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OPPOSITES PUT TOGETHER

BELARUS'S POLITICS OF MEMORY

Kamil Kłysiński, Wojciech Konończuk

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MAIN POINTS

- Immediately after 1991, the activity of nationalist circles in Belarus led to a change in the Soviet historical narrative, which used to be the only permitted one. However, they did not manage to develop a coherent and effective politics of memory or to subsequently put this new message across to the public. The modest achievements of the first few years of independence were wasted after Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power. He ordered a return to the Soviet vision of history that was only slightly modified. The Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), recognised as the first Belarusian state in history, still remained its pivot. It was only at the dawn of the new century that the regime, which had radically dissociated itself from the national narrative, began to see a need for conducting a politics of memory that would not only be based on the Soviet legacy, but also on earlier periods of Belarusian history. In Belarus, governed as it is by an authoritarian regime, the politics of memory is determined primarily by the Presidential Administration, which in fact has a monopoly on shaping it. Neither the opposition, which is weak and fragmented, nor independent historians have a real say in formulating the message addressed to the citizens.
- The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 marked a turning point in Minsk's politics of memory, making the regime emphasise Belarus's distinctiveness from Russia stronger than before. One of the key tools employed to implement this task was the activation of memory politics, which was formerly very restrained. To reinforce the foundations of an independent Belarus, the government has begun highlighting those elements of history that suggest self-reliance in the nation's development and which also allow a weakening of the ties linked to Russian dominance. Changes in the historical narrative have also become an urgent necessity, given the recurring disputes with Moscow and the increasing political pressure being applied.
- The most important indications of the changes which have been evident for several years, include going further beyond the Soviet tradition framework and gradually drawing upon those threads of Belarusian history which have been suppressed or distorted so far. The government has shown a very tentative engagement with the historic narrative of the opposition and independent historians, which it had rejected until recently. Even though an increasing number of events that are permitted (and which fit in with the framework of the official politics of memory) are gradually added to

the canon, the general principle of avoiding controversial and radical topics prevails. At the same time, adding older stages of statehood development to the politics of memory did not lead to a questioning of the Soviet legacy or an undermining of the narrative concerning the Byelorussian SSR. Thus, combining different threads that sometimes do not mesh with one another has become the essence of the new approach.

- Over recent years, the government has been promoting the narrative of the Principality of Polotsk – it has become one of the most important topics in the modified version of the Belarusian politics of memory. This entity, which existed between the 9th and 14th centuries, is currently recognised as the earliest form of statehood present in what is now Belarus and as the country’s historic cradle. This is aimed at creating a kind of foundation myth about the first Belarusian state, where it was not engaged in any disputes with its neighbours, in clear contrast to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, for instance. In its rhetoric, the government emphasises the independence of the Principality of Polotsk, a small but strong state pursuing a peaceful international policy, which is presented as a kind of historic equivalent of the present-day Republic of Belarus.
- One of the most interesting and far-reaching changes in the politics of memory after 1991 concerns the evaluation of the significance and the historical role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). A radical transition from absolute rejection of the GDL, as a state with which Belarusians have nothing in common, to recognising it as one of the sources underlying Belarusian statehood has taken place during Lukashenka’s rule. It is manifested, for example, through the prevalence of this topic in school textbooks. Since the present regime took over from the historians representing the nationalist approach and the opposition at least part of the narrative of this historical period, it has been able to shape this narrative accordingly to suit its political needs. Historical figures, including the most distinguished families linked to the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, are being inserted ever more conspicuously into the memory of this period. Architectural monuments, the most important of which have been (ineptly) renovated, have also been deliberately employed in the process of constructing historical memory. Some events are highlighted while others (e.g. the Battle of Orsha) are omitted from the reconstructed public memory of the GDL, which fundamentally contradicts the narrative concerning the Russian imperial tradition. Even though the ‘Belarusian-ness’ of the GDL is still being discussed, one may confidently attest that its

statehood tradition has become irrevocably incorporated into Belarusian history as its founding element.

- While evaluations of the history of the Principality of Polotsk and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania have been gradually reinterpreted, the presentation of the period when present-day Belarus was part of the Russian Empire has only been revised to a small extent. A select few events from this epoch are now presented in a slightly different light, in order to emphasise that the Belarusian stance differs from the Russian narrative. This concerns, for example, the Russian-French war of 1812, which is no longer referred to as the Patriotic War – the name used in the Soviet and Russian historical school. Now it is referred to as civil war, since Belarusians fought on both sides. At the same time, the government is cautious in evaluating the January Uprising, its leader Konstanty Kalinowski and the Belarusian national revival seen in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is most likely caused by an unwillingness to bring the official narrative too close to the views of the nationalist-inclined anti-regime opposition, as well as by the fear of Russian reaction. Therefore, the uprising of 1863 is presented above all as an initiative of Polish circles aimed at restoring the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as it was before the partitions. Regardless of the modification, the Belarusian government has not decided to question the historical tradition linked to the country's place in the Russian Empire as a whole. Opinions that this successfully impeded the 'Polonisation' of Belarusians, and allowed them to maintain their cultural and religious distinctness under Russia's auspices, still predominate in the official discourse. It seems that Minsk's scepticism about further reinterpretation of this period is partly due to it being considered of limited use from the perspective of strengthening the national narrative.
- A cautious and ambiguous modification of the official interpretation of the historical role played by the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), i.e. the unsuccessful attempt at building Belarusian statehood in 1918, has been evident over recent years. The government no longer presents the BNR, unlike the Soviet tradition maintained, as a pro-Western, German-inspired attempt to prevent the integration of Belarusian territories with Bolshevik Russia. A thesis has been recently added to the official narrative that this was also one of the stages in the process of building modern Belarusian statehood, the crowning achievement of which is the Republic of Belarus. This is linked to an attempt to reinforce the narrative concerning Belarusian state-building traditions that are not related to Russian dominance.

However, this alteration did not reach completion, and the experiment with conditional liberalisation of the memory of the BNR was viewed as overly risky. As a result, school textbooks have not been changed, and the government still refrains from permanently commemorating the BNR in public space or from bestowing national holiday status on the anniversary of its establishment. The government's cautious policy is primarily down to its fear of bolstering the opposition, who treat the Belarusian People's Republic as one of the most important points of reference in their politics of memory.

- The modification of the historical narrative has not effected the existing evaluation of the period when Belarus was part of the Soviet Union. Although the positive assessment of the Principality of Polotsk and the GDL has introduced new elements to the historical narrative, the weight of the Soviet component has not been reduced. This is due to the great symbolic meaning attached to this period, together with the respect accorded to its achievements. Such achievements are deeply rooted in the mindset of the Belarusian public, including the elites and Lukashenka himself, who flaunts his 'Sovietness' with pride. The victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II) plays an extremely important role in this case; a narrative which is in essence a copy of the Soviet and Russian narrative. Even the new museum devoted to this period (opened in Minsk in 2014) showcases hardly any national elements that would highlight the role played by Belarusians. As a result, if the significance of this epoch was openly questioned, this would be difficult to understand and controversial to many citizens, since this would undermine an essential part of the ideological base of an independent Belarus. Cultivating the memory of the USSR is also increasingly becoming a hollow ritual, one example of which is the fact that October Revolution Day is still celebrated. At the same time, the regime intends to develop elements of its own ideological narrative that would strengthen Belarusian sovereignty and dissociate itself from the politically inconvenient context of the 'Russian world' ideology. Examples of this include introducing its own symbols for Victory Day that differ from the Russian Ribbon of Saint George and highlight the meaning of Independence Day, which is celebrated on 3 July, the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk in 1944.
- Since a positive perception of the Soviet period is strongly rooted in the mindset of the government elite, the regime is unwilling to bring back the memories of Stalinist crimes. Proof of this is the official narrative of Kuropaty, Belarus's largest site of mass executions committed in the late

1930s and early 1940s. After long discussions, the government agreed to place a small monument there in 2018, which meant that this previously disregarded event was included in the country's politics of memory. However, not a single government representative was present during the unveiling ceremony. NKVD documents concerning the crimes committed there have not been revealed, nor have archaeological excavations that would make it possible to determine the number of victims been conducted. Furthermore, the narrative of Soviet crimes has not been reflected by changes to school textbooks – it is still based on only slightly modified Soviet standards (only brief mentions of Stalinist repressions have been added). This extremely cautious modification of the official narrative results above all from the need to gain control of this politically sensitive topic from the opposition, and to handle it in a manner that will not call into question the Soviet legacy, which remains important to the government and a section of the Belarusian public.

- The changes in the politics of memory have not been accompanied by a policy aimed at intensifying the presence of the Belarusian language in education or public life. Even though Belarusian has the status of the second state language, alongside Russian, in actuality it is becoming increasingly marginalised. Belarus and Moldova are the only post-Soviet states where language is not used as an instrument for strengthening national identity.
- The process of shaping the Belarusian politics of memory is incomplete, and is likely to be continued in the future. The direction and pace of these changes will depend on the regime's nature and its potential evolution. It should be emphasised that a more daring turn in the historical narrative, and orienting it more towards national traditions, have inalterably been prevented by two interlinked factors. The first of these is the mentality of President Lukashenka, a strongly Sovietised person who is fixed in his views, he has become hostage to his own rhetoric of negating the Belarusian national tradition for years, perceiving it as a threat to the regime's stability. The second, equally important factor – and likely to remain so in the near future – is the governing elite's fear of a reaction from Russia, which is watching the changes taking place in Belarus's historical narrative with increasing concern.
- These fears are confirmed by the mass protests that broke out after the presidential election on 9 August 2020. In the wake of repression against citizens contesting electoral fraud, Lukashenka broke off dialogue with

the West, and at the same time hardened the pro-Russian rhetoric. In the sphere of memory politics, this translated into the government's stance of denigrating and disparaging the historical white-red-white flags and the Pahonia coat of arms commonly used by demonstrators, which will probably also have an impact on other aspects of presenting the past.

INTRODUCTION

Belarus – along with Moldova – is one of the last two European countries where the process of building national identity is still unfinished. Almost all of the countries that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union began building the foundations of their new politics of memory, aimed at quickly strengthening national identity. The Republic of Belarus was an exception in this respect. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has governed the country since 1994, for a long time underestimated the significance of memory politics. As a result, during the first decade of his rule, it was based on the Soviet narrative but slightly reconfigured to suit the new times. Its key assumption was recognising the Byelorussian SSR as the first state in Belarus's history, while the earlier periods were marginalised.

To understand Belarusian peculiarity, which may seem bizarre at first glimpse, one should keep in mind how deeply ideologised the local public became during the communist era. Deprived of a national elite, it became a model example of Soviet community on a scale unseen anywhere else across the Soviet Union. Political opposition was practically non-existent in Belarus even in the late 1980s. As a result, a significant section of the Belarusian public were not particularly euphoric about their nation's unexpected independence. Public opinion polls conducted in 1993 revealed that 51% of residents preferred the USSR to be reinstated, with only 22% opposed.¹ A state that was unwanted by a major part of its citizens was unable to create – or rather rebuild – a national identity. On the contrary, Lukashenka's regime put a lot of effort into stymieing this. It is therefore unsurprising that he did not see any need to change the historical narrative.

The Belarusian national idea was viewed as something unnecessary. The government focused on building the state's self-reliance, developing a sense of patriotism associated with a geographical territory, yet at the same time devoid of national elements. This began to change only at the beginning of the 21st century, when new elements, including references to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Belarusian People's Republic, began to be gradually and cautiously added to the historical narrative, where the Soviet narrative had predominated so far. The government came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to build a stable state project based on the tradition of the Byelorussian SSR alone.

¹ W. Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki. Zmiany polityczne a konstruowanie przekazu historycznego na ziemiach białoruskich w XX i XXI wieku*, Białystok 2018, p. 288.

Doubtlessly, the factor that strengthened these tendencies or even gave rise to them was Russia's revisionist policy. Nevertheless, Russian influence also paradoxically hampers more radical changes.

Increasing signs that the regime is beginning to see the need to develop a politics of memory that would encompass other models, in addition to the Soviet one, have been evident over the past few years. An article containing an appeal for reviving the national historical narrative appeared in 2019 in the *Belaruskaya Dumka* magazine, published by the Presidential Administration. One may surmise that this is the government's own viewpoint, since the authors include the deputy secretary of the Security Council and the director of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (NAS of Belarus). It was stated in the text that the politics of memory "should contribute to consolidating the society, developing patriotic and civil features (...) and serve as 'immunity' to foreign ideals and values".² The authors recognised the Principalities of Polotsk and Turov, Kievan Rus and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and also the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire, as historical forms of Belarusian statehood. They also claimed that "unlike in other countries, the meaning of politics of memory as an instrument of a strategy for developing and forming national identity in Belarus is underestimated. There is an obvious desire among the public to understand more precisely the history of Belarusian statehood as one of the foundations for development of the idea of a modern state and of the state in general".³ This article, being a policy statement, may be interpreted as some kind of recap of the gradual changes taking place in the government's approach to history, while also being a forerunner of further changes.

However, the gradual transformation of the Belarusian politics of memory seen so far should not be overstated. The state is still in search of an independent identity and a historical narrative that will express this. This was aptly summed up by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Makei, who is seen as a leader of the patriotic faction in the government elite, in an interview for *The Washington Post*: "Belarusian identity has not been fully formed. We were overshadowed by big nations in the past for too long. We share our history with Poland and Russia. Some of its episodes were not the happiest. We have not realised yet what we really represent as a nation. (...) There should

² А. Коваленя, В. Данилович, В. Арчаков, А. Баньковский, 'К вопросу об исторической политике', *Беларуская думка* 2019, no. 8, pp. 3-4.

³ *Ibidem*.

be an idea that would unite all [Belarusians]. We are certainly still looking for such an idea”.⁴ It remains an open question as to what this conception will be.

The most important goal of this report is to outline the changes that have taken place in the Belarusian politics of memory after 2014, i.e. since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Chapter One presents the background to the politics of memory, including the traditional divide between the West Ruthenian and national schools of thought. Chapter Two shows the attempts at defining national identity in the first years after regaining independence, including the actions taken to build a national vision of history. Chapter Three focuses on presenting the politics of memory that was in place from the beginning of Lukashenka’s regime and which continued for more than ten years. The main assumption of this policy was the resumption of the Soviet narrative, and so the achievements of 1991–1994 went to waste. The fourth and most important part of this paper focuses on portraying the cautious turn seen in the politics of memory since 2014. It contains a thorough analysis of the official narrative concerning the most essential periods in Belarusian history: the times of the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Russian Empire, the Belarusian People’s Republic, the Second Republic of Poland and the Soviet Union. This is aimed at presenting the changes that are taking place or – in the case of some elements – their absence. The last chapter of this report is aimed at recapitulating the evolution of the country’s politics of memory as seen over the past few years.

The content of the historical narrative and the manner in which Belarusian identity is defined are important not only for Belarus. The question concerning whether the memory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania will come to the foreground or Soviet legacy will remain the centre of attention is also vital for Poland. The ancestors of contemporary Poles and Belarusians formed one state in the past, so we share some common historical heritage.

⁴ Стенограмма интервью Министра иностранных дел Республики Беларусь Владимира Макея газете «The Washington Post» (19 мая 2015 г.), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, www.mfa.gov.by.

I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE BELARUSIAN POLITICS OF MEMORY

The outlook of the Belarusian elite and public on history has been conditioned by the unique location of what is now Belarus at the crossroads of two civilisations – the Eastern and the Western. The territory of the contemporary Republic of Belarus was for centuries an object of rivalry between Russia, as the Tsarist empire and then the USSR, and Poland, which by the end of the 18th century formed a union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and after 1918 fought against Bolshevik Russia to determine the outline of its Eastern border. As a result, residents of these lands were continuously subjected to mutually colliding cultural, ideological and political influences. This led to the development of two distinct concepts of politics of memory, which are still present to date, not only in Belarus's historiography but also – as a much more simplified narrative – in the historical consciousness of its citizens.

The first concept refers to the Eastern, Russian cultural circle, and is therefore called **West-Ruthenian (Slavic-Ruthenian)**. According to this, the nation's genesis is closely linked to cultural contact with the world of Orthodox Slavs, above all Russians. It claims that Belarusian statehood began with the Byelorussian SSR and is continued by the present Republic of Belarus, but respects the significance that the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania holds for the nation.⁵ This concept has become an important part of the present state ideology interpretation, and is accepted by both the government (with some modifications introduced after 2014) and a definite majority of the Belarusian public. In political terms, it is used as a justification for the process of Belarusian-Russian integration, progressing since the mid 1990s, as part of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, which remains somewhat of a façade structure. An important addition to this pro-Russian view of the world, which is deeply rooted in Belarusian tradition, is the thesis that Belarusians – along with Russians and Ukrainians – are part of the so-called 'pan-Russian nation'. This is a direct reference to the 19th-century theory coined by the Belarusian-Russian historian Mikhail Koyalovich. Koyalovich was one of the key creators of the West-Ruthenian school, which presents the Russian nation as a great ethnos formed by three communities: Great Ruthenians (Russians), Little Ruthenians (Ukrainians) and West Ruthenians (Belarusians). According to this idea,

⁵ Z.J. Winnicki, *Ideologia państwowa Republiki Białoruś – teoria i praktyka projektu*, Wrocław 2013, pp. 49–50. The division into the two concepts of historical interpretation into GDL-Western and West-Ruthenian (Slavic-Ruthenian) originates from this work.

West-Ruthenian was not an identity in competition with the Russian conception, but rather supplemented it and formed its integral part. In this hierarchy, the Russian component prevailed over the other two, weaker elements. Orthodoxy was a major binding factor for this community, augmenting its clearly anti-Western (and to a great extent anti-Polish) character.⁶ This theory, from the moment of its inception to this day (excluding the Soviet period, when any direct references to the imperial rhetoric of Tsarist Russia were avoided), has been used by the Russian elite as an argument for proving that Belarus has historically belonged to the Russian sphere of civilisation.⁷

The second concept can be defined as **GDL-Western (national)**. Its supporters believe that Belarusian statehood and political tradition originates from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which, in their opinion, despite its multi-ethnic character, was primarily a country of Belarusians. This concept, given its Belarus-centric profile, references to Western culture and negative attitude towards the idea of Slavic unity, has become popular predominantly among the opposition circles, or at least those moderately sceptical towards Lukashenka's regime.⁸ Over the past few years, taking the Russian-Ukrainian conflict into consideration, its elements have also been included in the official narrative. In this way the government has sought to strengthen the historical foundations of Belarus's sovereignty.

By the late 19th/early 20th centuries, the two main civilisational-cultural narratives presented above had delineated the areas of dispute between the first ideologists of the then emerging Belarusian national movement on the one side and historians loyal to the tsar and supporters of Slavic unity within the Russian Empire on the other. The characteristic divide became entrenched at that time, namely extolling and highlighting the role of the Principality of Polotsk and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in Belarusian history by supporters of the national idea and, correspondingly, belittling their significance in favour of Kievan Rus (which was also presented as the cradle of Russian statehood) by propagators of the Slavic-Ruthenian idea. A similar approach was seen in the official Soviet narrative.⁹ Belarusian intellectualists who drew upon European statehood tradition were a minority until 1991. They were unable to successfully challenge the dominance of Russian culture and later its modified

⁶ E. Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, Warszawa 1999, pp. 12–13.

⁷ K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, *The end of the myth of a brotherly Belarus? Russian soft power in Belarus after 2014: the background and its manifestations*, OSW, Warsaw 2016, www.osw.waw.pl.

⁸ Z.J. Winnicki, *Ideologia państwowa...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–50.

⁹ W. Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–59, 70, 100–101, 213.

Soviet version.¹⁰ Therefore, it cannot be said even now that Belarusian national identity is fully fledged or coherent. This debate on the nation's civilisational and cultural identification has gone through various phases and has had a key impact on the development of Belarus's politics of memory. The Belarusian government had previously faced a choice between the East and the West when the country gained independence in 1991 – an attempt to combine both orientations could form an alternative solution. The search for a 'third way', a kind of compromise between not only the two contradictory visions of history but also different foreign policy strategies, has become an essential line of thought among the Belarusian elites and at least some section of the public.

During the first years of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule, the Western-Ruthenian idea, along with neo-Soviet elements, became the most important foundation for building Belarusian identity.¹¹ It was only in the 21st century that the government dared to add some components of the national narrative to it. Most school textbooks still present the viewpoint that complies with the Western-Ruthenian concept.¹² Public opinion polls have proven that this concept is quite widespread among the residents of Belarus. For many years, 65–66% of Belarusians have believed that they along with Russians and Ukrainians form 'three branches of one nation'.¹³

The cautious approach, typical of Belarus, of attempting to combine the different narratives as outlined above, not only concerns history but is also reflected in the political efforts to develop a status as a neutral country, which is even envisaged in article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus of 1994. This has been used by the state diplomacy over the past few years (particularly since 2014, i.e. since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict) to promote Belarus as a country predestined to play the role of mediator between Russia and the West, referring to the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) held in Helsinki in 1975.¹⁴ This is, above all, an attempt to find

¹⁰ In the early 20th century, the two main centres that potentially could offer the best support for the Belarusian national movement, i.e. Minsk and Vilnius, were almost completely dominated by Poles, Jews and Russians. Belarusian-speaking people (predominantly illiterate and pauperised peasants and workers) accounted for around 8% and 4% of the cities' population, respectively. See R. Radzik, *Białorusini. Między Wschodem a Zachodem*, Lublin 2012, pp. 41–42.

¹¹ W. Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki...*, op. cit., p. 59.

¹² A. Tichomirow, *Michaiła Kojalowicza koncepcja „Rosji Zachodniej” w kontekście relacji rosyjsko-polskich* [in:] Ł. Adamski, S. Dębski (eds), *Myśl i słowem. Polsko-rosyjski dyskurs ideowy XIX wieku*, Warszawa 2014, p. 319.

¹³ 'НИСЭПИ: На конфликт в Украине белорусы реагируют по-росийски', thinktanks.by, 9 April 2016, www.thinktanks.by.

¹⁴ K. Kłysiński, 'Un(realistic) neutrality. Attempts to redefine Belarus' foreign policy', *OSW Commentary*, no. 276, 28 June 2018, www.osw.waw.pl.

a safe niche for a country located at the intersection of East and West, between two civilisational and cultural concepts.¹⁵ In the opinion of some researchers, Belarus even lies on a “civilisational fault line”, as the American political analyst Samuel Huntington defined it, or (what seems to be a more apt definition) in “a zone of civilisational split”, where various groups of citizens in a single state view their civilisational belonging in different ways.¹⁶ For this reason, combining mutually contradictory elements of Tsarist Russia and Soviet tradition with the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the pro-Western Belarusian People’s Republic of 1918 has become one of the key features of the contemporary politics of memory of independent Belarus.

¹⁵ See A.M. Dyner, M. Rust, *Belarus between the East and the West: Old/New Dilemmas*, College of Eastern Europe, Wrocław 2018, pp. 20–31, www.kew.org.pl. The authors of this report, published in January 2019, define contemporary Belarus as a ‘state between’ also in civilisational terms.

¹⁶ A.R. Kozłowski, *Geopolityczne przemiany białoruskiej przestrzeni cywilizacyjnej*, Warszawa 2015, p. 38.

II. THE SEARCH FOR ITS OWN WAY ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE HISTORICAL IDENTITY (1991-1994)

The crisis of the ineffective Soviet economic model, which was getting progressively worse in the second half of the 1980s, and the accompanying erosion of Soviet government structures also contributed to the activation of national circles in the Byelorussian SSR, which until then had a reputation as one of the most Sovietised republics of the Soviet Union. Firstly, informal associations were established. Some of them (e.g. Talaka and Pahonia) openly demanded the introduction of Belarusian citizenship, the formal use of Belarusian state symbols drawing upon the GDL tradition and the formation of national armed forces. Intellectuals, who had been a rather passive group, were turning radical: they made public appeals in the form of open letters to Mikhail Gorbachev, the Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), insisting, amongst other things, on liberalising Moscow's policy with regard to Belarusian culture and language. The biggest shock came when archaeologist Zianon Pazniak and engineer Yauhen Shmyhalev found mass graves of Stalinism victims, who had been executed by the NKVD in 1937-1940 in Kuropaty near Minsk. When this information was revealed in the press in 1988, the government of the BSSR was forced to establish a special commission to investigate this crime, which until then had been covered up. In this manner, a campaign aimed at unveiling the most controversial moves of the communist authorities was initiated, contributing to the setting up of several political groupings with clearly defined views, including the best-known one: the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF).

However, anti-Soviet demands of the weak nationalist-oriented circles did not go hand in hand with the views of most Belarusian citizens. Public expectations were primarily focused on socio-economic stabilisation, undoubtedly a widespread desire in a country that had suffered the dire consequences of World War II, as summarised in the popular slogan "just let there be no war". Since national identity had not been deeply rooted among most Belarusians, the Byelorussian SSR was the place where Soviet authorities had the greatest achievements in forming the 'Soviet man' (*homo sovieticus*), someone who in principle has a negative attitude towards any radical politico-economic transformation and rejects any values linked to it, such as representative democracy, the market economy, human rights or private property.¹⁷ For this reason,

¹⁷ М.В. Кирчанов, *Интеллектуальная история белорусского национализма. Краткий очерк*, Смоленск 2011, p. 143.

further steps taken by the BSSR government in 1990–1991 on the way towards independence did not reflect genuine public sentiments, but were more like reflexive moves in the general process of the gradual disintegration of the structures of the USSR, while also showing signs of the sovereignty being manifested by other Soviet republics.

The act on the official status of the Belarusian language adopted in 1990 introduced a 10-year transition period in order to completely eliminate the Russian language from official use, which only betrayed the high degree of Russification and Sovietisation.¹⁸ Further moves, including above all the Declaration of Sovereignty of the Byelorussian SSR passed by the Supreme Soviet on 27 July 1990, together with the resolution on Belarus leaving the USSR of 25 August 1991 and the proclamation of its full independence, created a legal and political basis for the existence of an independent state. The Republic of Belarus in September 1991 already had new symbols referring to the GDL, namely the Pahonia emblem and the white-red-white flag. However, unlike its neighbours, Ukraine and Lithuania, it lacked support in the form of popular sentiment, such as a citizenry keen to affirm their pro-independence aspirations. This lack of popular support appeared to be an important factor years later. There is a popular saying from the early 1990s Belarus that “independence fell on Belarusians’ heads like a ripe fruit”,¹⁹ which seems apt in this context. For this reason, it was difficult to expect that a strong bond would be built between the nascent state and its citizens²⁰ – especially given the fact that the Belarusian public could clearly see that the USSR (and the way it had functioned) began to be criticised by the very same representatives of the *nomenklatura* who had held high positions before 1991.²¹ An example of the smooth transition between the systems was provided by Vyacheslav Kebich. He served as the head of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR from 1990 and retained his position to serve as the prime minister of independent Belarus.²²

¹⁸ The provisions of this act were almost openly sabotaged by the predominantly Russian-speaking state administration. See E. Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

¹⁹ This thought has been attributed to the outstanding Belarusian writer Vasil Bykau. See И. Антонович, ‘Уверенно идти своим курсом’, *Беларуская Думка* 2017, no. 1, p. 32, beldumka.belta.by.

²⁰ This was confirmed by the results of the referendum held on 17 March 1991 in which 83% of Belarusians chose maintaining bonds with the USSR.

²¹ S. Owsianik, J. Striełkowa, *Władza a społeczeństwo. Białoruś 1991–1998*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 19–20.

²² The situation in parliament was a little different: the BPF had 27 seats after the election in 1990, and Stanislav Shushkevich, a moderate supporter of reforms, served as the speaker of the Supreme Soviet. However, the key prerogatives were in the government’s hands, while the legislature played a secondary role.

Since the Republic of Belarus gained its sovereignty in such a peculiar manner, it has been unable to develop a coherent politics of memory that could be successfully implemented. A clear divide over historical consciousness became apparent in the early 1990s in the discourse of local intellectuals, who were split into two conflicting groups. The first one consisted mainly of the Sovietised staff of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and most academic teachers from top universities, as well as journalists and publicists from state media. Their views were an exact copy of the Soviet school that defines the nation and independence through the state and territory. Their adversaries, representing mostly the circles of the independent and nationally-oriented intelligentsia and university students, pointed to the cultural and linguistic distinctness of Belarusians, as well as their own unique statehood history.²³ The supporters of a new approach to the politics of memory were definitely in a minority – and this concerned both their number and their impact on the situation in the country, the course of action taken by the government and the state of public awareness.

As a result of these divisions and the disagreement over which orientation to follow, the politics of memory has been changing at a slow pace and is fragmentary. At first, history curricula and new school textbooks began appearing as late as 1993. Subsequently, however, no thorough revision of museum displays was conducted. The only move undertaken was to reduce the proportion which presented the history of Belarus as part of the USSR (mainly the times of the Great Patriotic War) and increase that of earlier periods. The texts published by supporters of the national vision of history claimed beyond any doubt that the epoch of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was the most important period in Belarusian history.²⁴ The apotheosis of this epoch gradually became visible among military circles also, one of the most conservative and pro-Soviet groups. The independent Belarusian Association of Military People, led by the charismatic Lieutenant Colonel Mykola Statkevich (he became one of the leaders of Belarusian opposition a few years later), organised a public ceremony of swearing allegiance to Belarus on 8 September 1992 – an anniversary of the Battle of Orsha of 1514, during which Lithuanian-Polish troops defeated the Muscovite army.²⁵ This event took place in the centre of Minsk and was

²³ М.В. Киручанов, *Интеллектуальная история...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140–141.

²⁴ Some Belarusian authors claimed that the GDL had then been the most important European country and even branded it as a Belarusian empire. W. Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki...*, pp. 262–276.

²⁵ See '25 лет назад на площади Независимости состоялась торжественная военная присяга на верность Беларуси', *Наша Ніва*, 8 September 2017, www.nn.by.

intended at launching an initiative to make 8 September a national holiday, known as the Day of Military Glory. However, the government's response was negative – Statkevich and other members of the association were expelled from the armed forces.

Economically, the new state remained strongly dependent on the Russian Federation. Therefore, its government, originating to a great extent from the previous epoch and lacking a national idea, was unable and unwilling to conduct a bold policy based on its native tradition and national interests – also in the area of historical memory. As a consequence of its cautious and inconsistent moves in 1991–1995, the process of relinquishing the Soviet vision of history remains incomplete. As one Belarusian researcher aptly noted, a kind of balance between national and Soviet elements was developed in both the mass media and education system.²⁶

²⁶ A. Kazakiević, *Współczesna białoruska tożsamość historyczna* [in:] R. Radzik (ed.), *Tożsamości zbiorowe Białorusinów*, Lublin 2012, p. 249.

III. THE PRO-RUSSIAN DRIFT THE IDEOLOGISATION OF THE POLITICS OF MEMORY (1994–2014)

In July 1994, the first presidential election in Belarus's history was won by a charismatic politician named Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who garnered as much as 80% of the votes in the runoff. In the presidential race he defeated Vyacheslav Kebich, who had served as the prime minister before the election, Stanislav Shushkevich, the speaker of the Supreme Soviet, and Zianon Pazniak, the leader of the BPF. The first two candidates lost because most of the public associated them with the economic crisis and the deterioration of living standards it entailed. In turn, Pazniak, with his uncompromising appeals for national revival, proved to be unpalatable to most of the Belarusian public, who were still deeply rooted in the preceding regime. Meanwhile, Lukashenka directly drew upon the recent Soviet past, which was already idealised in the public consciousness. He also promised a resumption of industrial production, which had been withheld due to cuts in supplies and fall in demand, as well as payment of outstanding wages and pensions, thus resolving what a clear majority of the Belarusian public saw as the key problems.²⁷

Another equally important component of Lukashenka's election manifesto was the clear orientation toward economic and political integration with the Russian Federation. This was justified not only economically but also ideologically, given the affirmation of the Soviet legacy that was widespread at that time in Belarus and the deeply rooted notion of Slavic unity. It also soon turned out that the new president was clearly making efforts to concentrate power, which led to building a stable authoritarian system during the first few years of his presidency. This was welcomed by most Belarusians, who viewed his iron-fist government as something that protected them from a 'democratic chaos' that lay beyond their comprehension.

Lukashenka's pro-Russian and anti-democratic policy led to changes in the politics of memory. Since he enjoyed strong public support,²⁸ the president soon embarked upon liquidating the state symbols that had been introduced just a few years before. While doing this, he used the fact that the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia emblem were associated by most of the public with

²⁷ В. Карбалевич, Александр Лукашенко. *Политический портрет*, Москва 2010, pp. 103–108.

²⁸ This was the only relatively democratic presidential election in almost 30 years of independent Belarus's history. Thus it can be stated that Lukashenka was really supported by a vast majority of the Belarusian public in mid 1990s.

Belarusian organisations who had collaborated with the German Nazi occupiers during World War II.²⁹ A referendum was held on 14 May 1995. One of the four questions raised during the referendum was the proposal to introduce a new flag and national emblem of the Republic of Belarus that strongly resembled the symbols used during the BSSR period, and which were modified to some extent by the president's aides.³⁰ The government's initiative was backed by 75% of citizens. During the same vote, a clear majority of the public also agreed to grant official language status to Russian and approved of the policy aimed at integration with Russia (in both cases the percentage of votes 'in favour' reached as much as 83%). Despite the opposition's objections regarding the referendum's transparency, its results to a great extent reflected the scale of pro-Soviet sentiments and the low awareness of the national distinctness of Belarusians. The 50th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War was celebrated with pomp during the referendum campaign. Both the style of these celebrations and the main slogan "We are right - we won" openly drew upon the Soviet model.³¹ Thus, the modest achievements of the first years of independence, when the activity of independent circles, with the government's reluctant approval, had led to gradual development of the foundations of alternative Belarusian national historical identity, were wasted.

The Soviet vision of history was resumed after 1995, with only slight modifications to serve the needs of the independent state. It should be kept in mind that Lukashenka's overriding strategic goal in the 1990s was integration with Russia. In doing so, he expected to pave the way for his presidency of the structure that was gradually being created at that time, which since 1999 has been known as the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Therefore, independent Belarus was treated at that time by its leader as merely a transitional stage on his way to achieving a further goal. Strengthening the tradition of the BSSR, which was presented as the first Belarusian state, while the Republic of Belarus was viewed as its immediate successor, became a priority in the politics of memory.³² The modest achievements of the early 1990s, contained in historiography and school textbooks, were thoroughly revised. Content that did not

²⁹ Numerous voices of disapproval for 'reactivation of collaborationist symbols' appeared in the press already in late 1980s in response to the use of national symbols by Belarusian nationalist activists (including the then emerging BPF). See С. Букчин, *Белорусская трагедия 1986–1999*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 46–51.

³⁰ Interestingly, no heraldry expert was asked for an opinion, and the final shape of the new symbols (especially the emblem) was an effect of random compilations made by high-ranking officials from the Presidential Administration. See А. Ярошевич, 'Референдум-1995. Беларусь десять лет жила под неправильным гербом', Naviny.by, 14 May 2015, www.naviny.by.

³¹ W. Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki...*, op. cit., pp. 301–302.

³² М.В. Кирчанов, *Интеллектуальная история...*, op. cit., p. 143.

correspond to Soviet templates was branded as Russophobic. As a result, historians who thought independently were pushed to the margins of scientific and social life, and could only publish their opinions in niche history magazines. As part of the policy of disavowing facts that were inconvenient for the government in those years, an attempt was also made to deny the crimes committed in Kuropaty by the NKVD. In 1997, the prosecutor general of Belarus decided to resume the investigation into this case in order to verify the commission's findings from the late 1980s.³³

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's ambitions to rule from the Kremlin were confirmed by the events of 1999. Boris Yeltsin, who was seriously ill and becoming ever less politically active, anointed Vladimir Putin as his successor. Lukashenka, who had been building up his popularity in Russia for years, had to adapt to the new conditions, and the only solution was to strengthen his position as the president. Moscow expected that Belarus, in accordance with an interstate agreement signed in the same year, would actually become part of the Union State. In practice, for Lukashenka, this meant not only Belarus forfeiting its sovereignty, but also him losing his position as an independent leader. Therefore, he resorted to the previously marginalised rhetoric of independence and made some adjustments to the politics of memory. In a speech given in 2001, he recognised the national cultural heritage as the most important strategic resource of the state, and announced that care for the preservation of the literary language of Belarus and monuments as a testimony to the historical memory of Belarus was one of the most important tasks for the government.³⁴

Lukashenka's speech in March 2003, in which he deemed it necessary to develop an official state ideology and personally outlined the basic theses that set the directions for thinking about the state, was the key to creating a new pro-independence policy. The concept that he presented assumed recognition of the importance of the GDL for Belarusian historical heritage, while at the same time marginalising the Belarusian People's Republic proclaimed in 1918. The main source of statehood, however, remained the BSSR, referred to as one of the founders of the USSR. This subjective, rather than objective, perception of Soviet Belarus was at the heart of Lukashenka's vision of history,

³³ Regardless of the visible determination, investigative authorities did not manage to find any evidence to disprove that the crime had been committed by the NKVD - neither then nor a few years later. С. Букчин, *Белорусская трагедия...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 173–174.

³⁴ *Выступление А.Г. Лукашенко на совещании «О мерах по решению проблем развития культуры и искусства»*, official website of the President of Belarus, 1 February 2001, www.president.gov.by.

set against the ‘extremely nationalist’ perspective of the BPF. According to the president, Belarus, although culturally, politically and economically tied to Russia, had resisted the ‘pathologies’ of capitalism and had retained traditional East Slavic values, and thus could serve as an example not only to Ukraine, but also to Russia.³⁵ In this chaotic and emotional speech, one could see his determination to prove to the world the special importance of this small nation of Belarus, a country which had faced criticism for its failure to conduct economic reforms and its violation of human rights. His speech also contained elements of polemic against the Kremlin, which perceived it as a provincial, backward state with no prospects.

This speech may be considered as the onset of Belarusian state ideology. Specially designated ideological workers assigned to state institutions of all types, including schools and industrial plants, were put in charge of its implementation. Nevertheless, it turned out impossible to develop a uniform, credible and sufficiently accessible programme that would seem credible to citizens. There were different versions of what was theoretically the same ideology in Belarusian socio-political life. This ideology was being modified not only by the authors of individual textbooks but also by officials at the central or even local level who followed top-down guidelines.³⁶ The world view promoted by the government, based largely on Soviet state traditions and emphasising cultural affinities with Russia, could not contribute to the postulated strengthening of Belarusian historical awareness and – in a broader aspect – a sense of national distinctiveness. Although the historical periods proving the existence of the history of Belarusian statehood beyond Russian domination, that is above all the times of the GDL, were not omitted, they only served as a background for the Soviet era, which was crucial in this narrative.³⁷ The attempt to introduce a substitute for a coordinated politics of memory was unsuccessful. Lukashenka himself admitted this in 2014, when he concluded after many years that Belarus was deprived of an ideology that would effectively bind the nation together and indirectly admitted that the use of Soviet models was a mistake.³⁸

The weakness of the government’s strategy at that time resulted primarily from President Lukashenka’s mindset. He could not imagine a politics of memory

³⁵ ‘Александр Лукашенко: мы не провинция нам надо выпрямляться’, Naviny.by, 27 March 2003, www.naviny.by.

³⁶ П. Рудкоўскі, *Паўстаньне Беларусі*, Вільня 2007, pp. 23–24.

³⁷ See *Основы идеологии Белорусского государства. История и Теория*, Академия Управления при Президенте РБ, Минск 2005.

³⁸ ‘Лукашенко: государственную идеологию, которая бы легла на душу, мы так и не изобрели’, Naviny.by, 17 October 2014, www.naviny.by.

that would unequivocally break with the Soviet heritage, while at the same time being based on a national rhetoric that was not fully understood by his generation, especially in the uncompromising version presented by Zianon Pazniak and other BPF activists. As a result, Minsk's growing distrust towards Moscow still did not entail any major changes in memory politics. One clear proof of this was the government's policy regarding Kuropaty: construction of additional lanes of the Minsk bypass at the site where the mass graves of the NKVD victims were located was commenced in 2001. Opposition circles, who viewed this move as another attempt to shroud the memory of the executions, started a protest. In the end, the government gave up the plan of turning Kuropaty into a construction site in 2002, but did not take any major steps to commemorate those events or to properly protect the site itself.³⁹

³⁹ See И. Карней, 'Спасение Куропат', Радио Свобода, 2 March 2017, www.svoboda.org. In January 1994, during a short several-hour visit to Belarus, US President Bill Clinton unveiled a monument in the form of a bench in Kuropaty, commemorating the victims of mass executions. This facility has been devastated many times by 'unidentified perpetrators', with no response whatsoever from law enforcement agencies. See 'В урочище Куропаты вандалы разрушили мемориальный знак – «скамью Клинтона»', Tut.by, 31 January 2007, www.news.tut.by.

IV. CREATING ELEMENTS OF DISTINCTNESS A CAUTIOUS TURN IN MEMORY POLITICS (2014–)

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict was a turning point in shaping the government's politics of memory. The fact that Moscow had questioned the territorial integrity of neighbouring Ukraine made Lukashenka seriously concerned. Given the deep crisis in Russia's relations with the West, the Kremlin's expectations towards its Belarusian ally increased significantly. As a result, what Minsk considered to be a sufficient guarantee of respecting Russian interests (close co-operation in the areas of security, foreign policy and politics of memory) was almost viewed as disloyalty by Moscow. It was especially dissatisfied with the lack of unequivocal support for its actions towards Ukraine. While the paradigm of the two countries' strategic alliance was maintained in the Kremlin's official rhetoric, Russian expert circles (including governmental institutions and those indirectly linked to the government) released a wave of critical, often very harsh opinions, questioning not only Minsk's loyalty but also the legal and historical foundations of Belarusian statehood and the ethnic identity of the citizens themselves. It was accompanied by a significant increase in the activity of pro-Russian circles in Belarus, promoting the idea of Slavic unity under Russia's leadership as part of the 'Russian world'.⁴⁰

Since he wanted to maintain the sovereignty of the state and, consequently, also his own position, Lukashenka had to emphasise the Belarusian distinctness from Russia more than before. One of the key tools to accomplish this task was the policy of remembrance, which had been conducted in a very conservative manner during the 20 years of his presidency and had been largely based on Soviet models. In order to strengthen the historical foundation of an independent Belarus, it was necessary both to emphasise those elements from the past that pointed to an independent path for the development of the Belarusian state and nation, and to weaken the threads directly linked to Russian domination.

Lukashenka's speech on 1 July 2014, on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from Nazi occupation, was a sign of the upcoming changes in the

⁴⁰ The issue of intensifying activity of Russian soft power in Belarus was presented in detail in 2016 by OSW. See K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, *The end of the myth...*, *op. cit.* The activity of the 'Russian world' in Belarus after 2016 was analysed by researchers from the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS) and the independent Belarusian think tank EAST. See A. Елисеєв, *Кардинальные перемены в антибелорусской дезинформации и пропаганде: анализ количественных и качественных изменений*, EAST Center, April 2019, www.east-center.org; *Принуждение к «интеграции»: ползущее наступление России на суверенитет Беларуси*, iSANS, 2019.

official interpretation of history. The president delivered the speech in Belarusian, which was unusual because until then he had almost exclusively used Russian in public. However, not only was the linguistic form of this speech meaningful but also its content, which included an unequivocal statement about the need to protect the country's sovereignty from the threats coming from East and West.⁴¹ These words were spoken on the eve of the celebrations commemorating the Great Patriotic War, and thus the essence of the historical heritage of the USSR, and also shortly before President Putin's visit to Minsk. Lukashenka's speech can be viewed as a strong demonstration of his will to preserve the country's independence at all costs, and as an expression of his disapproval of the Kremlin's expansionist policy in the post-Soviet area.

Thus 2014 can be viewed as the beginning of a slow and ambiguous process of strengthening the national narrative in the politics of memory, fitting in with the government's efforts to develop the identity of Belarusians. This process has been branded, with a dose of exaggeration and definitely prematurely, as 'soft Belarusisation'. It should be noted that the first efforts to build a national narrative were made before 2014 and included, for example, the unsuccessful attempt to develop a state ideology described in the previous chapter.⁴² However, it was only the Russian aggression against Ukraine that prompted Lukashenka to change the priorities concerning the politics of memory. The whole process can be traced back by looking at the changes in the narrative regarding particular periods of Belarus's past. These are presented in detail in the following subsections.

1. The cradle of statehood: the Principality of Polotsk

The history of the Principality of Polotsk as the earliest form of Slavic statehood in the territory of modern-day Belarus, which had been studied for centuries but was previously played down, became one of the most important threads of the new modified Belarusian memory politics. To distinguish it from the Russian historical narrative (or at least highlight some distinctive elements), Alyaksandr Lukashenka needed a kind of founding myth that

⁴¹ А. Класковский, 'Накануне прилета Путина Лукашенко заговорил о независимости по-белорусски', Naviny.by, 2 July 2014, www.naviny.by.

⁴² Pyotr Rudkousky, an expert in Belarusian identity and governmental politics of memory, rightly noted that after 2010, school textbooks began to present Russian history as separate from Belarusian, and that an official was punished by court for refusing to provide a formal answer in Belarusian for the first time in 2013. The author argues that for these reasons the events of 2014 were groundbreaking in that they induced the state authorities to accelerate changes in the historical narrative and identity policy. See П. Рудкоўскі, *Ад «хворозга» да «здаровага» нацыяналізму*, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 18 January 2018, www.belinstitute.com.

would reveal the native Belarusian roots of statehood, independent of other traditions. The Principality of Polotsk, which had existed from the 9th to the 14th centuries and mainly extended over the present-day Vitebsk Oblast and part of Minsk Oblast, was ideal for this. The political advantage of this choice – regardless of the historical evidence – was the fact that this heritage is not a matter of dispute with neighbouring countries, unlike the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which is understood differently by Vilnius and Minsk. Thus Lukashenka made a direct reference to the authors of national historiography, who had recognised the Principality of Polotsk as the onset of the Belarusian state’s history more than a hundred years ago.

Lukashenka’s speech in February 2017 was the first serious sign of increasing interest in the Principality of Polotsk. He spoke very positively about the work of Belarusian historians published in 2016: *Sources of Belarusian statehood: the Polotsk and Vitebsk lands from the 9th to the 18th centuries*, tracing back the roots of independent Belarus to this state structure. The president, commenting on the results of scholarly research, unequivocally supported the promotion of “historical truth, such healthy nationalism” and ordered school textbooks to be edited accordingly.⁴³ It is worth noting that the official narrative places a special emphasis on the independence of the Principality of Polotsk, which – unlike such important political centres as Kiev or Novgorod – was not aided by elites of foreign descent (i.e. primarily the Varangians from Scandinavia), but developed its own ruling class.⁴⁴ This should be viewed as a political move by the president’s spin doctors, aimed at strengthening the myth about the early medieval tradition of a small but strong state, resistant to external influences and pursuing its own, peaceful international policy, like the present-day Republic of Belarus.

The increasing role attributed to the Principality of Polotsk in Belarusian politics of memory was reflected in another speech given by Lukashenka on 1 July 2017, on the occasion of the Independence Day celebrations. He described Polotsk as “the historical cradle of Belarusian statehood”, once again emphasising its self-organisation and independence.⁴⁵ One natural consequence of

⁴³ ‘Лукашенко выступил за «здоровый национализм» в учебниках’, Салідарнасць, 28 February 2017, www.gazetaby.com.

⁴⁴ However, this narrative is oversimplified, since historians still disagree whether Rogvolod, the first chronicled Prince of Polotsk, who reigned in the 10th century, was a Varangian or a representative of one of the Slavic tribes. See С. Тарасов, *Полоцкий Чародей. Всеслав Брячиславич*, Минск 2016, pp. 24–25.

⁴⁵ Выступление Президента на торжественном собрании, посвященном Дню Независимости Республики Беларусь, 1 июля 2017 г., СБ. Беларусь Сегодня, 4 July 2017, www.sb.by.

this new narrative could have been the revision of school textbooks and, for the first time, clearly pointing to the Principality of Polotsk as the source of Belarusian statehood, completely distinct from Kievan Rus. In August 2017, changes were promised by the co-author of the new edition of Belarusian history textbooks, Olga Lyauko, professor at the Institute of History of the NAS of Belarus. However, no new publications covering this period have been released so far, and the traditional interpretation that treats the legacy of Kievan Rus as the main pillar of East Slavic unity remains prevalent, so it is still close to the Soviet/Russian historical school.⁴⁶ It cannot be ruled out that the government in Minsk has been delaying such a radical change in education concerning the origins of Belarusian statehood, or has even abandoned the project entirely, given the controversies it has sparked in relations with Russia.⁴⁷

The growing interest in the history of the Principality of Polotsk has also had an impact on the memory politics of Polotsk itself, where a monument commemorating the city as the cradle of Belarusian statehood was unveiled on 2 September 2017 (as part of the annual celebration of Belarusian Literature Day) near the historic 18th-century St. Sophia Cathedral.⁴⁸ The government has decided not to launch a more extensive initiative aimed at creating an exhibition (e.g. in a specially established museum), which, based on the latest research by Belarusian historians and using modern multimedia, would have presented the heritage of the dynasty of the Princes of Polotsk. Highlighting so clearly the founding myth of Belarus (as well as the aforementioned attempt to change the content of school textbooks) does not fit in with the way of thinking of local Polotsk authorities or the central government in Minsk. One proof of this is the fact that local museums have retained their earlier narrative, identical to the Russian one.⁴⁹

However, the inconsistent efforts aimed at increasing public awareness of the importance of the Principality of Polotsk does not mean that this topic has been abandoned in politics of memory. On 19 April 2019, during a solemn

⁴⁶ Ю.Н. Бохан, С.Н. Темушев, *История Беларуси с древнейших времен до конца XV в. 6 класс. Часть 1*, Минск 2016, www.uchebniki.by.

⁴⁷ An interview with Professor Lyauko in the independent, nationalist-oriented newspaper *Nasha Niva* sparked a wave of criticism, especially from Russian scholars and journalists, and was later permanently removed from its website. Information about this controversial statement is currently available only in foreign sources, such as Ukrainian. See 'Больше не братья? Беларусь открылась от «общей» истории с Россией', *Obozrevatel*, 5 August 2017, www.obozrevatel.com.

⁴⁸ А. Ярмоц, 'В Полоцке возле Софийского собора появился новый памятник', *Go214.by*, 27 August 2017, www.go214.by. City residents have branded this monument as a croissant due to its crescent shape.

⁴⁹ The author's own observations based on his study trip to Polotsk in April 2018.

session of the National Assembly, convened in connection with Lukashenka's annual address, history professor Ihar Marzaliuk, a member of the House of Representatives (the lower house of parliament), presented to the president a proposal for establishing a Belarusian Statehood Day. In his opinion, the holiday should be celebrated on 5 June, which is the day commemorating Saint Euphrosyne of Polotsk, a 12th-century princess, who is worshipped with particular devotion in Belarus. To back his proposal, Marzaliuk pointed to the fundamental importance of the traditions of the Principality of Polotsk for the development of the historical identity of contemporary Belarus. Lukashenka initially supported the idea as he deemed it useful for the interests of the state.⁵⁰ Marzaliuk is deeply trusted by the president and has for years been perceived as one of the main creators of the national historical narrative. Therefore, his proposal can be treated as an expression of the current trend in the mindset of at least a section of the elite in the field of creating a historical narrative.

Another proof of the importance of building the historical foundations of Belarusian statehood for the government is the launch of the enormous academic publication project, a five-volume synthesis under the title *The history of Belarusian statehood*, compiled by a group of researchers, mainly associated with the NAS of Belarus. The first volume, describing the roots of the Belarusian state tradition up to the end of the 18th century, was published in 2018 (four volumes have been published so far). The official narrative on the importance of the early Middle Ages in the history of Belarus, presented for several years, has been fully reflected in the content of this study, where the Principality of Polotsk was clearly recognised as a source of Belarusian statehood.⁵¹ It is worth emphasising that the most recent definition of statehood, which is the official interpretation of the NAS of Belarus, was presented in the introduction to the entire series in the first volume. This interpretation defines the process of development of the Belarusian statehood tradition in very broad terms, covering not only the Principality of Polotsk or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but also the period when the country was part of the Russian Empire.⁵²

⁵⁰ Marzaliuk's proposal provoked various reactions among independent academic circles. Aleh Trusau, PhD, the former chairman of the organisation, who insisted on moving the Belarusian capital to Polotsk (!), supported the idea of establishing a new holiday. In turn, Alyaksandr Krautsevich, PhD, viewed this as an attempt to marginalise the Freedom Day celebrated by independent circles on 25 March on the anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918. See Е. Спасюк, 'Марзалиук предложил отмечать День государственности. Зачем этот праздник?', Naviny.by, 19 April 2019, www.naviny.by.

⁵¹ О.Н. Левко, 'Полоцкое княжество (земля) - исток белорусской государственности' [in:] *История белорусской государственности*, vol. 1, Минск 2018, pp. 158-211.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

2. The powerful heritage: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

One of the most interesting and far-reaching changes in the politics of memory of Minsk since 1991 concerns the revision of the significance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In short, it can be characterised as a transition from almost total rejection to recognition as one of the sources of Belarusian statehood. During the Soviet period, the history of the lands of present-day Belarus before 1917 was almost completely disregarded. If mentioned at all, it was primarily presented as a period of class oppression and feudal exploitation. The aim was to completely eradicate it from the minds of Belarusians, so that it could not form an element of their collective identity.⁵³ The history of the GDL was treated only as a topic for Lithuanian historiography, which Belarusian historians, as a rule, were not permitted to study. The Soviet narrative regarding this was in fact a repetition of what was claimed by the authors of the West Ruthenian idea.

After Belarus gained independence, there was a rapid and radical change in the perception of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which began to be included in its history as one of the most important stages of its development. The removal of the ideological ‘muzzle’ made it possible for the first time to study the country’s history in isolation from the past of the Russian lands. This period of revival of the national idea was short-lived and ended in 1994, when Lukashenka took power. He initiated a return to the Soviet and Russian interpretation, according to which the GDL was not a Belarusian state, but a Lithuanian one, and Belarusians had fallen victim to its exploitation and expansion.⁵⁴ In turn, Belarusian land was portrayed as having always been part of the Russian civilisational and cultural space.

While nationalist-oriented historians could not find common ground with the Sovietised Belarusian public, President Lukashenka, who did not share their ideas at all, in fact began to voice the views of his voters. At that time he was openly criticising the GDL, largely inspired by his former history teacher, Yakov Treshchanka,⁵⁵ a supporter of the West Ruthenian school, who dated Belarusian statehood from the establishment of the Byelorussian SSR.

⁵³ W. Śleszyński, *Historia w służbie polityki...*, op. cit., p. 216.

⁵⁴ A. Krawcewicz, ‘Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie – wizja litewsko-białoruska?’ [in:] A. Nikžentaitis, M. Kopczyński (eds), *Dialog kultur pamięci w regionie ULB*, Warszawa 2014, p. 83, as in: ngoteka.pl.

⁵⁵ In 1975, Lukashenka graduated from history department (major: teacher) at Mogilev State Pedagogical Institute, where Treshchanka was one of his teachers. Treshchanka became an informal advisor to Lukashenka after he took the presidency.

Moreover, the myth of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was dangerous for the government, because it could be used as an argument that it was possible to build closer bonds with the West or to prove the influence of Latin culture. At the same time, it could be read as a sign that Belarus, which had maintained close relations with Europe for many years in the past, had other alternatives than integration with Russia. Meanwhile, this integration was the overriding goal of Lukashenka's foreign policy in the second half of the 1990s.

Over the past 26 years, the regime's attitude towards the GDL has changed radically, which is reflected in the statements of the president from various periods of his rule. In 2005, he stated that some scholars "speak seriously about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and keep silent about the total subordination and dependence of Belarusians that were seen in this medieval principality that was not self-reliant. They hate the Belarusian people".⁵⁶ This conclusion can be considered a typical stance on the GDL as modelled on Soviet historiography. Three years later, the president's statements were more nuanced. Namely, he claimed that "we have taken our rightful position in the system of international relations. And this didn't start today. We don't need to borrow this achievement from anyone. It already happened. We have been reaching this point for a long time. You know - [it happened] back in the times of Kievan Rus, the Principalities of Polotsk, Turov and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In all these periods, little by little, what we have today was gradually made. Not to mention the Soviet period".⁵⁷ This speech marked the beginning of the subtle process of including the GDL in Belarusian history, albeit without questioning the prevalent memory of the Soviet era.

However, these tendencies were still inconsistent and conservative. The statement made by Lukashenka in 2012 testifies to this: "Academic circles are continuing the efforts to diminish the importance of the Slavic roots of the Belarusian nation, to melt our past in the history of both Poland and Lithuania".⁵⁸ At that time, however, extensive information about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania appeared in school textbooks, which also began to be described as a Belarusian state in an indisputable and uncontroversial manner. This change can be dated to the end of the 2000s - this was the time when scepticism about

⁵⁶ 'А. Лукашэнка: прыхільнікі ВКЛ - ненавісьнікі беларускага народу', *Радыё Свабода*, 8 December 2005, www.svaboda.org.

⁵⁷ As quoted in: A. Dziarnowicz, '„Poszukiwanie ojczyzny”. Dyskurs na temat Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego we współczesnym społeczeństwie białoruskim' [in:] *Dialog kultur pamięci...*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁵⁸ 'Лукашенко: «не видно во многих общественных и гуманитарных исследованиях» белорусских ученых', *Naviny.by*, 7 February 2012, www.naviny.by.

the GDL was replaced by an emphasis on the importance of this period for the formation of the Belarusian nation and culture. An example that accurately reflects the scale of the changes was the trial of publicists who wrote for the Russian news agency Regnum in 2017. The charges brought by the Belarusian prosecution authorities included “denying the historical heritage of the GDL”.⁵⁹ The evolution of Lukashenka’s views on the GDL was in a way crowned by his interview for Radio Echo of Moscow in December 2019, in which he stated directly that “the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a Belarusian state. There were also Lithuanians and some Poles. [But it was a] Belarusian state (...) And no one denies it today”.⁶⁰

The question is why there has been such a significant change in the regime’s stance on the GDL and why the key theses of national historiography that had previously been rejected have in fact been accepted, albeit in a slightly milder form. It seems that the government is beginning to understand the need to pursue a politics of memory that would not be limited to highlighting the Soviet heritage, but would also draw upon earlier history of Belarusian lands. This has also become an urgent need, given the regularly recurring disputes and increasing political pressure from Russia. The regime needed a narrative that would separate Belarusian and Russian history and demonstrate that they are not the same. The early Slavic Principalities of Polotsk and Turov offered this opportunity, but they were too distant and too ‘archaeological’. Meanwhile, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had existed until the end of the 18th century, was perfect for the regime to achieve its goal. Since the regime appropriated at least some views about this period from the opposition and nationalist-inclined historians, it could make the narrative perfectly tailored to suit its needs. In 2009, the upcoming change was well diagnosed by the Belarusian researcher Alyaksandr Lastovski, who wrote: “The period of history before the Soviet era has the greatest potential for strengthening the Belarusian national identity due to the fact that it has not been utilised. Therefore, it can easily be filled with content shaped in any way and make its positive or neutral perception entrenched among the public”.⁶¹

The government in fact decided to adopt a selective approach towards the history of the GDL. On the one hand, it was quickly recognised as one of the

⁵⁹ П. Рудкоўскі, *Ад «хворага»...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁶⁰ ‘Лукашенко: Великое княжество Литовское было белорусским государством, это неоспоримо’, *Наша Ніва*, 25 December 2019, www.nn.by.

⁶¹ А. Ластовский, ‘Специфика исторической памяти Беларуси: между советским прошлым и национальной перспективой’, *Вестник общественного мнения* 2009, no. 4, p. 99.

foundations of the modern Republic of Belarus, as evidenced by its wide presence in school textbooks. While previously the most innovative changes in Belarusian historiography concerning the GDL were made by independent historians, at present researchers from the NAS of Belarus are also becoming involved. The history of the GDL became an attractive story about the powerful Belarusian-Lithuanian state, one of the largest and most powerful in Europe at that time, which developed its own culture and political tradition. Historical figures, including the greatest aristocratic and noble families linked to the history of the Republic of Poland (including the Radziwiłł, Sapieha, Tyszkiewicz, Wańkiewicz, Orda and Kościuszko houses), who were considered Belarusian, began to be more readily included in the memory of the GDL that was being shaped at that time. This was manifested by erecting monuments to commemorate some of them (including Grand Duke Algirdas in Vitebsk or Lew Sapieha in Slonim). Other activities included the reconstruction of architectural monuments from that period (for more, see below). More and more of the Polish heritage (including the traditions of tolerance) is readily being included in the historical narrative. The Battle of Grunwald began to be presented as a triumph of Belarusian troops also, and Kościuszko as a Belarusian hero.⁶²

On the other hand, rebuilding the public memory of the GDL, which fundamentally contradicts the imperial Russian and Soviet tradition, is a cautious process in which some events are highlighted, while other are passed over in silence or marginalised (e.g. the Battle of Orsha that was fought between the troops of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Grand Duchy of Moscow). A conservative approach is visible in many respects. This results from the fear of politicising history and provoking the anger of Russian propaganda, which is viewing the changes in the Belarusian historical narrative with increasing concern. A reflection of this may be the theses presented in the above-mentioned conceptual article from *Belaruskaya Dumka*. Its authors state that the falsification of history is “a denial of the important role played by the ancestors of modern Belarusians in the emergence of such forms of statehood as the Principalities of Polotsk and Turov and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania” and at the same time they claim that “using facts concerning the wars fought between the GDL and the Grand Duchy of Moscow as well as between Poland

⁶² The celebration of Thaddeus Kościuszko’s birthday in 2020 in Minsk was attended by the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei, the Polish ambassador Artur Michalski, the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius and the chargé d’affaires of the US Embassy Jenifer Moore. See ‘Имя Тадеуша Костюшко важно для Беларуси, США, Польши и Литвы – Makeй’, Бelta, 4 February 2020, www.belta.by.

and Russia in order to put Belarusians at odds with Russians is distortion of history”.⁶³

Despite the caution and avoidance of themes that could be perceived as anti-Russian in the new elements of Belarusian politics of memory, these changes are often exaggerated in Russia and treated as hostile moves.⁶⁴ One of the many examples of this may be the criticism from the well-known propaganda portal EurAsia Daily regarding Lukashenka’s statement that the GDL was a Belarusian state. In an article published in 2019, the author stated: “Official revisionism is gaining momentum in Belarus, which produces dogmas of mythological origin and consistently hammers them into the heads of schoolchildren and students. The most important claim of the nationalist treatment of history, which has been absorbed by the officials of the famous ideological section, is the myth of the «thousand-year history of Belarusian statehood»”.⁶⁵ Similar statements have been observed so far at the level of publicists and propaganda in the media, but not in the official Kremlin narrative. Nevertheless, they can be treated as a kind of warning sign towards Minsk against further changes in the historical narrative. In fact, they seem to have had the desired effect.

The evolution of the government’s approach to the history of the GDL has triggered a change in the way the Belarusian public perceives this period of history. While in 2004, 34.6% of Belarusians believed that the GDL was the first Belarusian state, in 2012 this ratio grew to 44.8%.⁶⁶ In the latter poll, 25% of respondents voted for the Principalities of Polotsk and Turov (they had not been mentioned in 2004), 9.9% for the Belarusian People’s Republic (a decrease of 5.6%), and 18.2% for the Byelorussian SSR (an increase of 1.2%). No such polls were conducted later, but it can be assumed that this trend has even strengthened.

Although discussion about the Belarusianness of the GDL is not yet over, one may claim with a high degree of confidence that its statehood tradition has been irreversibly inscribed into Belarusian history as an important part that has shaped it. However, as “more room” is being reserved for the GDL, the presence of elements linked to the Soviet tradition is not being eliminated; these two coexist. The present regime seems to be incapable of a further positive

⁶³ А. Коваленя, В. Данилович, В. Арчаков, А. Баньковский, ‘К вопросу...’, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁴ For more detail, see: K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, *The end of the myth...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁵ М. Самойлов, ‘Великое княжество Литовское никогда не было «белорусским государством»’, EurAsia Daily, 31 December 2019, www.eadaily.com.

⁶⁶ A. Dziarnowicz, ‘„Poszukiwanie ojczyzny”...’, *op. cit.* [in:] *Dialog kultur pamięci...*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

revision of the GDL's history at the expense of the Soviet period. This is partly due to the fact that the history of the Byelorussian SSR has been in some way 'sanctified' among the Belarusian public, and – probably to a greater extent – due to the fear that this will expose Minsk to additional tension in its already complicated relations with Moscow.

Architectural heritage monuments - an instrument of Belarusian memory politics

The change in the government's narrative about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was accompanied by an unprecedented interest in the cultural heritage that remained after that era, particularly towards residential buildings. Monuments of architecture and art in Belarus sustained serious damages during World War II and later as a result of Soviet policy aimed at their planned destruction (this primarily concerns historic churches, many of which were blown up in the 1950s and 1960s). Nevertheless, since the fall of communism a large number of these objects have survived, in most cases in ruins. In 2002, a governmental programme was adopted to restore selected monuments in Belarus, including the country's most valuable Radziwiłł castles located in Mir and Nesvizh. Both have been adapted for use as museums. Their importance increased when they were listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The Nesvizh Castle, which had been used as a sanatorium before the renovation, was opened in 2012 by President Lukashenka in the presence of representatives of the Radziwiłł family. Even though both renovations were conducted contrary to modern conservation doctrine, they turned out to be very popular among tourists. In 2019, the number of tourists visiting the Mir Castle exceeded 320,000, and in the case of the Nesvizh Castle it was over 400,000.⁶⁷

The success of the first major conservation projects encouraged the government to adopt a special programme 'Castles of Belarus' in 2012. It envisaged the renovation or partial reconstruction of 38 palaces and castles and securing archaeological sites over a timeframe of six years.⁶⁸ However, the project was not fully implemented, mainly due to a shortage of funds (only slightly above 6 million euros). In 2016 it was integrated into

⁶⁷ See the Mir Castle's website, www.mirzamak.by; О. Грох, 'В 2018 году экспорт туристических услуг Несвижского района составил 291,7 тыс. долларов США', Нясвіжскія навіны, 18 July 2019, www.nesvizh-news.by.

⁶⁸ Постановление Совета Министров Республики Беларусь «Об зацвярджэнні Дзяржаўнай праграмы „Замкі Беларусі“ на 2012–2018 гады», 6 January 2012, www.normativka.by.

a programme named 'Culture of Belarus'. Its effects included reconstruction works in the gothic castle in Lida, the Sapieha Palace in Ruzhany (reconstruction of the gate section), as well as in the castles in Navahrudak, Halshany and Krevo. The quality of these works, however, was criticised by specialists, who pointed out that in many cases they had little to do with conservation art. The most controversial example is the 'reconstruction' of the Old Castle in Hrodna, which started in 2017. The assumption was to reconstruct the former Renaissance-style royal residence on the basis of a blurred miniature made 400 years ago. The works sparked serious discussion in Hrodna, among Belarusian historians and in the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus. However, the efforts to block this pseudo-conservation project proved unsuccessful.⁶⁹

The gradual recognition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's architectural heritage as an important component of Belarusian culture applies not only to palaces and castles, but also to sacral art monuments, which are promoted as attractions of local or national importance. Another phenomenon is the increasingly active initiatives concerning some memorial sites linked to popular people who were born in the territory of present-day Belarus. The mansion of the Mickiewicz family in Zavoisse was rebuilt first (1996–1998), followed by Thaddeus Kościuszko's manor house in Merachouschyna (2004) and the Skoki Palace near Brest (2010–2013), the home of the Niemcewicz family. Work is currently underway to restore the Orda family's manor house in Varatsevichi to its former splendour.

The intensification of the state-financed initiatives linked to the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the former Polish Republic is a controversial issue. On the one hand, it underlines the government's growing interest in promoting the memory of the GDL and its willingness to spread knowledge about its heritage, which is an attractive addition to traditional peasant culture. At the same time this highlights the differences between the Belarusian and Russian lands. The tourist and image-building aspects are also important, as this is aimed at presenting Belarus as a country with an interesting history and valuable monuments. Pictures of the Nesvizh and Mir Castles can be seen on billboards in Belarusian cities, greet visitors at Minsk Airport and are even placed on banknotes (50 and 100 rouble respectively). Whatever the government's

⁶⁹ For more detail, see: W. Konończuk, cooperation P. Kosiewski, *Endangered heritage. Polish cultural goods in Belarus and Ukraine*, OSW, Warsaw 2020, pp. 92–93, www.osw.waw.pl.

intentions, the initiatives aimed at restoring selected monuments have led to increasing public awareness of the historical role played by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and identification with it as a Belarusian state.

On the other hand, work on valuable sites is usually conducted by regular construction firms lacking expert knowledge, using the cheapest materials and without due care for the historic authenticity. This proves that the priority is not so much to protect these cultural goods but rather to use them for propaganda purposes. It should also be noted that the complex history of the heritage of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is in most cases not mentioned. This heritage is usually not perceived as shared (i.e. also Polish and Lithuanian), but as solely Belarusian.

3. Moderate scepticism: Belarus in the Russian Empire

In contrast to the two previous stages of history, the period of the Russian Empire's reign over the entire territory of present-day Belarus has not yet been subject to a thorough revision aimed at strengthening the Belarusian national narrative. Only certain changes have been made as regards the presentation of some events from this epoch, including, in particular, the Russo-French war in 1812, which until recently was referred to in Belarusian historiography in line with the Soviet/Russian historical school as the Patriotic War.⁷⁰ Even before 2014, the government made an attempt to accentuate its own position towards those times – an idealised image of the war of all Eastern Slavs, united under the rule of Tsar Alexander I against the “Western invaders representing a foreign civilisation”, different from the one adopted in the USSR and contemporary Russia. The emerging differences became clear during the celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the war held in Belarus. Local historians presented a more balanced interpretation, based on the conclusion that, from the viewpoint of Belarusian citizens, this war meant enormous damage to infrastructure, the loss of about a quarter of the population, a collapse in the economy and agriculture, and above all, fratricidal fights of recruits or volunteers from the territory of present-day Belarus, serving both Russia and Napoleon. On this basis, a popular opinion was formulated among Belarusian

⁷⁰ The name ‘Great Patriotic War’ applied to World War II in the USSR and contemporary Russia, with which Western readers are more familiar, refers to the tradition of special commemoration of wars fought against a strong adversary representing a foreign civilisation. Such adversaries were both Napoleon's Grande Armée in 1812 and the armed forces of Nazi Germany and its allies in 1941–1945.

historians that the war of 1812 was not so much a patriotic war, but primarily a civil war for Belarusians.⁷¹

The change in the naming convention, important for shaping the nation's own historical narrative, was also seen at the level of official publications edited by the NAS of Belarus, such as the four-volume *Great Historical Atlas of Belarus*, in which the term 'patriotic' does not appear. The only term used to refer to this war is the 'war of 1812'.⁷² School textbooks have undergone a similar process. Their authors, in an attempt to present these events in a little different light than before, mentioned the great amount of support offered to Napoleon and his army by the residents of the area that used to belong to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The demographic and material devastation in Belarusian lands, resulting from the clashes between Russian and French troops, were also highlighted.⁷³ It is also worth noting that this reorientation in Belarusian politics of memory with regard to the war with Napoleon's Grande Armée, which is an issue of major importance in Russian historical memory, provoked a wave of severe criticism from both pro-Russian circles in Belarus and in Russia. The government was accused not only of "distorting the historical truth" but also of "disavowing the Russian-Belarusian brotherhood in arms" and undermining the ideological foundations of the Union State.⁷⁴ In response to these allegations, back in 2012, the Belarusian Ministry of Education and the NAS of Belarus presented an official interpretation that ruled out the notion of a patriotic war. At the same time, in order to avoid disputes, Belarusian academics refrained from using the concept of a 'civil war', which was controversial for Russians, and instead explained that in Belarus the conflicts with Napoleon were not ideological and should not be considered as patriotic.⁷⁵

Despite being criticised for years, the government in Minsk has not abandoned the narrative adopted in 2012, emphasising the huge scale of devastation in

⁷¹ In Belarusian historical narrative, this view has been expressed most emphatically by Anatol Taras, the author of numerous popular science books. See A. Тарас, *1812 год – трагедия Беларуси*, Минск 2018.

⁷² *Вялікі гістарычны атлас Беларусі, т. 3* (collective work), Минск 2016, pp. 37–42.

⁷³ С.В. Паноу, С.В. Марозава, У.А. Сосна, *Гісторыя Беларусі. Канец XVIII – пачатак XX ст. 8 клас*, Минск 2018, pp. 12–20, www.uchebniki.by. Although, as noted by the journalists of the *Nasha Niva* newspaper, the new edition of the textbook for eighth grades published in 2018 (only) reintroduced the phrase 'patriotic' in a subsection title, but the Belarusian interpretation, very distinct from Russian views, was retained. See 'В новых школьных учебниках война 1812 года вновь стала «Отечественной». По чьей инициативе?', *Наша Ніва*, 6 September 2018, www.nn.by.

⁷⁴ А. Полозов, 'Война но не Отечественная... Белоруссия по-своему отмечает юбилей отечественной войны 1812 года', *Столетие*, 17 September 2012, www.stoletie.ru; 'Отечественная война Белоруссии: без 1812 года. А 1941 и Брестская крепость?', *Рамблер*, 23 January 2017, www.rambler.ru.

⁷⁵ Ответ министерства образования Республики Беларусь на обращение участников конференции «Отечественные войны святой Руси», *Западная Русь*, 3 September 2012, www.zapadrus.su.

Belarusian territory rather than the ideological dimension of the joint struggle against Napoleon. One may even get the impression that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014 also made it take a firmer stance on this issue. This case can serve as an example of the attempts to make the Belarusian historical narrative distinct from the Russian one, resulting from Minsk's efforts to enhance its independence on the international arena. In his annual address on 24 April 2018, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, criticising the pro-war sentiments among a section of the Russian elite, rekindled the memory of the tragic events of 1812 and warned against the risk of unleashing a new war, deadly for a country located between the East and the West.⁷⁶ Thus, the theme of the Russian-French armed conflict began to be used by the government as a historical argument for the policy of de-escalating tension in the Eastern European region, and for the promotion of Belarus as a country striving for neutrality (as adopted after 2014).

Apart from the fragmentary, albeit meaningful, modification of the narrative about the events of 1812, Minsk, however, did not decide to question the historical tradition concerning the era when the territory of present-day Belarus was part of the Russian Empire. Sceptical opinions regarding the tsarist authorities' policy towards Belarusian people are still rare. Moreover, the predominant view among historians of the NAS of Belarus is that the incorporation of these lands into Tsarist Russia, as a result of the partitions of Poland in the second half of the 18th century, effectively stopped the increasing Polonisation of the local population and helped to revive the East Slavic cultural tradition under the auspices of Russia.⁷⁷ Professor Leonid Lych, from the Institute of History of the NAS of Belarus, is one of those few representatives from the circles of official Belarusian historians who explicitly criticise the Russification policy adopted by the tsarist administration in the 19th century. Lych is known for a number of publications and media statements, mainly concerning the history of Belarusian culture and language.⁷⁸ The government's stance concerning those events can be summed up as passive acceptance of the current state of affairs – both in terms of public awareness and the politics of memory. It seems that Minsk has concluded that presenting its own interpretation of this period would be of little use for strengthening the memory of Belarus' own statehood,

⁷⁶ 'Послание белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию', official website of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 24 April 2018, www.president.gov.by.

⁷⁷ А. Коваленя, В. Арчаков, В. Данилович, А. Баньковский, 'К вопросу...', *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁷⁸ An article by Lych presenting the negative effects of the Polonisation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the absolute Russification of Belarusians in the 19th century carried out by tsarist officials appeared in 2014 in the *Belaruskaya Dumka* magazine published by the presidential administration. His views, however, can hardly be considered representative of the entire NAS of Belarus. See Л. Лыч, 'Духоўны дыямент нацыі', *Беларуская Думка* 2014, no. 8, p. 52, www.beldumka.belta.by.

unlike with the Principality of Polotsk and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Denying the achievements of this era would also be a direct blow to the Russian language and culture, which still play an important role in the political and social life of contemporary Belarus.

The second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century are particularly problematic for the new Belarusian politics of memory. This is manifested through the rather cautious attitude towards the January Uprising and the figure of Konstanty Kalinowski. Interestingly, even in the Soviet period, his activity was viewed more positively than today. At that time, the social elements of his political agenda were exposed, including improving peasants' living standards. Thus, he was presented as someone who defended the lower social classes from tsarist oppression and landowners who supported the regime. Both Kalinowski and the Belarusian national revival at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries are treated by the present regime with kid gloves for a reason: had the official narrative been more approving of these issues, the state's historical ideology would have become overly close to the views expressed by a significant part of the regime's opponents, while these views form an important part of the opposition's value system. For this reason, Minsk also reacted guardedly to the archaeological discovery in Vilnius in 2017 of the remains of 21 participants of the January Uprising, including Kalinowski, and the subsequent invitation to a reburial ceremony organised by the Lithuanian government. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refrained from officially commenting on these events until March 2019. The ministry's spokesman laconically informed that the Belarusian side was interested in co-operation, describing Kalinowski casually as an "important historical activist".⁷⁹ Everything indicated that this reaction took place under pressure from the media, social activists and perhaps from the Lithuanian side, expecting Minsk to express its position. Ihar Marzaliuk was conspicuously less diplomatic about Kalinowski. In March 2019, in an interview with the first Belarusian television channel, he branded him as an ambiguous figure who, due to his radical views (including condemnation of the Orthodox Church), to this day creates ideological divides among Belarusians and therefore cannot be a national hero.⁸⁰ The public discussion between independent Belarusian historians and

⁷⁹ Ответ начальника управления информации и цифровой дипломатии МИД Беларуси А. Глаза на вопрос издания «Наша Нива», Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 29 March 2019, www.mfa.gov.by; А. Богуславская, 'Ненужный герой? Реакция Беларуси на обнаружение останков Кастуся Калиновского', Deutsche Welle, 3 April 2019, www.dw.com/ru.

⁸⁰ In the interview, Marzaliuk did not indicate Kalinowski directly, but he used his well-known statement concerning Orthodoxy. See Інтэрв'ю са старшынёй пастаяннай камісіі Палаты прадстаўнікоў Нацыянальнага сходу Беларусі, ВТ-1, 17 March 2019, www.tvr.by.

the Ministry of Education, seen in December 2018 in the *Nasha Niva* newspaper, also says a lot about the government's sceptical attitude towards Kalinowski. In a long and detailed statement, its representatives presented the official interpretation, according to which the uprising of 1863 was to a large extent an initiative of Polish circles, aimed at restoring a Republic of Poland in the same form as it had before the partitions. Therefore, in the ministry's opinion, Konstanty Kalinowski was, above all, an instrument and proponent of Polish interests, as defined by the insurgent government in Warsaw.⁸¹ In this context, the reluctance to commemorate him more widely in Belarusian politics of memory should be explained not only by the fear of boosting the stature of a figure idolised by some opposition circles, but also by the overly 'Polish' or 'pro-Polish' (in regime terms) nature of his political activity.⁸²

Finally, despite the reservations described above, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus, Ihar Petryshenka (Poland and Lithuania were represented by their respective presidents), took part in the reburial ceremonies of the uprising leaders, organised with great pomp by Lithuania in Vilnius on 22 November 2019. Unlike Lithuania and Poland, Belarus did not delegate its guard of honour to assist during the ceremony, and the participation of Minsk's official representatives was limited only to attending the mass in Vilnius Cathedral. In a short speech delivered in his native language, the deputy head of the Belarusian government omitted the topic of the insurgents' struggle with Russia, but noted that Kalinowski had played an important role in the history of Belarus and had been a great patriot. Finally, with probable reference to the nationalist-oriented opposition, he clearly warned against using the heroes of the uprising in the current political games.⁸³ The uprising is an important component of Belarusian historical memory. Minsk's stance on it was a manifestation of the strategy of cautiously pursuing a compromise between the Russian narrative and the need to strengthen the national identity

⁸¹ The discussion was initiated by an article in *Nasha Niva* criticising the new edition of the Russian literature textbook for the eighth grades, in which the uprising of 1863–1864 was called Polish. In its response to these accusations, the Ministry not only pointed to the Polish nature of the uprising, but also compared the *Muzhytskaya Prawdа* magazine published by insurgents in Belarus to... Belsat TV broadcasting from Poland. See 'Минобразования сравнило «Белсат» с «Мужицкой правдой» Калиновского', Бeлсaт TV, 17 December 2018, www.belsat.eu/ru.

⁸² In the historiography of the Byelorussian SSR Kalinowski's activity was exposed in the context of the revolutionary struggle of the people of the Russian Empire against the tsarist autocracy. The topic of the struggle for independence of Belarusians or the restoration of pre-partition Poland was ignored or marginalised.

⁸³ А. Класковский, 'Наш Калиновский. Почему белорусским властям так трудно переосмыслить историю?', Naviny.by, 22 November 2019, www.naviny.by; 'Вице-премьер Петришенко на похоронах в Вильнюсе: Имя Калиновского навсегда вписано в историю Беларуси', Наша Нива, 22 November 2019, www.nn.by.

of Belarusians that has recently been noticed by the Belarusian government. Its lack of interest in Kalinowski's funeral ceremony contrasted markedly with the massive participation of ordinary Belarusians, who predominated among the participants of the ceremony.

It is worth noting that in the latest edition of the Belarusian history textbooks for eight grade students, both the January Uprising and the Kalinowski Uprising are presented in a more balanced way, showing the complex nature of national relations and the motivations of the individuals engaged in those events in the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁸⁴ The nationalist-oriented opposition circles generally share a positive opinion about the insurgency itself and its leaders. In turn, supporters of the 'Russian world' usually disapprove of any attempts to present the complicated situation in the second half of the 19th century. The official Belarusian historical narrative tends to address these differences in a moderate way. Such guarded scepticism proves that this period occupies a low priority in the government's politics of memory, which has been evolving for several years.

The narrative of selected museum displays

The message on display in Belarusian historical museums is highly varied and reflects the contradictory official historical narrative. On the one hand, the Soviet (or post-Soviet) canon of presenting the past of Belarus through the prism of the October Revolution and socio-economic transformations in the USSR remains widespread, with the Great Patriotic War being placed at the very centre of this perspective. A large number of museums are laid out in this way, including the numerous local museums in the provinces presenting the history of a given town and the area around it.

The Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, which was re-opened in July 2014 (after moving to a new building), is a typical example, while also being the most monumental illustration of an exhibition created in the spirit of the Soviet era. Despite the use of modern multimedia techniques and dioramas, the narrative of this institution has maintained the classic style developed back in the Soviet era. The praiseworthy episodes of the Red Army's battles with Nazi troops

⁸⁴ С.В. Паню, С.В. Марозава, У.А. Сосна, *Гісторыя Беларусі...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–65.

and the heroism of the Belarusian population towards the German occupier are in the foreground. Plentiful space is also devoted to war crimes. However, difficult topics are not discussed, including collaboration with the invader or negative aspects of activities carried out by the Belarusian guerrilla movement, which is invariably one of the key themes in Minsk's narrative about the nation's participation in the war. Moreover, the museum is universal in nature and contains almost no national elements that would emphasise the specific role of Belarusians in this armed conflict. An identical narrative could be successfully presented in any Russian city. Another meaningful fact is that the flag of the USSR is permanently hoisted on the huge museum building in Minsk.

A similar vein is apparent in the exhibition presented in another important museum commemorating the Great Patriotic War, i.e. the Brest Fortress, which is a symbol (highly mythologized) of the heroic Red Army defence during the Nazi offensive launched on 20 June 1941. A reconstructed section of the fortification system, built in the 1930s along the then western border of the USSR (informally known as the Stalin line), is an interesting way of commemorating this period. The museum complex near Minsk was opened in 2005. It presents the Soviet Army's potential and achievements in a positive light. At the same time, numerous outdoor events also take place here, including reconstructions of battles from that period. Another place that is worth noting is the memorial complex in Dzerzhinovo (formerly Oziembłowo), managed by the Ministry of Culture, dedicated to the commemoration of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the creator of the Soviet security apparatus who was born there. The complex was thoroughly renovated at the beginning of the 21st century, to be opened in 2004 by President Lukashenka himself.

The component devoted to the period of the Second Polish Republic, when the western part of present-day Belarus was part of the Polish state, is also strongly embedded in the Belarusian politics of memory, and this is derivative of Soviet traditions. The time of Polish rule is referred to as 'occupation' and 'terror' in the exhibitions of some museums. Furthermore, the isolation camp, which was established in Bereza Kartuska in 1934 (now part of the Local Historical Museum in the same location), has been called a concentration camp. However, the Polish presence in Belarus in earlier times, including the multi-ethnic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, is not evaluated in such negative terms.

Over the past decade or so, the segment devoted to earlier periods of Belarusian history has been developing particularly intensively in Belarusian museums. The most important role in this non-Soviet trend is played by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, presented in the context of the tradition of Belarusian statehood not subject to Russian influence. A special place in this narrative is occupied by the restored castles in Nesvizh and Mir, which now house richly equipped museums presenting the splendour of the GDL, including its aristocratic families (primarily the Radziwiłł), who are presented as representatives of the Belarusian magnates.

It is worth noting that the recent increase in significance attached to the Principality of Polotsk in the new version of Belarus' politics of memory has not yet been mirrored by sufficient prominence being given to it in museum displays (including in Polotsk itself), in comparison to that concerning the GDL. This is probably due to the lack of a sufficient number of exhibits, and the ongoing discussion among the pro-governmental historians about how to present the origins of Belarusian statehood.

Museums that are partly or entirely devoted to representatives of the Russian aristocracy linked to the history of Belarus are a separate phenomenon. Examples include the Alexander Suvorov Museum in Kobrin and the exhibition at the Rumyantsev-Paskevich Residence in Gomel. Both of these residences were built on land granted to these generals by the Russian tsars for military merits, including effective suppression of the Kościuszko (Suvorov) and November (Paskevich) uprisings. Strikingly, the presentations of both of these historical figures completely disregard the negative aspects of the actions taken under their command against the insurgents, and in the case of Suvorov, the authors of the description in the audio guide went so far as to openly disavow the rumours about the slaughter in Warsaw's Praga District in 1794. A much more balanced approach is presented by the Volkovysk War and Historical Museum named after Pyotr Bagration, the commander of the Russian troops stationed in western Belarus at the beginning of the war against Napoleon in 1812. The authors of the exhibition consistently avoid the term 'Patriotic War' and place the emphasis on the victims among the Belarusian population and the material losses suffered. The museum's narrative reflects the official position of Belarusian historiography, different in this respect from the Russian point of view.

4. A conditional acceptance: the Belarusian People's Republic

The Belarusian People's Republic has a special place in the Belarusian government's present politics of memory. The opposition utilises this attempt to create an independent state in 1918 even more than the figure of Konstanty Kalinowski. Both the symbolism associated with it (i.e. the white-red-white flag that is not recognised by the government) and the anniversary of its creation, which is always celebrated, have been the ideological foundation of most independent circles, including political opposition, since the 1990s. Therefore, from the regime's perspective, the significance of this initiative should be disavowed in the official historical narrative. Meanwhile, the narrative concerning the BNR, which used to be very critical, has changed since 2014. This was triggered by the need to strengthen the propaganda message pointing to Belarusian statehood traditions, unrelated to Russian domination in response to Russia's aggressive policy in the region.

A clear change was evident in 2018 during the celebrations marking the centenary of proclaiming the BNR. The theory (coined in the Soviet era) that the BNR was a pro-Western attempt, inspired by the Nazi occupation authorities in Belarusian territory, to defy the will of the Belarusian people who allegedly wanted these lands to become part of Bolshevik Russia was shelved at that time, both at the level of academic discourse and in the sphere of official statements by government representatives. In March 2018, during a conference devoted to the anniversary of founding the BNR at the NAS of Belarus, the historian and parliamentarian Ihar Marzaliuk delivered a program speech in which he recognised the BNR as one of the stages in the formation of the modern Belarusian state, the ultimate form of which is the independent Republic of Belarus. According to him, the key argument supporting this thesis was the transfer of power to the representatives of the Byelorussian SSR, existing within the Soviet Union, which took place in 1925. In his opinion, this not only testifies to the high significance of the BNR in national history, but also disproves the frequently repeated accusations that activists associated with it allegedly collaborated with the Nazi occupier during World War II.⁸⁵ Given the privileged position of Marzaliuk, who is considered to be one of the creators of the new Belarusian politics of memory, his statements may be treated as a meaningful sign of upcoming changes in the regime's historical narrative. This revision of the views suggested during the conference was confirmed a few days later by

⁸⁵ А. Гарбацэвіч, 'Марзальюк резка адказаў тым, хто спрабуе праводзіць паралелі паміж БНР і нацыстамі', Наша Ніва, 15 March 2018, www.nn.by.

Lukashenka. Though the president did not glorify the founders of the BNR, this was the first time he publicly distanced himself from the radical criticism of the republic that had hitherto predominated in the official narrative. He also emphasised the need to conduct in-depth research into the complicated situation existing in the period just before the end of World War I, the time when attempts were made to build an independent Belarusian state.⁸⁶

The change in rhetoric was accompanied by the liberalisation of the government's policy of commemorating the BNR. After six years of efforts, Belarusian social activists and historians obtained permission to put up a commemorative plaque in a central Minsk park devoted to Anton and Ivan Lutskevich, who were among the main founders of the republic. The monument was unveiled on 13 March 2018, but no government representatives participated in the ceremony.⁸⁷ At the same time, the initial consent to place a commemorative plaque on the building in the centre of the Belarusian capital where the BNR had been proclaimed was withdrawn just one day before the ceremony. The most important indication of the new approach, however, was the unprecedented consent to celebrate the anniversary of the BNR's proclamation on a much larger scale than in previous years. Thanks to the government's approval, a concert devoted to this event was held for the first time in Minsk, with an audience of around 30,000 people. Legal celebrations of the BNR centenary also took place in other cities, including Hrodna, Baranavichy, Slutsk, Gomel and Brest. During these events, participants could publicly display the white-red-white symbols that are normally forbidden. However, this softening of the government's stance on the anniversary of the establishment of the BNR, which was important to the opposition, had its limits. Despite the demands made by independent circles for years, 25 March did not become a public holiday, and no government representative took part in the celebrations held on that day. Many people attending the concert in Minsk and carrying illegal symbols had their identities checked and were detained after leaving the fenced event site. On the other hand, repressive measures typical of an authoritarian regime were applied against the supporters of the illegal march organised by the radical opposition in the city centre, including preventive detentions. In this way, they wanted to clearly show that the opposition's activity was possible

⁸⁶ It is worth realising that even such a toned down statement was something unprecedented for President Lukashenka, whose mindset is Sovietised to such an extent. See 'Лукашенко: Историю о создании БНР знать надо, но гордиться теми событиями не стоит', Tut.by, 20 March 2018, www.news.tut.by.

⁸⁷ С. Шаршуков, '«Новы час на Беларусі настаў». В центре Минска открыли памятный знак основателям БНР Луцкевичам', Tut.by, 13 March 2018, www.news.tut.by.

only within the bounds set by the government. Therefore, it may be said that an attempt to introduce a constrained form of patriotism was made as regards commemorating the BNR.⁸⁸

The celebration of the 101st anniversary of the republic's proclamation, held one year later, clearly showed that Minsk had not only decided against developing the policy of commemorating this event, but had even chosen to once again restrict the freedom of independent circles seeking to increase public awareness of the establishment and activities of the BNR. Given the lack of government approval as well as the failure to coordinate actions by the individual organising committees, the two largest legal concerts in Hrodna and Minsk were attended by an audience of just a few thousand in March 2019. It is also worth noting that on the 101st anniversary of the BNR's proclamation, President Lukashenka visited agricultural companies in the Mogilev Oblast, which some commentators saw as a deliberate demonstration of indifference to this part of the Belarusian historical tradition.⁸⁹ In addition, the government also ignored the bill on the legal protection of the white-red-white flag, submitted in May 2018 by opposition circles, including a proposal to grant it a legal status equal to that of the current national flag.⁹⁰ The bill, contrary to the intentions of those who submitted it (including the then independent MP Hanna Kanapatskaya), was never discussed in parliament.

There are many signs implying that Lukashenka ultimately concluded that the conditional liberalisation of the memory of the BNR in spring 2018 was too risky an experiment, especially from the point of view of the authoritarian regime's stability. Despite the growing fears relating to the Kremlin's revisionist policy in the post-Soviet area, the president is equally or even more concerned about the growing potential of independent circles, which he believes is excessive, particularly that of the nationalist-oriented opposition. In this way he became, in a sense, a hostage of his own rhetoric. This rhetoric has been based for years on negating the national idea, understood by him

⁸⁸ K. Kłysiński, 'The celebration of the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic', OSW, 28 March 2018, www.osw.waw.pl. This limited liberalisation was aptly summarised in an interview with the Belarusian radio station Euroradio by the Belarusian MP, Valery Varanetsky. He stated, *inter alia*, that the government had granted the consent to hold the concert in the centre of Minsk, not as a result of the opposition's pressure but only due to the need to shape its own national history at the state policy level. See 3. Лукашук, 'Дэпутат: Уладам патрэбны Дзень Волі. Ні адмены, ні чорных спісаў не будзе', Euroradio, 6 March 2018, www.euroradio.fm.

⁸⁹ А. Класковский, 'День Воли остается для Лукашенко чужим', Naviny.by, 25 March 2019, www.naviny.by.

⁹⁰ Е. Тонкачева, 'Депутат Канопатская, БХД и активисты разработали проект закона об использовании и охране БЧБ-флага', Tut.by, 11 May 2018, www.news.tut.by.

as an oppositional and anti-system idea. Thus he was directly drawing upon the tradition of the Soviet historical narrative. At present, the government's stance on the republic is closer to the indifference displayed towards Konstanty Kalinowski than to the active promotion of the Principality of Polotsk as a cradle of Belarusian statehood. The weakness of this new, inconsistently implemented narrative is also evidenced by the content of the school textbooks for grade ten (published in 2012) which are still in use. The BNR is presented in a rather disrespectful tone as a 'bourgeois' project, whose founding fathers "mistakenly sought support" from the German Emperor Wilhelm II.⁹¹ Their authors, following the old interpretation, see the sources of modern Belarusian statehood only in the BSSR established in 1919. At the same time, even though the government is definitely unconvinced about the need to commemorate the BNR to the extent expected by the opposition, the government's narrative is unlikely to return to the radical negation of this period, as it was in the official discourse a few years earlier.

5. The neo-Soviet narrative: Belarusian territories in the Second Polish Republic

The topic of the Second Polish Republic's reign over part of the territory of the Republic of Belarus is rarely mentioned in Minsk's historical narrative, but it is discussed in detail in school textbooks and periodically appears in the media. The Polish government's policy in this region is always criticised, while its positive aspects are disregarded. Almost all of the narratives on this subject are presented similarly – or even identically – to Soviet and Russian historiography.

The Polish-Soviet War of 1919–1920 is perceived as a Polish armed intervention aimed at seizing all Belarusian territory. The Treaty of Riga is treated as an agreement that prevented the unification of the entire population within the Byelorussian SSR, viewed as a Belarusian state within the Soviet Union – it allegedly led to the unlawful seizure of west Belarusian lands. Just as in modern official Russian historiography, which created a kind of anti-Katyń narrative, it is written that "dozens of thousands of Soviet soldiers and officers were captured and destroyed by the Polish authorities through monstrous abuse, hunger and cold".⁹²

⁹¹ Я.К. Новік, *Гісторыя Беларусі. 1917–1945* 22. 10 клас, Мінск 2012, pp. 24–25.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 39; Н.С. Шарова, *История Беларуси: опорные конспекты для подготовки к централизованному тестированию*, Мінск 2016, p. 225.

The Polish interwar rule in the Belarusian territories is branded as ‘occupation’, ‘national oppression’ and ‘economic, political and spiritual exploitation’. Poland is presented as a state that persecuted national minorities on a mass scale and strived for their denationalisation. Allegedly, its inept economic policy resulted in increasing backwardness of the eastern provinces, which contrasted with the policy of industrialisation and the development of culture and education in the Byelorussian SSR.⁹³ In official historiography, Polish rule is presented as a ‘colonial regime’, which treated the Belarusian population as ‘a source of cheap slave labour’. Much has been written about Polish settlements, depriving Belarusians of land and allegedly forcing them to emigrate. At the same time, the Catholic Church is presented as an instrument of the Second Polish Republic, which, “following the Vatican’s orders”, persecuted the Orthodox Church and strived to deprive Belarusian people of their traditional religion. The Communist Party of Western Belarus is presented as a symbol of heroic resistance against the Polish government.⁹⁴ At the same time, the textbooks’ authors admit that the party leaders were murdered in 1938 on the Soviet leadership’s orders under the alleged pretext that they were ‘Polish intelligence agents’, and that they were not rehabilitated until 1956.

In the vision of the textbooks’ authors, interwar Poland is presented as a country that persecuted Belarusians on a mass scale, ruling through terror, interning political opponents in the ‘Bereza Kartuska concentration camp’ and combating the Belarusian national movement.⁹⁵ While in Polish historiography the Second Polish Republic’s policy towards national minorities is assessed negatively, the picture emerging from the Belarusian historical narrative looks grossly exaggerated – almost all negative Soviet stereotypes have been preserved, and Poland is sometimes caricatured. This contrasts with the marginalisation of mass communist crimes committed in Belarus in the 1920s and 1930s, including the murder of most of the local activists or brutal collectivisation, in textbooks and in the official Belarusian interpretation of history. In this interpretation, contrary to historical authenticity, the Second Polish Republic’s policy is presented as much more repressive than the actions taken by the Soviet authorities during the same period.

The predominance of the official narrative in the interpretation concerning the Polish government’s policy towards the Belarusian minority in the interwar

⁹³ In fact, the living standards in the Belarusian territories that belonged to interwar Poland, though their residents were among the poorest in the country, were higher than in the Byelorussian SSR.

⁹⁴ Н.С. Шарова, *История Беларуси...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 248–249.

⁹⁵ Я.К. Новік, *Гісторыя Беларусі...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–36.

period has made many Belarusians distrustful and suspicious about the Polish government's policy today. This is particularly evident in the statements of Lukashenka, raised in Eastern Belarus and shaped by the ideological Soviet message. In his speeches, the president regularly points to Warsaw's alleged territorial claims against Belarusian territory. In 2011, he stated directly that Poland would try to annexe part of Western Belarus, and in 2014 he stated that "some countries" were making territorial claims against Minsk.⁹⁶ He also asked in 2019: "Why can you still see maps in Poland where the Polish border is demarcated near Minsk?"⁹⁷

The narrative about the causes of the outbreak of World War II is in fact a repetition, albeit in a less aggressive form, of the Russian message. It is emphasised that pre-war Poland was the first country in Europe to sign an alliance agreement with Nazi Germany. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact is presented as a tactical decision that needed to be made, and was therefore justified, as it was intended to give the Soviet Union time to prepare for the inevitable war. What is worth noting in school textbooks, however, is the fact that the secret German-Soviet protocol is mentioned in them as a document dividing the spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe – this is one of the few differences as compared to Soviet history teaching materials.

17 September is an important date in the calendar of Belarusian anniversaries, as proven, for example, by street names in many cities. However, it is not celebrated solemnly at the state level, and most often it is even ignored and kept silent by government representatives.⁹⁸ It is worth noting that this date – referred to in historiography and official journalism as the day of the unification of Belarus – is not (and everything indicates that it will not be) a public holiday, which is another indication of the government's striving to keep the official historical narrative non-confrontational (in this case with regard to Poland). In line with this logic, on 17 September 2019, Minsk ignored the round anniversary, while 10 years earlier, President Lukashenka sent special wishes to Belarusians. His speech included the following words: "the liberating march of the Red Army, the aim of which was to defend the Belarusian and Ukrainian people left to fend for themselves on Polish territory during

⁹⁶ 'Лукашенко напомнил КГБ о претензиях «отдельных государств» на территорию Белоруссии', Regnum, 13 November 2014, www.regnum.ru.

⁹⁷ 'Лукашенко про «Белсат»: Что у нас там есть, какой-то «Белсат»? Польша транслирует какие-то каналы?', Белсат TV, 1 March 2019, www.belsat.eu/ru.

⁹⁸ In 2019, this provoked criticism from the Russian-Belarusian propaganda portal EurAsia Daily. See 'Почему в современной Белоруссии не отмечают дату её создания?', EurAsia Daily, 24 September 2019, www.eadaily.com.

the Nazi invasion (...) Regardless of the different opinions and assessments of these events, it is indisputable that the artificially separated Belarusian nation was united as a result of the military operation, which was an act of historical justice”.⁹⁹ In the above-mentioned article (published in *Belaruskaya Dumka*) providing the official interpretation of the goals of politics of memory, “treating the unification of Western Belarus with the BSSR in 1939 not as historical justice but as a kind of event that was unlawful from the point of view of international law and thus providing grounds for Poland’s potential claims against the western territories of the Republic of Belarus” was considered to be an example of “falsifying history”.¹⁰⁰

Very similar assessments of the situation that took place on 17 September 1939 are presented by the governmental media and official historiography, which emphasise that “the purpose [of the attack] was to take care of the people of Western Belarus”. The Soviet aggression is branded as ‘liberation’, a ‘liberation march’ or simply ‘crossing the border’.¹⁰¹ The pseudo-elections held in the annexed territories of the Second Polish Republic (so-called Western Belarus) on 22 October 1939 are defined as a democratic “expression of Belarusians’ will”. The mass deportations of people from these areas, including Belarusians, to Siberia in 1940–1941 are not mentioned at all. Similarly, the topic of Soviet repression and crimes committed in this period is non-existent (the Katyń massacre is not mentioned either). A completely different narrative is presented by independent historians who, however, do not have a significant impact upon public opinion.

Summing up, it can be stated that only certain details differ in the assessments of Polish rule in the interwar period presented in independent Belarus and those that prevailed before 1991, where the pejorative image of Polish politics was predominant. Although no public opinion polls that could reveal the attitudes of the Belarusian public towards the Second Polish Republic are available, the analysis of texts published in the media (governmental and independent) amongst other materials creates the impression that unfavourable perceptions prevail.¹⁰² The message presented for many years in school textbooks

⁹⁹ ‘Лукашенко поздравил сограждан с годовщиной воссоединения Западной Белоруссии с БССР’, Naviny.by, 17 September 2009, www.naviny.by.

¹⁰⁰ А. Коваленя, В. Арчаков, В. Данилович, А. Баньковский, ‘К вопросу...’, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ ‘100 лет БССР: воссоединение Западной Беларуси с БССР’, Белта, 19 November 2018, www.belta.by; Н. Часовитина, ‘17 сентября исполняется 80 лет с начала воссоединения Западной Белоруссии с БССР’, СБ. Беларусь Сегодня, 17 September 2019, www.sb.by.

¹⁰² In 2009, Andrei Vashkevich wrote in *Arche* that “probably one in ten [residents] in Belarus can answer the question about what happened on 17 September 1939”. However, this has not been

has formed a positive vision of 17 September, which is commonly known as the day of ‘unification of Belarus’.

From Lenin to Kościuszko – the government’s commemoration policy

Monuments in Belarus perfectly reflect not only the complicated fate of the country, but also the peculiarities of its current politics of memory. Minsk chose not to decommunise the symbols and memorials associated with the Soviet period. Both in the general public perception and in the government’s rhetoric, respect for the achievements of that era and the memory of the tragic consequences of World War II have been upheld. There are numerous monuments dedicated to the Soviet guerrillas and Red Army soldiers. In addition, statues of Lenin stand in prominent places in many locations across the country – there are currently about 400 of them. The Felix Dzerzhinsky monument, located in the very center of Minsk (opposite the headquarters of the KGB of the Republic of Belarus), is a special expression of respect for the most controversial Soviet traditions. There are many statues of Dzerzhinsky across the country, including one in Hrodna – the ceremony of its unveiling after restoration took place in 2018.

Along with the numerous memorials related to the Soviet heritage, many commemorations of earlier periods of Belarusian history have appeared, mainly of the historical figures linked to the Principality of Polotsk and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Examples of these include the monuments of St. Euphrosyne of Polotsk, Prince Vseslav Bryachislavich (Vseslav the Sorcerer), Symeon Polotsky (Polotsk), Francysk Skaryna (Minsk and Polotsk), a monument commemorating the 1000th anniversary of Brest displaying the figures of Grand Duke Vytautas and Mikołaj ‘the Black’ Radziwiłł, amongst others, as well as the monuments of two Grand Dukes of Lithuania – Vytautas (Hrodna) and Algirdas (Vitebsk). In addition, a statue of David of Grodno was erected in 2018 in Hrodna. He was a commander of the GDL troops from the late 13th/early 14th centuries, famous for winning battles against the Teutonic Order. Other important events included the unveiling in 2019, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Hrodna Oblast, of the equestrian statue of Grand Duke Gediminas in Lida and the monument of the Hetman and Chancellor of the GDL Lew Sapieha in Slonim.

confirmed by any research, and this proportion seems to be highly underrated. А. Вашкевіч, ‘Прадмова’, *Arche* 2009, no. 8, p. 8.

There were also several commemorations expressing pro-Russian sympathies of part of the public and local administration, e.g. monuments to the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Alexei II and Alexander Nevsky (both in Vitebsk). An interesting example of pro-Russian sentiments at the central level is the statue of a tsarist constable (Russian: *зоподохоў*), unveiled in 2017 in front of the building of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Minsk, sparking great controversy among independent circles. The then interior minister Ihar Shunevich, for whom the monument was a symbol of the tradition of the Belarusian police, was involved in its design. It is worth mentioning that the monuments devoted to the Patriotic War of 1812 (e.g. in Polotsk and Vitebsk), erected back in the tsarist era, have also been preserved.

As a result, statues carrying very different ideological messages coexist in many cities. Svislach, a town in Hrodna Oblast, where there the busts of both Joseph Stalin and Konstanty Kalinowski (who graduated from a local secondary school) can be found, is an example of tolerance for this 'monumental eclecticism'. There are also situations where there is a fundamental contradiction in the message – e.g. between the monument of General Alexander Suvorov, who pacified the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794, erected in the USSR in Kobryn, and the statue of the leader of this uprising, Thaddeus Kościuszko, which was erected in May 2018 in Merachoushchyna, located in the same district. Such paradoxes result from the principle of avoiding radical rejection of some heritage (e.g. the Soviet era) that might be controversial for various circles, while striving to build a deeper historical memory of Belarusian statehood dating back to the early Middle Ages, adopted by the government.

6. Respect with some reservations: Belarus in the Soviet Union

The modification of the historical narrative affected the epoch when Belarus was part of the USSR to the smallest extent. This is mainly because this period is considered important by the Belarusian public. Respect for the achievements of those times (primarily industrialisation, urbanisation, the elimination of social barriers, universal access to education) is deeply rooted, not only in the minds of ordinary citizens but also among the elite, including Lukashenka, who proudly shows off his 'Sovietness'. The cautious attitude towards any attempts to revise the narrative concerning the USSR is further reinforced by the strongly cultivated memory of the Great Patriotic War and its painful

consequences for Belarusians.¹⁰³ This is accompanied by an extensive and largely mythologised story about the guerrilla movement operating in the territory of what today is Belarus. Any open questioning of this era would be incomprehensible to many citizens, and even controversial to a significant part of them, as this would undermine a major part of the ideological foundations of independent Belarus.¹⁰⁴ For this reason, the positive narrative of the Principality of Polotsk or the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that has emerged in recent years only introduces new elements of politics of memory, without diminishing the Soviet component.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, cultivating the memory of the USSR increasingly resembles a meaningless ritual. One clear example of this is October Revolution Day, which is celebrated on 7 November and remains a public holiday in Belarus (unlike in no other post-Soviet republic; Russia discontinued celebrating this anniversary in 2005). The celebrations of this holiday have long lost their mass character and are limited only to the ceremony of laying flowers at the Lenin monuments in some cities by a small group of members of both communist parties operating in the country, representatives of official trade unions and supporters of the Soviet ideology. Characteristically, neither the president nor any senior government official take part in such celebrations.¹⁰⁶ Lukashenka has admitted in public that, even though the holiday has been preserved according to longstanding tradition, there are no grounds for celebrating this anniversary in the new era, which differs from the Soviet reality.¹⁰⁷ While evaluating the revolution's significance for Belarus, in 2019 the president presented the view that it was precisely this revolution that made it possible for the first time to build statehood structures that created the conditions

¹⁰³ According to official Belarusian estimates, between 2.5 and 3 million residents of the Byelorussian SSR (nearly one third of the population at that time) died during the military operations and Nazi repression. Most of the industrial and municipal infrastructure was also destroyed (in Minsk, Gomel and Vitebsk, the level of destruction reached 90%). See 'Последствия Великой Отечественной войны для Беларуси', Архивы Беларуси, www.archives.gov.by.

¹⁰⁴ Since the government has adopted a tougher policy towards independent public opinion research centres over the past few years, it is difficult to use polls showing the attitude of Belarusians towards the Soviet era. During a survey conducted in 2018 by Andrei Vardamatsky's independent sociological studio, the Belarusian Analytical Workroom (BAW), concerning the possible de-Sovietisation of street, city and village names, over 44% of respondents wanted to keep the existing names. '44% Белорусов - против переименования советских названий', thinktanks.by, 22 November 2018, www.thinktanks.by.

¹⁰⁵ P. Rudkouski, 'Soft Belarusianisation. The ideology of Belarus in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict', *OSW Commentary*, no. 253, 3 November 2017, www.osw.waw.pl.

¹⁰⁶ С. Королевич, 'Назад - в СССР. коммунисты отмечают День Октябрьской революции', Naviny.by, 7 November 2018, www.naviny.by.

¹⁰⁷ А. Класковский, 'Красные даты. Почему Лукашенко держится за советский календарь', Naviny.by, 7 November 2018, www.naviny.by.

for self-determination of Belarusians and the development of their own culture.¹⁰⁸ This statement may be construed as an attempt to give a deeper meaning to the local celebration of the October anniversary. At the same time, proposals made by independent circles to link them with the commemoration of the victims of communism (including, in particular, the Stalinist period) or to move the public holiday from 7 November to the *Dzyady* (Day of the Dead, in the Belarusian tradition) celebrated five days earlier, have not been supported by the authorities. In this way, what used to be one of the key public holidays in Soviet times has been maintained only due to an enduring tradition, which is also personally cherished by a president who was brought up in the Soviet era.

The entrenchment of the old patterns in the narrative about the Soviet period in Belarusian historiography is accompanied by a gradual dissociation from some elements of the Russian historical narrative. Given the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, this narrative has acquired a dangerous imperial tone for Minsk, glorifying Russian military and cultural strength in the post-Soviet area. Lukashenka is particularly concerned about the manner of the Victory Day celebration observed in Russia in recent years. This is an important holiday for both countries, and is celebrated on 9 May according to the Soviet tradition. The Ribbon of Saint George (Russian: *георгиевская ленточка*), introduced in 2005 and popularised among the Russian public since 2014, has become the local symbol of victory over Nazi Germany, and is now a symbol associated with the annexation of Crimea, and therefore has been subject to informal restrictions in Belarus. In search of an alternative, in 2015 the government in Minsk introduced its own symbols for Victory Day celebrations – a green-and-red pocket square referring to the colours of the national flag, prepared as part of the patriotic project ‘Colours of the Great Victory’.¹⁰⁹

Given the inconvenient political context of the ‘Russian world’ ideology, the government has been making efforts to impede holding the massive civil event known as the ‘Immortal Regiment’, which is popular in Russia and has been openly supported by the Kremlin since 2015, aimed at solemnly commemorating (on 9 May) Red Army soldiers who fought in the Great Patriotic War. As with the Ribbon of Saint George, the event has not been officially banned, and the ‘Immortal Regiment’ march is observed every year on this day in some

¹⁰⁸ ‘Лукашенко назвал Октябрь 1917-го фундаментом создания первого белорусского государства’, Naviny.by, 6 November 2019, www.naviny.by.

¹⁰⁹ Е. Данейко, ‘9 мая в Беларуси: яблоневый цвет вместо георгиевских лент?’, Deutsche Welle, 7 May 2015, www.dw.com/ru.

cities (including the capital). The Belarusian organisers of this march, however, face numerous formal obstacles and are encouraged to join a similar initiative, initiated in 2016 and endorsed by the state under the name 'Belarus Remembers'.¹¹⁰

In both cases the government did not directly question the symbols promoted by Russia for ideological reasons, but instead proposed its own projects free of imperial context, while also showing due respect for the account of the Great Patriotic War.¹¹¹ The fact that the Belarusian president has traditionally attended the holiday celebrations in Minsk for years, although it is celebrated at the same time in Moscow, is a meaningful manifestation of the distinctness of the Belarusian policy concerning this holiday.¹¹² It is also worth noting that over recent years, there has been a visible increase in the significance of Belarusian Independence Day, celebrated on 3 July on the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk by Red Army troops in 1944. A massive parade is staged on this day, in which troops from other countries, including Russia and China, participate.¹¹³ Thus, the Independence Day celebrations are clearly becoming the most important event commemorating the participation of Belarusians in World War II, which seems to be deliberate policy on the part of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who is striving to develop his own narrative in this ideologically important sphere that will fortify Belarusian sovereignty.

The recurring crises in Russian-Belarusian relations caused primarily by the Kremlin's desire to increase its control over Belarus, are accelerating the process by which Minsk is developing its own point of view concerning its role in the history of the USSR. The tension over the tough negotiations on further integration as part of the Union State, which has been growing since 2018, has prompted the authorities to place ever more emphasis on the population and material losses sustained as a result of hostilities during the Great Patriotic War. In November 2019, Belarusian state media presented the conflict for the

¹¹⁰ On 1 March 2019, during the annual TV conference 'Conversation with the President', Lukashenka questioned the sense of holding an additional march in Belarus in honour of the Red Army heroes and appealed for support of the event held under the auspices of the Belarusian government. See 'Лукашенко об акции «Бессмертный Полк»: Я категорически против', Tut.by, 1 March 2019, www.news.tut.by.

¹¹¹ Minsk behaved more moderately with regard to this issue in comparison to the Patriotic War of 1812, as in the latter case the name, which is symbolic for Russians, is no longer used.

¹¹² Lukashenka made an exception and appeared in Red Square on 9 May 2005, during the celebrations of the 60th Victory Day anniversary. Normally, he is not present during the 9 May celebrations in Moscow, using his obligations as head of state and commander of the armed forces of the Republic of Belarus as an excuse.

¹¹³ See 'В Минске прошел военный парад в честь Дня Независимости', ВТ-1, 4 July 2019, www.tvr.by.

first time as an ‘unnecessary’ catastrophe, which Belarusians did not pursue but were drawn into by the course of events.¹¹⁴ Thus, the first signs appeared of an unprecedented degree of distancing from what had hitherto been an almost sacredly respected war, to some extent reminiscent of the reservations about the Russian narrative concerning the ‘patriotic war’ with Napoleon.

An important factor consolidating the Belarusian politics of memory with regard to the Soviet era is the fact that the traditions of most state authorities are very strongly linked with the beginnings of the USSR. The events witnessed during the first years after the revolution of 1917 continue to serve as a kind of founding myth for the power apparatus. This dependence was emphasised by the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Belarusian police, internal troops, security organs, and the Soviet youth organization, i.e. Komsomol, celebrated in 2017–2019.¹¹⁵ These celebrations had a very solemn setting, reflected in the media, and the organisers clearly referred to the most classic traditions of the USSR, forgotten in many post-Soviet countries. Ihar Shunevich, who served as the Minister of Internal Affairs in 2012–2019, chose a special form of expressing respect to the achievements of the security services: he wore a uniform of an NKVD officer, made according to the pattern from the 1940s, several times during the 9 May ceremonies.¹¹⁶ The most surprising event, however, was the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian diplomatic service, organised on a grand scale. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was believed to be the chief architect of dialogue with the West for several years, unambiguously invoked the roots of the USSR, indicating that Belarusian diplomacy had come into existence on 22 January 1919, when the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of the BSSR was established.¹¹⁷

The positive image of the Soviet era is deeply rooted among the ruling elite, and thus the regime maintains a conservative attitude towards the memory of the crimes of Stalinism. As in the previous stages of shaping Belarusian politics

¹¹⁴ This was Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s polemic with the Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, who criticised changes in Minsk’s rhetoric concerning the Great Patriotic War, broadcast on national TV. See К. Иванов, ‘ОНТ жестко прошелся по Медведеву, намекнув на Крым и Донбасс’, Салідарнасць, 6 November 2019, www.gazetaby.com.

¹¹⁵ ‘К 100-летию белорусской милиции’, Белта, 3 March 2017, www.belta.by; ‘100 лет на страже порядка и спокойствия’, ВТ-1, 16 March 2018, www.tvr.by; В. Держанович, ‘Комсомольская неделя к 100-летию ВЛКСМ начинается в столице’, Минск-Новости, 22 October 2018, www.minsk-news.by.

¹¹⁶ ‘Фотофакт. Глава МВД Игорь Шуневич пришел на площадь Победы в форме НКВД’, Naviny.by, 9 May 2018, www.naviny.by.

¹¹⁷ А. Александров, ‘Столетие белорусской дипслужбы отгуляли в Большом театре’, Naviny.by, 19 January 2019, www.naviny.by.

of memory, after 2014 the government's stance on the Kuropaty mass executions that had taken place in the late 1930s/early 1940s was the determinant of possible changes in the official narrative about these events. After many years of avoiding this topic or manipulating the facts, the government began to officially recognise Stalinist crimes committed against representatives of various nationalities (including Poles). A serious change took place at the beginning of 2017, when protests by the opposition and social activists against the construction of a business centre and restaurants in the immediate vicinity of Kuropaty forced the government to take a stance on this increasingly controversial issue. In February 2017, Pavel Yakubovich, the editor-in-chief of the presidential newspaper *Belarus Segodnya*, who had been keenly interested in this topic for many years, organised a round table with experts and representatives of the state administration devoted to the problem of commemorating the crimes in Kuropaty. The deputy head of the KGB, General Ihar Serhiayenka, who was invited to the discussion, admitted directly that innocent people had been executed there unlawfully. The statement made by a senior official representing the security apparatus, usually highly reluctant to make any attempts to revise the heritage of the USSR, should be considered unprecedented, given the special conditions existing in Belarus. What is equally important, in his summary of the discussion Yakubovich stated that "the public has matured" to build a monument in this place commemorating the tragic events of the 1930s. In the following weeks, the newspaper announced public fundraising to finance the monument's design and construction.¹¹⁸

The return of the critical trend in Belarusian historiography and popular science literature

Since 2014, historical and popular science publications presenting the history of Belarusian statehood in a more critical light have begun to appear on the Belarusian book market much more often. Previously, this niche was mainly filled with more or less reliable studies as part of the *Unknown History* series, which was launched in 2009. However, it is only in recent years that local historians (including amateurs) have taken up on a larger scale a number of topics that had usually been omitted in publications, or presented in accordance with the official interpretation of Soviet or Russian historiography. An example of this new perspective is the book by Emmanuel Ioffe: *Panteleimon Ponomarenko, the Iron Stalinist*, published

¹¹⁸ Е. Спасюк, 'Мемориал в Куропатах. С государством или без?', Naviny.by, 7 March 2017, www.naviny.by.

in 2014. This was the first critical Belarusian biography of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus (1938–1947) and the commander of the Soviet guerrilla movement during World War II. In 2016, another work by this author was published: *Lavrenty Tsanava – They called him the Belarusian Beria*, portraying the head of the security service of the Byelorussian SSR from 1938 to 1951 in unfavourable terms. Another example of a new narrative in historical literature is the popular science book *1812 – the Tragedy of Belarus* by Anatol Taras, published in the same series in 2014. It presented the history of the Battle of Orsha in which Lithuanian and Polish troops defeated the Moscow army. The clashes between Napoleon’s army and the troops of Tsarist Russia were shown from the point of view of human, material and political losses sustained by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and not according to the patriotic war tradition canonical for Russian historiography.

The independent History Book Publishing House Yanushkevich, which since 2014 has published a number of important, sometimes controversial books presenting a new perspective of the young generation of local historians, has greatly contributed to promoting a new, balanced view of various difficult moments in Belarusian history. The most interesting of these include: *1939 Belarus – The Forgotten War* by Anatol Trafimchuk, presenting unknown facts about the Soviet occupation of Western Belarus; the study *BNR – The triumph of the defeated* by Andrei Chernyakevich, helpful in deepening the knowledge concerning the role played by the Belarusian People’s Republic; and *The sexual revolution in Soviet Belarus in 1917–1929* by Alyaksandr Guzhalovsky.

It is also worth mentioning the popular science monthly *Nasha Gistoryia*, a project of the nationalist-oriented independent newspaper *Nasha Niva*, published since 2018. The magazine was very popular (some issues exceeded 10,000 copies, which is a very high circulation in the independent press market). All publications were (and still are) partially available in state bookstores, and their authors have not faced any repression from the government. Thus, it can be said that a tacit consent has been given in Belarus for several years to conduct independent historical research and popularise history, breaking the persisting taboos inherited from Soviet times. Despite this, the authors of the critical trend still have a marginal position in Belarusian historiography.

President Lukashenka also expressed his opinion regarding this issue, admitting that he had personally ordered the preparation of an “adequately modest” monument in Kuropaty, and announced that the final design would be selected through a competition announced by the Ministry of Culture.¹¹⁹ Thus, he made it clear that for the first time since the beginning of his reign he considered it important to include this tragedy, which until then had primarily been the object of the opposition’s interest, in the governmental politics of memory. As a result of lengthy competition procedures and the accompanying controversy,¹²⁰ a monument dedicated to “the victims of political repression of the 1930s and 1940s” was created in November 2018. The monument was unveiled by representatives of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, who had officially ordered the project. Nevertheless, no government representative attended the modest ceremony, nor did the president. Lukashenka himself admitted that he had never visited Kuropaty.¹²¹ It is worth noting that in June of the same year, the opening ceremony of the memorial complex in Maly Trostenets (located on the outskirts of Minsk), the site of mass Nazi crimes against Jews, was attended by Lukashenka and the presidents of Germany and Austria, who accepted his invitation, as well as other foreign delegations (including one from Poland).

In the opinion of Belarusian independent commentators, the strikingly divergent ways of commemorating the crimes committed on the territory of present-day Belarus by the two totalitarian regimes once again confirmed the president’s selective approach to the politics of memory, in particular with regard to the USSR.¹²² The government has adopted a sceptical approach, based on the traditions of Soviet historiography with regard to both the BNR and Stalinist crimes. Therefore, neither comprehensive archaeological work was carried out on the site of the mass graves of execution victims in Kuropaty or

¹¹⁹ А. Александров, ‘Лукашенко поручил создать мемориал в Куропатах’, БелаПАН, 24 March 2017, www.belapan.by.

¹²⁰ The social activists striving to commemorate the crimes in Kuropaty were questioning both the form of the monument (modest and ambiguous) and its location. It is also worth mentioning that in February 2018, Pavel Yakubovich, who was involved in this case, lost his position as editor-in-chief of the presidential newspaper. He was also ousted from work on the monument construction, which in his opinion resulted from behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings inside government circles and his excessive openness to the voices of independent circles, while also being a reaction to his far-reaching proposals to commemorate the Kuropaty crime. See Г. Соўсь, ‘Былы рэдактар «Советской Белоруссии» пра няездзейсьненыя пляны ў Куропатах і жыцьцё пасля адстаўкі’, Радыё Свабода, 16 April 2019, www.svaboda.org.

¹²¹ ‘В Куропатах открыли официальный памятник жертвам сталинских репрессий’, Белсат TV, 15 November 2018, www.belsat.eu/ru.

¹²² А. Класковский, ‘Тростенец и Куропаты. Власти Беларуси подходят к исторической правде выборочно’, Naviny.by, 29 June 2018, www.naviny.by.

in dozens of other places located near larger cities, nor was access provided to NKVD documents kept in the Belarusian archives. Over the past few years, the narrative has been corrected only to some extent due to the need to take over this morally and politically difficult topic from the opposition and to develop it in a way that would not undermine the Soviet legacy, which remains important to the authorities and sections of the public. In addition, some state institutions continue to question the responsibility of the Soviet authorities for the Kuropaty crime. One illustration of this is an article published in 2020 in the official periodical of the Ministry of Defence of Belarus, which stated that “not a single piece of evidence proving that the NKVD had been responsible has been found” and claimed that Germany was responsible for the mass execution.¹²³

One proof of the regime’s cynical approach to the memory of Stalinist crimes was the decision to remove about 100 crosses in the area of the Kuropaty forest complex, carried out by construction crews in early April 2019. This move was condemned not only by the opposition, but also by the head of the Catholic Church in Belarus, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, and a representative of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. However, the work was not halted, because the most important thing for the government was that the crosses had been set up by independent social activists without formal consent from the regional state administrator. In this way, the regime has clearly demonstrated that it wants to have the exclusive right to shape the historical memory of Belarusians, especially with regard to such sensitive topics as the crimes perpetrated by the Soviet authorities.¹²⁴

The government’s conservative approach to the memory of the Soviet episode of the Belarusian past is well reflected in the Belarusian history textbook for grade ten (in the national education system it is the penultimate grade of secondary education), covering the events from 1917 to 1945. One may even get the impression that the vision of modern national history taught at school is much closer to the standards of Soviet historiography than to the current narrative presented by the government. For example, they do not mention the mass executions in Kuropaty at all. The actual topic of political repression in the 1930s was presented very briefly, with a commentary that relativises the scale of the Stalinist crimes. World War II is presented through the prism of

¹²³ О. Александров, ‘Куропаты — наглая ложь «свядомых»’, Во славу Родины, 21 March 2020, www.vsr.mil.by.

¹²⁴ K. Kłysiński, ‘Białoruś: skandal wokół usuwania krzyży w Kuropatach’, OSW, 10 April 2019, www.osw.waw.pl.

the positive outcomes arising from the historically justified unification of the territory of Western Belarus with the BSSR in 1939, and of the Great Patriotic War as discussed in the previous chapter.¹²⁵ In turn, in the textbook for grade eleven, the functioning of the BSSR in the post-war years, up until the collapse of the USSR, is shown in a slightly more balanced way, taking into account the ineffectiveness of Soviet economic development policy, for instance.¹²⁶

The language policy after 2014. The ‘soft Belarusisation’ myth

Lukashenka’s unprecedented symbolic speech in Belarusian on 1 July 2014 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from Nazi occupation could serve not only as a symbolic beginning of a new politics of memory but also as a harbinger of a shift in the language policy. From the point of view of the Belarusian *raison d’état*, strengthening the role of the national language and, consequently, reducing the domination of the Russian language was perfectly justified. Due to the growing tension between Minsk and Moscow, there has been a visible shift in the emphasis in the official narrative in the areas of culture, history and identity, as well as some visual changes in the public space, e.g. more frequent use of Belarusian in advertisements. There is also a kind of fashion for folk symbolism, created in part by the sale of gadgets referring to traditional Belarusian culture (T-shirts, mugs, etc.). Moreover, since 2016, Vyshyvanka Day has been celebrated on 2 July under the government’s auspices.

A section of independent Belarusian journalists stated that – in parallel to expanding the national component in the policy of remembrance – President Lukashenka had taken steps to increase the role of the Belarusian language, which was called ‘soft Belarusisation’, a phrase popular among journalists. However, the linguistic situation in Belarus remains ambiguous, as evidenced by the data on the share of the national language in individual spheres of socio-cultural life, collected as part of a project conducted by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.¹²⁷ Although the number of books published in Russian in the country has been steadily declining since 2008, with a simultaneous upward trend in the Belarusian-language segment, these changes have been slow, and

¹²⁵ Я.К. Новік, *Гісторыя Беларусі...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 84, 114–167.

¹²⁶ See В.М. Фамін, С.В. Паноу, Н.М. Ганушчанка, *Гісторыя Беларусі другая палова 1940-х гг. – пачатак XXI ст.*, Мінск 2013.

¹²⁷ А. Расинский, *Белорусский язык: 1918–2018. На примере образования и печати*, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 18 February 2019, www.belinstitute.com.

consequently the number of publications in the mother tongue is still almost six times smaller than those published in Russian. The press market is similar. School education is doing much worse in this respect, and it is mainly through its prism that the real language situation can be defined. In the pre-school education segment, the number of children attending kindergarten with Belarusian language of instruction decreased in cities from 68.9% in 1994 to 2.3% in 2017. The proportions are equally unfavourable in primary and secondary schools and, in particular, at universities, where Belarusian speakers constitute only 0.1% of students. Pedagogical universities have almost completely abandoned teacher training in the mother tongue. Currently, at Maxim Tank Belarusian State Pedagogical University in Minsk, classes where Belarusian is the only language of instruction are attended by just 0.5% of the total number of students. For these reasons, it is difficult to find any real rationale for the claim of any broader Belarusisation. Any external manifestations of the increase in the presence of the Belarusian language in public space (primarily in advertising, entertainment, trade, cultural and social initiatives) should, however, be regarded as a result of the unplanned convergence of the activity of social associations and private entrepreneurs, and the limited liberalisation seen in the government's policy towards the Belarusian language and culture since 2014.¹²⁸ It is also worth adding that, as regards the language policy, Minsk is trying to refrain from taking any initiatives that could question the linguistic *status quo*, i.e. the overwhelming dominance of the Russian language. This is due to the fear that the regime's stability could be undermined and that tensions in relations with Russia might escalate. The 'liberalism' that has prevailed for several years, therefore, consists primarily in tolerating grassroots initiatives originating primarily from non-governmental and small business sectors.

¹²⁸ П. Рудковский, *От «больного» к «здоровому» национализму. Исследование BISS политики идентичности*, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, 22 January 2018, www.belinstitute.com.

V. CONCLUSION. THE POLICY OF BRINGING OPPOSITES TOGETHER

The changes in the Belarusian politics of memory seen after 2014 are not revolutionary, but rather evolutionary, and can be summed up as a rather cautious, though progressive, revision. This is due both to the specificity of the authoritarian regime and the sentiments predominating among the Belarusian public. Belarusian people are sceptical about radical changes, including changes in ideology and historical memory. The most important factor limiting more radical transformation of the politics of memory is the stance taken by Russia. The government in Minsk has concluded that for a country located between East and West, the optimal strategy for strengthening the national narrative about the past, and thus also Belarusian identity, will be to gradually add to the post-Soviet heritage elements testifying to its own state traditions. In this way, the president avoids excessive ideological proximity to the opposition, while at the same time gradually building a distance from the Russian vision of the region's history.

One effect of the revision of the official politics of memory seen over recent years is the glorification of the Principality of Polotsk and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which are presented as sources of Belarusian statehood – something unprecedented in the earlier period of Lukashenka's rule. In tandem with this, the entire positive narrative about the period when Belarusian lands were part of the Russian Empire and then the USSR has been preserved (with some fragmentary changes). The Republic of Belarus is therefore both the heir to the GDL and the continuator of the BSSR. Thus, at the root of Minsk's slightly modified politics of memory was a fundamental contradiction between the praise for domestic state projects and the continued acceptance of Russian achievements of imperial domination in Eastern Europe. This 'eclecticism' results in combinations of characters or events that seem mutually exclusive, which is difficult to understand for external observers. The most vivid example and symbol of the internally contradictory Belarusian politics of memory is the simultaneous commemoration of Alexander Suvorov, the pacifier of the Kościuszko Uprising, and of Thaddeus Kościuszko himself. A similar impression arises when we juxtapose the unprecedentedly solemn celebration of the centenary of the BNR with the 100th anniversaries of the establishment of numerous government and law enforcement agencies, celebrated respectfully in recent years. Those who organised these celebrations directly invoked the deepest traditions of the beginnings of the USSR.

Another characteristic topic raised in contemporary Belarusian politics of memory is the experiment of building a Belarusian narrative about the Soviet era, modified for purposes of strengthening the independence of Belarus. In spite of this, the shared historical heritage of that period seriously restricts the attempts made in recent years to separate the Belarusian memory of the USSR from the current Russian politics of memory. At the same time, regardless of the political aspirations of the individual post-Soviet republics (including Belarus), it is Russia, the former Soviet centre, that will continue to play a leading role in shaping the narrative about the Soviet period.

Given the background as outlined above, the current politics of memory is more of a problem for the government in Minsk rather than a means of support in its efforts to bolster sovereignty. The question that remains open is whether such an inconsistently implemented, incoherent narrative, based on difficult experiments, is capable of finally separating Belarus from the historical heritage of its neighbours, especially Russia, and also uniting the deeply divided and politically passive Belarusian society.

As a result of the processes outlined above, Belarus has still not developed a fully sovereign politics of memory, and this process faces numerous internal and external limitations. The two most important ones are the influence of the Russian factor and the nature of the present regime, which is afraid of developing a national project but also seems to still underestimate its importance. Moreover, one gets the impression that the government (as well as the loyal circle of historians from the NAS of Belarus) is satisfied with the unclear and incoherent narrative, seeing it as a guarantee of stability – both in public sentiments and in dialogue with neighbouring countries. Therefore, no radical changes should be expected in the structure of Belarusian politics of memory under Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Only certain adjustments are made to the distribution of its accents in relation to individual historical events.

The clear shift in Minsk's foreign policy towards strengthening its co-operation with Russia, observed after the presidential election on 9 August 2020, means a depreciation of national components in the sphere of historical narrative. This is indicated by the policy of discrediting the white-red-white flag, which is now associated with demonstrations by opponents of the regime. It seems that the reversal of this tendency will only be possible in the event of another crisis in relations with the Kremlin or a change in the system of power in Belarus. At the same time, the profound changes taking place in Belarusian

society herald the development of a grassroots revision of identity and historical memory, which will take place in opposition to the regime's narrative.

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