as relevant today as it was then. The author has encountered similar opinions being expressed in her more recent visits to Belarus.

“average” Belarusians, the interviewees were more outspoken and often critical. Their comments focused on three major themes: people’s attitude to land, education, and the society’s Soviet character.

The first theme involved the claim that a characteristic feature of the Belarusian is his/her attachment to the land. This observation can be regarded as proof that the Belarusians’ perception of themselves as a peasant society is still valid⁶, despite official data showing that Belarus is becoming a more urban society:

“An upward trend has been observed in the urban population in Belarus. In 1999 (according to census data) the percentage of town residents amounted to 69.3% of the population whilst data for 2009 showed it rising to 74.3%. The rural population decreased correspondingly from 34.6% in 1999 to 25.7% in 2009” (Novye 2011, 4).

These figures, however, do not have to imply that changes are taking place in social stratification, or are impacting on attitudes towards the land. It is worth recalling “that until the war [the Second World War – K.W.] Belarusians lived predominantly in villages” (K.W. Archives. Interviews 5, 66, 90)⁷, with towns being inhabited mainly by Jews, Russians and Poles⁸. After World War II, however, with the development of industry and the consequent expansion of urban centres, the situation changed, because “if a man from a village wanted to change his status, raise it, he had to move to town and break away from his roots” (K.W. Archives. Interviews 5, 9). It should also be kept in mind that the Republic of Belarus is one of the few former Soviet republics that failed to implement agricultural reforms involving the dissolution of collective and state farms, which continue to operate today. Small plots of land (the so-called *sotki*), parcelled out from the farming land of the Kolkhoz, remain at the disposal of families. In addition to these plots, in an initiative dating from the 1990s, there are also less numerous, private plots known as *dachas* in existence. In times of recession, both have played an important role as a source of food:

“one wants to have a piece of land to be able to do something on it (...) such are the times that people have to work like mad on their plot or dacha so there is something to eat” (K.W. Archives. Interview 2).

⁶ The perception of Belarusians primarily as peasants was characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also in the literature of Belarusian studies, their peasant origin is indicated as a distinguishing feature of the Belarusian people.

⁷ The numbers in brackets refer to the interviews which were recorded and transcribed. All of them are in the author’s archives. 95 people were interviewed, of whom 80 declared themselves to be Belarusians. 15 did not, 11 of whom were Russians. The interviews were conducted in Belarusian and Russian, and less often in the so-called *trasyanka*, a popular Belarusian-Russian interlingua. To meet the requirements of this paper, they were translated into English.

⁸ According to G. Ā. Kaspàrovìč (2001, 421), before World War II the population of towns were made up of 80% Jews (– this means that from entire Jewish population living in what is now Belarus, almost 80% lived in cities, while only 20% in rural areas), 34% Russians, 21% Ukrainians, 20% Poles, and only 8% Belarusians.

Moreover, the land has a value of its own though not so much because of the proprietary rights it confers⁹, but more for simply existing, regardless of the political system prevailing:

“It is characteristic of the Belarusians that they hold on to their native land so strongly as if it was the only stable thing that exists” (K.W. Archives. Interview 39).

What attracts attention in the above statement is the phrase “hold on to their native land”, which can also be understood as a *sine qua non* for belonging to, or being included in, the community. The interviewees argued, “to be a Belarusian means first of all to live on this land and be part of this community” (K.W. Archives. Interview 94). Thus the Belarusians’ attachment to the land involves something more than just working on the land; it is the bond between man and the territory on which he/she was born, lives and works, a bond which determines his/her life, but also his/her nationality: “To be a Belarusian means that one was born and died on Belarusian land” (K.W. Archives. Interview 36).

The second theme discernible in their description of Belarusian society concerned education. We were told: “our Belarusian society is not well educated, most are ignorant people” (K.W. Archives. Interview 53). This excerpt can be interpreted as an evaluation of the level of education, but also as an indication of the society’s ignorance. On matters of education, it is worth noting that universal education has been in existence on the territory of Belarus since 1921¹⁰. When evaluating it, however, the interviewees referred primarily to the Belarusian system of education after World War II, which they had experienced themselves or knew from the experiences of their relatives. In principle, everyone agreed that the level of education in Belarus was low, as evidenced by the problems the average Belarusian experienced when attempting to answer questions about Belarusian history and its Belarusian heroes. It was argued that this originated from BSSR times and was the result of Soviet propaganda, which distorted people’s knowledge of their own history, culture and language. Respondents also added

⁹ It is worth noting that private ownership of land in Belarus was a rare phenomenon, experienced mainly by the inhabitants of the western lands of Belarus before World War II, or today (post-1989). As a rule, land in Belarus was collectivized. Collectivization of farms in Belarusia began before World War II – the eastern areas of Belarus were collectivized in the 1930s, and western Belarus after 1939. This process was intensified in the years 1949–1952 (Szybieka 2002, 378–381).

¹⁰ The system of universal education was introduced in 1921–1922 and was initially understood as compulsory education for adults (primarily Communist education); after 1926, it became universal. It should be noted that the development of education was supported by clubs, people’s halls and reading rooms organized in almost every village, where the programme of the Communist Party and the policies of the Soviet state were popularized (in Russian because visiting teams lacked knowledge of the Belarusian language) (Głogowska 1996, 109, 128). Currently, the Belarusian education system consists of pre-school education (optional), nine-years (mandatory) primary school education supplemented with – a two-year secondary or vocational school (college), and finally tertiary.

that present-day education differs little from that in Soviet times. As a confirmation of this, one may point to Zachar Šybieka's (2011) analysis of the history textbooks currently used in Belarusian schools. He underlines the tendency for textbook authors to confuse national and Soviet themes in Belarusian history, and to evaluate them subjectively. As an example, one can cite after Šybieka the figure of Konstanty Kalinowski, who sometimes is presented as a Polish insurgent, like in the history textbook for 10th-grade students (Traščanok *et al* 2008), and another time he and his activities are presented neutrally; as an activist in an uprising on the territories of Belarus, like in the history textbook for 11th-grade students (Traščanok *et al* 2009). This state of affairs has been interpreted as having arisen from the eclectic historical policy being pursued in Belarus today (Šybieka 2011, 711). It is worth noting that this is not only visible in history textbooks, but also in the naming of streets and monuments (those remaining from the time of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, as well as newly-erected ones). As a result,

“the majority of the population remains indifferent to the issue of heroes, reacting to them mechanically, as if they meant nothing to them. According to data from 2009, about 40% of the citizens of Belarus do not have any knowledge about their national heroes. There is also a lack of understanding how important historical heroes are or could be for the public. This applies both to the state authorities and to average citizens” (Šybieka 2011, 711).

All of this leads to the conclusion, voiced by one of the interviewees that:

“Belarusians raised and educated on the periphery of Russian culture are a threat to the modern Belarusian society” (K.W. Archives. Interview 36).

This policy regarding history goes hand in hand with the official ideology of Belarus since the year 2000¹¹, whose aim is to create in Belarus a social welfare state which is unique in not being susceptible to external influences (Lukianov 2006, 345). Achieving this goal is becoming possible thanks to the introduction of patriotic and civic education. On 14th February 2006, the Ministry of Education issued a “programme for the education of children and teenagers” (Bernatowicz 2010, 90), however prior to this (1st September 2004), children in the first grade of primary schools had been given at the start of the school year, a textbook entitled *Belarus – our Homeland. A Gift from the President of the Republic of Belarus Alyaksandr Ryhoravich Lukashenka to First-Grade Pupils*. This book is also the first textbook on the basis of which lessons about Belarus are conducted. In the teachers book one can read that its goal is

¹¹ It is worth noting that the so-called “ideological stream” has been in place since 2003. Its tasks and objectives have been approved by scholars from the Chair of Ideology and Political Science, Academy of Management under the President of the Republic of Belarus. Also, Act No. 111 “On the training of staff responsible for ideological work in the Republic of Belarus” was adopted on 20 February 2004 (Bernatowicz 2010, 88).

“to develop in pupils feelings of love and respect for their country, a sense of pride in their homeland, and awaken in them curiosity about the history of their nation” (*Belarus – our Homeland* 2007, 4).

When looking at the book’s contents, one finds that even though it contains themes from the history and literature of Belarus (not just from the time of the BSSR), the very selection of issues corresponds to Soviet propaganda (along with its characteristic rhetoric) These issues include:

– heroism during World War II:

“The most terrible and devastating experience was World War II, in which every third inhabitant of Belarus lost his/her life (...) we should not forget those who did not spare their own lives to defend the freedom and independence of our Motherland” (*Belarus – our Homeland* 2007, 8);

– diligence¹²:

“We can be proud of our fellow citizens who, by doing their work with dedication, glorify our homeland. These are farmers who have done everything they can to gather good crops. Honest work is done by Belarusians in factories and on construction sites. The country’s economy is today oriented towards the needs of people and creating appropriate living conditions” (*Belarus – our Homeland* 2007, 8);

– sporting achievements¹³:

“A lot of attention is devoted in our country to the development of sports (...). This is a very important matter because the people of Belarus should take care of their health and be physically fit. Only a healthy person can, through dedicated work, make our country famous and contribute to its being ever more beautiful and strong” (*Belarus – our Homeland* 2007, 8).

A similar “gift” was prepared for young people in secondary schools. Since 2007 young people who turn 16, along with identity documents/passports, receive a book with two CDs, entitled *I – a citizen of the Republic of Belarus*, which offers, in a condensed form, comprehensive information on the current law, including the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with commentaries; the CDs features recordings of the most famous pieces of Belarusian classical music (see: *Kniga* 2007).

Yet it is not only the authorities that perceive the younger generation as an important part of Belarusian society. My interlocutors also pointed out that young people provide an opportunity to rebuild or rather create a twenty-first-century Belarusian society because: “the young generation is focused on modernization, and not on tradition” (K.W. Archives. Interview 45). This applies equally to civic-social as well as to national issues. It was emphasized that young people’s experiences and perception of the world are more modern because more opportunities enabled them to travel “freely”

¹² It is worth noting that this is one of the characteristics of the stereotypical Belarusian (for more on this, see Ancipenka 1995; Dubânecki 1995).

¹³ Incidentally, it is the achievements of Belarusian athletes along with the figure of President Lukashenka and the policies pursued by him, that make Belarus ‘visible’ in the international arena.

(mostly beyond their western border) and they have access to the Internet. Sociologists, too, point to this qualitative change, arguing that:

“Not only the ethnic, but also the Belarusian identity of young people is taking on a new character. It is developing (and it is very significant and important) on the basis of historical knowledge, on their noticing the manifestations of ethno-cultural diversity. Young people often believe that Belarusians can and should be proud of their history and their ethno-cultural uniqueness, and at the same time should know and exercise their civil rights, fulfil their duties, be involved in the life of their country, and regard themselves as citizens” (Navumienka 2010, 257).

Young people it has been shown in opinion polls are more in favour of joining the European Union than of being joined to Russia. Belarusian analysts argue that:

“This is not a new phenomenon. (...) In a 1997 national public opinion survey, more than 54% of young respondents preferred a European-style democracy, while in the entire sample only 42% chose this option. (...) A nationwide survey in 2004 showed that the pro-European orientation among people aged 18–25 was twice as large as among the older generation. 51% of young respondents answered that membership of the European Union would be more advantageous for Belarus, while only 34% favoured a union with Russia. (...) According to a poll by the NOVAK Agency from October 2008, 43% of young Belarusians had positive sentiments for the EU, while 32% had similar towards Russia (Vidanava 2009, 107).

This continuing high percentage of young people opting for the Western model of life may signal that social change in Belarus has already begun. We should not forget, however, that only some have experienced how people live on the other side of the western border of Belarus. Others may not have had such an opportunity, or simply may be uninterested. Was it this segment of the young generation that our interviewees had in mind when they said:

“They have no goal in life, maybe except for a hamburger and expensive clothes, which you need to have to be acknowledged in company” (K.W. Archives. Interview 11).

It is difficult to say. It must be remembered that all young people living in today's Belarusian state, are exposed to Belarusian propaganda, which like during BSSR times is anti-western (Waszkiewicz 2008, 81). Therefore, they accept the vision of the West presented to them and are “afraid that the EU ‘will enslave them’ or ‘turn independent Belarus into a puppet state’” (Vidanava 2009, 108).

In the description and characteristics of Belarusian society one can find another important theme – already signalled above – namely its Soviet ‘stamp’. This refers to the times when Soviet nationhood¹⁴ was being shaped within the framework of the

¹⁴ The article refers to the period after 1945, however it must be noted that the eastern part of Belarus, i.e. the BSRR, had belonged to the USSR since 1922, while the western part was annexed later, in September 1939. From 1921 to 1939, the western part of Belarus was part of the Second Polish Republic and greatly influenced by Polish politics and culture.

Soviet Union, which Belarusians were part of, and to the Soviet ideology, which they were influenced by:

“Belarusians are on the most part Soviet people who have been brainwashed into believing that their culture, language and history are worse, retarded, there’s nothing good about them” (K.W. Archives. Interview 9).

Many contemporary researchers and analysts indicate that they are still under this influence, even though the Soviet Union ceased to exist over 20 years ago. This influence is said to still permeate because the ideas, values, rhetoric and methods of operation associated with it still remain (as evidenced by the aforementioned patriotic and civic education). The soviet features of Belarusians also pose difficulties in somebody endeavouring to answer the question whether or not the Belarusians are a nation. To hedge their bets, some commentators describe, Belarus as an example of “a delayed nation-building process” (Janowicz 2001, 89; Radzik 2000, 259), or “an unfinished national project” (Bulhakau 2001, 80). It is also pointed out that “the society still functions under the so-called conditions of unspecified identity, where several models of identity coexist, collide and mutually permeate” (Lichtarovič 2009, 211). Only a few like Adrian Severin – The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Belarus – are prepared to state bluntly (a report of March 2005) that the Belarusians “do not have their own identity” (Lichtarovič 2009, 202).

During my research I came across opinions similar to those above, supporting one of two views. Some of my interviewees said that Belarusians are not a nation, which according to them derives from “an elementary lack of understanding” (K.W. Archives. Interviews 31, 35), “and loss of a sense of belonging to their own nation” (K.W. Archives. Interview 45).

It is worth noting that although denied the term “nation”, in the light of the above statement, Belarusians once were one. This stopped because of their socio-political immaturity resulting from the society’s Sovietness, which has revealed itself – it is added – during the successive victories of Lukashenka in the presidential elections, but also in the lack of protest against the referenda conducted in 1995 and 1996¹⁵.

Others in turn point to the process involved in the formation of the Belarusian national consciousness, and thus of the nation, both dependent on state policy. This policy – endorsed by President Lukashenka and his political base – implements a national project and a national idea which is based on the experiences and achieve-

¹⁵ The referendum of 14th May 1995 approved, among other matters, a return to the old state symbols (75.1% votes in favour), equal status of the Belarusian and Russian languages (83.3% votes in favour), an endorsement of the President’s actions towards a union with Russia – (83.3% votes in favour). The referendum of 24th Nov. 1996, in turn, endorsed the changing of the Independence Day of Belarus from July 27th to July 3rd – the day of liberation of Minsk from German occupation in 1944 (88.2% votes in favour); a ban on free trade in land (82.9% votes in favour). It should be emphasized that the turnout was as high as ca 80% of the population (Szybička 2002, 463).

ments of the Soviet era. These experiences and achievements are close to the hearts of many of the residents of Belarus, who remember those times and understand the contents (the signs and symbols) which evoke that period (Bekus 2012, 345). It was often that I heard such opinions, uttered with nostalgia¹⁶:

“Formerly it was different, and today it’s just beyond words, everything’s changed; former Belarus was different – pleasant, you could ask your neighbour to help you with a problem, and there’s no such thing now (...) everyone only cares for themselves” (K.W. Archives. Interviews 2, 50).

But when one takes a closer look at the interviewees’ remarks about the Soviet era, one can detect a critical note. A case in point being the interviewee who said that the Soviet system caused a split in people’s attitudes, the emergence of “two truths”:

“For as long as I can remember, there were two truths: one for the street – an official one, and another for your home and family – a private one. Even children knew that you weren’t to say outside the walls of your home what you’d heard there” (K.W. Archives. Interview 2).

One of the reasons for this attitude was thought to be intimidation: “Belarusians have been so muzzled that we ourselves don’t know who we are” (K.W. Archives. Interviews 2, 56). Yet another factor was Soviet propaganda, which focused on three elements. First of all, it involved language: “In those days they called the Russian language our native language” (K.W. Archives. Interview 52). The same was true of culture as only Soviet culture counted. Subordination to these guidelines was easier when one lived in town, the kind of life which most Belarusians aspired to:

“When I came to town, it was difficult for me at the beginning to switch to the different conditions and to the language, but once I decided that I wanted to live here, I also had to understand that what is mine is secondary, because what is most important here is Russian” (K.W. Archives. Interview 73).

“Being Belarusian was associated with the countryside – it was very offensive, insulting (...); it was as if they threw a stone at you (...) because the one who spoke Russian was a man of higher prestige, he was the boss, the one in charge” (K.W. Archives. Interviews 66, 5).

Secondly, the propaganda concerned history:

“Propaganda deformed the Belarusians’ awareness and took control of the history of the Belarusian statehood. It tried to prove that the state’s history began in the early 20th century” (K.W. Archives. Interview 45).

“Until 1991 Belarusian historiography promoted the stereotype of a Belarusian forever enslaved and subjugated” (K.W. Archives. Interview 54).

Thirdly, it concerned Belarus being perceived as just a region of a larger homeland, the Soviet Union. To answer the question “What is sovietness?”, Jerzy Waszkiewicz

¹⁶ This nostalgia often turns into a specific “defensive system at the times of an accelerated rhythm of life and historical upheavals” (Boym 2002, 274).

points to the activity of spying on people as one more tool useful in the formation of a new Soviet person. He explains: “Fear, psychosis and spy-mania accelerated the atomisation of the society, subordinating it increasingly to state control” (Waszkiewicz 2008, 81).

The interviewees in turn talked about it clearly and directly: “the Soviet times damaged people” (K.W. Archives. Interview 2). So when the Soviet Union collapsed:

“A huge number of people felt stripped of something. They don’t have, and never did, a system of values that could replace party instructions. And even though there weren’t among them many, so to speak, ideological Communists, they had just got used to the fact that there were certain rules of the game in public life” (K.W. Archives. Interview 5).

Eliminated values were not replaced leaving people discomforted. Literature on the subject, describes this as a vacuum,

“a specific kind of normative-axiological vacuum. The previous ideals and values were, in the minds of many people, discredited, and the new ones have not yet been formed” (Dubieniecki 1999, 51).

According to our interviewees, this is a huge Belarusian problem. Lukashenka has noticed it too:

“Our nation is not used to living its own life. It has got accustomed to being given things by somebody else, to being brought things. It has got used to living in a socialist state. It believes that many of the roles which should be performed by people themselves, by families on their own, should be performed by the State” (Lukashenka 2003, 3, quoted after Usau 2007, 45).

However, despite the implied criticism this statement contains, he has taken advantage of the situation to consolidate his power.

One of the elements of official policy in Belarus emphasizes “the importance of Soviet heritage, including the cultural, symbolic, institutional, social and political [aspects of this heritage – K.W.]” (Bekus 2012, 144). This in turn has had an influence on Belarusian-Russian relations. In this context, it is worth returning to the opinions of those of our interviewees who, when describing Belarusian society, stressed its ethnic diversity. They said:

“There are many non-Belarusians living in Belarus, the most numerous among them, about a million, being Russians, and there are other nationalities, too” (K.W. Archives. Interview 15).

Belarusian society, according to official data from the 2009 census, is made up of just over 10 million people. 84% are Belarusians and 16% are representatives of more than 140 different ethnic groups. The largest of these are Russians (8%) followed by Poles (3%), Ukrainians (2%), and Jews (0.1%) (Lokotko ed. 2012, 13). Belarus is often called a multiethnic state in which ethnic and religious tolerance prevails. The decisive factor concerning this has been:

“the geopolitical location of Belarus which determined the unique character of ethnocultural interaction between numerous nations throughout the entire history of ethnic Belarusians, up to when they won their own statehood” (Lokotko ed. 2012, 12).

Today, the whole issue of national minorities in the Republic of Belarus is regulated by the provisions of the Constitution of 1994, with amendments from 1996 (in particular Articles 14, 15, 16, 17, 22, 50, 51 and 52) and the provisions of the Law “On national minorities in the Republic of Belarus” dating from 11th November 1992, as amended in 2004. It should be pointed out here that although the term ‘minority’ appears in the title of this document, the definition adopted is very general and just says that

“representatives of minorities are those who permanently reside in the Republic of Belarus and have Belarusian citizenship, and who, because of their origin, language, culture and traditions, differ from the titular group” (Article 1).

No groups are named as having such a status. It is stated, however, that

“belonging to a national minority is the individual choice of the citizens of the Republic of Belarus” (Article 2).

It is clear from these documents that their binding principle is the equality of all citizens of the Republic of Belarus, regardless of their ethnic origin or duration of residence. Having laws on the statute books is one thing but implementing these laws is another and one only needs to look at the situation of Poles in Belarus or the unequal treatment of Belarusian- and Russian-speaking citizens to see that this implementation is sadly lacking.

According to census data, Russians¹⁷ constitute 8% of the total population of Belarus, which makes them one of the largest non-Belarusian groups in the country. This proportion remains unchanged (Lokotko ed. 2012, 207).

Historically, the Russian settlement on Belarusian lands dates back to the seventeenth century and the arrival of the Old Believers after they had split from the Russian Orthodox Church (Lokotko ed. 2012, 221). The next waves of settlers arrived in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries. One of the interviewees said that those who lived on Belarusian territory in Tsarist times were real Russians, in contrast to those who came later:

“The Russians who lived next to us Belarusians in the old days, they were good people. They too were persecuted if they had land because there was also *dvorianstvo* [gentry] among them. But later, when the Bolsheviks came, no words can describe it” (K.W. Archives. Interview 58).

It should be noted that those who arrived later were not always ethnic Russians, but as newcomers from the Soviet Union they were perceived as such. They were usually

¹⁷ One of the first among the few articles devoted to the Russians in Belarus is that by Wierzbowska 1999.

called *Ruskis*. This label, however, may refer not only to the Russians and non-Russians from the territories of the USSR, but also to Orthodox Christians. Thus the term *Ruski* is ambiguous, which poses a problem in interpreting our interview materials, in which there is often no precise indication which *Ruskis* the speaker had in mind.

Most interviewees had experienced contacts with the Russians who came to Belarus (then the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) after World War II. A large group among them were military personnel and their families. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these army men were allowed to choose where they wanted to be stationed, with the result being that many decided to remain in Belarus. Military settlements, sometimes called “military towns” because of their self-contained nature still continue to the present day in many Belarusian cities. To gain admission to them one had to have friends in high places. One of our interviewees mentioned that she would go shopping there because the shops offered a greater variety of goods (except, of course, for rationed commodities). Among the other occupational groups in Belarus, the most numerous were manual workers¹⁸, teachers, and administrative officials¹⁹. It should be added that although they came to the BSSR to work and initially may not have wanted to stay, in many cases that is what eventually happened. A decisive factor in their decision to stay was when they started a family. One of the policies of internationalization pursued in the Soviet Union was mixed marriages and its success in the BSSR influenced many people who came to stay. Proof of the success of the mixed marriage policy can be seen in the make up of our interviewing sample. The group consisted of 95 people, of whom 45% were the product of mixed marriages (most of them being Belarusian-Russian and Belarusian-Ukrainian – 36% each), while 29% of them had themselves opted for a mixed marriage (with Belarusian-Russian marriages representing 52%). Therefore, a statement from one of them: “The Russians are at home here! Just like us” (K.W. Archives. Interview 73) should come as no surprise.

In BSSR times and also today, “a feeling of affinity among the Slavs” was emphasized. As a result, there was no need to distinguish between Russians and Belarusians. It was explained that these are “fraternal nations, as it was before. Even today one can notice longings for a union of the Slavic peoples” (K.W. Archives. Interview 23).

¹⁸ In the years 1947–1953, about 90 thousand Belarusian labourers left the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and moved to the Russian Federative Republic (mainly to the Karelo-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic, the oblasts of Perm [Molotov] Chelyabinsk, Kaliningrad, Arkhangelsk, Amur, Irkutsk, Omsk, Tomsk, Tyumen, and to the Altaisky, Krasnoyarsky, Primorsky and Khabarovsk Krai). In their place, Russian labourers were sent to Belarus (Szybięka 2002, 371).

¹⁹ In the years 1945–1955, about a million Belarusians representing the social and professional elites were resettled, and in their place Russians were brought in. The Russians held positions in both the administration of the republic (in 1951 the government of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic consisted of 22 Russians, 9 Belarusians, 1 Georgian, and 1 Jew), districts and cities and towns, where in 1946 more than 90% of managers were replaced, as well as 83% of the directors of collective farms who were replaced with Russians (Mironowicz 1999, 183).

This “affinity” is based on ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural kinship. In fact, ethnic kinship dates back to the nineteenth century²⁰, but it was tapped into when “the Soviet nation”²¹ was being created within the USSR. Today, it provides the foundation stone for pro-Russian policy, which places Belarus at the periphery of the Russian metropolis and subordinates it politically and economically (Karp 1997, 16–17). This kinship also serves to account for the recognition of Russians as equal-status citizens of Belarus. Linguistic kinship, in turn, together with the russification policy pursued by the authorities, gives the Russian language a privileged status, even though according to the Constitution it should be on a par²² with Belarusian. It is interesting that although:

“Russia has a large potential for influence on the Belarusian society [and] according to the last census, for more than 90% of the population the language of everyday communication is Russian, which has significance for their identification with the Russian cultural area. [It] is Russia that has not yet deployed towards Belarus a conscious policy of *soft power*, building a close cultural proximity and cultural attractiveness and then using it to promote her own interests. Belarus is the only country in the Commonwealth of Independent States without a single operating Russkiy Mir Foundation centre, an organisation for the promotion of the Russian language and culture (while in the neighbouring Ukraine there are eight)” (Wierzbowska-Miazga 2013, 27–28).

Similarities also exist in the religious sphere, namely in regards to Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity. No one religion previously in the territory of Belarus was granted more privileges than any other but in 2002 an amendment was passed to the Law on freedom of conscience and religious organizations, which emphasized the primacy of the Orthodox Church²³. It should be noted, however, that the leading position of the Orthodox Church is not so much proof of “Slavic unity”, as it is of the administrative subordination of the Belarusian Orthodox Church²⁴ to the Moscow Patriarchate.

“Slavic affinity” was also emphasized in the cultural sphere. This was particularly evident in the era of the Soviet Union, when in parallel with the construction of a Soviet society, based on peasant and working class values, there were attempts to

²⁰ This refers to the popular at the time socio-political movement known as *Zapadnorusizm*. I assumed the existence of three nationalities: *vielikorusskaya* [lit. Great-Russian] (Russian), *maloruskaya* [lit. Little-Russian] (Ukrainian) and *zapadnoruska* [Western-Russian] (Belarusian), which were supposed to combine the joint Russian historical and cultural heritage.

²¹ Although the shaping of the ‘Soviet nation’ in the USSR was based on the Slavonic commonwealth, it did not entail equal powers for all members. Russians occupied a dominant place and this division of influence has remained to today, despite the fact that Russians might be a minority, as they are in Belarus.

²² Article 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994, as amended in 1996.

²³ In the Preamble to the constitution, the Orthodox Church is placed first. Then “the spiritual, cultural and historic role of the Catholic Church on the territory of Belarus” is mentioned, and also “the inseparability of Belarusian history from the history of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Denomination, Judaism, and Islam” (*Zakon* 2002, 3).

²⁴ In 1990, the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church was established, headed by the Synod led by the Metropolitan bishop of Minsk and Slutsk, the Patriarch of the Exarchate of the whole of Belarus. Since 25th Dec. 2013, this position is held by Pavel, former Metropolitan of Ryazan and Mikhailov.

create a common Soviet culture in all the republics whose aim was to reduce cultural diversity to the status of local folkloric or ethnographic curiosities. The Slavonic Bazaar²⁵, an annual event held in Vitebsk, can be viewed as a contemporary attempt to build a “community of culture”. It was originally intended as an international festival highlighting achievements in art. However, since 1999 only two countries have participated : Russia and Belarus, and as a result it is now perceived in the context of efforts to integrate the two countries.

As can be thus seen, Belarusians do not view Russians and Russia as: ‘external’ but instead view them as ‘within’ Belarus and constituting an integral part of Belarusian-ness” (Bekus 2012, 337).

Interestingly, though, for some of our interviewees the Russians and Belarusians do differ, and although they found it difficult to express these differences when pressed to do so they eventually came up with more than “there is a difference”. When asked to explain what that difference involved, they pointed mainly to features of character. When pressed further, they resorted to using opposition and contrast in getting their point across. Thus, if Belarusians were characterized by a lack of respect for themselves as a nation, by reticence, peacefulness and diligence, the Russians, conversely, were aware of their own worth, talkative, prone to aggressiveness, and workshy. Attempts were also made to distinguish Russians from Russia and those living in Belarus. The latter were defined simply as “mere shadows of those Russians who live in Moscow (...), they are similar to some of the Belarusians, who are like a formless mass” (K.W. Archives. Interview 17).

The former, in turn, were referred to as “Muscovites, those who live in Moscow”. This clearly indicates that the Russians are seen primarily as inhabitants of Moscow rather than of Russia. This may derive from the belief that Moscow is where “real” Russians live, but may also be the result of the aforementioned Soviet propaganda, which treated Moscow as the cornerstone of the Soviet Union (and after its fall, that of the Commonwealth of Independent States), while the Union republics, including the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, were its peripheries. This sense of belonging to the peripheries is also reflected in my interviewees’ opinions, especially when they said:

“I sometimes feel deprived when I hear that there’s Moscow and that’s where the Russians live, but we too are Russians, and yet it’s not Moscow but Belarus” (K.W. Archives. Interview 36).

This tone is also present in the Belarusian press (but not only).

An important aspect of this issue is the policy that has been pursued since the mid-1990s by the authorities of Belarus and Russia. It reveals a desire to return to the

²⁵ The Slavonic Bazaar culture festival has been held since 1992 (at the end of July). In 1995 it was put under the patronage of President Lukashenka. It presents singers, folk bands and groups, ballet groups and quasi-theatrical performances, concerts of classical and popular music, exhibitions, competitions and fairs of art, both high and folk. There are also competitions for child, teenage and adults performers.

“fraternal community of nations” because Belarus “was the only one not to betray the ideals of the unity of the Slavic peoples and seeks a rebirth of a mighty Slavic state” (Usau 2007, 46).

The evidence that such a policy is being implemented comes in the form of the successively declared Association of Russia and Belarus (2nd April 1996), the Union of Belarus and Russia (2nd April 1997), and the Union State of Belarus and Russia (December 1999). And even though ultimately not all of the assumptions of these agreements have been implemented, and the integration inherent in them has become a bargaining chip between President Lukashenka and especially President Vladimir Putin, the need for cooperation is still being emphasized. This is also mirrored in the two respective societies, the Russians and the Belarusians, which do not perceive one another in terms of being part of a foreign country. Thus,

“according to the results of a poll by the Russian Levada Centre from October 2010, more than 74% of the Russian society support a policy of rapprochement with Belarus, and 61% of Russians still do not consider Belarus to be a separate country” (Wierzbowska-Miazga 2013, 13).

Similar data are reported by the Belarusian research centre NISEPI: “Belarusians, asked in March 2010 whether they considered Russia as being a foreign country, answered: no 74%, yes 17.4%, lack of response (do not know) – 3.2%” (Radzik 2012, 206). This data matches to observations of analysts from the Warsaw-based Marek Karp Centre for Eastern Studies who agree, that despite of peripheral:

“Belarus plays a significant role in Russian foreign and security policy, in the transfer of Russian raw materials and commodities to the West, and in pursuing current Russian policy objectives, especially in the project of creating a Customs Union and a Common Economic Space”²⁶ (Wierzbowska-Miazga 2013, 5).

The fact remains, however, that opinion-poll results in surveys concerning Belarusian society’s attitudes to the implementation of such structures are far less enthusiastic, and only 33.3% of respondents have endorsed such a union. More and more people are beginning to see the future of Belarus as closer to the European Union (as many as 44.1% in a survey from September 2012) (Radzik 2012, 205). Under such circumstances, is it possible that Belarus might leave the orbit of Russian influence or declare “disobedience”, as the Ukrainians did on November 21, 2013? This may come to pass argues Alexander Milinkevich, a Belarusian politician and former presidential candidate:

“In the society there really is a great desire for change. Surveys show that 80 percent of Belarusians want economic reforms and, even more importantly, more than 50% want political reforms, which is an unprecedented result. Support for Lukashenka is falling because his model of the state fails the stress test during a financial crisis. People understand this more and more” (Milinkiewicz in: Szczerek and Milinkiewicz 2012).

²⁶ In 2015, it is to be transformed into the Eurasian Economic Community; the creation of such pacts as the Customs Union or Economic Community is interpreted as Russia’s response to the EU’s interest in the East and the Eastern Partnership project (Wierzbowska-Miazga 2013, 14).

Whether Belarussians find in themselves the will and necessary will to oppose their authorities is something only time will tell.

The discussion on issues above was never meant to be the final word on them but merely to touch upon an ongoing debate still taking place about modern Belarusian society. “The Belarusian case” defies easy analysis and unequivocal assertions. The debate ebbs and flows depending on a variety of factors: arising from both the historic and contemporary socio-political circumstances of Belarus, and especially from its current socio-political and economic situation.

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