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Culture Wars, Soul-Searching, and Belarusian Identity

Grigory Ioffe*

Attaching political labels to a situation whose roots transcend politics constitutes a critical weakness of Western policies vis-à-vis Belarus. The contemporary nationalist discourse in Belarus allows one to discern three “national projects,” each being a corpus of ideas about Belarus “the way it should be”: (1) Nativist/pro-European, (2) Muscovite liberal, and (3) Creole. While the projects’ nametags are debatable, the trichotomy is a useful abstraction, as it reflects the lines of force in the “magnetic field” of Belarusian nationalism. The article analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of each project, cultural wars between them, the role of a civilizational fault line that runs across Belarus and the attendant geopolitical divisions that underlie multiplicity of national projects. The idea is expressed of a desirable consensus based on the most viable aspects of the national projects.

Keywords: Belarus; Belarusian; Lukashenka; culture wars; civilizational fault line

A Belarusian exists and at the same time he doesn't. Therefore one must either figure him out or track him down. This is always much like going after game.

A person who does not understand who he is is actually a Belarusian. That, however, does not mean that others have any good understanding of him.

From Belarusians, like from a cocoon, sometimes come out “Russians.” These are local silkworms.

—Ales Antsipenka¹

Belarus is one of the least-studied European states to emerge from the breakup of the Soviet Union. Little is known about Belarus besides the undemocratic practices of its president, Alexander Lukashenka. Limited familiarity with Belarus is not a feature of the general public alone. “I’ve always liked your country,” an American congressman once told Stanislaw Shushkevich, the first leader of independent Belarus, “especially since you got rid of

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that Ceaușescu fellow.”² One would think that low name recognition and a cliché-ridden image make an odd couple. Apparently this is not so in the area of foreign policy. A country that most Americans would fail to identify on a map has been portrayed as “a virtual ‘black hole’ in Europe” and “an anomaly in the region.”³ It has been called a “modern sultanate,” and popular attitudes that ensured support for Lukashenka were labeled “mass psychological marasmus.”⁴ Recent descriptions of Belarus call it “an authoritarian cesspool,”⁵ “a bastard of Europe,”⁶ “an outpost of tyranny,”⁷ and the juiciest of all, “the last dictatorship of Europe.”⁸

These rhetorical delicacies add zing to pronouncements on Belarus, and no primer in public speaking should pass them up. However impressive they sound, they leave much to be desired in substance. Repeatedly attaching political labels to a situation whose roots transcend politics suggests a classic case of reductionism. It is definitely not going to get us anywhere past satisfaction with *our own* virtue as forceful promoters of democracy. And so we should not complain that the ten-year-old policy designed to unseat Lukashenka does not work. It does not work precisely because our thinking about Belarus seeks to fit it into an ideological template of our making instead of trying to understand Belarus on *its own* terms. Otherwise, it would have long been seen that political clichés cannot capture the crux of Belarus’ problems. At least some attention would have been paid to its delayed urbanization, delayed nation-building, and an unusually strong cultural attachment to Russia. While these factors do have political ramifications, they cannot be addressed by issuing stern statements. Lukashenka still enjoys significant support at home, and he has been particularly skillful in mobilizing a certain brand of Belarusian nationalism.

This article addresses a key problem of delayed nation-building: the lack of a single consolidating national idea of Belarus. I begin with observations on the Janka Kupala Theater’s production of *Tuteishiya*, a quintessential piece on Belarusian identity. These lead to reflections on a language-identity relationship and on external impulses for national consolidation in Belarus. Subscribing to the idea that nationalism precedes nation, I analyze three “national projects” on Belarus and the uneasy relationships

between their constituencies. I conclude with an assessment of the prospects for nation-building in Belarus.

Tuteishiya

The setting of this play,⁹ written and performed in Belarusian, is the city of Minsk from 1914 to 1919. The word *tuteishiya* means locals, but because Jews, Poles, and Russians living in Belarus never identified as *tuteishiya*, this nickname applies to the nationally indifferent, that is, to local Slavs without clear national identity. Indeed, only three out of fifteen characters refer to themselves and are referred to by the rest as Belarusians: Janka, a rural teacher; Alenka, much influenced by Janka's moralizing; and her father, Garoshka. Other characters do not subscribe to this ethnonym. According to Janka, they are all "renegades and degenerates." There are two comical scientists who repeatedly bump into one another and whose identically worded verdicts in regard to Belarus and Belarusians are expressed in Russian and Polish. Both scientists are also *tuteishiya*. But one of them refers to Belarus as Russia's *Severozapadnyi krai* (northwestern fringe) and the other as Poland's *Kresy Wschodnie* (eastern periphery). The play reflects Kupala's satirical attack on his fellow countrymen's lasting anonymity and on Russian and Polish claims on Belarus.

The Kupala National Theater's production of *Tuteishiya*, which I watched on 27 May 2005, is superb. It has been on since 1990 (except for a 1.5-year break). The plot unfolds in front of two places of worship, a Polish *kosciól* and a Russian Orthodox *tserkov'*. Both are represented as antinational forces. A fixture of the Russian church is a revolving icon, with Jesus Christ on its one side and Karl Marx on the other; so when the moment is ripe the appropriate side is exhibited. In the final episode, which is absent in Kupala's text, Bolsheviks acting as one last incarnation of Russians shoot nationally indifferent and self-identified Belarusians alike.

Following the executions, a white-red-white flag¹⁰ is revealed dangling from a crib. As the crib is lifted above the stage, the flag flutters in the air, and a feeling that while human bodies can be destroyed the national spirit of Belarus is indestructible captivated the viewers, who stood up and kept a minute of silence

that gave way to applause. This was a cathartic finale. But on leaving the theater, the first thing that viewers caught sight of was the edifice of the Presidential Administration across the street, with a red-green banner on its roof top.

To be sure, encounters with reality began even earlier, as a sales clerk in the box office and then staff selling a playbill and working in the snack bar during the intermission all spoke Russian to their customers—in that Belarusian national theater. While I cannot ascertain that all viewers spoke to their companions in Russian, it is safe to say that most did.

Language and identity

Only 1.5 percent of Minsk adults surveyed in 2005¹¹ said that at home they use predominately Belarusian, while 83.3 percent said they speak mainly Russian. In recent *national* surveys, Minsk accounts for about 25 percent of all Belarusian speakers in the republic.¹² However, according to Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS)¹³ surveys from 1997 to 2004, 2 to 7 percent of all Belarusian adults predominantly speak Belarusian.

In today's Belarus, Belarusian speakers form two very different groups: rural and urban. The rural group accounts for about 65 percent of all Belarusian speakers. Rural villagers normally do not know any other language. For urbanites, however, speaking Belarusian is a conscious choice. Whereas the rural group is receding because of a heightened proportion of the elderly, the urban group has been on the rise but is still small, hardly accounting for more than 3 percent of Belarus' entire population.

One's language of communication and one's national identity do not always match, though. In the Minsk-based survey, 61 percent claimed that the ability to speak Belarusian is not an important factor uniting Belarusians into a single community. Yet 71 percent said that Belarus should remain an independent country, and only 12 percent said it should unite with Russia into a single state. This reinforces the suspicion that national identity and ability to speak Belarusian may be living their separate lives. Moreover, they have been evolving in opposite directions. In the past, when

Belarus was more rural, more people spoke Belarusian, yet their identity presented a problem for researchers and, as we know, for playwrights as well. Until the second decade of the twentieth century, even a common name of the people we now call Belarusians, a verbal denominator of identity that would transcend localism, was missing. Belarusians would identify themselves most frequently as *tuteishiya*. Today, however, many fewer people speak Belarusian, but not too many would doubt that Belarus is a separate nation—their nation—and should remain independent.

A challenge to statehood and national consolidation

Belarusians' allegiance to Belarus' statehood is nonetheless tenuous. In Minsk, many more people are associated with national causes than elsewhere around the country. No wonder they value statehood. But when a *national* IISEPS survey in November 2003 asked, "What is more important to you, economic improvement or national independence?" the result was 62 versus 25 percent in favor of economic improvement. Even among the self-proclaimed supporters of the opposition, the ratio was 51.4 versus 35.9 percent! That a question like this could even be included in a public survey in Russia, Poland, Latvia, or Lithuania is unthinkable because in those countries statehood, the way it is thought of, is of existential importance and not an option to be traded for better life.¹⁴

When in May 2002 Vladimir Putin floated the idea that six regions of Belarus be incorporated in Russia one by one, this was perceived as odd by some, but many remained unruffled and some even welcomed the idea. Alexander Yaroshuk, the leader of the most mass—agrarian trade union (now the leader of the alternative or independent trade union movement of Belarus) protested against "the propaganda campaign that becomes insulting to Russia." Yaroshuk suggested that while he personally is not in favor of the type of integration favored by Putin, "a significant number of Belarus' citizens" are. "I believe," said Yaroshuk, "that these citizens' viewpoint also has to be expressed in the media, and the reasons they are ready to sacrifice our national sovereignty ought to be understood."¹⁵

Putin's suggestion and the lack of its spontaneous repudiation by Belarusians may have been the single most serious wake-up call for Lukashenka over his entire tenure as president. In autumn 2002, after one more run-in between Lukashenka and Putin, all government-controlled media in Belarus began to criticize Russia. Belarusians appeared to be receptive to this change, and the idea of a Belarus-Russia union, let alone a merger with Russia altogether, cooled significantly. When on 19 February 2004 the flow of natural gas into Belarus was cut off for several hours to force Belarus to deliver on its gas payment arrears, Lukashenka did not miss his chance, calling this incident an act of terrorism against Belarusian people.¹⁶ The incident itself and Lukashenka's rhetoric combined to boost national consolidation in Belarus in an unprecedented way. A shrewd prediction, according to which "the Belarus government . . . has no choice but to resort to the national awareness of the population as a sort of barrier against absorption of national sovereignty by Russia,"¹⁷ began to materialize. And so did the suggestion by an opposition publisher that "as long as Lukashenka is certain that by asserting the Belarusian sovereignty he is defending himself, he will be doing it 100 times more skillfully than even the most nationalist flank of the opposition."¹⁸

What comes first, nation or nationalism?

Having emerged from a contest with Putin as a clear winner, Lukashenka came across to many as a Belarusian nationalist by default, a *kind of* a nationalist. Of course, this means that Belarusian nationalism has more than one strand. If a national project is a corpus of normative ideas about Belarus's past, present, and future, then there is more than one such project. I would like to preface my description of those projects by posing a question: do nations shape nationalism, or does nationalism shape nations? As a student in the Soviet Union, I thought the answer obvious: because being determines consciousness, nation comes first. Otherwise, Marx and Engels would not have distinguished historical nations from ahistorical ones, and Stalin, whose teachings have influenced Soviet ethnography long after

he was declared a thug, would not have come up with his four “objective” criteria for a nation.¹⁹

Whatever source on ethnic history of Belarusians one uses, a book or an article, a fresh one or one a hundred years old, one encounters a recurring theme: “Belarusians do exist as a separate ethnicity.” On first blush, this does not seem strange, but when you come across efforts to prove the existence of Belarusians for the umpteenth time you get intrigued. Whether the refrain in question is couched in neutral terms, shaped as a disclaimer (like “of course, we do not subscribe to those infamous views”), or is a fervent rebuttal of somebody’s ideas is a different matter, but the refrain itself is a palpable reality. Yuri Shevtsov, who recognizes this reality, explains it by Belarusians’ alleged aversion to open manifestation of identity (“Belarusian identity is there to comprehend, not to manifest”).²⁰ Viacheslav Nosevich, another Belarusian author, writes that Belarusians’ ethnic territory was designated by method of elimination, that is, by pinpointing areas not quite gravitating to Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish national centers.²¹ While this may not be a very uplifting image, *all* efforts at vindication of Belarusians’ existence will prove redundant if we assume that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”²² Embraced by most modern scholars of nationalism, this perspective provides only a partial relief to students of Belarus: while they are no longer required to furnish proofs of the obvious, they ought to focus on the national project with a potential to consolidate Belarusians. But is there such a thing?

Elsewhere I described the situation of Belarusian identity as a “split identity disorder” unusual for a modern European ethnic group. I discerned two brands of national mythology: the Westernizing brand and the Russophile brand. I concluded that these brands are as old as the Belarusian idea (i.e., the idea that Belarusians are a distinctive ethnic community) itself; and they have been competing for the minds and souls of Belarusians and continue to pull in opposite directions.²³ The idea that national projects on Belarus may actually be three, not two, took me aback. I believed that even two is one too many, as the perennial fight between them is not conducive to national consolidation.

When, however, I began to read the *Arche* magazine, a mouth-piece of Belarusian opposition, I found numerous references to three national projects and their respective core communities and descriptive labels. If there is something that all three projects are unanimous about, it is the value of national independence of Belarus.²⁴ Another shared feature is that the city of Minsk is home to a disproportionately high number of each project's activists.

Project One: Nativist/pro-European

“Nativist” and “pro-European” is how some of the project's framers such as Valer Bulgakau, Igar Babkou, Andrei Dyn'ko, and so on christened it. The project is the extension of the Belarusian Revival (*Adradzhenne*) idea envisaging Belarus's liberation from the shackles of Russian colonialism and rediscovering its (Belarus's) true European roots. Those who form a core community of this national project are Belarusian speakers by choice, the so-called *svyadomyya* or nationally conscious Belarusians. The project has its codified historical narrative. One of its best expressions, *Ten Centuries of Belarusian History* by Arlou and Saganovich, a book earmarked for a popular audience, is discussed in detail elsewhere.²⁵ In the West, Jan Zaprudnik expressed the standpoint of the nativist project,²⁶ but his is an academic book devoid of the zest characteristic of homegrown nativist publications. The project sees the precursor of the Belarusian state in the Polatsk principedom, which was more open to Western influences than the Rostov-Suzdal and Vladimir principedoms, which formed the nucleus of Muscovy. Further on, the nucleus of Belarus developed within the Great Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and Rzeczpospolita, the European polities that waged wars with Asiatic Russia, and most ancestors of today's Belarusians were fighting not on Russia's side. Eventually, however, Russia's cunning and brute force gained the upper hand, and since 1772 Belarus has been Russia's colonial domain. It is now time to undo Russia's oppressive impact. Politically, the project is represented by the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), whose founder, Zianon Pazniak, led the way in the nativist project from the late 1980s to his emigration in 1996. The viewpoints of the project's active

promoters show up in the *Nasha Niva* weekly and the bimonthly magazine *Arche*. The enthusiasts of the project listen to the Belarusian-language Radio Liberty broadcasts and are fixated on anti-Russian sentiment. "For people seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential,"²⁷ writes Huntington. This maxim has ample confirmation in various texts authored by the activists of Project One, although a militant Russophobe attitude of Zianon Pazniak's vintage is rare these days. Disassociating Belarus from Russia is nevertheless the central idea of the project; it is the refrain of Arlou's and Saganovich's as well as Zaprudnik's books. "There is a mental chasm between a Russian and a Belarusian," says Valyantsin Akudovich, one of the project's most revered intellectuals. In contrast to Belarusians, "Russians have never been aware of their ethnographic frontiers and have never been attached to any definitive place on earth (unless one thinks that such a boundless space as that between Brest and Vladivostok is such a place)."²⁸ Such crucial elements of the nativist/pro-European ideology as fascination with the alleged Belarusianness of the GDL and assigning the entire Soviet period to the dustbin of history are at times criticized by the members of the nativist community itself. Others, however, stress that identity is one's metaphysical choice, and anything that helps create a European identity of Belarus is commendable, particularly for a community with a belated national revival. This reasoning is employed most consistently by Piotra Sadowski, the first (1992-1994) Belarusian ambassador to Germany. To drive his point home, Sadowski stresses that Belarusians should not feel ashamed of their national myths because those of other nations cannot withstand historical scrutiny either, and yet they have done well to promote national consolidation. He refers to such examples as a German myth about Hermann, to which more than two hundred heroic-patriotic poems were devoted in the German lands just from 1750 to 1850, and another German myth about Barbarosa that is even more vulnerable, as is the Russian myth about Yermak, the alleged conqueror of Siberia. Instead of calling our national myths into question, says Sadowski, one should stay away from the national projects that are explicitly Russian and that continue to disorient Belarusian children.²⁹

The framers of Project One take every opportunity to stress the importance of speaking Belarusian. For them, it is the only legitimate language of national discourse. Linguistic Belarusification of Belarus is perceived by them as instrumental in fostering clear-cut national identity, which in turn facilitates democratization, not the other way around. Also, without switching to Belarusian, the monumental task of detaching Belarus from the inherently undemocratic Russia cannot be solved. Language is thought of as not only the means of communication but also as a reflection of the soul of the Belarusian people. In that context, the expert opinions of a third party, that is, of someone who is neither Belarusian nor Russian, are particularly appreciated—if of course those opinions are in sync with Project One—but they are scornfully castigated and disqualified if they are not.

Project Two: Muscovite liberal

Until recently, Project Two was more of a putative or ad hoc intellectual niche, as the existence of its core constituency was far from self-evident. The fact that according to the 1999 Census 77 percent of Belarusian urbanites admitted to speaking predominantly Russian *in their homes*³⁰ while most national surveys reveal an even higher percentage of Russian speakers does not in and of itself suggest a separate national project. Many intellectual Russian speakers developed a habit of issuing public excuses for not conversing or writing in Belarusian. For a long time, the “I-am-so-sorry-but-this-is-how-I-was-brought-up” disclaimer created the impression that the entire nation-building theme had been farmed out to the nativist camp. At the same time the self-imposed prerogative of Russian-speaking liberals was to display abuses of the ruling regime in higher-circulation media outlets of the political opposition (as Belarusian-language publications are not read by many) and issue prodemocracy statements. Indeed, in Belarus the most obvious mass alternatives to Russia-based media are not by any means *Arche* and/or *Nasha Niva* but *Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta (BDG)*,³¹ *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi*, a daily; and a Web site, *Naviny.by*—all using Russian. The bilingual newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* is also quite popular in Minsk. To be sure,

there are many Belarusian-language sites, but sociologist Vladimir Dorokhov, who recorded the frequencies of their use and that of their Russian-language counterparts on a random day in August 2005, revealed that a Russian-language site, Naviny.by, was accessed 1,466 times and *BDG* 1,354 times, whereas the Belarusian-language *Nasha Niva*, the de facto major organ of the nativist project, had only 39 visitors.³²

The rift between two groups of Belarusian intellectuals, the Belarusian-speaking minority and the Russian-speaking majority, is older than the Lukashenka regime. In fact, this is an ideological divide, which cannot be reduced to language alone, and it is reflected in publications dating back to 1990 if not earlier. For example, polemics were sparked by the 1990 article by Zianon Pazniak in *Narodnaya Gazeta*, in which he claimed that though close to each other linguistically, Belarusians and Russians belong in “different races, different cultures, and different value systems, and their historical destinies are different as well.”³³ A book by Semion Bukchin carefully documents these and other polemics between 1990 and 1994. Bukchin’s position suggests that in Belarus, to be critical of Lukashenka and preach up democratic values does not spell unanimity on other important issues. As early as November 1991, an attempt was made to create a “Movement for Democratic Reform—Democratic Belarus” as an alternative to the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF).

Throughout the 1990s, quite a few self-proclaimed democrats came to resent the situation whereby BNF-centered nativist community holds a monopoly on Belarusian nationalism. Aversion to the national radicalism of Zianon Pazniak vintage became widespread, if not overwhelming in Belarus. At the same time, Russian speakers were reevaluating their ambivalent relationship with Russia on a personal level, and many were reaching the conclusion that “Well, I may be a person of Russian culture, but I stand for an independent Belarus, my homeland.”

In 1998, Yury Drakakhrust, a former secretary of the BNF, published an article titled “Belarusian Nationalism Speaks Russian.”³⁴ In it, he shared the results of a 1997 national survey by the IISEPS, according to which Russian speakers are on average much less Lukashenka-friendly than Belarusian speakers, who are rural

villagers for the most part. This conclusion was dissonant to the iconoclastic nativist message disseminated since the late 1980s, according to which Belarusian speakers form the most dynamic and most vividly antiregime group. The entire political opposition and its sympathizers were divided in their reaction to Drakakhrust's article. Whoever shared the view that the relatively few Belarusian urbanites who spoke Belarusian ought to renounce their monopoly on Belarusian nationalism began to realize that he or she was not alone. A community of like-minded people began to form. Among them are such personalities as Svetlana Alexievich, arguably Belarus' most well-known living author; Alexander Feduta, a philologist who in 1994 was part of Lukashenka's presidential team and then publicly apologized for his role; Sergei Pankovsky, the editor-in-chief of the Web site *Nashe Mneniye*; and Leonid Zayiko and Leonid Zlotnikov, who are both prominent economists, as is Stanislaw Bogdankevich, the first chairman of the Belarus National Bank, Semion Bukchin, Yury Drakakhrust, and a few other well-known people. When in late 2004, *Arche*, a mouthpiece of the nativist project, rounded up "twelve outstanding Russian-speaking intellectuals of Belarus" for an interview,³⁵ it effectively defined the core of Project Two's constituency.

In 2005, Yury Drakakhrust published a sequel to his 1998 article.³⁶ This time, he wrote in Belarusian and published in *Arche*. The sequel draws from both 1997 and 2004 national polls by IISEPS, the institution that had been just denied registration by the Lukashenka regime. In response to a question from the 2004 national poll, "How would you vote in a possible referendum about the future of Belarus?" twice as many Belarusian speakers opted for unification with Russia compared with Russian speakers! Obviously, it was mostly if not exclusively the voice of rural Belarusian speakers revealing their strong pro-Russia leaning. But this was at odds with their urban counterparts' contention that they are the spokesmen for the Belarusian people. On the contrary, the 2004 national survey confirmed that many more Russian speakers would like to see Belarus in the EU compared with their Belarusian-speaking compatriots. Also, many more Russian speakers see the precursor of Belarus' statehood in the GDL and fewer in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (compared with Belarusian speakers).

“Sometimes one can hear,” writes Drakakhrust, “that in contemporary Belarus a struggle is under way between two [groups], the one which is simultaneously Belarusian-speaking, pro-independence, and pro-Europe and the one which is simultaneously Russian-speaking, pro-Russia, and anti-West.” According to Drakakhrust, this is wrong. “The Russian-speaking-anti-Lukashenka-and-pro-Europe group is here as well. That representatives of this group act on behalf of Russian speakers may not be quite noticeable today because it would be stupid to fight for their linguistic preferences now that the regime is stifling the Belarusian language and culture, not Russian. But this is not to say that such a fight will not commence under the conditions of free society, particularly if an attempt is made to encroach on the interests of the Russian speakers.”³⁷ The competition between Belarusian and Russian-speaking segments of society will then come to a head, the argument goes. It is not by any means a product of the Lukashenka regime, and it will only get more acrimonious and destructive for Belarus when this regime falls. And because Belarus does not have its own equivalent of either Ukraine’s Galicia or Crimea that would ensure a modicum of spatial separation between the diehard linguistic nationalists, this fight threatens to possess the entire country. Knowing this, asks Drakakhrust, why do we not sign a kind of Geneva Convention on culture wars in advance, in which we will stipulate mutual recognition and respect, and reject either linguistic community’s monopoly on Belarusian nationalism?

Nativists versus Muscovite liberals: A sparring match

Three ripostes to Drakakhrust’s article showed up in *Arche*. Alongside the view mainstream to the nativist project—that democratization is impossible without joining Europe; that Europe is a community of nation-states; and that without linguistic Belarusification, we cannot become a nation and are doomed to remain a Eurasian satrapy—the ripostes contained a strike below the belt. For example, Valer Bulgakau declared that Drakakhrust’s number-crunching (his findings were drawn from cross-tabulated results of the national survey) is not persuasive because if truth be

told, Western sociologists normally entrust their Belarusian collaborators only with data collection, not with analysis.³⁸ A more serious argument put forward by Danila Zhukovsky was that Drakakhrust correlated the actual language use with political and geopolitical preferences. But whereas real-life options are usually limited, values by their nature are more wide-ranging, and certain value options were left out by Drakakhrust. For example, some people are adamantly opposed to Belarusian and hate it.³⁹ To that argument, Drakakhrust replied that his circle of Russian-speaking acquaintances does not include haters. While these may in fact exist, the most widespread attitude to Belarusian—in the Belarusian society—is not hatred but well-meaning indifference. To make his case, Drakakhrust prefaced his response to Zhukovsky with an epigraph reproducing a real-life conversation between a correspondent of Radio Liberty and a passerby in a street of Minsk. “Do you speak Belarusian?” asks the reporter. “Rarely,” replies a passerby. “And why don’t Belarusians speak Belarusian?” the question follows. “Apparently they don’t have time to,”⁴⁰ is the answer. This, argues Drakakhrust, is an expression of indifference to something that constitutes a deviation from an established societal norm in Belarus, which is to speak Russian. Those who risk violating this norm may be courageous people, but they should not get angry if not too many join their ranks. Otherwise they will fan the flames of a culture war, which at one point already produced an autocrat whose first widely acclaimed action was to protect his people from “nationalists” (which in Russian is close to a swear word, whose actual meaning is “xenophobes”).

Nothing validates the notion of a culture war as convincingly as the August and September 2005 polemics triggered by the decision of the *Deutsche Welle*, a German broadcaster, to begin transmission of its shortwave half-hour roundups of Belarusian news and politics for Belarus’s audience. Shortwave receivers are no longer in wide use, and there are other reasons as well why the *Deutsche Welle*’s new project is not going to make much of a difference. But the broadcaster’s decision to use Russian, not Belarusian, brought about the stormiest public debate ever amidst opposition-minded intelligentsia in Belarus.

There is no doubt that the skirmish pleased Lukashenka as much as anything. Those who may call it a tempest in a teapot are certainly not Belarus-watchers. To me, for example, this public exchange of views confirmed the idea that Project Two exists. The exchange was sparked by Vitaly Silitsky, a Belarusian political scientist formerly affiliated with the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C. In his open letter, Silitsky claimed that the German broadcaster's decision to use Russian in their new project is "despicable" and a testimony to European bureaucrats' "wholesale support of the politics of annihilation of the Belarusian language and culture."⁴¹ The letter was signed by several people whose engagement with the national Project One (aka the Nativist/pro-European project) is well known. Silitsky's letter contains a caveat that he is not calling for "removal of Russian from the Belarus' media space." Rather, he is "protesting removal of Belarusian from that space."⁴² However, this disclaimer did not fit the tenor of the letter, which ended up with an appeal to Belarusian politicians, journalists, analysts, and public servants to boycott the new radio project until it changes its language policy.

Publication of Silitsky's letter aroused "sound and fury." Scores of individuals went public with their statements. Here are some voices in the debate.

Alexander Feduta

If they [nativists] see us as part of the Belarusian context, they would not just bemoan a lack of a Nobel Prize for a pro-democracy Belarusian. They would collect all the pieces by Svetlana Aleksievich translated into European languages and begin a lobbying campaign. Would they agree to this, though? No. And if we initiate this, they would say something like "A Nobel for Aleksievich is another nail in the coffin for Belarusian." And there will be another brawl like this one about the Deutsche Welle, or worse.⁴³

Yury Drakakhrust

They [nativists] believed that their Russian-speaking compatriots are beholden to Moscow like Muslims are to Mecca, which they face during their prayers. It turned out, however, that those Russian speakers

are also Europeans, and what is particularly troubling is that Europe itself does not deny them that.

A Russian-language national project on Belarus, the project whose existence [they] doubt, effectively exists. One ought to take off his or her ideological glasses. He or she would then see that in quite a few areas this project is a more serious challenge to the influences of Russia [than nativists themselves].⁴⁴

Vadim Kaznacheyev

A remark about the lack of respect to the language of the titular nationality of Belarus does not make sense because the language of the vast majority of this nationality is Russian.

You [nativists] publish stern statements. But the very tone of your appeals is a problem. What if you come to power? Will you then resist a temptation to resort to forcible methods [of implanting Belarusian]?⁴⁵

Svetlana Aleksiyevich

Belarusians do not perceive Russian as the language of the occupiers.

The people from the *Arche* and *Nasha Niva* do not represent Belarusian people. What they represent is their dream about Belarusian people.

In my books, I convey in Russian my love to Belarus.⁴⁶

Needless to say, these statements were contested by the ideologues of Project One, who by and large compensate their de facto minority status by good organization skills and whole-hearted devotion to their cause. Here are some voices from the nativist side:

Akhrem Matyl

There is no cohesive Russian-language national project of Belarus.

Why build one more Russia under another name?

There is hardly any difference between Russian-speaking Belarusians and their Russian counterparts.⁴⁷

Siarhei Khareuski

A Russian-language radio initiative brings grist to the mill of Lukashenka's language policy.

The language-related division within Belarusian democratic society is profound.

Russian-language projects cannot facilitate national consolidation.⁴⁸

Vital Tsygankov

The whole idea behind any form of identification is to set oneself apart from the rest. This cannot be achieved without switching to Belarusian.

What they [Muscovite Liberals] effectively mean by putting democratization ahead of language is let the child grow first with the aim of nurturing him (or her) later.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most impressive of nativist responses to "Muscovite Liberals" was by Andrei Dyn'ko, editor-in-chief of the *Nasba Niva*. "A novel reflecting the Belarusian's pain for his/her language has not been written yet," wrote Dyn'ko. Referring to relations between himself and his comrades-in-arms, on one hand, and Russian speakers, on the other, he posed a question: "Are we going to fight for democratic Belarus shoulder to shoulder, or just side by side?" Shoulder-to-shoulder is Dyn'ko's own choice. "Whether Russian can become the basis for the national discourse in Belarus requires proof. So, go ahead, prove; but this is risky,"⁵⁰ cautions Dyn'ko. And yet, "You are our allies, and you are no Moscow stooges; you are part of our world," says Dyn'ko to Russian-speaking liberals. This was like extending an olive branch, and some on the other side responded in kind. Conciliatory though it is, Dyn'ko's peace-making is not without qualifications. "My principle," wrote Dyn'ko, "is that any new initiative or project must be couched in Belarusian, as Russian-language projects do not need help, they will appear on their own."⁵¹ In Drakakhrust's rendition, this message reads: Beautiful flowers need to be tended, while useless weeds appear on their own.⁵² Dyn'ko ends his letter to *Nasbe Mneniye* with an appeal: "Let us proceed

together, we know where to go.”⁵³ This self-assured possession of the right knowledge irritated some of Dyn’ko’s opponents. Apparently, Dyn’ko meant reconciliation, but on his own terms. The message of Dyn’ko’s article in the *Nasba Niva* was equally ambivalent. On one hand, “We remain insensitive to Russophiles, we do not monitor their evolution and do not take their interests into account. . . . It is difficult for us to comprehend how can one be a Moscowphile and at the same time want to build an independent Belarus. Let us leave this behind. . . . By and large they also see themselves as designers of Belarus. Yes, *according to their project* [italics added], but on Belarus, not West Russia.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, “It is difficult to build a bilingual Belarus without a moment of symbolic repentance to the Belarusian language.” Also, “Germans [i.e., the Deutsche Welle] give you back to Russian Europe, and you, nationalists—you are Russian-speaking Belarusian nationalists, after all—consent to that.” In the end of this article, Dyn’ko admits that “our discussions about national interests influence the part of social elite loyal to Lukashenka, *this third side of the Belarusian triangle* [italics added].” So, what about that third side?

Project Three: Creole

The third national project on Belarus is labeled *Creole*. This label was borrowed from Mykola Ryabchuk, a Ukrainian philosopher who spent about ten years calling into question dichotomies like Russians-Ukrainians, Ukrainian speakers–Russian speakers, and nationally conscious–mankurts.⁵⁵ For Ryabchuk, Creoles are those Ukrainians who enthusiastically support Ukrainian statehood yet speak Russian as their primary language and distance themselves from other sociocultural aspects of Ukraine-ness.

Uladzimer Abushenka, Valerka Bulgakau, Andrei Dyn’ko, Igar Babkou, and other activists of Project One began to make use of this term in Belarus, and that points to a certain evolution in the nativist thinking. For much of the 1990s, they repeatedly accused the Belarusian masses of being nationally indifferent mankurts. It now appears, however, that many Belarusians who speak “trasianka,” which is phonetically Belarusian and lexically Russian,

are quite patriotic and nationalistic. As described by Uladzimer Abushenka, these people are midway in their sociocultural evolution. For them, things Russian no longer belong in “we,” yet they cannot be assigned to “they” yet. Similar ambiguity typifies their attitude to things Belarusian. Creole consciousness is a kind of extrapolation of “tuteishasts,” that is, a Belarusian variety of localism.⁵⁶

Creole is essentially a prenatal consciousness. Igar Babkou believes that it has long existed in areas that straddle a kind of cultural divide where the peripheries of adjacent cultural zones come together. Belarus is just such a place.⁵⁷ Valer Bulgakou, who is prone to a more politicized, flashy, and straight-arrow language than his philosophic friends, writes, “Russian and Pigeon-speaking Creoles with national passports of the republic of Belarus are . . . the political resource for sustaining the political regime created by Lukashenka. Owing to their sense of cultural inferiority and therefore psychological instability, they appear to be particularly receptive to ideological indoctrination . . . Lukashenka’s 1995 and 1996 referenda removed all the constraints from reproduction of Creole consciousness . . . and made it the major goal of his state policy.”⁵⁸

It becomes clear from this declaration not only that the Creole component is dominant in Belarus’s population, but that Lukashenka is in fact the president of Creoles. “The Creole masses not so much threaten Belarus’ independence as ensure that the authoritarian regime is stable and unassailable.”⁵⁹ And “Lukashenka’s standing is at its weakest not where Russian democratic influence [read Project Two] is at its highest but where Belarusian culture and Catholic anti-imperial ethos survived the best.”⁶⁰ This last statement is important, as it portrays Projects One and Three as antagonistic but having local roots, whereas Project Two is a mere nuisance not potentially instrumental in getting rid of Lukashenka.

The framers of Project Three (such as Pavel Yakubovich, Eduard Skobelev, and Lev Krishtapovich) are associated with Lukashenka’s Presidential Administration. They supervise the development of what is called the “state ideology of the republic of Belarus.” The major component of this ideology is the historic attachment of Belarus to Russia; the role of the Great Patriotic War of 1941 to

1945 that cemented this bond; communal and antientrepreneurial ethos; and, however ironic it sounds in conjunction with national ideology, antinationalist sentiment directed squarely against the nativists. Only in this context can you appreciate one reference to Lukashenka as “the main anti-Belarusian nationalist of Belarus.”⁶¹

As mentioned previously, if Russian “nationalism” is given a bad name, so “antinationalist” might be translated as “averse to xenophobia,” if in fact the term did not also include aversion to Belarusian nationalists of the nativist strand, whose spiritual mentors, like Radaslau Astrousky, Fabian Akinchyts, Yauchim Kipiel, and some others, collaborated with the Nazis.⁶² It is little wonder that so much has been made of this collaboration by Lukashenka staff propagandists. After all, more than one-quarter of Belarus’s population perished in World War II.

The “state ideology of the republic of Belarus” is still under construction, though, and there is no accomplished version of it. If anything, unsteady interpretations pertain more to the past than to the future, which is envisaged as a patrimonial welfare state with elements of a market economy. But there is no codified narrative of the pre-Soviet past. Although some Creole ideologues incorporate historical myths cultivated by Project One, they steer clear of prominent personalities with Catholic roots such as Kosciusko and Mickiewicz. There is no clarity about the role of Kalinowski. Not only is there no accomplished Creole version of Belarusian history, there is a feeling that the true history of Belarusians somehow begins with the “Great October Socialist Revolution” of 1917, whereas the earlier past is not so important. The realization of this weakness led to state funding of a movie epic based on the historic chronicles of the GDL. Whereas nativist authors relish war episodes between the GDL and Russia, the Creole movie project focuses on the GDL struggle with Crimean Tatars. Anastasiya, princess of Slutsk, born near the end of fifteenth century and adept at martial arts, not only presides over her people’s success at beating off a Tatar assault on the town of Slutsk but commits heroic acts herself. She takes the lead after her husband, Prince Simeon Olelkovich, is poisoned by traitors. In the movie, not all Tatars are “bad guys.” In the town of Slutsk, there are local Tatars who are peaceful and loyal to the

princess, and some of them get butchered by bad Tatars. Local pagans resisting conversion to Christianity are also good at heart. There is a German and a Balt and even a Jew who invites everybody to his inn to feast after the military victory, so Slutsk is shown as a truly international and yet cohesive stronghold, much like the Soviet Union at its best. While the movie *Anastasiya Slutskaya* would not satisfy sophisticated viewers, it was a success with many rank-and-file Belarusians.

David Marples suggested that the influence of Lukashenka's court historians can easily be undone should Belarus get rid of the current regime. Marples justifies his point by stating that "the president has not offered any new conceptions of what Belarus means today other than a state that is linked historically and psychologically with Russia. The limited options of such an interpretation are surely self-evident."⁶³ Obviously, it matters who is at the helm of power. However, it follows from what has been discussed in this article that the culture wars in Belarus will most likely intensify when Lukashenka is gone. And there are other reasons to disagree with Marples' reading of the situation. First, the nativist account of Belarusian history—the one that challenges the Russophile account—is by no means more elaborate than it; there are no new conceptions there either, and those that have been in circulation since the 1920s are vigorously contested, not only outside Belarus but inside as well. Second, as was stated previously and elaborated elsewhere,⁶⁴ the school of thought known as West Rusism is older than the Belarusian idea itself. So while Lukashenka's court historians may not be to Marples' liking, they have a tradition at their disposal no less durable and replete with historical evidence than the nativist one. Third, whatever "options for interpretations" there are, limited or not, are of dubious importance. What is important is public acceptance of a historical myth, and that never rests on the value of historic evidence, much less on its academic interpretations. In 2000, almost 50 percent of the respondents to a national poll subscribed to a traditional statement that Belarusians are a community that branched out of old Rus' and closely associated with its two other branches, Russians and Ukrainians.⁶⁵ In my July 2005 survey, 57.6 percent of respondents said

“yes” to this statement. From this perspective, it would make sense to pay closer attention to the opinions of Belarusians themselves than to our own likes and dislikes.

Integral to this discourse is the message of Creole nationalism contained in Lukashenka’s 23 September 2004 speech before a student audience at Brest State University. In the beginning of that speech, Lukashenka described quite accurately the confusion and despair that possessed his fellow countrymen in the early 1990s when disruption of supply lines from Russia and a shrinking Russian market brought most Belarus factories to the verge of closure. He then turned to external influences on Belarus exerted at that time.

Two outer forces wanted to sway us. On the one hand, Russia was trying to shape Belarus’ choice, but it did so in an unpersuasive and unsystematic way because it was itself going through confusion and vacillations. On the other hand, the West that won the cold war was aggressive and businesslike. The West’s message to us was: Quickly conduct privatization, unhook yourself from Russia, and jettison Russian military; then we will accept you and assist you financially. Those were the conditions that the West presented me with. That was the gist of their proposition. Not only was this influence from without. Also, inside the country a pro-Western party, the Belarusian Popular Front—and it was the only political party at the moment—pushed us in the same direction. Why didn’t then Belarus go to Europe? . . . Well, in the first place because in contrast to Poland and the Baltic States, Belarus never—I dare say, never ever—has been part of Western culture and the Western way of life. Yes, we were subjected to the influence of Western culture within Rzeczpospolita and the GDL. That influence, however, was short-lived. They did not succeed in implanting the Western ways then, and they probably cannot succeed today. . . . Yes, we were, are, and will be an inalienable part of pan-European civilization, which is a mosaic of different cultures. But to the Catholic-and-Protestant . . . civilization, Belarus and Belarusians, who are predominantly Orthodox and for centuries coexisted in the same political setting with Russia and Russians, are alien.⁶⁶

Alexander Lukashenka apparently did not read Samuel Huntington, yet what he is speaking about is much like one of Huntington’s civilizational fault lines, and Lukashenka is also adept at appealing to selective historic memories, as well as in the choice of place for that speech. There are two regional centers of western

Belarus. But in one of them, Grodno, the previous message might not find as avid listeners as in Brest, as the Polish community and Polish influence are incomparably stronger in Grodno than in Brest, which is much more of a Soviet town.

While Creole nationalism is for the most part fleshed out by theorists with Soviet agitprop credentials, it occasionally gets a hand from people with a broader outlook. For example, the 2005 book by Yuri Shevtsov contains a lot of insights that objectively speaking prop up the Creole project.⁶⁷

The strengths and weaknesses of the national projects

Although the idea of three national projects on Belarus was conceived by pundits who represent just one of them (Project One), it proves to be a useful abstraction. Indeed, most, if not all, Belarusian intellectuals concerned about the future of their country can be assigned to one of three projects described earlier. This is not to say that the borderlines between the projects are set once and for all. For example, some activists of Project Two (Muscovite Liberals) expressed concern about the possibility of collusion between two other national projects behind the Muscovite liberals' back. Most eloquently, this concern was expressed by Grigory Minenkov, a dean of philosophy at the European Humanities University. Minenkov predicted that Lukashenka will soon switch to Belarusian, and that traditional ethno-linguistic nationalism will be "the last frontier of Lukashenka's defense from the rest of the world."⁶⁸ As for the ideologues of Project One, they expressed similar concerns that somehow Lukashenka befriends Russian-speaking liberals behind their—nativists'—back. By the same token, one may also speculate about some common ground between Projects Two and Three.

Taken separately, however, each project has strengths and weaknesses. The principal strength of Project One is a tight-knit community united by conscious choice of the Belarusian language, devotion to it, and an anticolonial national liberation ethos, including fighting with Russian cultural colonialism. Given the overall deficiency of traits by which to tell Belarusians from

Russians, language may indeed be viewed as an important agent of nation-building. Such a suggestion draws from the actual experiences of other Europeans (e.g., Czechs, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians) who overcame linguistically alien influences, even though this looked like an uphill battle. Yet they proved that linguistic nationalism can win despite overwhelming odds and be instrumental in nation-building.

Some of the weaknesses of Project One are the extensions of its strength. The project's community resembles a sect insulated from the country's ambient environment. If "nationalism is essentially the general imposition of high culture on society,"⁶⁹ then one may say that Project One performs this function superbly, considering the unfriendly political climate. The *Arche* and *Nasba Niva* set standards of high culture, Belarusian style. The problem of the nativist cultural elite, however, is in its constituency, which still leaves much to be desired in terms of sheer numbers. To some extent, this is the case because the members of the elite come across as arrogant; they claim monopoly on Belarusian patriotism and are prone to accuse all those who speak Russian or disagree with their version of history of ulterior motives. The legacy of three unsuccessful Belarusification campaigns⁷⁰ also works against Project One, as does its wholesale negativism in regard to the Soviet period, which is the longest period of Belarusians' nationally conscious existence to date.

Valyantsin Akudovich, one of the most respected critical intellectuals in the nativist community, came up with a stunningly bitter criticism of the entire project. In his essay pointedly titled "Without Us," published on 28 April 2003 in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of the *Nasba Niva* weekly, he wrote,

The Revival [Adradzhenne] movement denied any value whatsoever to real Belarus. Lurking behind the need to return to the historical legacy, language, and cultural experiences of the past is a rigid ideological construction that does not sit well with the achievements and values of contemporary Belarusian society, because all its triumphs, accomplishments, and delights are either of communist or colonial origin. . . . We have remained lonely not because somebody abandoned us but because in their absolute majority the denizens of the state, in whose God-forsaken spot we are holed up, do not even budge to take a trip to the "new land" that we discovered for them. Even if they were

pushed towards us by tommy-gun barrels on Lukashenka's orders, even then they would flee to their comfy quarters. . . . It does not make sense to think that the situation will change if there is somebody other Lukashenka at the helm of power. It is not us but the "Belarusian people" who elected him, and the same "people" will throw him out (sooner or later), and then again they will elect not our but their own president; and we will again write about Belarus as a hostile territory.⁷¹

Akudovich's impressive essay elicits a mixed reaction. On one hand, his is the harshest criticism possible suggesting that the nativist national project has been a complete failure. But on the other hand, just because his criticism is inward-directed, the nativist community may be able to sustain itself through refreshing change. The prescription for such change is unclear, though. In his later essay, Akudovich writes that Belarusians have been too late with their "national revival" and that in a qualitatively new, information-based society the declared goals of that revival can no longer be achieved. Openness to communication is something which even totalitarian regimes cannot escape. But cultures whose formative experience is not yet over are the first to fall victim to this openness.⁷²

A strength of Project Two is that it embraces the language of the overwhelming majority of Belarusians. In Belarus, all bureaucratic, scientific, technological, and economic and much interpersonal communication is in Russian, so using Russian presents itself as a cultural norm. Another strength of Project Two is that it is not as elitist as Project One and is less insulated from larger society. A weakness of Project Two is a lack of its own historical narrative and such a detailed formulation for its blueprint for the future that would go beyond the mere statement that Belarus should maintain its statehood and be a democratic country. Also missing is a cohesive explanation of Belarusians' differences from Russians. In many ways the national project of Russian-speaking liberals remains putative. Its backers seem to form a community when there is a commonly shared sense of threat, and they get atomized when it recedes. The letter of Vitaly Silitsky protesting a Western Russian-language radio project had such a mobilizing potential because it purported to use the language of ultimatum. But because a mobilizing sense of threat is not always incited by

another brand of self-proclaimed democrats (only by the Lukashenka regime), the Muscovite liberals, as they are called by their nativist/pro-European counterparts, remain blissfully disorganized. Their evolution into a tight-knit community will most probably intensify if Lukashenka indeed forges an alliance with the nativists, as some Russian-speaking liberals fear, and/or if Lukashenka is gone.

An obvious strength of Project Three is that its social base is broader than that of the other projects. Its other strength is in its sponsorship by the ruling regime. The economic success of post-1995 Belarus, all doubts in which should have evaporated after 2005 reports by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, can also be attributed to national mobilization techniques within the so-called Creole project, and so can the loyal, professional, and disciplined cadre of Belarusian bureaucrats and their relatively low level of corruption.⁷³ Apparently, Lukashenka's management style and his charisma as a peasant-born upstart have been and still are to the liking of many Belarusians. Earlier I wrote about the peasant ferment of Belarus, a country of delayed urbanization, as the nourishing environment for Lukashenka-style leadership.⁷⁴ To Ales Chobat, Lukashenka resembles Vasil Vashchyla, a legendary leader of the 1743 to 1744 peasant uprising against Radziwil, a Polish magnate, whose people imposed too heavy taxes (in the form of expropriated wheat) on peasants in eastern Belarus. Svetlana Alexievich says that with three-quarters of its residents being urbanites, "Belarus is still a country with a patriarchal peasant culture" and that Lukashenka is a "peasant leader. . . . I was asked why our own [Vaclav] Havel did not emerge in Belarus. I replied that we had Ales Adamovich, but we chose a different man. The point is not that we have no Havels, we do, but that they are not called for by society."⁷⁵

In their own way, even devout Lukashenka-haters recognize his bond with the people. In December 2003, Victor Ivashkevich, an opposition journalist, was released from jail. Accused of publishing a libel about Belarus' President, he was sentenced to a two-year term. Ivashkevich was released after one year due to intense international scrutiny of his case. While in jail, he was visited by two foreign ambassadors (U.S. and Czech) and by the

MPs from several countries; the OSCE and the U.S. government made statements on his behalf. "I got out of prison more tolerant and sober-minded than before," said Ivashkevich upon his release. "The problem is not Lukashenka. . . . Lukashenka did not fall from the sky, his coming was not accidental. He embodies the worst traits of our people, which is why he comes across to people as their man."⁷⁶

While most observers recognize Lukashenka's bond with many of his fellow countrymen, not everybody is as emotional as a former prisoner and a victim of the regime. According to Drakakhrust, "much of what we attribute exclusively to Lukashenka's ill-will pertains to Belarusian society regardless of who presides over it."⁷⁷ Andrei Pankin admonishes Russian liberal democrats that their common interest with Putin outweighs their contradictions; he sees that common interest in not letting a Lukashenka-like spokesman for real people seize power. Pankin's article is pointedly titled "Demos and Cratos in Belarus and in Russia."⁷⁸ Clearly, the author makes it a point to avoid idealizing *demos* in either of these countries. Yet another confirmation of Lukashenka's bond with his numerous supporters can be seen in his deliberate 2002 to 2003 campaign to discredit Russia's political establishment, ending up in worsening the public attitude toward a close union with Russia—a fact recorded by independent pollsters.

The continuing glorification of Soviet Belarus's role in the Great Patriotic War and constant appeals to the socioeconomic success of Belarus throughout the period between that war and the breakup of the Soviet Union are among other strengths of the Project Three. On these matters, Lukashenka is very much in sync with the vast majority of Belarusians. It is unclear, though, how long a mobilization potential of the war and the postwar success is going to last. Definitely among the project's strengths is maintaining close ties with Russia, with which most Belarusians feel a strong bond, yet not to the point of giving up on Belarusian statehood.

The Project's major weakness is its low appeal to highly skilled and educated Belarusians. In a way, Creole nationalism helps sustain Belarusians as a *demotic ethnies*, that is, an ethnic group devoid of high culture and its promoters. Ostracism of the Lukashenka regime by the West is also a weakness of the national

project, if only because the opinion of the West is significant for most educated people in the eastern part of Europe.

Is Belarus on the road to national consolidation?

Whether or not the previous account of culture wars in Belarus is illuminating, one may find it somewhat depressing. Today, a hundred years after the Belarusian idea was first packaged for popular consumption and even more years after it was conceived, national consolidation of Belarusians is still in the balance. Held up against Hroch's influential three-phase model of nation formation (the scholarly phase A, the national agitation phase B, and the national movement phase C),⁷⁹ Belarusians are still somewhere in the beginning of phase B. As a result, Belarus is deficient as a nation even while having a state of its own. "The internal group around which the nation coalesces and the external groups to which the nation is contrasted and compared have historical and cultural experiences and associations with particular modes of political and economic development,"⁸⁰ writes a researcher of nationalism.

Belarus presents two major deviations from this normative pattern. First, there is no single internal group around which to "coalesce." Second, in Belarus, the outward-looking dimensions of identity apparently overshadow its inward-looking dimensions. Each concept of Belarusianness is more specific in stressing who Belarusians lean to or away from outside of Belarus (Russia or Europe) and more vague in asserting who they are. Yury Drakakhrust calls this situation "blissfully medieval,"⁸¹ and Ales Chobab warns that "no nation which has not resolved its inner problems has a chance for political independence and survival of its culture and distinctiveness."⁸² In light of this nation-building morass, the statement of Yury Shevtsov that "Belarusian identity is there to comprehend, not to manifest" sheds an aura of mysticism and acquires down-to-earth meaning: Belarusian identity would certainly be manifested just as any other one if only Belarusians knew what to manifest, which they apparently do not. Instead, they are confused.

One mitigating circumstance, though, objectively speaking, has always stood in the way of national consolidation in Belarus.

The country straddles a cultural divide that Huntington calls a civilizational fault line, and cultural geographers have long been fascinated with it. Piotr Eberhardt attempted to mark out this cultural divide more accurately than Huntington did in his seminal book about the clash of civilizations. According to Eberhardt's version, the divide leaves a strip along the northwestern border of Belarus (at the crossroads between Grodno, Minsk, and Vitebsk regions) on the side of "Western civilization," while the rest of Belarus gets assigned to the Byzantine-Orthodox.⁸³

If this is the case, then Western individualism and attachment to personal freedom should have been waging war with Oriental communalism inside Belarus, undermining cultural homogeneity. One traffic policeman in Minsk inadvertently familiarized me with his take on that clash of civilizations. When he learned that I was from the United States, he asked what I was doing in Minsk. And when I said that I was gathering material for a book about Belarus, he stunned me by the following exclamation: "A book about Belarus? To be put out in America? Then let it be known to everybody in America that the president of Belarus ought to be selected from Grodno or Brest and not from Vitebsk or Mogiliov." While such a blueprint for Belarus elections may be found too rigid, it is no more rigid than Huntington's pronouncements about dismal prospects for democracy and market outside the Western world. And yet in a mysterious way, the overall situations in Eastern Europe seem to vindicate Huntington's projections. For example, in Ukraine, another country straddling the cultural divide, the triumph of pro-Western forces is not a foregone conclusion.

Igor' Bobkov, a Belarusian author who has been researching the impact of the major cultural divide on Belarusian identity, concluded that this identity can develop only as trans-cultural. Moreover, he sees the civilizational divide as potentially the major organizing principle of Belarusian culture. In this trans-cultural tradition, "Adam Mickiewicz is a native alien, whereas Alexander Lukashenka is an alien native."⁸⁴ Bobkov envisages Belarus eventually waking up to consciously embrace its inborn trans-culturalism, so his entire account of the Belarusian idea's genealogy reads like an implicit appeal to synthesize the available national projects,

perhaps under some civic nationalism umbrella. The necessity in such a synthesis is also realized by Yury Drakakhrust.⁸⁵ Valyantsin Akudovich says that he sees Belarus as “the original combination of different linguistic and cultural models. Here, the Russian culture and language will never be displaced, and the analogous Polish influence will not disappear either, and in the nearest future the English-language culture will play an enormous role.”⁸⁶

Yet there is quite a distance between recognition of the idea of cultural synthesis and its implementation. While theoretically speaking it is in the realm of possibility, pitfalls are equally obvious. Huntington deftly distinguished between torn and cleft countries. According to him, “A torn country has a single predominant culture, which places it in one civilization, but its leaders want to shift it to another civilization. They say in effect ‘we are one people and belong together in one place, but we want to change that place.’”⁸⁷ For Huntington, a classic torn country is Russia, by which he probably meant Russia proper without its numerous and compactly settled Muslims. “In a cleft country, major groups from two or more civilizations say in effect ‘We are different people and belong in different places.’ The forces of repulsion drive them apart, and they gravitate toward civilization magnets in other societies.”⁸⁸ Belarus seems more cleft than torn, which curbs my optimism in regard to its national consolidation. Yet hope remains that the ongoing existence of Belarusian statehood will sooner or later generate demand for national unity, and new generations of Belarusians will be up to that task. To this end, a refreshing change in Western policies vis-à-vis Belarus may prove helpful. For quite some time, all hopes have been placed on traditional East European nationalism of a nativist strand with more than a touch of anti-Russian sentiment. It worked so well and in so many places that the same approach was rubberstamped for Belarus. For a long time, however, Belarus has showed signs of being different: what worked elsewhere has not worked in Belarus, and it will not. A more imaginative strategy is overdue, which would draw from a consistent attempt to understand Belarus on its own terms instead of fitting it into a foreign ideological template.

Notes

1. Ales Antsipenka, "Zatsemki na Paliakh Belaruskai Mentalnasti, *Nasbe Mneniye*, www.mnnby.org, 23 September 2005.
2. "The Dark Heart of Europe," *The Economist*, 21 October 2004.
3. Margarita M. Balmaceda, "Myth and Reality in the Belarusian-Russian Relationship," *Problems of Post-Communism* 46:3(1999): 3.
4. Steven M. Eke and Taras Kuzio, "Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52:3(2000): 536.
5. John McCain, U.S. Senator, Speech at "The New Atlantic Initiative" Conference, Washington, D.C., 14 November 2002, <http://minsk.usembassy.gov/html/mccan.html>.
6. Boryczko, Alicja, "Belarus—A Lonely Island," *Democracy International*, 13 May 2004, <http://www.european.referendum.org/up/up125a.html>.
7. "Rice Names 'Outposts of Tyranny,'" BBC News, 19 January 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4186241.stm>.
8. "Bush Calls Belarus Europe's Last Dictatorship," *NewsMax.com Wires*, 6 May 2005, <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2005/5/5/214450.shtml>.
9. Janka Kupala, *Tuteishiyia* (Munich, Germany: Batskaushchyna, 1953), 22.
10. This flag was a symbol of the Belarusian National Republic declared by the enthusiasts of the Belarusian idea in 1918 under German military occupation. The white-red-white flag was also used under another German occupation, particularly in its final 1943 to 1944 phase. In 1991, it became the official flag of independent Belarus. In 1995, the country returned to a slightly modified Soviet insignia, including a red-green flag with a strip of Belarusian folk ornament. Belarus is the only post-Soviet country to resort to Soviet-era symbols.
11. A survey of two hundred randomly selected adult residents of Minsk was conducted in July 2005 by the Novak firm. Random route method was used in the study. To realize interviews with "difficult-of-access respondents," at the end of each route quotas were used that made it possible to reach the required level of conformity between the universe and the sample. Respondents' gender and age were used as quota criteria. The main criterion was age. The correlation by gender was controlled during the study by each interviewer independently (about 50-50). When using quota by age, the following age groups were used: eighteen to twenty-four, twenty-five to thirty-four, thirty-five to forty-four, forty-five to fifty-four, and sixty-five-plus. The number of respondents in each age group was the same as in general population.
12. Yury Drakakhrust, "Zhaneuskaya kanventsiya da vainy kulturau," *Arche* 32:3(2004), <http://arche.home.by/2004-3/drakakhrust304.htm>.
13. Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies is an opposition-minded sociology firm. After the October 2004 referendum, IISEPS was denied registration by Belarus's government; it is now registered as a Lithuanian entity but continues to function in Minsk, for the most part on grants from Western donors.
14. As for Ukraine, yet another Belarus neighbor, the responses to the same questions would likely be different from those obtained in Belarus as well, although some regions of eastern and southern Ukraine may actually harbor similar reactions.
15. Alexander Yaroshuk, "Pust' Putin Otchitayetsia," *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 23 August 2002, www.bdg.by/newsnews/news.shtml?0871,1.
16. See, for example, Alexander Bekker, "Lukashenko Otstupil," *Vedomosti*, 20 February 2004.
17. Jan Zaprudnik, "Belarus: In Search of National Identity between 1986 and 2000," In Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson, and Rosalind Marsh, eds., *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (London/New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2003), 112-24.
18. Piotr Martsev, "Prezident v Kotle" [President in a Hot Spot], *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 25 February 2004.
19. I. V. Stalin, "Marxism i Natsional'nyi Vopros," *Prosveshcheniye* 3-5 (March-May 1913), <http://www2.unil.ch/slav/ling/textes/Stalin13.html>.
20. Yury Shevtsov, *Obyedinnionnaya Natsiya: Fenomen Belarusi* (Moscow: Yevropa 2005), 71.
21. Viacheslav Nosevich, "Belorusy: Stanovleniye Etnosa i 'Natsional'naya Ideya'" (Moscow: Prava Cheloveka, 1998), 11-30, <http://vn.belinter.net/vkl/17.html>.

22. Ernest Gellner (1964), as quoted in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.
23. Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55:8(2003): 1241-71.
24. While some Belarusians still favor merging into one state with Russia, there are fewer of them today than before February 2004 and decidedly fewer than before May 2002. In 1998, their political affiliation, Belaya Rus, did not even apply for requisite government reregistration. Either they failed to round up the one thousand followers required by law or the government gently advised them to dematerialize (Yury Drakokhrust, "'Pamiarkounasts' Zhiviot i Pobezhdayet," *Kuriyer* 2 [2002]).
25. Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus," 1263-66.
26. Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus at a Crossroads of History* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).
27. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), 20.
28. Interview with Valyantsin Akudovich, Belaruskaya Atlyantyda, radio talk show of the Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty, 23 June 2005, www.svaboda.org.
29. Piotra Sadowsky, "Natsional'naya Identichnasts yak Metafizichny Vybar," *Arche* 2 (2004): 77-100.
30. *National Composition of Population of the Republic of Belarus and Languages Used by the Population* (Minsk, Belarus: Ministry of Statistics and Analysis 2001), 326.
31. Discontinued in March 2006, it now exists only online at www.bdg.by.
32. Vladimir Dorokhov, "Trusovskaya Logika," *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 12 August 2005.
33. Semion Bukchin, *Khronika Suverennoho Bolota* (Minsk, Belarus: Yevropeiskoye Vremia, 1996), 106.
34. Yury Drakokhrust, "Belorusskii Natsionalizm Govorit Po-Russki," *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, 19 January 1998. In Russian-language publications, the name of this author is spelled "Drakokhrust," whereas in Belarusian-language sources it is spelled "Drakakhrust."
35. "Na Pytan'ni 'Arche' Adkazvayuts Viadomyya Raseiskamounnye Intellectually Belarusi," *Arche* 5 (2004): 7-27.
36. Yury Drakakhrust, "Zhaneuskaya Kanventsiya dlya Vainy Kul'turau," *Arche* 3 (2004), arche.home.by/2004-3/drakachrust304.htm.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Valer Bulgakau, "Chamu Belarus Nia Austriya, a Yeuraziiskaya Satrapiya," *Arche* 5 (2004): 33.
39. Danila Zhukousky, "Pax Vobiscum," *Arche* 5 (2004): 49.
40. Yury Drakakhrust, "Vayennaya Khitrasts," *Arche* 5 (2004): 54.
41. Obrashcheniye Vitaliya Silitskogo, *Nasbe Mneniye*, 10 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Alexander Feduta, "Bol'noi Zub," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 12 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
44. Yury Drakakhrust, "Yashche Raz pra Zhaneuskuyu Kanventsiyu," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 23 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
45. Vadim Kaznacheyev, "Volna i Pena," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 31 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
46. "Sprechki Vakol Movy Novai Pragramy Niametskoi Khvali dlia Belarusi" (Dialogue between Svetlana Alexievich and Gennadz Buraikin), *Prazhski Accent* (talk show of the Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty), 24 September 2005, www.svaboda.org.
47. Akhrem Matyl, "Paslaidounyya, razcharavanyya i Inshyya," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 25 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
48. Siarhei Khareuski, "Pakayan'ne perad Movai," *Nasba Niva*, 19 August 2005; <http://nn.by>.
49. Vital Tsygankov, "Pra 'Natsional'na Dezaryyentavanykh,'" *Nasbe Mneniye*, 17 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
50. Andrei Dyn'ko, "Poplech tsi Pobach?" *Nasbe Mneniye*, 12 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Yury Drakakhrust, "Yashche Raz pra Zhaneuskuyu Kanventsiyu," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 23 August 2005, www.mnnby.org.
53. Dyn'ko, "Poplech tsi Pobach?"
54. Andrei Dyn'ko, "Deutsche Welle, Braty-Rusafily," *Nasba Niva*, 2 September 2005.
55. Creatures whose historical memory was surgically removed from their brain; they are pictured by Chingiz Aitmatov in his hallmark novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred*

- Years*, trans. F. J. French (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980). See also Mykola Ryabchuk, *Vid Malorossii do Ukraini* (Kiev, Ukraine: Kritika, 2000).
56. Uladzimer Abushenka, "Mickiewicz kak 'Kreol': ot 'Tuteishikh Geneologii' k Geneologii Tuteshastsi," <http://www.lib.by/frahmenty/sem-abuszenka.htm>.
 57. Igar Babkou, "Genealogiya Belaruskai Idei," *Arche* 3 (2005): 136-65.
 58. Valerka Bulgakau, "Vybary Prezydenta Kreolau," *Arche* 4 (2001), arche.home.by/2001-4/bulha401.htm.
 59. Ibid.
 60. Ibid.
 61. Alexander Feduta, "Nedoliot," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 3 August 2005, www.nmnby.org.
 62. See John Loftus, *The Belarus Secret* (New York: Knopf, 1982); see also *Belarusian Nazi during World War II and Their Work for the Cold War*, <http://www.geocities.com/dudar2000/Bcc.htm>. A few alleged collaborators who found themselves in the West were tried and convicted. Anton (Andrei) Savoniuk, who in 1999 was given two life sentences for his role in a 1942 massacre of Jews, died in a British prison in November 2005.
 63. David Marples, "Europe's Last Dictatorship: The Roots and Perspectives of Authoritarianism in 'White Russia,'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 57:6(2005): 905.
 64. Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus," 1248.
 65. Andrei Vardomatsky, "Belarus i Mir" [Belarus and the World], *Analitycheskii Biulleten Belorusskikh Fabrik Mysli* 2 (2000): 18-30.
 66. Alexander Lukashenka, *Stenogramma Vystupleniya pered Studencheskoi Molodiozh'yu Brestchiny*, 23 September 2004. www.president.gov.by.
 67. Grigory Ioffe, "Belarus: The Nation Yet to Be United. Reflections on the Book by Yury Shevtsov," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (forthcoming).
 68. Grigory Minenkov, "Zametki o Yazyke, Znani Puti i Prochem," *Nasbe Mneniye*, 23 August 2005, www.nmnby.org.
 69. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 57.
 70. Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: The Questions of Language," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55:7(2003): 1009-1047.
 71. Valyantsin Akudovich, "Bez Nas," *Nasha Niva*, 28 March 2003, accessed at www.litara.net.
 72. Valyantsin Akudovich, "Vaina Kulturau ili Piramida Kheopsu za Muram Minskaga Zamku" (2005), <http://www.knihi.com/>.
 73. From 1998 to 2002, Transparency International (TI) considered Belarus to be one of 50 countries with the least corruption. More specifically, the 2002 ranking of 102 world nations on "perceived corruption" had Belarus as number 36, tied with Lithuania and less corrupt than Poland (ranked 45), not to mention Russia (71), and Ukraine (85). In 2003, Belarus was ranked 53; in 2004 its rank was within the range 74-78; and in 2005, within the range 107-116. A change of this magnitude within just three unremarkable years defies objective explanation and allows one to suspect regrettable corruption of TI's criteria, that is, their infusion with politics. This suspicion finds tentative confirmation in the 25 October 2005 broadcast of the Prague Accent, a talk show of the Belarusian service of Radio Liberty. "What happened? Did they begin to steal more in Belarus?" asks the talk show's host. Says Yaroslav Romanchuk, one of the leaders of the United Civic Party of Belarus' standing in opposition to Lukashenka: "The authors justly call this index [TI's corruption index] a perception index—this is how corruption is perceived by different personalities and institutions. Belarus' rating of 2.6 [on the 0-10 scale where 10 stands for the total lack of corruption] was assigned on the basis of responses to five questions given by . . . the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House, and UN. The presence of these organizations in Belarus is not wide enough to monitor all changes in our legislation and practical relationships between business and state. I met with TI's experts and explained to them the methodological differences between corruption estimates in market and non-market countries. And two years of those discussions and explanations brought about the result which led to an essential methodological correction" (<http://www.svoboda.org/textarticlesprograms/pragueaccent/2005/10/27>).
 74. Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Economy and Political Landscape," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 1 (2004): 85-118.
 75. Interview with Svetlana Alexievich, *Izvestia*, 14 May 2004, www.izvestia.ru/person/article103553.

76. Sergei Nekhamkin, "Na Put' Ispravleniya Nie Vstal," *Izvestia*, 16 December 2003, www.izvestia.ru/world/article42249.
77. Yury Drakokhrust, "Sapega i Masherov," *Svobodnyye Novosti* 33 (31 August 2001), <http://www.bymedia.net/press/gazeta.article.php?articleID=146193>.
78. Alexei Pankin, "Demos i Kratos v Belorussii i v Rossii," *Izvestia*, 3 November 2004, www.izvestia.ru/comment/629774_print.
79. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
80. Stephen Shulman, "National Identity and Public Support for Political and Economic Reform in Ukraine," *Slavic Review* 64:1(2005): 59-87.
81. Yury Drakokhrust, "Velikoye Knizhestvo Belorusskoye," *Belorusskiye Novosti*, 15 August 2003, www.naviny.by/ru/print/?id=18242.
82. Ales Chobat, "Tlum Dziatsei," *Nasba Niva* (2001), accessed at <http://gw.longwo.minsk.by/nn/2001/35/10.htm>.
83. Piotr Eberhardt, "The Concept of Boundary between Latin and Byzantine Civilization in Europe," *Przegląd Geograficzny*, 76:2(2004): 169-8.
84. Igor Bobkov, "Etika Pogranich'ya: Transkul'turnost Kak Belorusskii Opyt," *Perekrostki* 3-4 (2005): 130.
85. Yury Drakokhrust, "Zhaneuskaya Kanventsiya dlya Vainy Kul'turau," *Arche* 3 (2004), arche.home.by/2004-3/drakokhrust304.htm.
86. Valentin Akudovich, "Belorusy—Strashno Ambitsioznyye Liudi," *Turizm i Otdykh* 39, 27 September 2001.
87. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996), 138-39.
88. *Ibid.*, 139.