

## EVOLUTION OF BELARUSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CONDITIONS OF INDEPENDENT STATE

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*The article is devoted to the peculiarities of the Belarusian national identity within the Belarusian state formation. The author analyzes the role of the Belarusian language, catholic and orthodox religions, historical and cultural symbols in this process. The “geopolitical split” in the Belarusian society is defined in the article as the most negative factor of the national consolidation.*

**Keywords:** national identity, independent state.

The emergence of 15 new independent states of the former Soviet Union brought about wide prospects for national development to their indigenous ethnic groups. Former Soviet republics, that previously had a few attributes of statehood only formally, now have got the right to determine their priorities in foreign and internal policy including the ability to actively support and develop their ethnic and cultural identity.

National development in different countries had both general and specific features. As in other republics, active movement to create ethnically homogeneous nation in Belarus had started before gaining the independence: in the end of 1980s – beginning of 1990s. The most important event in this direction was the adoption of the law “On

Languages in the Belarusian SSR” in January, 1990. According to the Article 2 (“State language, other languages in the Belarusian SSR”), the Belarusian language was declared a state language. At the same time the right to free usage of Russian as the language of international communication of the people of the USSR was guaranteed<sup>1</sup>.

The Belarusian language was expanding its presence in the educational process, in record keeping of state and public institutions thought this process was rather slow. Courses of Belarusian were actively functioning in the republic. In kindergartens, schools and universities there were created Belarusian groups. Thus, in 1978 there were 905 children’s pre-school institutions with the education in the Belarusian language, or 18.3 % of the total number of kindergartens, and in 1993 – already 3 277 (68.6 %). Before May, 1995, the upbringing of children in pre-school institutions of many areas and cities was fully in the Belarusian language. In 1994-1995 around 80 % of first graders started their education in Belarusian (in 1986-1987 this number was only 15 %)<sup>2</sup>.

However, it should be mentioned that active implementation of the Belarusian language as the only one state language caused discontent among the pro-Soviet and pro-Russian part of the citizens, which was a significantly large part of the Belarusian society. The question of the status of the Russian language was included into the political agenda of the state. It became an active subject of discussion that took place in Belarus on the eve of the first presidential elections (1994).

Alexander Lukashenko that was elected as the president (July, 1994) suggested to conduct a referendum on actual problems of country’s development. Along with the three other questions on the referendum (May, 1995) there was also stated a question “Do you agree with giving the Russian language an equal status with the Belarusian language?”<sup>3</sup>.

The referendum of 1995 became the event, after which the Belarusian state started to form civic, not ethnic, model of nation. In conditions of free competition, as many experts had warned, the positions of the Belarusian language became inferior. For example, in 2011/2012 school year in pre-school institutions the education was conducted in

the Belarusian language for 45 thousand children, which was approximately 12 % of all children attending kindergarten. In the same academic year in the institutions of secondary education 164 thousand pupils (18 % of all pupils) studied all the subjects in the Belarusian language.

According to official statistics, in 2012 there were 11 thousand 40 kinds of books and pamphlets in circulation of more than 43 million issues produced in the republic. 951 printed items of them (around 9 % of all kinds of items) were printed in the Belarusian language in annual circulation of 4 million copies<sup>4</sup>.

Why was particularly this model of national development chosen? Why have not Belarus, in contrast to neighboring countries, chosen the model of nationalizing state, in which the state would be declared to be "the property" of one ethnic group. Can any major changes in favor of ethnic factor occur in this process?

On the basis of the analysis of the studies on Belarusian national identity it is possible to outline some of the features of the development of Belarusian nation in 1990-2000s.

1. The main feature of national development of the Republic of Belarus was the fact that it was carried out without the support of the Belarusian language. Many supporters of ethnic model of national development have seen in this a serious threat not only for the future Belarusian ethnos, but also for the Belarusian state in general. As it has been mentioned above, in conditions of free competition, the Belarusian language was inferior to the position of the Russian language.

Reducing the use of the Belarusian language in the official sphere has shaped in the minds of many Belarusians the so-called "guilt complex" in relation to their mother tongue. This phenomenon was particularly evident during the national census (1999, 2009). It meant that in fact most Belarusians used Russian in their daily life, but in official surveys (censuses) declared the superiority of the Belarusian language. This is proved by the following information of the Census of Belarus in 2009<sup>5</sup>.

Table 1. Distribution of population of certain nationalities by their native language (people)

	Altogether	Of the total number of people of this nationality indicated as their national language				
		The language of their nationality	Belarusian	Russian	Polish	Ukrainian
The whole population including	9 503 807	5 688 429	217 015	3 191 963	1 057	4 636
Belarusians	7 957 252	4 841 319	x	2 943 817	941	3 786
Russians	785 084	756 111	21 956	x	25	406
Poles	294 549	15 854	171 287	99 819	x	183
Ukrainians	158 723	46 403	12 497	97 139	22	x
Jews	12 926	245	1 175	11 126	3	27

Table 2. Distribution of population of certain nationalities by language, which is usually spoken at home (people)

	Altogether	Of the total number of people of this nationality indicated as the language they use at home				
		The language of their nationality	Belarusian	Russian	Polish	Ukrainian
The whole population including	9 503 807	2 853 013	153 271	5 915 433	379	701
Belarusians	7 957 252	2 073 853	x	5 551 527	336	600
Russians	785 084	757 531	16 653	x	9	35
Poles	294 549	3 837	120 378	149 904	x	24
Ukrainians	158 723	5 578	9 701	140 249	9	x
Jews	12 926	37	254	12 401	1	1

Thus, according to the census data (2009), more than half of the inhabitants named Belarusian to be their native language. Among ethnic Belarusians more than 60 % considered Belarusian to be their native language. At home only 30 % actually spoke Belarusian. However, in our opinion, the percentage of Belarusian citizens permanently speaking Belarusian at home is lower than in the data of the official survey.

Analysis of the situation shows that despite the primacy of language in the definition of national identity in the Belarusian case it is only of secondary importance. The determining factors are statehood, historical territory and others. The dominance of the Russian language made the process of national identity development and self-determination of Belarusian people more difficult.

2. The most important element of national identity is the total (shared by the national community) system of fundamental ideas, historical and cultural symbols, myths. The major role in the development of the identity of modern Belarusians belonged to the Soviet period and first of all to the events of World War II. For the majority of Lithuanians the Soviet period is the period of occupation, but for most Belarusians the history of the BSSR was the most active period of development and formation of the nation. This approach was supported by a large part of the society and was institutionalized in the system of state ideology. However, national-oriented part of Belarusian society turned for inspiration to earlier historical periods, especially to the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The interest in the medieval history of Belarusian lands (Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, *Rech Pospolitaya*) that increased in the years of independence has not played a significant role in the national identity development. Thus, in March 15<sup>th</sup> in Minsk at the roundtable meeting “The Religious Factor of the National Security of Belarus” (March, 2012) Deputy Director of Information and Analysis Centre under the Administration of the President, Professor Lev Krishtapovich offered to refuse the idea that Belarusian identity comes from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: “... it appears that attempts to bring Belarusian identity out of the so-called Grand Duchy

of Lithuania are the attempts that lie away from the real process of our spiritual strengthening and development”.<sup>6</sup>

3. The third peculiarity of the development of the Belarusian nation in conditions of independence was the so-called “geopolitical” split. According to the data of sociological research (Novak, IISEPS), approximately half of the Belarusians supported the integration into the European space, while the other half considered political and economic rapprochement with its Eastern neighbor to be the most promising.

4. Another peculiarity is the weak expression of the collective will of the Belarusian nation, its mobilization for resolving most complicated national and state objectives. In the Belarusian society individual family (adaptation) strategy of overcoming the crisis is still dominant. Thus, solving of one’s own problems, problems of one’s family is the primary, in comparison to national actions. Obviously, this model of behavior has evolved over the years. All the events, including bloody wars and conflicts, have convinced the Belarusians that they are not able to change the unfavorable development of the situation, but can survive only on their own. It seems that the Belarusians have not had enough of “victories” of the national level or these “victories” have not been consolidated in the collective consciousness.

Both in scientific research and in everyday practice it is hardly necessary to prove that the higher level of national identity, more developed sense of national unity would significantly strengthen the motivation of the society to political consolidation and economic reforms. The society with a high level of national identity is ready to “sacrifice” its short-term personal benefits for the implementation of long-term national, state interests to a greater extent.

Analysis of the situation shows that the evolution of national identity of the Belarusians can develop according to both optimistic and pessimistic scenario. We hope that despite the influence of negative factors and tendencies the Belarusians will choose the optimistic scenario.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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## SANTRAUKA

## BALTARUSIŲ NACIONALINĖS TAPATYBĖS EVOLIUCIJA NEPRIKLAUSOMOS VALSTYBĖS SĄLYGOMIS

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* nacionalinė tapatybė, nepriklausoma valstybė.

Straipsnyje analizuojama Baltarusijos evoliucija nuo etninės iki pilietinės valstybės modelio per 20 nepriklausomybės metų. Lemiamu šios evoliucijos lūžio tašku galima laikyti 1995 m. referendumą dėl rusų ir baltarusių kalbų statuso sulyginimo. Empiriniai duomenys leidžia teigti, jog baltarusių kalba, iki 1995 m. buvusi vienintelė valstybinė kalba, po šios reformos praktikoje įgavo antraeilį statusą. Straipsnyje pateikiama keletas galimų tokios evoliucijos paaiškinimų, įskaitant Baltarusijos gyventojams būdingą tapatinimąsi su valstybe ir teritorija (o ne etnosu ir kalba), sovietinio periodo idealizavimą oficialiajame istorijos naratyve, o pastaruoju metu – materialinės gerovės klausimų iškėlimą tapatybės debatų atžvilgiu.