Belarusian national identity: what did the 2020 protests demonstrate?

Description

The 2020 post-presidential protests, the most long-lasting and numerous in the history of independent Belarus, are noticeable from various perspectives, one of which is the unification of Belarusian society.

Belarusians are quite often referred to as weak, “a denationalized nation”(1), or as those who “have not developed a distinctive national identity”(2). The book(3) by a Belarus-born sociologist Nelly Bekus suggested that Belarusians possess two identities – the official one, with predominantly (post)Soviet elements, with a strong focus on Russian culture and Soviet nostalgia, and the so-called “alternative” one, described by N. Bekus as a rather marginal, yet strong and nationalist.

All the previous post-electoral protests (especially those from the presidential elections in 2006 and 2010) had a clear “opposition vs. state” division and were initiated by opposition leader(s) and involved mostly those sectors of the society whose political views were already formed and who manifested them openly (intelligentsia, students, etc.) Protests of 2020 have a significant structural shift towards “society vs. regime” and include almost all segments of the Belarusian society, even those who previously were seen as and considered to be Lukashenka’s electorate, such as state-paid workers (teachers, medical workers, or factory workers – as mostly all major factories in Belarus are either state-run or sustain on a state support –, public transport workers, etc.), and even some public servants and officials. The 2020 protests, grass-rooted and lacking a sole leader, became not only a political manifestation and a claim for a new democratic political regime, but also revealed a range of elements of Belarusian national identity presented by the protesters in a creative way.

National symbols

National symbols such as the white-red-white flag and Chase coat of arms, the ones that were official within a short period of 1991-1995, were previously strongly linked to the opposition and for many years strongly associated with one particular opposition party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). For some Belarusians, the white-red-white flag remained the symbol of Belarus’ independence, while the red-green one was seen as an attempt to link the Soviet past with independent present.

For over two decades, the majority generally reconciled to the red-green flag as a state symbol and, during the first week of protests, it used it along with the white-red-white flag, showing the nation’s unity and avoiding cleavages based on symbols. However, despite the mutual respect for both symbols, the white-red-white flag rapidly became dominant and its significance expanded with Lukashenka’s attempts to reinstate its image and popularity with the support of Russian image-makers and propaganda machine. Soon enough the white-red-white flag remained as the only symbol of freedom, change, and democracy while the red-green became a symbol of regime violence and police brutality.

The Chase coat of arms is a clear visualization of change too and, with Tsikhanouskaya becoming the main alternative contender against Lukashenka in the presidential election, the horseman on the Chase was often replaced with horsewoman. The White-red-white flags are used during the protests, but also as a symbol of protests placed on citizens’ windows, balconies, cars. Some put matching white-red-white t-shirts or stripes on their balconies, windows, or elsewhere instead of flags as a protest against the destruction of the flags by the communal and police workers.

The White-red-white flag became not only a national symbol used as a flag, but this combination of colors started to be widely used in clothes worn by the protesters (people matching white-red-white in their clothes, some brought their white wedding dresses with an added red stripe on it to the protest rally, while some being detained for wearing a white-red-white dress). All the attempts by the Lukashenka's regime to link the white-red-white flag with the collaboration movement during the Second World War (as a typical reference of regime's nation unification strategy and propaganda based on the WWII past – Belarus united against an enemy (the Nazi regime) and survived, and now descendants should continue this fight against all potential enemies of Belarus and their collaborators) failed mainly due to the fact that the actions of the riot police, especially during the first week of protests and brutality and inhuman treatment against protesters in detention centers and prisons, were compared with Nazi actions and the regime as the one acting against its own nation.

Geopolitical choice

Unlikely other political protests both in Belarus and beyond, the 2020 ones do not have appeals to geopolitical or civilizational choice, opting between either Russian or the EU. These protests are rather Belarus-centric by nature, where the main focus is made on the need on free and democratic elections, new reforms (including constitutional), the release of all political prisoners, and investigation of all the cases of police and military brutality against peaceful protesters. Thus, no flags of either of the EU or Russia were present at the protests.

The only concern expressed by the protesters was related to the discussion of potential Russian military intervention as a third-force to settle the conflict. However, any military intervention, especially from the side of the Russian Federation, was seen as a threat to Belarus's sovereignty and perceived extremely negatively. Back in December 2019, Belarusians had already unified over political divisions in the protests against deepening Belarus-Russia integration processes, promoted by Putin's regime.

In August-September 2020, protesters expressed their deep concerns on Russia's potential involvement, sending a clear message against active involvement of Russian authorities into Belarus's domestic affairs or any military intervention not wanting to repeat either the Crimea or Donbass scenario. However, most of the protesters support the continuation of a friendly relationship with Russia including close economic relations and cooperation. Such a vision was also expressed by the members of the Coordination Council, organized by the active members of the Belarusian civil society, including members of Tsikhanouskaya's team.

Bilingualism as a new linguistic reality

Protests did not bring much to the linguistic landscape of Belarus but rather revealed and visualized already existed trends. For the last decade, the Belarusian language has expanded its usage both in private and public spheres, and more young people opt for Belarusian as a language of daily communication; more Belarusian families chose Belarusian as a language of their children upbringing. Bottom-up requests coming from the Belarusian society made governmental institutions and many businesses to add Belarusian version to their official websites. A growing number of local public transport providers in various cities in Belarus switched from Russian into Belarusian for public transport tickets, banks upon numerous requests added documentation in Belarusian.

Contrary to the numerous statements on the degradation of Belarusian language or Russian dominance in Belarusian public sphere, during the protests, a significant number of slogans and posters were in Belarusian, while the Belarusian language dominated in musical performances organized by the women solidarity chains (singing lullabies in Belarusian), Philharmony, in actions in support of the Janka Kupala Belarusian National Theater. The song "Mury", claimed as an anthem of protests was initially performed in Russian but was immediately translated into Belarusian and presented in both languages during the meetings organized during the pre-election presidential campaign by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's team. The Belarusian language often opts for the songs with political criticism.

The innovation of the creation of city districts' coat of arms/emblem (mostly for Minsk districts) presented a combination of national symbols and the Belarusian language. The Belarusian language was equally used in all the 2020 protests,

while the meetings organized in support of Lukashenka virtually avoided using it in the official addresses and statements.

The protests did not create anything new that was not there before. They rather served as a litmus paper to reveal on-going and/or formed processes and crystallized the existing identity elements. Thus, one may see that despite a widely-distributed stereotype about Belarusians as a group with a lack of distinctive identity, the protests have shown all the major elements of a formed and rather strong national identity shared by the various segments of Belarusian society.

References:

(1) David R. Marples, *Belarus: a denationalized nation,* Amsterdam, Hartwood, 1999.

(2) Grigory Ioffe, "Belarus Defies Clichés", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 9, n° 117, June 20, 2012.

(3) Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over identity: the official and the alternative "Belarusianness"*, Budapest, CEU Press, 2010.

Picture: Protest rally against Lukashenko, 16 August. Baranavichy (Copyright: Raviaka Ruslan/Wikimedias Commons.

Translation in French.

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