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CONCEPTS (IDEAS) OF THE BELARUSIAN NATION SINCE GAINING INDEPENDENCE (1990–2009)²

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to present the research findings concerning the development of the Belarusian nation since gaining independence. Yet, a nation is a complex political and social community with a dynamic structure, on top of which researchers' and intellectuals' methods in studying nations are just as unstable and changeable.

The objective of the proposed paper in this field is quite modest. It basically focuses on studying a particular aspect, namely the concept of the Belarusian nation represented in the intellectual or political and intellectual sphere. To be more precise, the article aims to analyse and systematise the core ideas of the nation that have been consistently present in intellectual and political texts since Belarus obtained sovereignty.

This by no means undermines the importance of representation of *an idea of the nation* on other levels (for example, the one of actual politics or everyday life). Intellectuals may have a considerable influence, but it is not decisive. Apart from that, the relationship between *ideas* and socio-political *practices* is rather complex; and the nature of ideas as social phenomena is an issue of a separate discussion.³ Moreover, it is obvious that a nation is not “an imagined community”, as it is supported not only by ideas or perceptions, but also by institutions,⁴ which makes the situation even more complicated.

¹ Passport spelling: Andrei Kazakevich, in Belarusian: Андрэй Казакевіч

² The text is based on the findings of a research carried out by the *Political Sphere* Institute in 2008 – 2010. At first, the research was supported by Carnegie Corporation within the program of the CASE Centre, which is a department of European Humanities University, Vilnius. A conflict caused by violations of academic freedoms at EHU led to the Political Sphere Institute cancelling the initial project format and finishing the research on its own. The research group included Aliaksiej Dziermant, Andrej Kazakievič, Aliaksiej Kryvalap, Aliaksiej Lastoŭski and Taćciana Čyžova.

³ The classics approached this problem in different ways. For example, Weber, on the one hand, stated that innovative ideas could create “a world of representations” and dramatically reformulate a conflict of interests. On the other hand, “thinking patterns” are closely connected with and dependent on evolution of social groups and their interests (Mannheim, 1993: 260-264). A lot of historians keep to a diffusionistic vision, i.e. ideas of leading intellectuals become gradually accepted in wide social strata (see, e.g., Parris, 1960; Hart, 1965 on the influence of Bentham's ideas on the 19th century social policy). This approach, however, is severely criticised too (Skinner, 1974: 280). It is also evident that the influence of ideas on politics strongly depends on the type of leadership (Snare, 1995). For particular study of relationship between ideas and policies, see: King, 1994; Weir, 1994. On ambiguity of the impact of ideas on judges' practices, see: Sherry, 2004.

⁴ At least a nation is based on collective representations no more than any other community.

Nevertheless, the study of the intellectual field seems significant for analysing transformations that national communities have been going through since the collapse of the USSR. Firstly, the ideas formulated by intellectuals to a certain extent influence the development of the community, though we do not tend to overestimate this impact. Secondly - and this is even more important - intellectuals' ideas reflect those fundamental processes taking place on the everyday and political levels, in a concentrated form. Studying the intellectual field has a considerable advantage, as this field is more transparent and analysable. Systematisation of the intellectual field can make an effective foundation for studying the evolution of national community in other social fields.

As mentioned above, the research centres on "intellectual constructs", which are first and foremost in the focus of our attention. As for the disciplinary positioning, the paper comes closest to "the history of (political) ideas." Its general theoretical context is determined by Quentin Skinner's (Skinner, 2002a, b) and Arthur Lovejoy's works, with the latter's concept of a unit-idea in particular (see Lovejoy, 2001: 3–23). For definite analyses of political ideas, see Nisbet, 1994; Grosby, 2002.

Researchers of nationalism also pay attention to ideas, particularly the *idea of a nation*. Most often, however, they take the stance of "diffusionism",⁵ approaching intellectuals' ("elites") ideas as a real "project" that is carried out in the process of nation-building, which is actually a very rare case. They do not study ideas as an independent phenomenon, but only as an element of nationalism as a social and political process, which does not really meet our objectives.⁶ In addition, researchers are apt to concentrate on successful cases, ignoring huge bulks of failed or unfulfilled ideas and projects. Considering all this, the theoretical framework of the history of ideas seems more suitable for implementation of the objectives set in the opening paragraphs of this paper.

The choice of the discipline, i.e. the history of ideas, determines the methods and strategies of data processing. First, it is necessary to define what exactly we mean by the idea (concept) of the nation in intellectual and political texts, then we'll set basic principles of choosing texts for analysis, and only after that it is possible to go on to a more detailed analysis of the Belarusian intellectual discourse and the ways a concept of the nation is formulated within its framework.

Research of the Belarusian nation in the context of ideas and intellectual constructs has a certain history, though, unfortunately, the texts seldom consistently meet precise methodological positions.

⁵ On diffusionism in the history of ideas, see, in particular: Skinner, 1974:280.

⁶ Although the leading authors, such as Anderson, Hobsbawm, Hellner et al. accomplished their fundamental works decades ago, and by the 1990s had already become orthodoxy (Smith, 2001: 49), a lot of Belarusian authors still perceive them as a recent innovation and modern achievement in social science.

Firstly, the problem of nation (“national project”, “discourse” or “vision”) is all too often mixed up with the foreign policy orientation, electoral behaviour, political ideologies, etc., though these spheres can function quite independently. Secondly, intellectual trends or authors’ visions of history are sometimes automatically interpreted as “national projects” or concepts of the nation, which in most cases is erroneous and simply not true.

A political approach is more appropriate for classifying political agendas, ideologies and reform plans. But to our mind, it is not quite efficient for distinguishing the concept of the nation. Such approach is based on the assumption that each political project or ideology is bound to have a coherent “concept of the nation,” which often does not correspond to the reality. Firstly, a political agenda, as a rule, is not detailed enough to articulate the idea of the nation. Secondly, the same concept can be shared by different political movements which sometimes stand very far from each other within the political spectrum. Thus, the idea of a “civil” nation can be supported both by democrats and proponents of authoritarianism, while the belief in a “unified Russian people” can be shared between liberals and extreme right-wingers. And vice versa, political movements that stand close to each other can adhere to different concepts of the nation. For example, conservatives can advocate both ethnic and cultural and political concepts.

If we look at the actual political orientations in present-day Belarus, russo-centrists can stand for independence, while supporters of the idea of an independent nation can consistently stand for integration with Russia.⁷ The division of the political spectrum into “nationalists” and “proponents of the state”, “nationalists” and “liberals”, etc. is even less meaningful, since all intellectual constructs that formulate a concept of the nation are nationalist by definition.

If we touch upon the ways different concepts of the nation are reflected, at least indirectly, in researchers’ texts, we can see that they usually propose their classifications basing to a large extent on their own experiences, perceptions and public debate. Moreover, such classifications tend to refer to different levels, which makes comparison of their conclusions more complicated.⁸ They discuss mainly “national projects” or “discourses”, which are linked to various political and cultural aspects of Belarusian society and its development. However, in most cases it is political division that seems to be of primary concern, making the basis of their classifications.

In fact, publications on the history of political ideas (political thought) pay little attention to the subject. They either do not discuss the period since 1990

⁷ Like Jury Šaŭcoŭ, to give but one example. For his position on the Belarusian nation, see Šaŭcoŭ, 2005: 33–38.

⁸ This is particularly true of foreign authors, who tend to make their conclusions on the basis of “relevant” texts or conversations with Belarusian intellectuals.

(Šalkievič, 2002) or touch upon some fragments that have little to do with concepts of the nation, offering discussions of the national idea and a short overview of ideology of the Belarusian state (Višnieŭskaja, 2004: 252–258).

In analysing the Belarusian society, most social writers and researchers come up with a binary model of cultural and political division in Belarus, i.e. official governmental vs. oppositional discourses (Hansen, 2006), “Slavonic” vs. “European” nationalism (Goujon, 2007), “national/democratic” vs. “post-Soviet/pro-Lukashenka” project (Brzozowska, 2003), “national” vs. “Soviet” strategies of nation building (Leshchenko, 2004).

Sometimes, more complicated models are offered. For example, some researchers distinguish a nativist/pro-European, Muscovite liberal and creole national projects (Ioffe, 2007); or projects based on the ideas of “getting Belarus back into Europe,” “Slavonic brotherhood,” and “memory of the Great Patriotic War” (Pershaj, 2006). “Intellectual discourses of Belarusian identity” can be simply divided into “right”, “left” and “centrist” ones (Rudkoŭski, 2008), or researchers can come up with complex models consisting of five intellectual projects that are, unfortunately, distinguished without any precise criteria.⁹

Most of the abovementioned texts contribute to understanding the Belarusian situation, yet, they are not applicable for our analysis in their pure form. Firstly, most of them refer to the analysis of the concepts of the Belarusian nation as a community rather than a political project or agenda. Secondly, our objective is to offer an analysis based on empirical data, at least as much as it is possible.

A Concept of the Nation as an Intellectual Construct

Even if we take the *history of ideas* as the point of reference, a nation remains a rather complicated structure, so we are going to focus on what we see as core elements that determine the logic of the structure and development of the whole construct. These core elements will be referred to as a *concept of the nation*.

There can be more than one answer to the question, “What is the nation?” depending on political orientation, social and cultural background of a certain representative of a national community. Still, the answers are bound to contain some common elements, a kind of *unit-ideas*, which are more stable and reflect the *idea of the nation* in a concentrated form. Of course, distinguishing such *unit-ideas* is an analytical and at the same time quite arbitrary process, which, nonetheless, is in line with our objectives.

⁹ A special problem is put forward by distinguishing a postmodern project, the formulation of which is attributed to the authors of a number of books on Belarusian history (Mackievič et al., 2008: 15–25).

By a concept of the nation we mean the following decisive unit-idea: how the community's borders and elements are determined and what kind of community is viewed as the foundation of the nation. For a concept of the nation to be complete, we are going to outline the public institutions (*res publica*)¹⁰ that the community is associated with. Thus, within our research, a concept of the nation refers to the community and its public institutions.

The first element of a concept of the nation, i.e. definition of the community, does not seem to require any detailed explanations. What we mean here is the principles and rules according to which the borders of the national community are determined and who is included into the community.

The issue of public institutions is not so simple, so it is worth discussing in detail. A vast majority of definitions of a nation, on both scholarly and popular levels, include a reference to a certain set of institutions. Our research is based on the assumption that a community both as a social phenomenon and an intellectual construct is based on a certain set of institutions. The set itself can vary, including, for example, the origins (race), language, church, cultural tradition, territory, state, etc. In its turn, the state can be "Belarusian," "national," "union," etc. The public institutions do not only consolidate the community, making the foundations of its identity, but also determine collective practices and behaviour, as well as other components of the nation.

On the level of ideas, the set of institutions determines the logic of nation building as an intellectual construct, including formulation of values, projects, interpretations of history and behaviour programmes. In the intellectual field, the combinations of institutions can be infinite, with various unusual, individual and peripheral concepts coming into being alongside conventional ones, which may be shared by wide circles of the community. In theory, an individual intellectual or an ordinary person can formulate his or her own concept of the nation. The only thing that can limit the flight of imagination is the cultural context and principles/values or an intention to destroy them. Unusual concepts or attempts at creating them can resound in the intellectual sphere, still remaining marginal phenomena. All this leads to a problem of setting the canon and criteria for selecting texts for analysis, as well as dividing the authors and concepts into mainstream and peripheral ones.

The Canon and Sampling

Each researcher who studies ideas of a certain period faces the problem of selecting texts and personalities to be analysed. A canon as an acknowledged and legitimate set of authors and their texts recognised by the intellectual or academic tradition as a reflection of "ideas of the period" to a certain extent

¹⁰ Something that belongs to a community (society, a people or a nation).

simplifies the matter. Alternatively, the number of texts available to researchers may be just too small, which automatically makes the problem of sampling irrelevant (that is the case, for example, with the studies of Belarusian political thought before the 16th century).

At the same time, a lot of authors admit that the canon may not be sufficient, but only a few of them try to extend their analyses, breaking through a conventional set of texts (Skinner, 2002). An obvious problem with analysing the canon may be that it is not representative enough, but at least it has been tested by tradition and practices of forming a coherent corpus of texts. This in any case presupposes at least some degree of critical reading, sampling and ranging the texts.

As for our research, there is obviously no canon for the purposes of analysing political ideas in contemporary Belarus,¹¹ even on such all-important issues of national thought as “the nation” or “Belarus.”¹² The problem of text corpus to provide the basis for our analysis leads to the necessity of choosing an appropriate method to process and structure an extensive database. To make the research more effective, a certain modification of the pure “intellectual field” model is required.

The intellectual field or the field of intellectual production in Belarus is by no means narrow, with the subject of the nation and political ideas being present there on a regular basis. Yet, strange as it may seem, the text corpus on the subject is not wide enough. In addition, if we centre on the intellectual level in its narrow sense, it will result in a noticeable disproportion of the concepts in favour of “national” ones, since advocates of various visions of the Belarusian nation are not similar in representing their intellectual attitude.

Focusing on the academic level might provide a possible solution, but there are not enough relevant studies. As our objective lies in analysing more or less defined intellectual constructs, the modification means including a certain segment of the political field into the intellectual one. To be more precise, it is the segment of intellectualised policies, such as political and social writings and agendas, rather than speeches, commentaries and other regular political routines. Thus, our sample includes books, both academic and popular ones, as well as biographies, educational text books, articles in journals and publications in the media,¹³ political and intellectual writings on topical issues, as well as political agendas published in Belarus in 1990–2009.

¹¹ The existence of the canon of Belarusian political thought is problematic in principle. Modern intellectuals very seldom refer in their reflections to their predecessors. It is also an interesting fact that activists of the Belarusian national revival of the early 20th century did not actually refer to each other in their contemplations and political writings.

¹² For an attempt at systematisation, see An Anthology, 2003; The Belarusian thought of the 20th century, 1998.

¹³ Mainly papers, even dailies, such as the “Narodnaja Hazieta” and “Sovetskaya Byelorussiya”. It was a typical feature of the 1990s in particular that papers published reflections and strategic texts by intellectuals and politicians, followed by readers’ discussions.

After primary selection, about 1000 texts appeared in the analysis field, of which 450 were short-listed after the first round of analysis.¹⁴ This corpus provided the basis for our analysis of concepts of the nation in the intellectual field.

Just as we expected, the analysis revealed a great intellectual variety and presence of different concepts in the intellectual and to a much more limited extent in political spheres, which posed the problem of criteria for sampling.

In our research, the criteria for selecting a concept as a “significant” one were its representation in over 5% of the texts and presence in the texts by at least six authors. Only four concepts met the criteria.¹⁵ Two of them, i.e. ethno-cultural and russo-centrist ones, had a predominantly historical importance and were actively represented in the 1990s, while the other two, i.e. cultural-and-political and state-and-political ones, are relevant today. Their names demonstrate that the concepts are determined by political and cultural institutions. If we name them basing on their key notions, they may be labelled as ethnos-centred, russo-centred, nation-centred and state-centred. The concepts determined can provide a basis for discussing state, cultural, ethnic and russo-centrist nationalisms.

Expectedly, some “projects” that raised remarkable discussions among intellectuals, for example, in the blogosphere, did not fit into this group, having a low representation in the form of completed texts or a limited number of authors. Among them are the concepts of “Lithuanians” (Licvins) in different forms, Kryvian project, Eurasianism, pan-Slavonic, liberal and cosmopolitan concepts, etc.

Concepts of the Belarusian Nation since Gaining Independence

Historical background. From the 19th to the early 20th century, Belarusians were perceived as an ethnic (ethnographical) community, so they could be described, understood and interpreted in ethnic terms only, basing on ethnic (popular) social and cultural institutions. For a number of reasons it was impossible to refer to other political, social and cultural institutions, such as an existing state, “high culture” or the church. In practice, such a reference would have actually meant an automatic shift from the Belarusian to another concept, for example, Russian, Polish, etc.

¹⁴ The size of the article does not allow us to give a detailed description of the sample. It will be provided in a special publication. It has to be pointed out once again that the units of research were texts rather than authors. The latter could change their attitudes as the time went by or affected by the context and circumstances in which the texts were written.

¹⁵ In the article format, we are not providing the precise statistics. However relative the mathematical precision in this field may be, it should be noticed that in absolute numbers “national” concepts prevailed over the state-centred and russo-centrist ones.

This state of things determined the strategies of “understanding,” “awakening” and “revival” of a separate Belarusian people. Virtually all the activists of the Belarusian movement of the late 19th – early 20th centuries viewed “people” (and then “nation”) as an ethnic notion, perhaps with some variations (see, for example, Lastoŭski, 1991; Lucevič, 2003; Bahdanovič, 1994; Liosik, 1994: 253–262). The other actors of the political and cultural processes in the region, such as the Polish national movement, the Russian imperial authorities, the Soviet government, etc., approached Belarusians in the same vein.

This ethnic model of understanding the nation (*the national issue*) was basically adopted by the Soviet state. Nations were invariably interpreted as ethno-cultural (ethnographical) communities that represented a new stage in the evolution of *nationality*. The concept of a single *Soviet people* came into being a bit later and had a complicated and unstable relations with the concept of multiple *Soviet nations* even on the ideological level, to say nothing of actual social practices. What we witnessed in the USSR was to a considerable extent a conflict/combination of “Sovietism”¹⁶ and ethnicity, which took different shapes in the post-war period. Urbanisation, decline of village communities, Sovietisation and Russification undermined “ethnicity”, though in some sense Belarus went through a small “ethnic revival” in the 1970s and an upsurge of interest in ethnic culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was characteristic of the whole region.¹⁷

In the late 1980s, Belarusian intellectuals faced the problem of reformulating the understanding of the nation, which at that time represented a specific combination of the Belarusian ethno-cultural tradition and Sovietism. Each of the abovementioned concepts can be viewed as a reaction to the challenge posed by the collapse of the Soviet system and creation of a new state.

Ethno-cultural concept of the nation.¹⁸ It is a concept of the nation with a complex of ideas of the Belarusian ethnic community at its core. Thus, the Belarusian ethnos, origins (either real or imaginary) and ethnic culture are thought of as the centre and public institutions of the national community. The ethnic or “popular” concept of the Belarusian nation has a long history. For this reason, its influence is determined not only by the mere idea, but also by the tradition, which, in its turn, made the foundations of the national culture. In the analysed period, it was in the early 1990s that the concept reached its highest point, and then its influence gradually went down, giving way to political concepts. Its most characteristic expressions are found in: Lyč, 1994, pp. 80–89 in particular; Dubaviec, 2003; Konan, 1998 and Saňko, 1999.

¹⁶ Based on russo-centrism.

¹⁷ On the phenomenon of ethnic revival in the West, see Smith, 1995: 158–173.

¹⁸ Its possible alternative names are ethnic and ethnographical, particularly for the Soviet period.

The dominant tendency in Central and Eastern Europe was that the functioning of an ethnos/people¹⁹ provided an immediate basis, reason and motive for a national community to arise. In the 19th – early 20th centuries, all the modern nations in the region were formed according to this model. That is why the influence of popular/ethnic concepts is to a certain extent still noticeable in the countries' culture and policies. At the same time, their modernisation, gaining political sovereignty and collapse of the Soviet system led to a shift towards actualisation of political institutions and culture in a wider, non-ethnic context.

Thus, the community relevant to the concept is the Belarusian people thought of as an ethnic community. For most of its authors, the attributes of community correspond to an academic definition of an ethnos, i.e. common origins, either real or imaginary, language, common history and culture, particularly traditional one. Accordingly, members of an ethnos or people constitute a nation in a natural way, while members of other ethnic groups or peoples form national minorities.

As for public institutions of the nation, in most cases these are an authentic culture, language, *national state* and continuity (origins). However, it should be said that the list is rather a product of reconstruction, as not all of the authors describe public institutions in detail.²⁰

Authentic culture and language. The ethnic concept does not offer an exact description of an authentic culture, but outlines a strategy for seeking it in the form of traditional popular culture and (ethnic) history. An authentic culture in the first place refers to traditional social institutions, practices, models of the universe, behaviour codes, folklore and cultural links. It is these phenomena that are viewed as true ones that should be “revived”. In pragmatic terms, the “revival” means elevating the social status of ethnic culture, which was traditionally low in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), expanding its social space through education, politics, the media and cultural activities, and approaching the true culture through the restoration of (ethnic and historical) traditions.²¹

The language plays an important role in the concept, and so does the intention to revive the “true Belarusian language” through a spelling reform and changes in its lexicon and grammar. The language is thought of as an essential social fact, a way of manifesting the tradition and lifestyle, as a world outlook and a natural borderline of a “Belarusian character.”

¹⁹ Ethnos is a relatively new term. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, authors used to refer to the people (*narod*), nationality or a tribe (*pliemia*).

²⁰ Siarhiej Dubaviec's formula “the language, the village and Vilnia” that he came up with in 1990 is a good example.

²¹ The historical tradition is in the first place the tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Political organisation of the national community is not paid much attention to, but it is mainly not a very detailed vision of a national state. The national state is a principle on the one hand and a fact of political continuity on the other. As a political principle, the national state should be guided by the interests of the people and guarantee the revival and functioning of the authentic culture. Belarusians are viewed as a state-building nation, which consolidates with or opposes other national communities, depending on their attitude and loyalty to the state.

The emphasis on *direct continuity* is to link the modern state with the political reality of the past. Feeling and knowing this continuity is of great importance for both building and legitimising the modern state. Thus, for the ethno-cultural concept, the national state primarily stands for (direct) political continuity with certain political institutions of the past. It is in this case only that the state is utterly true and authentic. For the authors of the early 1990s, the legitimate political institutions of the past were the Princedom of Polack, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Belarusian People's Republic and (a bit later) pre-Christian/pre-Slavonic times.²² The institutions of the Russian Empire, the USSR, sometimes the Polish Commonwealth and even the Republic of Belarus²³ were denied authenticity.

The origins are the least definite public institution of the ethnical concept. The Belarusian nation first and foremost includes original Belarusians, but the meaning of the notion is not precisely outlined. The concept itself seems to be grounded in such a state of things when the ethnos/people was a priori a natural community, determined by cultural markers, social status and nationality as recorded in passports, so it did not require any additional explanations. The authors never actually appeal to "blood;" more important seem the cultural and political continuity, as well as recognition of the culture and behaviour codes for quite a long period of time.²⁴

Cultural-and-political concept.²⁵ It is based on understanding the nation as a political and cultural community. Its political dimension represents connection with certain political institutions, such as, for example, the institute of citizenship, while the cultural one stands for common cultural symbols, practices and understanding of history. A gradual rise of the concept started in the mid 1990s, so that in the mid 2000s it began to prevail. Its charac-

²² Certain elements of such vision were shaped in the 1970s – 1980s, but it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that it was brought into the focus of real public attention (Kryvaŭcevič, 1999). Its strategic text is Saňka, 1993.

²³ Also due to the fact that the modern Republic of Belarus has very few signs of direct continuity with the states of the past.

²⁴ The issue of "blood" is thoroughly analysed only in a quite new almanac *Druvis*, but some of its authors noticeably depart from the concept of "Belarusianness", so their inclusion into the ethno-cultural concept of the Belarusian nation seems problematic.

²⁵ National or national-democratic one.

teristic early manifestations are found in Pliska, 1999, especially pp. 26–31; Hlušakoŭ, 1999, pp. 122–124 in particular; Jaskievič, 1998; Babosaŭ, 1998: 63–66.

Historically, the concept is strongly linked to the ethno-cultural one, but it offers a different strategy of national consolidation. The cultural-and-political concept was able to get shaped only due to the establishment of the *independent Belarusian state*, which provided the basis for shifting to a different model of understanding Belarus, Belarusian and Belarusianness. Certain elements of the cultural-and-political concept were present even before the 1990s in the form of “the BSSR patriotism.”²⁶ But it is only since gaining independence that this stance has become institutionally grounded and acquired a mobilising potential.

For the cultural-and-political concept, the nation is a community of citizens of Belarus. At the same time, it is pointed out that citizens make a cultural community, with national culture as an integrated element of the nation. The nation’s public institutions are an independent state (country), national culture and political continuity.

The authors of the cultural-and-political concept pay quite a lot of attention to the political structure of the community and state. They view the public institution of the (independent) state not only as a sum of governmental bodies and power, but also as a country, a system of social and political institutions, such as civil society, political organisations, regions, religions, the state apparatus, etc.²⁷ The adjective *independent* stresses that the state is free from immediate dependence on other countries, so the concept opposes the idea of “union” sovereignty or union statehood, which was pronounced in the 1990s by the proponents of Belarus – Russia integration or restoration of the USSR. *Political independence* and *national sovereignty* are viewed as basic attributes of statehood. Pointing out that Belarus depends on Russia to a considerable degree, a number of authors traditionally pose a question whether the modern Republic of Belarus can be called an independent state, which was particularly typical of the 1990s.

The other important public institution is *national culture*. The state and national community should not (and cannot) be culturally neutral in the same way as it can be neutral, for example, towards religious institutions. For the cultural-and-political concept, a certain culture represents integrated

²⁶ Manifestations of civil patriotism were present even in Zianon Paźniak’s early texts, “Let us not forget that all of us make the Nation. Russians, Jews, Poles and Tatars – all of us. Never forget about it!” (Paźniak, 1998).

²⁷ Apart from a number of democratic (or republican, to be more precise) configurations, a certain subordinated position of the state among the public institutions is explained by the fact that a part of the concept was formulated by the people who did not belong to the governmental institutions or took a critical attitude to them, sometimes even refusing to recognise the Republic of Belarus as a “normal” state because of its political regime.

part of the nation, being as important as the state for making it a real community. The Belarusian cultural tradition formed in the 20th century is placed at the basis of the concept.

Though, while the ethno-cultural concept centres on a search for authentic (true) culture, the cultural-and-political one takes a bit different approach. Something that can be called the *experience principle* substitutes the criterion of authenticity. Different cultures within the Belarusian context can be interpreted as Belarusian, making part of the national culture.²⁸ The strategy allows including, for example, Polish-language authors of the 19th century, “West-Rusism”, the Soviet past and other elements of Belarusian/local/regional cultural experience into the national culture, though they may not be directly linked with the ethnic Belarusian character. Great prominence is also given to the Belarusian language. Russian within the cultural-and-political concept is viewed as a means of communication, but only as an operational phenomenon and, unlike in russo-centrism, never as a value. Thus, Russification is not perceived as something “normal.”²⁹

A similar strategy is applied to the institution of *symbolic continuity*. The presence and a sense of political continuity with the past, as well as understanding the nation as a historical community still play an important role. For the cultural-and-political concept, however, continuity is not grounded in authenticity, unlike it is in the ethno-cultural one. Quite different political and social institutions can be included into the “historical heritage” of the national community, though the value of some corpuses of experiences is actively debated. This allows combining traditional elements of historical legacy, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Princedom of Polack and the Belarusian People’s Republic with more ambivalent components in terms of political and cultural development, such as the BSSR, interwar Poland, even the Russian Empire, etc.

State-and-political concept. It is based on understanding the nation as citizens or population of the Republic of Belarus. The main political institutions are the state, Soviet cultural and political continuity and ethnographic distinctions. The fact that the concept has found its way into the top four is to a great extent explained by the state sponsorship, which supports different publications that fit into the “ideology of the Belarusian state.” This has a considerable impact on their contents.³⁰ The concept is probably more vague and situational than the others. Its typical manifestations are found in: *Belarusian model...*, 2003, particularly pp. 3–8, 46–50; Mielnik, 2007.

²⁸ A characteristic example of such strategies can be found in the concept of trans-culturality. See Babkoŭ, 1999.

²⁹ The language is a subject of never-ending debate.

³⁰ On the process of creating the Belarusian state ideology, see Kazakievič, 2007. On the intellectual context, see Kazakievič, 2004.

The background of the state-and-political concept can be debatable. It is a quite new phenomenon, shaped at the time of sovereignty, though it can be partially considered a continuation of the Soviet republican patriotism (the BSSR people), the idea of the “Soviet people” and even “localness” as a strategy of avoiding any definite cultural identification.³¹ The concept had some degree of representation in the early 1990s, particularly in political texts, when the disoriented elites were trying to adapt themselves to the new cultural and political situation. In 1994, the concept gave way to russo-centrism, which at the time could be considered the official state ideology (Kazakievič, 2005: 132–133). A real upsurge in the representation of the state-and-political concept in the political and cultural field was observed after 2003, when the government launched the project of “Belarusian state ideology”.

On the one hand, the concept technically approaches “pure” civil nationalism, since all the population of a certain territory is included into the nation, irrespective of their origins, religion, culture, etc. Yet, this principle is theoretical only and is not implemented in practice.³² On the other hand, the principle of “citizenship” in the state-and-political concept is very seldom steadily adhered to in the texts, when their authors go on from declaring the general principle to specific details.³³ Very often only eastern Slavs or “our people” according to some other criteria, like political loyalty or conforming to the dominant behaviour pattern, can be true citizens. For example, Catholics, Poles and opposition supporters are often regarded as “not quite our people.” In addition, the state-and-political concept may be formally declared to be culturally neutral, but it is not the case in practice. To be more precise, its neutrality usually equals to distancing itself from the Belarusian culture, whereas the Soviet and to a certain extent Russian contexts evidently play a significant role, which is far from neutral.³⁴

Unlike the other concepts where various elements have a relatively equal status, the state-and-political concept has its distinct centre in the form of public institutions of the state and periphery consisting of much less important elements.

Thus, the core public institution is the *state* as power and the whole complex of state bodies. Within this concept, the state is mainly a structure that exists in space, its representation in time, i.e. historical continuity being out-

³¹ There was a fruitful discussion of the problem at a research seminar held by the *Political Sphere* journal in 2008.

³² It is not fully implemented even in the countries where immigration laid the foundations of the nation, such as, for example, the USA, Latin America, Australia, etc.

³³ An indicative example: Mielnik, 2007.

³⁴ Such a strategy was to some extent typical of the Soviet tradition, when phenomena that contradicted each other, like, for example, democracy and dictatorship, humanism and violence, sovereignty and subordination to the metropolis were included in one concept. This makes the construct contradictory, but at the same time flexible.

lined quite faintly. The state is viewed as a certain territory and power that dominates it (Kazakievič, 2005: 138). In this respect it is different from a “conventional” civil nation, since the significance is given to state institutions, rather than civil society.

Like any other “civil” concept of the nation, the state-and-political concept is not culturally neutral. Its subsidiary cultural institution is *Soviet political and cultural continuity*. Sovietness and the Soviet past are viewed not only as a norm but also as a value. The concept underlines its continuity with Soviet practices in the social sphere and economy. The political system of the BSSR is regarded as a source of valuable experience and a starting point of statehood. Certain historical events of the Soviet period are worshipped as landmarks in national history. However, apart from the Great Patriotic War (World War II) and some other fragments of Soviet history, the concept does not offer a comprehensive vision of history. Accepting Russification as a normal practice and even “patriotic” attitude toward the old Soviet empire could serve as examples of Soviet continuity.

One way or another, the concept has to deal with the problem of Belarusian culture. There is no consensus on this issue, but as a rule it is given the status of an ethnographic peculiarity. The existence and some value of Belarusian culture may not be denied, but it is mainly interpreted as an ethnographic folklore phenomenon. As a result, the social space of such culture should be limited to a few separate spheres like history, literature, etc. When the ethnographic culture (language) exceeds these boundaries, it is treated as something weird and abnormal, or as a sign of “nationalism.”

Russo-centrism.³⁵ It is a concept of the nation based on the presumption that there is a single *Russian people*, which consists of Great Russians, Little Russians, i.e. Ukrainians, and White Russians, i.e. Belarusians.³⁶ To a certain degree, there is a problem in defining whether this construct can be treated as a concept of the *Belarusian* nation. The main problem is that the “centre” of the community (people or nation) is placed outside Belarus, which makes the concept ambiguous (Kazakievič, 2005: 21). Its typical examples are Kryštapovič, 1999; Traščanok, 2006 and Traščanok, 2002.

As a rule, Belarusian russo-centrists do not give a detailed description of their construct, but keep repeating the formulas of the “triple unity” and a “Russian super-ethnos.” These structures are not transparent or stable in determining a precise type of relations between its components. That is why the question of what nation is meant here remains open. The public institutions of russo-centrism are usually the “union state,” Russian culture (civilisation), ethnographic or regional distinctions and Russian origins.

³⁵ Possible alternative names: pan-Rusism or West-Rusism.

³⁶ Sometimes, “Rusyns” are added to the list.

Russo-centrism is a rather old concept in Belarus. It had been finally shaped as a political phenomenon in the form of West-Rusism by the mid 19th century (Čvikievič, 1993). It was partially a trend popular among scholars of Belarusian origin, but it was also an official practice of the imperial government following the 1863–1864 uprising and aimed at “Russifying” the province. The imperial government and the scholars had not been able to work out a single approach by the early 20th century. Belarusians could be recognised as a separate tribe or nationality or they could be considered as “just Russians.”³⁷

When the Soviet regime came into power, it was admitted that West-Rusism was a form of Russian “superpower chauvinism” and it lost its official status. The logic of this concept, however, was revived in the 1930s in the form of a new Soviet ideology based on russo-centrism. In the early 1990s russo-centrism in Belarus took a new shape as a combination of Soviet russo-centrism, Russian nationalism and attempts to restore the 19th century West-rusism. From 1994 until the early 2000s, russo-centrism was in fact an official ideology, which lost its leading position only as a result of an “ideological change of direction” after 2001 (Kazakievič, 2005: 132). Since then, the significance of the concept has been declining steadily, so at present it seems peripheral.

The main political institution within the concept is the *union state*. As the community of the *Russian people* does not fit into the cultural and social borders of Belarus, its sovereignty also requires an external centre. The union state should include all the *people*, though its parts can enjoy territorial autonomy. The “union” functions as a symbol and an ideal rather than a mere political agenda. It is more important than its parts. Such an understanding of state sovereignty is very similar to the Soviet model of federation, where the republics were recognised as independent entities, but at the same time they were directly controlled by the metropolis. Not surprisingly, the authors of the concept usually see the USSR as a successful and reference model of a “union state”.

The same logic determines their attitudes to culture. *Russian culture (civilisation)* as a public institution is not only important, but also represents a much bigger value than the regional versions. In theory, Russian culture can differ from the Great Russian one. However, in practice or when it comes

³⁷ The late 19th century overview see in: Pypin, 1892: 3–4. The official governmental circles usually denied the existence of a special Belarusian “people,” while for ethnographers, linguists et al. its existence was a “scientific fact.” The situation is well reflected in M. Muravyov’s statement of 1864, “*The disastrous idea of division of nationalities in Russia and introduction of Little Russian, White Russian and other dialects has already become widespread in the public opinion. This should be put an end to and the Minister of Public Education should be obliged to act in the spirit of Russian unity, banning ideas that contradict it from educational establishments.*” (Quoted from: Komzolova, 2005: 107)

to details, they are identical. Thus, only the Russian Orthodox Church can be recognised as the true Orthodoxy, and so on. Moreover, specific local features are often viewed as separatism and a threat to the union's integrity.³⁸ The ethno-cultural concept unequivocally treats Russian culture as something *alien*, the state-and-political one accepts it as a norm, the cultural-and-political concept selects only those parts of it that are connected with the Belarusian context, whereas russo-centrism sees Russian culture as an important and indisputable value. Consequently, the process of Russification is viewed not only as something normal, but also as an exclusively positive development, which facilitates cultural and political integration of the Russian people and advance of its civilisation.

Ethnographic (regional) distinctions may not be denied, but they are marginalised. This practice is strengthened by a critical attitude to the Belarusian language and cultural tradition, particularly if it includes “non-Russian” and “non-Orthodox” components. Thus, ethnographic and regional distinctions are of certain value for the *Russian people* as manifestations of cultural variety; however, their full-scale functioning in society poses a threat to the Russian unity. In this situation, the Soviet model of limiting national cultures to ethnographic distinctions only and constraining them within certain spheres, such as literature and the humanities, is regarded as a desirable pattern. The radical versions consider a possibility of complete assimilation (integration).

The concept defines Belarusians as part of the *Russian people* which is basically an ethnic formation, where ethnic origins and religion are of great importance. Common origin determines natural boundaries of the Russian people, as well as the community's political, cultural and social shape. As for the details, the authors of the concept cannot find a common ground here. Just like in Russian nationalism in its extreme forms, we can notice both ethnic tendencies and super-ethnic imperial aspirations.

Some Conclusions

The research has demonstrated a relative variety of concepts of the nation in the Belarusian intellectual and political field, at least in the light of stereotypes of a homogenous *idea of the nation* in established national communities, to which Belarusians undoubtedly belong.³⁹

Four concepts were able to meet the criterion of significance set by the research. These are ethno-cultural, cultural-and-political, state-and-political and russo-centrist concepts, each of them with its history, as well as intellec-

³⁸ For example, the authors of the concept can deny the existence of the Belarusian language and label its literary version as “artificial,” “alien,” and “unnecessary.” Yet, this view is aired by the most radical authors only, and mainly in texts or speeches aimed at Russian audience.

³⁹ In all probability, for most modern nations, the stereotype contradicts the reality.

tual and (quasi)political circles. Each concept is important for understanding the development of the Belarusian society or at least the Belarusian intellectual field since gaining independence. From the historical perspective, the “political” concepts are gradually becoming more and more influential, while the ethnic and especially russo-centrist ones are being marginalised.

The research findings definitely reflect certain essential processes in the national development, though further research is required in order to give their detailed description. It should also be remembered that the actual scene of concepts of the nation can be distorted by a variety of factors. For example, the number of texts and authors representing a concept may indicate high productivity of its proponents, rather than real popularity of the idea among intellectuals and politicians. The number of texts and their contents may be influenced by such factors as the state order or grant policies, yet, in our opinion, such “distortions” cannot deform the basic structure of the intellectual field viewed from the perspective of the twenty-years period. Moreover, once the structure is determined, the “distortions” can make an interesting subject for research, which would help to get a clearer understanding of how the *ideas of the nation* and national *identity* function in modern Belarus.

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