SUMMARY. The article examines the processes of formation and translation of the images of authority, people and historical past in the public speeches of the Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka on the celebrations of Independence Day. Representations of different periods of historical past (pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet) are analysed. The author concludes that official view of the Belarusian history is very limited and oriented to pragmatic political aims.

KEYWORDS: Public speech, politics of memory, identity construction.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, a number of independent states were established. These states faced new and difficult tasks: establishment of a stable political system, transformation of command economy, geopolitical identification as well as consolidation of society, and strengthening of national identity. The most common and influential path of transition common to the post-communist states of the Eastern Europe was establishment of democratic regimes, transition to the market economy, desire for the integration into the European Union, and victory of the ethno national project. However, this “ideal” trajectory of transition had its deviations, difficulties, and even traitors.

The transition of Belarus is very often defined as anomalistic due to specific historical reasons, i.e. strong Russification and Sovietization. Sometimes the country is called “the last dictatorship in Europe”, “a state without a nation” or “a country without history”.

In the development of the official memory narrative of the Republic of Belarus, two key milestones can be highlighted. The first is 1991, the year which marked the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of an independent Belarusian state, along with the restoration of the national Belarusian historiography which was repressed in the Soviet period. The historiography has taken three key paths:

a) delving into the ‘glorious’ historical past and tracing the roots of the Belarusian
national statehood back to the early medieval Principality of Polatsk. In other words, the Soviet narrative which posited medieval Kiev as the cradle of the three East Slav nations of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine is rejected;

b) focusing on Europe: treating the Belarusian history as a part of the European history, with common processes and characteristics, and, therefore, opposed to the Russian history;

c) demonstrating the negative influence of Russia on the Belarusian history.

Another event that radically changed the fate of the Belarusian politics of memory is the election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka as the President of Belarus in 1994. In contrast to the early post-Soviet period, in the Lukashenka period, the Belarusian historiography turned back to its pan-Slavic, Russophile and Soviet roots. A historian David Marples has argued that Lukashenka ‘recognizes the historical legacy of Belarusians only selectively – strictly in the Russian context’ and that under Lukashenka, ‘history as a form of public policy is limited to the Soviet period, at the expense of important fundamental periods of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish Commonwealth’.

These two versions of history employ radically different chronological frames and foundation myths. The national historiography traces the roots of the Belarusian state back to the Principality of Polatsk, a feudal principality of the 9th-12th centuries which achieved a significant political influence in the region. The official state historiography, by contrast, features a myth of origin which is based primarily on the partisan resistance during the World War II, and on the figure of partisan as a heroic defender of the state against the external aggressor. This myth was put in place in the Soviet period. After the World War II, the former commanders of the partisan groups became the local leaders in the communist Belarus, and the mythologized image of the ‘partisan republic’ allowed them to legitimize their own authority and acquire symbolic prestige in the general Soviet hierarchy. The heroic Belarusian ‘Partisan Myth’ was fixed in the historical memory and turned out to be beneficial to the government in the post-communist period, too.

It is also worth noting that the most important public holidays in the Republic of Belarus – the Independence Day and the Victory Day – are directly related to the triumphant moments of the Great Patriotic War. Since 1991, the Independence

Day was celebrated on July 27, the day of the Declaration of the Sovereignty of Belarus. In 1996, by the initiative of the President of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukashenka, a nationwide referendum was held, a result of which was moving the date of the holiday to July 3. This date refers directly to July 3, 1944, when the Soviet Army liberated Minsk, and later that day was celebrated as the “Day of the Liberation of Belarus from the Nazi Invaders”. Thus, even the independence of Belarus is in close semantic conjunction with the victory in the Great Patriotic War.

In most Eastern European countries, the national historical narratives in the post-communist period were organized by more or less the same pattern: searching for a long genealogy of the statehood, and emphasizing the traditions of democracy and the imposed nature of the totalitarian communist experience. Obviously, Belarus stands out in this case trying to include the Soviet historical myths in the foundation of the national self-determination, and creating collisions and conflicts in the historical memory. This situation, for sure, does not contribute to the consolidation of society.

For the Belarusian authorities, and particularly for Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who remains an unchangeable president of Belarus since 1994, an extremely relevant task is to achieve the legitimacy of their own rule (which is vigorously contested by both the democratic opposition in the country, and the international community) and the consolidation of society.

Experience shows that for this purpose, tools of social policy are used – populist campaigns aimed at attracting support of different segments of the population, as well as purely symbolic campaigns that can be called the rituals of power.

In our study, we tried to consider the content enclosed in the solemn speeches during the country’s main national holiday – the Independence Day. We took the public speeches of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the President of the Republic of Belarus from 1994 up to the present as the main source. A special attention paid to Lukashenka’s speeches was due to several reasons: according to the Constitution, the President is the head of the state and has the highest power competence; in addition, Lukashenka has been the President for a very long time. Moreover, as the primary analysis of the public speeches shows, Lukashenka is a renowned public “speaker” of the state course – he gives extensive speeches very often, while public speeches of other officials are far rarer and far less informative.

Thus, the purpose of the study was the reconstruction of the dynamics and the content of interpretations of the historical past of the country in the public program speeches, as well as the rhetorical techniques of building a symbolic community.

The German researcher Rainer Lindner noted that especially Aliaksandr Lukashenka, a former history teacher, often uses the historical material (taken from the Soviet propaganda arsenal) in public speeches. “Not devoid of charismatic traits, he thus learned to stage – reaching significant impact on the masses – the political
speeches or actions using historical references or linguistic images. No wonder the advisory staff of the president from the very beginning included historians who tried to provide him with the history-related rhetorical figures.\[^5\]

Accordingly, the historical past is effectively used by the Belarusian authorities for building the desired image of the past, present and future of the Belarusian nation, although this can never be called a unique invention, but rather a local incarnation of a generally accepted scenario of power.

The analysis models, in which the historical past has a central role in building the myth of power legitimization, have expanded and received acknowledgement in political science and sociology in recent years. Tradition and continuity warrant the legality and necessity of the existing authorities in the public consciousness by assigning the qualitative characteristics of stability and respectability to them. The single interpretation of the historical past also helps to consolidate the power elites, contributing to their mutual understanding and strengthens their will to rule the society, which is also seen as single and coherent.\[^6\] Modernity is estimated as the result of a linear historical process which had the realization of this power project as its latent or explicit goal. Further, historical myths are also principal for the international legitimacy of states and recognition of their sovereignty or historical rights to the zones of influence.

Accordingly, public speaking has two main functions:

1) consolidation of the elite, setting the scope and content of the common cause;

2) legitimization of the government in the eyes of society through the use of various symbolic tools, among which the creation and restoration of historical myths takes the central and most important place.

Lukashenka’s public speaking is widely and intensively broadcasted through various media channels (TV, radio, printed press, and the Internet). Obviously, in the state policy of Belarus, public speaking is one of the most important means of creating a common symbolic space of power, with an imagined community – “the Belarusian people”, which, in this case, is reduced to the public of the media messages. The corresponding medialization of these performances gives them the priority value in the processes of determining the content of the national identity and the construction of the relevant frames. As noted by a Latvian researcher Solvita Denis, “with the help of certain communication strategies, Aliaksandr Lukashenka seeks to define the limits of his own understanding of nation and delegitimizes any competitive concept”.\[^7\]

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The current research focuses on the public speaking of the period 2001-2012. The period starting from 2001 was chosen due to the fact that it is referred to as the beginning of a new stage in the self-determination of the Belarusian government. According to the Belarusian political analyst Andrei Kazakievich, from this point “the strategy of expansion operated by the political mission (which was only partially successful in signing a number of agreements, protocols and memorandums with Russia) changes into the strategy of self-preservation and adaptation to the adverse and hostile environment”8. It can be defined as the establishment of a new stage in the self-understanding and self-description of the Belarusian authorities, which found the most striking manifestation in the launch of the Belarusian state ideology project.

THE PRESIDENT AND THE PEOPLE

When it comes to the political identity of political actors, the image of “I-WE” and the reference groups with which the actors are symbolically in the same space, and share the common values are particularly important.

The corpus study suggests a complex structure of space where the following interrelated key elements of AUTHORITIES-PeOPLE-COUNTRY stand out.

The most stable personal identification with the power belongs to the President of the Republic Aliaksandr Lukashenka. In his speeches, the definitions of “I”, “Lukashenka”, “the President” look synonymous and interchangeable. So at this point, a semantic transformation of the definition “President” (elected position which theoretically can be taken by different people) is converted into a personal attribute inseparable from the personality of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. In this context, the official prohibition in the Republic of Belarus on using the word “President” in relation to any other position except for the country’s leader looks rather logical. In the system of representations created by the Belarusian authorities, there can be only one President in the country.

The people in the public speeches of the Belarusian politicians is, actually, a sacred category (“the holy unity”), the main source of legitimacy of the government, which, through the institutions of elections and referendums creates this government (the Parliament, as well as the President and all the presidential power is formed by the people).

The word “people” is supposed to include all the citizens of the country, but in practice has certain qualitative characteristics that act as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The people of Belarus is simple. Accordingly, the government

promotes the image of homogeneity and cohesion, the total unity of the people, and this consistently leads to the absence of disagreements, debates and different opinions “inside” the people. A Latvian researcher Solvita Denis also notes that the unity is the main communication strategy for the president’s appeals: “There is a kind of auto-training of national unity, and the legitimacy of the need for the unity is achieved primarily through the creation of the image of what will happen if the Belarusian people is not united. A formula ‘unity-stability-confidence in the future’ is revealed. And the key concept of the communicator is precisely the unity”.

Another important consequence of the use of the formula of the “simple” people is the programming of reduced social standards, when wealth can be justified only by intensified work. On the other hand, exactly in this attitude lies a radical disruption with the Soviet system of values in which, according to the Marxist philosophy of history, there was a stable system of opposition of the workers / the poor (good) versus the parasites / the rich (bad). In the public statements of Lukashenka, one can still hear the echoes of this value system, where the main quality of the people is work. However, the main strategy of the country’s leadership for many years declares improving the living standards and welfare of the population, which leads to a partial rehabilitation of wealth as a desired ideal – only to the extent when it is not speculative but “earned”. “This ideology of minimal but stable consumption became the new people’s faith and penetrated the whole social life”.

The fact that the statements of Lukashenka frequently turn to the events of 1994, when he first won the presidential election are also important. The situation in the early 1990s is described as apocalyptical, when the country was on the brink of a precipice, and destruction reigned in most areas of life. Only a wise decision of the people (the election of A. Lukashenka as the president) saved the country from the disaster. Accordingly, Lukashenka is not only the one chosen by the people, but is also the people’s saviour. On the other hand, constant references to the presidential elections of 1994 and almost complete ignorance of the subsequent elections in the speeches of 2008-2010 suggest that the choice of the people was made only once – but forever. The next elections can only confirm the choice made and ritually renew the direct link between the people and the president, but are not able to destroy this relationship. Therefore, the procedure of the presidential elections is seen by Aliaksandr Lukashenka as the confirmation of his legitimacy, but not as a competitive procedure with an unknown result.

9 Denis, 83-84.
PRE-SOVIET HISTORY

Again, unlike most of the Eastern European countries which are passionate about the political archaeology, the Belarusian authorities, by the tradition initiated in the Soviet era, are rather wary of speculations with the past.

One can not say that the historical past of the times of the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is completely ignored in the public speeches of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. In appropriate circumstances, when an extensive genealogy of building the Belarusian statehood is restored (a perfect reason for that is the Independence Day), these times are mentioned as the constituent elements of the genesis of the contemporary state: “We know and respect our history, do not abandon the old traditions. We remember about the Polack and Turov Principalities, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, about the Belarusian lands as part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire” (Lukashenka, 2001), “The Belarusian statehood has a solid foundation. It originates from the ancient Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the heroes of the Battle of Grunwald” (Lukashenka, 2002). However, in this case, it is extremely interesting that these two references to the extended traditions of the Belarusian state – which in principle follow the tenets of the national historiography – were used in two speeches at the Independence Day ceremonial meetings only for two years in a row, 2001 and 2002 (it is also significant that these statements were in the Belarusian language, while the later ones are in Russian). In further speeches, such references to the historical past are reduced to the acts of bravery in the Great Patriotic War and the positive experience of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, which is the foundation for the modern Belarusian state.

It should be noted that the Principality of Polack and the GDL are explicitly mentioned in Lukashenka’s speeches only once in the past three years (2008-2010), although in some interviews to the Lithuanian and Polish editions he spoke of the “common past”. Thus, we can state with confidence that these historical periods, being central to the national historiography, are unimportant and marginal to the vision of the Belarusian past advocated by the President of the Republic of Belarus. On the other hand, the lines of interpretation of the times of the GDL and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth where the main emphasis is on the foreign rule (popular among the Russo-centrist project of the Belarusian nation) are missing in his speeches.
The main object of symbolic correlation for the Belarusian authorities is the Soviet period, with which they have to enter into the complex relationship of refusal / overcoming / continuation. The problem was particularly acute in the beginning of the 90s, in the early post-communist years, when the task of avoiding the Soviet forms, radically set by the domestic and foreign policy processes, was almost impossible to fulfil due to significant proportion of the continuity of the elites and the weakness of the opposition. The return of a positive attitude to the Soviet past was used as one of the key elements of the electoral program of A. Lukashenka, which further confused the unsolved problem of separation of the society from the patterns and values of the communist legacy. On the other hand, the degree of continuity and the importance of the Soviet legacy for the official historical narrative vary according to the opinion of different researchers. For example, Per Anders Rudling writes that the institutionalized Soviet nostalgia has become the cornerstone of the state policy of modern Belarus11, although elsewhere he stresses that this nostalgia is selective, and while the Soviet myth of Victory is preserved in an untouched status, the subject of the October Revolution is almost unused by the regime12. Andrei Kazakievich also concludes that for the state-political concept of the Belarusian nation developed and manifested by the Belarusian authorities, the Soviet political and cultural continuity is of fundamental importance. “Sovietness and Soviet past are seen not only as normal, but also as valuable. Continuity in the social system and economic development is emphasized. The political system of the BSSR is viewed as a source of valuable experience and beginning of statehood. Certain historical events of the Soviet period are cultivated as central to the history of the nation”. However, this researcher also indicates the lack of a coherent vision of the past, which determines only a partial continuity of the Soviet period13.

The analysis of the public statements indicates that the Soviet period is reconsidered by the Belarusian authorities in a rather specific way. Several pathways can be identified as most frequently used to represent the Soviet past:

1) the foundations for the Belarusian statehood were laid in the Soviet era;
2) the Soviet period is characterized by a high level of welfare;
3) the greatest historical achievement of the Soviet times is the Victory in the Great Patriotic War;

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4) the USSR was a great state;
5) the collapse of the USSR was disastrous.

These subjects are extremely stable and are present in almost every speech by Aliaksandr Lukashenka that has to do with the commemoration of the past (the Victory Day, the Independence Day, and the Day of the October Revolution).

The rehabilitation of the Soviet period, which is often seen as a complete reconstruction, is a rather nostalgic rethinking in the manner of “good old days”. This leads to the “oblivion” of the communist ideology and the actual deconstruction of the rigid ideological framework of that era. The Soviet past is constantly present in the public speeches of Lukashenka, but in a specific mode of nostalgia, where it acquires the status of an ideal past, which, however, passed into oblivion, and which only has its descendant in the modern Belarusian state.

THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

The Great Patriotic War has its own specificity, which took shape even under the Soviet rule. First of all, the Belarusian war myth foregrounds a huge number of casualties among the Belarusian people. Within the local myth, the Belarusian nation acquires an aura of not only heroism, but also, and equally, of martyrdom. The tragic price that the Belarusian nation paid for the victory is underlined and echoed in the continuous playback of one rhetorical statistical figure: every fourth Belarusian, we are constantly being reminded, died during the war. Moreover, in recent years it is also increasingly common to hear that every third inhabitant of Belarus died in the war (the fact that ethnic and territorial definitions are constantly confused nullifies any attempt to verify these figures, but in no way diminishes their emotional significance). Secondly, the Belarusian version highlights the exceptional role of the Belarusian people in the victory over the fascism. Here again, the ‘Partisan Myth’ comes into play, with its emphasis on the huge (unprecedented, according to some accounts) scale of the Belarusian anti-Nazi resistance movement.

The Belarusian war myth thus places the popular notion of “the Soviet people as the conqueror of fascism” into the shadow, with the Belarusian people taking up this place of honour instead.

However, the myth of the War is not only used to create a positive identity of the collective community (Hero Nation and Martyr People). The stunning emotional potential founded here is also used for the negative purposes of creating a negative image of political opponents that are associated with the war enemies. This utilitarian aspect was noticed by a French political researcher Alexandra Goujon, who writes that
the memory of the War is also used to legitimize Lukashenka’s policy with respect to his opponents, who are often shown as fascists or as belonging to the fifth column\textsuperscript{14}. Moreover, some Western countries are also charged with attempts to overthrow the government of Belarus in the vein that reminds of the Nazi Germany’s plans.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the use of the historical past in the official public speeches indicates the absence of a coherent and consistent image of the past in the discourse of the Belarusian authorities. Elements of various meta-narratives are used (national, Soviet, Russo-centrist), but their proportion and significance mainly depend on the situational needs and tactical interests. These contradictions and eclectic approach of the Belarusian historical policy can not be explained by the lack of resources or poor intellectual potential; they must inevitably result from the geopolitical situation in which modern Belarus appeared. The desire to avoid clear and final decisions, the aspiration to be both here and there – all this reinforces the country’s status as a borderland between the big geopolitical players, where the policy of balancing can only be inconsistent and eclectic. Therefore, neither the trend of nationalization nor Russification can achieve the final victory. On the one hand, the lack of the possibility to construct the canonical image of history offers some advantages for the freedom of historical research; on the other hand, it leads to uncertainty of the public historical consciousness.