INTERNATIONAL PRESSURES AND REGIME EXPEDIENCY: SHIFTING THE IDENTITY PATTERNS

Identity Dynamics in post-Soviet Belarus

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis tackles the question of a broader pattern of Belarusian identity shifts in the post-Soviet period and implications of international pressures which combine to produce different identity dynamics. The research explores Belarusian identity dynamics by embedding the question of national identity in the theoretical frameworks of competitive authoritarianism and situational nationalism. The example of Belarus illustrates the implications that forces on the international level can have on domestic ideational arrangements.

Coalescence of distinct types of international pressures in a fluid and competitive identity setting can enhance and weaken particular types of national identity campaigns. A combination of different levels of democratizing pressure and alternative support from a hegemonic power providing the means of the authoritarian regime sustainment has two effects. Firstly, it affects how the national identity discourse is constructed, and secondly, it creates different patterns of self-identification among the society. The stronger the support of an alternative hegemonic power is, the stronger the appeal of particular identity campaign is for the population.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Belarus, with its tangled history of belonging to different multinational state formations and position at the crossroads of competing civilizational projects, represents a complex intellectual puzzle for scholars interested in nationalism studies. Academics in Belarusian studies drew attention to the Soviet and Russo-centric character of Belarusian national identity, pointing either to its weakness or the multiplicity of interpretations.[1] Therefore, the calls for 'soft Belarusization' by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka emerged as a startling statements that have already drawn some scholarly attention.[2] Given Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, justified by a vaguely formulated doctrine of the right to protect Russian-speaking citizens, which came to be known as the idea of the 'Russian World', the geopolitical background of Lukashenka's reaction did not go unnoticed.

This issue, however, raises a question about a broader pattern of Belarusian national identity shifts and the implications of international pressures which combine to produce different identity dynamics. The recent geopolitical developments in the shared neighborhood of the European Union and Russia point towards the need to explore the issue of the national identity of borderland states more deeply, from a broader perspective that includes forces beyond the borders of nation states, capable of applying significant pressure. Therefore, it is necessary to take into consideration also the regional hegemons, such as Russia and the

[1] see for instance: David Marples, Belarus: A Denationalized Nation, 1 edition (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Routledge, 1999); Larissa Titarenko, "Post-Soviet National Identity: Belarusian Approaches and Paradoxes," Filosofija. Sociologija 18, no. 4 (2007): 79–90; Nelly Bekus, Struggle over Identity: The Official and the alternative "Belarusianness" (Budapest ; New York: Central European University Press, 2010); Nelly Bekus, "Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus: Ethnolinguistic Survival as an Argument in the Political Struggle," Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 35, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 43–58, doi:10.1080/01434632.2013.845197; Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity," Europe-Asia Studies 55, no. 8 (2003): 1241–72; Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina, Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), http://link.springer.com/10.1057/9781137453112; Natalia Leshchenko, "A Fine Instrument: Two Nation-Building Strategies in Post-Soviet Belarus," Nations and Nationalism 10, no. 3 (2004): 333–352.

[2] see for instance: Andrew Wilson, "Belarus: From a Social Contract to a Security Contract?," *The Journal of Belarusian Studies 2016*, 2016 Annual London Lecture on Belarusian Studies, 8, no. 1 (January 9, 2017): 78.

European Union, as important variables having an impact on internal identity dynamics of borderland states, producing distinct patterns of identification and shifts in identity discourses.

The aim of this research is thus to explore identity configurations of 'new nations' with fluid identity environments within the context of different international pressures. This phenomenon is explored within the example of Belarus which illustrates broader implications that the forces on an international level can have on domestic ideational arrangements. It examines the way Belarusian identity dynamics transform due to the considerations of regime sustainment, and the range of consequences authoritarian calculations have on the process of identity formation.

This thesis combines theoretical frameworks of situational nationalism and competitive authoritarianism to explain the changing identity configurations and to point out the factors on the regional level that affected these dynamics. Adopting the logic of competitive authoritarianism allows one to examine how the Western democratizing pressure and presence of a countervailing hegemonic power influence how Belarusian identity discourse shifts due to the calculations of regime expediency. It explains how these factors produce different shifts in the institutional identity discourse to accommodate the need for provision of alternative resources and constraints imposed upon the transformations stemming from this dependence.

Applying the framework of situational nationalism enables one to assess the successes and failures of particular identity campaigns and the dynamics of society's self-identification in the context of the Western leverage and Russia's support. The logic of situational nationalism also illuminates the dangers that Belarusian society mobilizing along alternative identity cleavages represents in the shifting geopolitical conditions in the region.

Navigating the complex issue of Belarusian national identity, this thesis examines the institutional identity discourse articulated by Belarusian authorities and how it has transformed

over the years, under differing international pressures which enhanced or hindered the appeal of domestic identity discourses.

1. New nations in the post-Soviet space

The sudden disintegration of the communist-governed systems of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, accompanied by a demise of the communist international movement, was seen as a signal of the triumph of nationalism over the class-based system of human organization.[3] The immense changes in the European post-Cold War order stimulated scholars to produce vast amounts of literature on the nation states that emerged from the ruins of the previous systems of government.

As many of the new states had to go through new processes of state- and nation-formation, much of the literature produced drew attention to the role of nationalism in the democratization process that these states were expected to go through. [4] For instance, Ghia Nodia focused on the interrelation between nationalism and democracy, arguing that nationalism should be understood as an element in a more complex unit of 'liberal democracy', given the anti-Communist revolutions that occurred in former Soviet states. Therefore, according to Nodia, nationalism is 'unthinkable' without the concept of democracy, while simultaneously being in almost perpetual tension with each other. In her interpretation, the way in which the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union took place, proves validity of her point.[5]

The causal link between the collapse of autocratic regimes and nationalism was also made by Mark Beissinger, who analyzed the function nationalism had in the process of the disintegration of the Soviet state, claiming that, both the presence and absence of nationalism

[3] Ronald J. Hill, "Creating New Identities, New Nations, New States," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 585–601, doi:10.1080/13523270903310944.

[4] Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism : Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press, 1992); Anthony D. Smith, "State-Making and Nation-Building," in *States in History*, ed. John A. Hall (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986); Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, *Russia and the New States of Eurasia: The Politics of Upheaval* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); G. O. Nodia, "Nationalism and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 3, no. 4 (October 1992): 3–22, doi:10.1353/jod.1992.0053.

[5] Nodia, "Nationalism and Democracy."

had a significant impact on the manner in which the communism collapsed.[6] He argues that the crumbling of communism should not be seen as separate individual national accounts of resistance, but a set of mutually influencing flows of activities – "part of a larger tide of assertions of national sovereignty that swept through the Soviet empire during this period."[7] The causal mechanisms between democracy-building and nationalism that these scholars examine, however do not show the whole picture, as nationalism and national identity have been a tool of autocracy consolidation in the newly emerged countries of the post-Soviet space as well.

As Lucan Way demonstrates, national identity does not necessarily need to be a driving force behind democracy consolidation, and ethnic identification does not have to be the only salient source of identification for societies. Emphasizing the contextual factors which determine the impact of identity on political contestation, Way argues that national identity does not necessarily need to be constructed in a way that would facilitate democracy, but also in a way that would result in a regime of autocracy. The outcome depends on the relationship of national identity to the dominant power and the level of popular support for a particular identity.[8] Therefore, "whether identity becomes more of a tool for the autocrat or opposition hinges on (a) whether an identity can be framed in anti-incumbent terms or pro-incumbent terms; and (b) whether that identity is held by a majority or minority of a country's elite/population."[9] This discussion also points to a broader issue of the uniformity of types of nationalisms and national identities, which were seen in terms of ethnicity by scholars such as George Schöpflin.

[6] Mark R. Beissinger, "Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism," *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (August 2009): 331, doi:10.1017/S0960777309005074.
[7] Ibid., 331.
[8] Lucan Way, "Identity and Autocracy: Belarus and Ukraine Compared," in *Second Annual Danyliw Research Seminar in Contemporary Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa, Canada*, 2006, http://homes.ieu.edu.tr/~ibagdadi/INT435/Readings/Western%20NIS/Way%20-%20Belarus%20and%20Ukraine%20Compared.pdf.
[9] Ibid., 3.

For Schöpflin, ethnicity naturally appeared as a desirable and viable basis for the creating and formatting of new political communities that emerged after the collapse of communism. Be it in Central Europe, southeastern Europe, or Central Asia, ethnicity served as a new origin of legitimacy, identity, and community in the new political conditions affected by the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[10] Viewing ethnicity as the only viable basis for new political communities is, however, a rather limited perspective, as non-ethnic identity can also serve as a successful source of identification for the post-Soviet societies and also a source of legitimacy for these political communities.

As Rogers Brubaker posits, not all successor states and their politics were motivated by the agenda of ethnic nationalization. The allure of the nationalizing programs and policies towards the domestic audience has varied.[11] Ronald Suny pointed to the unpredictable and diverse character of the new nationalisms. He posits that after the new states appeared following the demise of communist regimes of Europe, trajectories of nationalist ambitions that exploded along various lines were still malleable and unpredictable. The nationality and class formation, therefore, ought to be grasped as an event that is contingent and historically determined.[12]

Suny argues that the problems of forming fairly stable national and political identities are especially salient in the current region of the post-Soviet Eurasia. The newly emerged societies no longer live with the Soviet guiding visions they grew up with, and elites, and the state as a whole, have little grasp of the 'national idea' concept.[13] We can extend this scope also to countries such as Belarus, which hold borderland positions between Eurasian and European

[10] George Schöpflin, "Nationalism and Ethnicity in Europe, East and West," in *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe*, ed. Charles A. Kupchan (Cornell University Press, 1995).
[11] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed : Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[12] Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past : Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, c1993, n.d.).
[13] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *International Security* 24, no. 3 (January 1, 2000): 139–78, doi:10.1162/016228899560266.

civilizational frameworks and in which ethnic identity is not the only viable source of identification.

Identity dynamics in these countries are particularly sensitive to the influence of factors from a broader ideational setting, as the situational nationalism theory states.[14] According to Jenne & Bieber, the potency of a national identification campaign may be inhibited or enhanced by ideas, actions, and conflicts extending beyond the frontiers of a nationalizing territory.[15] The recent changes of national identity rhetoric of the Belarusian President taking place in the backdrop of geopolitical shifts on the regional level have demonstrated that the actions, events, or ideas beyond the borders of nation states are capable of influencing Belarusian domestic identity dynamics.

1.2 Mapping Belarusian nationhood

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was in many countries seen as a welcomed development that allowed for an institutional and ideological shaping of newly emerged states of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the position of Belarus in regard to Europe is somewhat ambiguous, argues Andrew Savchenko. On one hand, from a geographical perspective, it is a European country, while on the other, the development of modern European-style political and cultural institutions failed. He posits, that in case of Belarus, the neighboring states in the West and East, Poland and Russia, possess largely differing systems of culture in terms of religious affiliation, political philosophies, economic aspirations, and self-perception of its position in a greater system of nations. And for a long period of time, both nations have presented themselves as entities of distinct and antithetical civilizations.[16] Unlike the majority

[14] Erin K. Jenne and Florian Bieber, "Situational Nationalism: Nation-Building in the Balkans, Subversive Institutions and the Montenegrin Paradox," *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 5 (October 20, 2014): 431–60, doi:10.1080/17449057.2014.912447.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Andrew Savchenko, *Belarus: A Perpetual Borderland* (BRILL, 2009).

of European nations, the Belarusian nation did not adopt the form of an ethno-national community with a solid nationalist historical narrative, indigenous culture, and language. [17] The late Belarusian movement emerging at the beginning of the 20th century never managed to fully instill their idea of national consciousness among would-be Belarusians.[18] Instead, Belarusian national consciousness coalesced as an outcome of a communist project that had persevered for seventy years.[19]

Like other European countries, Belarus also embarked on a turbulent path of post-Communist transition where de-Sovietization in the sphere of culture, politics and society was at the core of this process.[20] The policy of Belarusization employed by the nationalizing elites in the early years of independence had a specific agenda of de-Sovietization, imagining Belarus as a part of Europe by drawing on the pre-Soviet history and myths of Belarus. Belarusization policy rejected the Soviet legacy as belonging to the era of Soviet colonization and national oppression and was seen as a natural outcome of Belarus gaining its independence.[21] A revival of the Belarusian language assumed a core position in the new nation-building program.[22]

The attempts to 'nationalize' Belarus along the ethnolinguistic lines through a this policy, after it gained its independence in 1991, however were not met with success and the

[17] Vadzim Smok, "Belarusian Identity: The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule," Analytical Paper 3 (Minsk-London: Ostrogorski Centre, 2013), http://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarusianidentity.pdf.
[18] Per A. Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931*, Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies (Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).
[19] Smok, "Belarusian Identity: The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule."
[20] Bekus, "Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus."
[21] The nationalizing discourse drew on the early 20th century idea developed and articulated by a first Belarusian national movement comprised of a small circle of intellectuals. According to this version of Belarusianness, nation building took place in the pre-Soviet period, being carried out by the first Belarusian nationalists, and later was supposedly cut off by the 1917 October revolution and the Soviet State. To confirm this genuine European affinity, the discourse refers to three chapters of Belarusian history, when its lands were considered as a part of European civilization. These include the myths of 10-12th century principality of Polatsk, multinational state formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the Belarusian People's Republic established in 1918 under German occupation (not internationally recognized). This version of national identity was advocated by Belarusian People's Front (BPF) which was created in 1988 as a 'general-democratic' and 'national revival' movement whose leader was Zianon Pazniak until 1996 Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*.
[22] Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014).

majority of the population did not define itself in a radical contradiction to its Soviet past.[23] Alyaksandr Lukashenka, campaigning for presidency in 1994 on Soviet nostalgia and reintegration of Russia, consolidated his grip on power by 1996 and Belarus strayed from its democratization path soon after it commenced.[24] Lukashenka halted ongoing reforms, reversed the process of Belarusization, and returned Belarus to the position of 'Russia's island of stability.'[25]

After Lukashenka consolidated his power, Belarus has been typically labeled in Western discourse as 'the last European dictatorship.' Nevertheless, as was revealed by more nuanced scholarly analyses, these types of labels appear to be reductionist.[26] While falling within the category of 'not free' by the Freedom House ranking of freedom in the world,[27] Belarus can be classified as a type of hybrid regime, meaning it possesses certain characteristics of both democracy and authoritarianism. Due to its continuing overwhelming dependence on Russia, the logic of competitive authoritarianism provides an appropriate framework which takes into consideration the role of Russia's economic and diplomatic support when explaining Lukashenka's regime emergence and durability.[28] The post-Soviet institutional nation-formation in Belarus went along Russian civilizational lines as a result of the authoritarian calculations, while the competing ethnolinguistic identity project remained marginalized.

As an outcome of a complicated historical development within various multistate formations and its borderland position, despite 16 years of Belarus' existence as an independent state, national identity remains split within multiple identity discourses that have been classified

[23] Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*.
[24] Thomas Ambrosio, "The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a Color Revolution," *Demokratizatsiya* 14, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 407–34.
[25] Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*.
[26] Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus."
[27] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World: Belarus," *Freedom House*, 2016, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/belarus.
[28] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, 1 edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

by scholars using varying taxonomies.[29] The recent developments of nation-building policies in Belarus, following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, have revealed that the official Belarusian interpretation of national identity, built upon the idea of common civilizational space with Russia, may have serious repercussions towards the resilience of the authoritarian regime. The identity discourse of 'The Russian World' disregards the concept of Belarusian sovereignty in its vision of Belarus as a part of the Russian nation, which is being intensively advocated on the Belarusian territory. This points to the risks of Belarusian society mobilizing around an alternative identity campaign which advocates for the incorporation of Belarus into the territory of the Russian Federation.

The aim of this thesis is to provide answers to three main research questions that guide the course of the research agenda: How do identities of 'new nations' shift due to a combination of different international pressures? How is the official interpretation of Belarusian national identity influenced by the considerations of regime sustainment and what are the consequences of this? How do Belarusian identity dynamics correlate with the changes on the regional level?

[29] see for example: Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*; Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus"; Leshchenko, "A Fine Instrument"; White and Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*; Aliaksiej Lastouski, "Russo-Centrism as an Ideological Project of Belarusian Identity," *Belarusian Political Science Review*, no. 1 (2011): 23–46.

2. Analytical framework

In this section, main concepts and theoretical tools adopted for conducting the analysis are defined. Firstly, competitive authoritarianism theory is introduced for the sake of analyzing how the regime sustainment is influenced by the factors on the international level and how it affects the identity construction. Further, the terms of nation and national identity are clarified and their discursive construction via state institutions is explained. The theory of situational nationalism is introduced in order to explore the patterns of identification and strength of the official identity discourse throughout the years of Lukashenka's regime. Lastly, the research questions arising from the review of previously presented literature will be laid out, together with methodology summarizing how they are approached in this thesis.

2.1 Competitive authoritarianism

As the authoritarian character of the regime is an important variable in nation-building and influences the way national identity has been constructed within the official identity discourse, it is necessary to conceptualize it first. To do this, the analysis of national identity will be embedded in the literature on competitive authoritarianism by Levitsky and Way.

Competitive authoritarianism is a type of hybrid regime that possesses characteristics of democracy as well as authoritarianism. In these civilian regimes, formal democratic institutions are present and are commonly seen as the main mechanism for power acquisition, nevertheless, the abuse of state power by incumbents allows them to possess a crucial advantage in relation to their opponents. Their competitiveness rests in the fact that opposition parties seriously compete for power using democratic institutions, however, they are non-democratic because the field for competition is substantially skewed in favor of incumbents. Thus, competition exists but it is unfair.[30]

[30] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

Levitsky and Way theorize that the emergence of authoritarian regimes and their stability in the post-Cold War era was influenced by Western leverage (which was often decisive), states' linkage to the West, and organizational power of the incumbent. Western leverage is understood as the vulnerability of a particular government to pressure from the external environment, the organizational power refers to the degree and cohesion of the ruling party and state structures, and the linkage to the West is understood as a thickness of a state's ties to the European Union and the United States in terms of economy, politics, diplomacy, organization, and society, as well as mutual cross-border flows. Crucial factor that influences the Western leverage is the presence of the so-called "Black knights"[31] - the countervailing hegemonic powers providing military, economic, and/or diplomatic assistance, which may reduce the Western leverage and, thus, weaken the impact of the democratizing pressure by the EU and the US.[32]

The case of Belarus, Levitsky and Way argue, accentuates the way support provided by a countervailing power and discretionary economic power can play an important role in stabilizing the authoritarian system of government.[33] Attention will be given to the aspect of the Western leverage and the way national identity allowed Belarus to take advantage of the Black knight support, which is a neglected aspect in the scholarship of hybrid regimes.

Undertaking the analysis of Belarusian national identity dynamics through the lense of competitive authoritarianism enables one to take into consideration the position of Belarus between the European Union and Russia and its impact on the regime's sustainment. This is of crucial importance, as the underlying issue behind the struggle over Belarusian identity has been a choice between Russian and European civilizational framework represented by these two actors. While Russia played the important role of the Black knight, capable of countering

[31] a term introduced by Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliott, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and Current Policy* (Institute for International Economics, 1990).
[32] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
[33] Ibid.

the democratizing pressure of the EU by providing alternative financial assistance through energy rents and other subsidies, of principal importance was also the historical and cultural ties to Russia that allowed the Belarusian national idea to be instrumentalized for extracting this financial support. The thesis thus focuses on the aspect of the Western leverage and the role of Russia as the Black knight, which is directly linked to the issue of national identity which is under scrutiny.

2.2 Nation and national identity

This thesis combines insights from the new-institutional and a post-modernist/post-structuralist-inspired approaches to analyze Belarusian national identity dynamics. Since Belarus is an authoritarian state, it should be taken into account that public discourse is defined, first of all, by the state institutions which have a privileged position in identity construction. To define national identity and the role of institutions in shaping it this study draws on the insights provided by Rogers Brubaker's approach to studying nation and national identity as a category of practice and a result of institutionalization. And in order to explain the role of discourse in national identity formation, arguments made by Stuart Hall and Rudolf De Cillia, Martin Reisigl, & Ruth Wodak who draw on post-modernist and post-structuralist scholarship are employed.

Nation and nationhood are viewed by Rogers Brubaker as an event, contrary to developmentalist understandings of this phenomenon. In his interpretation, a nation is seen as a category of practice which is a result of institutionalization. This approach proposes to analyze "the practical uses of the category of nation, the ways it can come to structure perception, to inform thought and experience, to organize discourse and political action."[34] Identity, understood by him as a category of practice is operationalized by "lay" actors in order to give

[34] Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 16.

meaning to themselves and their actions and to make sense of their difference from others and what they share with them in certain everyday settings. Political entrepreneurs utilize it (for certain purposes) to convince people to make sense of themselves, their circumstances and interests in a specific way, and also to convince them of their sameness and simultaneously of their distinction from other groups, and to justify and regulate collective action in a particular fashion. In this manner, the notion of 'identity' is embedded in its differing forms in everyday life as well as in 'identity politics'[35] Brubaker's new institutional approach emphasizes how institutions affect specific perceptions and self-perceptions, and the way identity is created via the process of institutional reification.[36]

Stuart Hall argues that collective identity and experience are "constructed historically, culturally, politically – and the concept which refers to this is ethnicity. The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity."[37] According to Hall, there are no unified identities and, in contemporary times, they are becoming gradually more fractured and fragmented; and nor are they singular but complexly constructed over various, frequently convergent and antagonistic, positions, practices, and discourses. Being subjected to a radical historicization, they are in a constant process of alteration and transformation. He argues that it is necessary to position the discussion of identity within respective historical developments and practices that upset the fairly 'settled' nature of numerous populations and cultures. Due to the fact that identities are constructed within the discourse and not outside of it, they should be understood "produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies".[38]

[35] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000).
[36] Bekus, "Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus."
[37] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *"Race", Culture, and Difference*, ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London, UK: Sage Publications in association with the Open University, 1992), 257.
[38] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 4.

Being viewed as specific types of social identities, national identities are created, recreated, transformed and dismantled via the language and different types semiotic systems.[39]

> The idea of a specific national community becomes reality in the realm of convictions and beliefs through, reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by political, intellectuals and media people and disseminated through the systems of education, schooling, mass communication, militarisation as well as through sports meetings.[40]

The process through which nations and national identities are constructed takes place in parallel with the process of constructing difference and uniqueness. When raised to the level of collective imagination, the sameness and difference construction infringe upon the democratic and pluralistic diversity and variety through 'group-internal homogenization'.[41]

Belarusian national identity is thus examined by analyzing how its understanding has been constructed and transformed within the official Belarusian identity discourse shaped by Belarusian state institutions and the level of support this particular interpretation of Belarusianness received. The national identity dynamics therefore encompass the institutional identity discourse construction and also the way people self-identified according to this narrative; the appeal of a particular identity narrative.

2.3 Situational nationalism

The theory of situational nationalism is used to supplement the institutionalist and post-modernist/post-structuralist-inspired accounts on Belarusian national identity construction and allows to encompass the strong position that external factors – identities, actors, and events situated on the regional and global level may hold, and thus be more than just intervening variables.[42]

[39] Rudolf De Cillia, Martin Reisigl, and Ruth Wodak, "The Discursive Construction of National Identities," *Discourse & Society* 10, no. 2 (1999): 149–173.
[40] Ibid., 154.
[41] De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak, "The Discursive Construction of National Identities."
[42] Jenne and Bieber, "Situational Nationalism."

"Situational nationalism refers to national identities that shift in response to overarching, compelling geopolitical battles that appeal to the loyalties of individuals in fluid identity settings."[43] According to the situational nationalism theory, the potency of a national identification campaign may be inhibited or enhanced by ideas, actions, and conflicts extending beyond the frontiers of nationalizing territory. Jenne & Bieber argue that the role of the nationalizing institutions and elites is thus not sufficient to consolidate national identity while developments in the wider identity environment are prone to cause mobilization around different political cleavages. Even though national identities can undergo regression and progression, and therefore are provisional, the fluid identity settings are more conducive to an exceptionally pronounced national competition. This implies that nation-building in its early stages, in periods of political turmoil or conflict, and territories located in border regions are most likely to experience substantial identity shifts.[44]

While situational nationalism was employed by Jenne & Bieber on a sub-national level, this thesis adopts it on a national and international level to examine how the factors present beyond the borders of the state influence domestic identity dynamics in Belarus, enhancing and weakening particular identity campaigns. Furthermore, it illustrates that Russia's identity discourse of the Russian World, spilling over the states' political boundaries, may cause mobilization around this alternative identity cleavage within a part of the Belarusian society.

2.4 Methodology

This thesis combines theoretical frameworks of situational nationalism and competitive authoritarianism to explain the changing identity configurations and to point out the factors on the regional level that affected these dynamics. Adopting the logic of competitive

[43] Ibid., 439.
[44] Jenne and Bieber, "Situational Nationalism."

authoritarianism allows one to examine how the Western democratizing pressure and presence of a countervailing hegemonic power influence how particular identities shift due to considerations of regime sustainment. It points to the factors of regime sustainment that produce different shifts in the institutional identity discourse to accommodate the need for economic resources, and also it also explains the constraints imposed upon the transformations stemming from this dependence.

Applying the framework of situational nationalism enables one to assess the successes and failures of particular identity campaigns and the dynamics of society's self-identification in the context of the Western leverage and Russia's support. The logic of situational nationalism also illuminates the dangers that Belarusian society mobilizing along alternative identity cleavages represents in the shifting geopolitical conditions in the region.

This research is conducted using a qualitative interpretative approach drawing on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include public statements of President Lukashenka that are used to map the shifts in official identity interpretation formed by Belarusian state institutions, and data from public opinion polls that serve to illustrate the level of popular support for particular identity discourse. The secondary sources include previously written literature that analyzes the question of Belarusian national identity, foreign policy analyses concerning the relationship between Russia, Belarus, and the EU, and media news.

Embedding the discussion of Belarusian national identity within the frameworks of competitive authoritarianism and situational nationalism, the shifts in the national identity discourse will be analyzed by comparing the institutional identity discourse between April 2014 and April 2017 with how the official version of national identity was formulated in periods before. The periodization is created based on different levels of the Western leverage and alternative hegemonic support to illustrate the correlation between them and the identity shifts.

2.5 Limitations

The scope of this paper imposed limitations upon the conduct of this research which is reflected in the manner the question of national identity in Belarus is approached. The focus of the thesis is narrowed down to the transformations within the official national identity discourse in relation to Russia, while the alternative identity interpretations are treated as a cluster of ideas, which are, however, more nuanced. There are multiple actors with differing identity interpretations and divergent agendas, who do not present a unitary interpretation of Belarusian identity. However, a proper discussion of this phenomenon, which would include the development of alternative identity discourses and their transformations within the changing context, is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. Belarusian identity dynamics in the framework of regional factors

This chapter tackles the issue of national identity dynamics and examines the shifts of the institutional identity discourse and patterns of Belarusian society's identification under differing conditions of the Western leverage and Russia's economic support. It explains the successes and failures of different identity discourses in Belarus as linked to the factors on the international level.

3.1 Competitive authoritarianism and Belarusian identity

As was demonstrated by Lucan Way, the autocratic consolidation of power of Alyaksandr Lukashenka was also from a significant part stimulated by an instrumentalization of national identity. The opposition's efforts for a regime change were undermined by the broad appeal of the Soviet-Belarusian national identity, which cut off the crucial resources for opposition mobilization and thus contributed to the resilience of autocratic regime. [45] While establishing the link between national identity and autocracy consolidation, Way focused mostly on the domestic level and did not fully address the external factors – the actors and events on the international level that influence Belarusian national identity dynamics. This thesis therefore draws attention also to events and identities linked to two major actors on the regional level, the European Union and Russia, which influence the way national identity is constructed for authoritarian purposes.

As noted by Alex Nice, the EU and Russia are both players whose aim is to influence and format the domestic normative environment of Belarus. The EU policy implies a need to rediscover Belarusian European identity which Lukashenka's regime and the Soviet legacy has suppressed, while the integration with Russia is justified by their shared history and closeness of cultures, comprising a unitary Slavic civilizational framework.[46] Embedding Belarusian

[45] Way, "Identity and Autocracy."
[46] Alex Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU," in *Economization versus Power Ambitions: Rethinking Russia's Policy towards Post-Soviet States (DGAP-Miscellanies about International*

national identity debate in the framework of competitive authoritarianism, the chapter will approach the question of Belarusian identity dynamics from the perspective of its relationship with Russia and the EU.

As Russia's support is a crucial element in Lukashenka's capability of maintaining his grip on power, shaping the national identity discourse around the idea of closeness and unity with Russia ensured the stability of his rule. Belarus' long historical experience as a part of Russia's multinational state formations and the fact that major modernization, economic development, and prosperity occurred during the Soviet times[47] implies that social preconditions for this affinity with Russia were already there and Lukashenka only took advantage of the circumstances at hand. The identity construction within the Russian civilizational framework went hand in hand with political and economic reorientation of Belarus towards Russia.

As mapped out within the competitive authoritarian framework by Levitsky & Way, Belarus possesses low linkage to the West and the Western leverage has shifted from low to medium in mid-2000s. In spite of its closeness to Western Europe, migration, trade, and communication links to the West were weak. Contacts of the EU were restricted and prospects of EU membership were not viewed as credible by majority of Belarusian elites and citizens.[48] Being a state where the role of the Black knight and the discretionary economic assistance plays a crucial role in stabilizing authoritarian regime, the democratizing pressure exerted towards Belarus by the EU is mitigated by diplomatic and economic support received from Russia. The President's abuse of authority since 1990s has been continuously condemned by the Western powers and resulted in country's international isolation.[49] The European institutions such as the

Politics / DGAP-Schriften Zur Internationalen Politik): Nomos Publishers 9783832976453 - Hall Street Books, ed. Stefan Meister (Nomos Publishers, 2013).

[47] Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906-1931*.

[48] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

[49] Ibid.

Council of Europe or the European Union, repeatedly attempted to stray Belarus from its increasingly authoritarian path towards democratic principles by engaging political, diplomatic, economic pressure in order to isolate Minsk, even actively supporting opposition groups in Belarus.[50] After 1996, following a tightening of Lukashenka's authoritarian control, Belarus lost its Council of Europe observer status and visa restrictions were applied towards Belarusian officials, while economic assistance by the US and the EU also declined dramatically. Moreover, after the 2004 referendum, which further strengthened Lukashenka's regime, the entire bilateral assistance provided by the US was halted.[51] The support for Belarusian opposition groups was provided under the assumption that EU's policy towards its Eastern neighborhood would succeed when democratization, nationalization, and Europeanization are aligned.[52] The negative effects of international isolation and sanctions exerted by the Western powers towards Lukashenka's regime were dulled by diplomatic support and economic subsidies from Russia.[53]

Contrary to the actions of Western powers, Russia has not pursued a policy of pressure and isolation towards Belarus to induce democratization; instead, Russian authorities were willing to offer a diplomatic cover to Lukashenka as a reaction to Western condemnation of fraudulent elections taking place in Belarus.[54] The elections in Belarus were acknowledged by Russia as free and fair, while international observers were condemned as biased.[55] While diplomatic support remained stable throughout the years, despite the cycles of conflict, economic support was of crucial importance. As long as the economic support from Russia

[50] Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009).
[51] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
[52] Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU."
[53] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
[54] Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*.
[55] Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Policy towards Belarus: A Tale of Two Presidents," in *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, ed. Joerg Forbrig, David R. Marples, and Pavol Demeš, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The German marshall Fund of the United States, 2006), 79–84.

prevailed, Lukashenka did not appear to mind the international seclusion.[56] Looking deeper into the details and circumstances of how this foreign assistance from Russia was provided reveals that national identity construction played an important role.

We can discern three timeframes based on how the official identity discourse and patterns of self-identifications of Belarusians transformed in the face of altered circumstances on the regional level. Firstly, the period of Lukashenka's rule from 1994 until the beginning of the 2000s, during which the integration process with Russia took place, bringing Belarus huge amounts of economic support in form of energy rents. The official identity discourse was firmly embedded in Russian civilizational framework during this timeframe. The second period saw a decreased amount of economic aid from Russia and increased Western leverage. This correlated with official Belarusian identity interpretation that strives to delineate Belarusian individuality within the civilizational metanarratives. The annexation of Crimea in April 2014, marked a new stage of national identity construction during which a new shift in the official identity narrative occurred in altered geopolitical circumstances and continuous economic rows with Russia that will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter.

3.2 The Belarusian economic miracle and heydays of Russo-Belarusian unity

The post-Soviet identity formation in Belarus has been heavily influenced by the considerations of regime sustainment that reflected institutional identity discourse embedded in Russia's civilizational framework as a means of maintaining close ties with Russia, and that way limiting the democratizing pressure from the West.

The economic support was provided by Russia especially in terms of privileged energy trade terms occupied an important position in this relationship and the influx of Russian subsidies was exceptionally intense in the first decade of Lukashenka's rule and the integration

[56] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

process of both states into a Union state. The interpretation of the Belarusian national idea was during Yeltsin's presidency very much relying on the broader metanarratives that conceptualized Belarus within the overarching Russian identity umbrella that took the form of Panslavism, Sovietness. This type of identity interpretation was a precondition for the establishment of a relationship with Russia that would economically help limiting the democratizing pressure from the West.

In the first years of independence, both countries signed multiple bilateral treaties with the aim of establishing the Union State of Russia and Belarus that would facilitate economic, political and military integration.[57] Margarita Balmaceda emphasizes that the lack of institutionalization and blurriness of this relationship, in fact, allowed Belarus to continuously extract energy rents and other subsidies from Russia. She provides illuminating insights into the Belarusian "energy political model" through which Lukashenka was capable of gathering great amounts of energy rents and utilized them for the sake of gaining popular support on domestic level and thus limited the democratization pressure from international actors. 'The Belarausian energy model' facilitated an asymmetric relationship characterized by the provision of tangible and intangible goods to Russia from Belarus, in exchange for preferential trade conditions in terms of external energy rents. Lukashenka capitalized on transit fees, price differentials, and re-exports to produce profits which are being redistributed between the actors on domestic level and further increase his popularity and strengthen the social contract.[58]

Furthermore, Balmaceda points out that Belarus, besides being the principal beneficiary in the asymmetric relationship, was also a supplier of tangible goods, such as military capacities, and, more importantly, intangible goods in the form of psychological support of

[57] Ambrosio, "The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations."
[58] Margarita M. Balmaceda, "Energy Policy in Belarus: Authoritarian Resilience, Social Contracts, and Patronage in a Post-Soviet Environment," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 55, no. 5 (September 3, 2014): 514–36, doi:10.1080/15387216.2015.1028083.

Russia's self-esteem.[59] The strategy of Lukashenka in this line consisted of exploiting the traumatic loss of Russia's sphere of influence through manipulation of psychological uncertainties that are rooted in the collapse of the USSR. By offering an alliance, Belarus provided a self-esteem boost that was explicitly or implicitly granted not just in terms of alliance but also as a guarantee of a revived Union, a continuation of a powerful and thriving Soviet Union.[60]

Underlying this psychological support was the national identity discourse that positioned Belarus within a greater Russian civilization. The presence of a countervailing hegemonic power in the region that would enhance the resilience of Lukashenka's regime influenced the national identity formation which defined the Belarusian nation as a part of greater Russian civilization and in this sense provided the psychological support. The official interpretation of the Belarusian idea in this period was based on the idea of Slavic unity and Soviet traditions, relying on Russian language and culture as an integral part of the cultural and historical legacy of Belarus, supported by a shared religious tradition of Orthodox Church.[61] This national identity interpretation rejected the significance of a distinctive national idea of Belarusianness, and the idea of the Belarusian independence itself.[62]

Drawing on, what Wilson calls Pan-Slavic or Russophile historiography, the official idea of Belarusiannsess has had its particular mythic structure. First of all, it is the tradition of the common roots of the three Slavic peoples, which is strengthened by separation myths claiming that their separation in 13 – 17th centuries was an unnatural outcome of political divisions and thus it was only superficial.[63] Emanating from this are the reunion myths of 17th

[59] Margarita Mercedes Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk : Russian Energy Rents, Domestic Populism and Belarus' Impending Crisis* (Budapest ; New York : Central European University Press, 2014, 2012).
[60] Ibid.
[61] Bekus, "Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus."
[62] Lastouski, "Russo-Centrism as an Ideological Project of Belarusian Identity."
[63] Andrew Wilson, "National History and Identity in Ukraine and Belarus," in *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities*, ed. Graham Smith et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

and 18th centuries, parallel to the common Orthodox traditions and a resulting presence of 'a community of faith' which is the main motivating factor for their reunion. The final myth concerns the current statehood of Belarus and Ukraine, which is seen as a result of their shared labors during the period of Soviet rule.[64]

At the ideological center of this project lies the image of the Belarusians as an integral component of the Russian people.[65] The concept of Russian people is conceived as a super-ethnos which unites Great Russians with Little Russians (Ukrainians), and White Russians (Belarusians). This super-ethnos is distinctive for their unity in terms of language and culture and their common set of values and mentality.[66] Belarus was seen as superior to Europe since it managed to preserve its spirituality that has been missing elsewhere in Europe. The discourse of the first decade was entirely focused on the ethnic, historical, and spiritual unity of both nations.[67] References to the Slavic unity that depends on the culture of Russia and a particular Belarusian mentality with its exclusive qualities, served as a counterweight to the western principles. [68] Overall, this official national project was organized around the concept of a supreme Slavic civilization, at the core of which is Russia.[69]

3.3 External factors and their impact on domestic support

The official Belarusian identity discourse was significantly coinciding with the Russian one especially in the first six years of Lukashenka's rule when the official interpretation was intertwined with the Soviet and Slavic references and presented a driving force behind the integration process of both states. Russia's identity discourse interpreted Belarus as an allied

[64] Ibid.
[65] Lastouski, "Russo-Centrism as an Ideological Project of Belarusian Identity."
[66] Ibid.
[67] White and Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*.
[68] Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*.
[69] White and Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*.

fraternal nation and positively evaluated the prospects of 're-integration' of both states.[70] The Russian fraternity narrative "has organized the events in Russo-Belarusian relations into a linear sequence of success stories that is directed at further integration based on the Union State."[71]

Public opinion polls available from this period suggest that this type of national identity interpretation was supported by a majority of population. In a 1994 referendum, 82,3 % of the population voted for economic integration with Russia. Although the fairness of the vote was questioned by international observers, numbers of the independent surveys point to a high support from the population.[72] In the 1995 referendum, one of the three questions was concerned with the replacement of the former state symbols, which were introduced in the period of Belarusization and represented the ethnolinguistic interpretation of the Belarusian nation. These were to be replaced with modified versions of a national flag and emblem from the time of Soviet Belarus after 75,1% of the participants expressed their support for this measure. In another question 83,3 % of participants voted to give equal status of the Russian and Belarusian languages. Turnout was 64,8% of the population.

Based on the survey conducted by the Center for Sociological Research based in Moscow in 1999, the integration with Russia was supported by 77 % of Belarusians based on the premise that "Russians and Belarusians are historically one people, they are spiritually close, and have similar languages, cultures, and traditions."[73]

The appeal of Russo-centric interpretation of Belarusian identity was dominating within the society during the period when Russia's fraternal narrative was aligned with the official

[70] Ian Klinke, "Geopolitical Narratives on Belarus in Contemporary Russia," *Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2008): 109–31.
[71] Ibid., 116–17.
[72] Nezavisimaya Gazeta in Clelia Rontoyanni, "A Russo-Belarusian 'Union State': A Defensive Response to Western Enlargement?," Working paper 10/00 (University of Glasgow, 1997), http://www.mcrit.com/scenarios/visionsofeurope/documents/one%20Europe%20or%20Several/C%20Rontoyanni%20.pdf.
[73] survey cited in Clelia Rontoyanni, "Belarus and the East," in *Postcommunist-Belarus*, ed. Stephen White, Elena Korosteleva, and John Löwenhardt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 134, https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780742535558/Postcommunist-Belarus.

narrative and due to the fact that Russia was the main supplier of economic help which is linked to the authoritarian calculations of Lukashenka's regime. This officially-constructed identity enjoyed throughout the Yeltsin's presidency highest amount of support from the population.

A combination of low Western leverage, caused by an exceeding economic support from Russia, and alignment of Belarusian institutional identity discourse with the identity of the Black knight, created conditions for a strong support base of Belarusian identity that is firmly embedded in Russian civilizational space. On the other hand, the competing narrative of Belarus that was in juxtaposition to the Lukashenka's interpretation of Belarusianness received very little support. There are few opinion polls available to confirm the appeal of the alternative identity discourse based on ethnolinguistic characteristics of Belarus, but from the opinion polls presented, it can be concluded that it was marginal.

3.4. Belarus as a unique component of the Russian civilizational framework

Beginning the second decade of Lukashenka's rule, Russia's support turned out to be more precarious. The reductions in terms of energy subsidies from 2004 on revealed the insecure status of Russia as a patron and made Belarus vulnerable towards increased Western leverage.[74] The structure of the union and the anxious relationship with Putin, who assumed the office in 2000, became a subject of disputes and thwarted any substantial progress of the integration process.[75] This relationship failed to be institutionalized in many aspects, in a sense that, not only the real union was not established, but also many of the formal agreements signed between the parties were not adhered to. The integration of both states remained only on virtual level, with Belarus consistently maintaining rhetoric of unification, however in practice little of that manifested.[76]

[74] Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
[75] Ambrosio, "The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations."
[76] Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk*.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the process of integration of the two states came to the stage when Russian authorities indicated that Belarus would have to be incorporated into Russia in order to profit from the privileged economic conditions it had been provided with until then. This would however undermine the unlimited authority of Lukashenka in Belarus and thus he quickly shifted his rhetoric towards the topics of sovereignty and independence.[77]

The gas cut-off in February 2004 represented a new landmark in the Russia-Belarus economic relationship that was followed by numerous disputes over economic issues.[78] The series of 'micro-wars' which ensued, included recurrent and persisting conflicts over oil and gas in 2004, 2006-07, 2010-11 and the 'milk', 'meat', 'sugar', and 'machinery' wars taking place between 2009-10.[79] The cycles of conflicts with Russia were partly a result of changes within the approach of Russia in relation to its near-abroad, seeking to set the relations on more pragmatic commercial terms and simultaneously seeking to take control over the strategic commercial assets and pipelines.[80] The disputes should be also seen in the context of negotiation processes over Belarus' participation and membership in the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) and afterwards Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The micro wars that took place therefore stalled the process of launching EEU by several years.[81]

The Black-knight support in this period decreased and the economic situation in the country worsened in the face of declining economic help and concessions made towards Russia. However, in spite of the cycles of conflicts, Belarus still continued to enjoy comparatively

[77] Natalia Leshchenko, "The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 8 (October 2008): 1419–33, doi:10.1080/09668130802292234.
[78] Balmaceda, *Living the High Life in Minsk*.
[79] Elena Korosteleva, "Belarusian Foreign Policy in a Time of Crisis," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 27, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2011): 566–86, doi:10.1080/13523279.2011.595167.
[80] Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU."
[81] Elena A. Korosteleva, "The EU and Belarus: Seizing the Opportunity?," *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*, no. 2016:13epa (November 2016), https://www.academia.edu/29648451/The_EU_and_Belarus_seizing_the_opportunity.

privileged terms for energy imports in comparison to its neighbors and paid lower prices for energy rents, remaining structurally dependent upon Russia's economic help.[82]

We can also observe that the following decade witnessed significant changes in the regional political landscape. Following the biggest EU enlargement in 2004, Belarus became a part of the European Union's neighborhood and EU's increased efforts of engagement with its Eastern neighborhood. In order to adapt to a new situation and create a 'ring of friends', the European Neighborhood Policy was launched in 2003 and later on the Eastern Partnership in 2009, creating an increased competition between the European Union and Russia over the influence in their shared neighborhood. The leverage of the EU increased during this period, as was indicated by a series of overtures made from Lukashenka towards Western democratizing pressure.

By joining EU's Eastern Partnership initiative or by close contacts with European politicians prior to fraudulent elections in 2010, Belarus on occasion flirted with the idea of engagement with the West.[83] During this period, Vadzim Smok observed that a new trend emerged: authorities started to depoliticize the cultural activities through their separation from the political actions of the opposition and thus allowed non-institutional actors to strengthen the alternative identity discourses. Since the late 2000s, Belarusian authorities amended the policy towards organizations which are not aspiring to acquire power in the sphere of politics. Smok described it as 'closing eyes' towards certain types of cultural activities not organized by the state, and not a top-down policy of Belarusization implemented by authorities. This is, however, taking place in parallel to other continuous repressions towards different cultural

[82] Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU."
[83] Yaraslau Kryvoi and Andrew Wilson, "From Sanctions to Summits: Belarus after the Ukraine Crisis," Policy paper (European Council on Foreign Relations, May 5, 2015), http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_sanctions_to_summits_belarus_after_the_ukraine_crisis3016.

projects.[84] Belarusian culture based on the ethnolinguistic understanding of Belarusian nationhood, previously limited to the sphere of intellectuals and political 'fighters for Belarus', has gained resonance among broader society, especially students and artists.[85] Therefore, there were some concessions made by Lukashenka as a result of the Western democratizing pressure. However, these were retracted soon after the Western audience recognized these actions or Russia provided means to limit the Western influence.

As Elena Korosteleva notes, there have been a set of attempts to strike a compromise with the West, nevertheless, no tangible results emerged; from the moment that the issue of EU political conditionality resurfaced, Belarusian authorities would "retreat to a zone of limited responsibilities – as a part of the defunct CIS and a paper Union with Russia".[86] The competition over the influence among the two regional hegemons facilitated conditions for Lukashenka to exploit it in order to make up for the decrease of Black knight support, while also making certain concessions towards the EU, which resulted in a shift of national identity discourse.

In light of this, it important to take into consideration Balmaceda's point about the importance of discursive mechanisms which were utilized by Lukashenka in order to cushion the policy failures in terms of reduced subsidies and economic concessions made towards Russia is important. Lukashenka's discursive management was employed in order to increase his level of support in the sphere of domestic politics, however after 2006, the EU also began to be targeted as an audience.[87] The extraction of rents from Russia took place in exchange for rhetorical affirmation of loyalty, or under Minsk's warnings of reorientation towards other international actors, including the EU. Belarusian authorities have in the course of next decade

[84] Vadzim Smok, "How Cultural NGOs Struggle for the Right to Be Belarusian," in *Civil Society in Belarus 2000–2015. Collection of Texts*, ed. Valer Bulhakau and Aliaksei Lastouski (Warsaw, Poland: East European Democratic Centre, 2015).
[85] Ibid.
[86] Korosteleva, "The EU and Belarus."
[87] Balmaceda, "Energy Policy in Belarus."

perfected the skill of maneuvering within the ambiguous relationship with Russia.[88] Behind this rhetoric of balancing between the EU and Russia can be seen an underlying transformation of the official interpretation of Belarusian national identity. The changing relationship with Russia and chronic conflicts over economic issues should therefore be viewed in the context of national identity discourse.

The institutional identity discourse began to transform at the beginning of the 2000s in order to accommodate the decreasing economic support from Russia, extract more subsidies and retain Belarus' sovereignty, and ultimately Lukashenka's grip on power. The official idea of Belarusianness during this decade sought to position Belarus more between the West and Russia, however still giving priority to the Russian civilizational affiliation. As noted by White & Fekluynina, the official Belarusian identity discourse evolved into being more ambiguous in its relation to Russia as it began emphasizing not only the exceptionality of Belarus in relation to the West but also in relation to Russia. The discourse that previously focused on spiritual and historical unity of both Slavic nations now shifted to a more uniquely Belarusian vision of the nation.[89] Similarly, Alex Nice argues that in the backdrop of changing relations with Moscow, Lukashenka's regime has been promoting a new nation-building strategy that seeks to gradually distinguish Belarus from Russia while persisting to play the card of Slavic Unity.[90] Belarusians were in the official interpretation of the national idea considered to be exceptional not because of their ethnic features, but their uniqueness dwelt in the portrayal of Belarusians as the highest standard of Eastern Slavs, who preserved their quality by drawing on their inner selves to define their priorities of further development and not being influenced by external factors.[91]

The Belarusian position in the Slavic metanarrative was thus seen as exceptional and had its special place. As Lukashenka claimed in 2003 interview:

[88] Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU."
[89] White and Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*.
[90] Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU."
[91] Leshchenko, "The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus."

> We followed our own path, and as a result we have preserved in our country, in our hearts, souls and brains all the sacred features of the Eastern European civilization. The Belarusians have preserved all the best, all the most valuable, which our nations have created for centuries.[92]

On the other hand, position of Belarus started to be increasingly interpreted as not only being unique, but also as existing between Europe and Russia, however still leaning towards Russian vector.[93]

3.5 External factors and their impact on domestic support

In this time frame, Russia retained its position of a crucial alternative source of economic and diplomatic support that still significantly constrained how the official identity is being institutionally constructed, and to a certain degree, how the Belarusian society self-identified. Since the beginning of the 2000s, we can observe a shift in the alignment between Belarusian and Russian civilizational identity as the official discourse strived to create a more unique vision of Belarus. Furthermore, the conflictual relationship between both states continued and Russia 's fraternal representation of Belarus changed towards representations of a parasite or a weak nation in need of protection[94] which set both states on unequal footing.

In the course of the next years, patterns of self-identification among Belarusians changed and support of common state with Russia declined. In 2003, 47.6 % of the people asked expressed support for the integration of Belarus and Russia[95], in 2008, only 35,7 % of respondents supported that idea, and in 2014, a mere 23,9% of surveyed favored the integration of both states.[96] This indicated that increasingly more Belarusians saw themselves as an independent nation. However, the metanarrative of Slavic civilization remained still popular

[92] Lukashenka cited in ibid., 1422.
[93] White and Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*.
[94] Klinke, "Geopolitical Narratives on Belarus in Contemporary Russia."
[95] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "Geopolitical Compass of Election," December 2006, http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1790&lang=en.
[96] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "March 2016: Conflict in Ukraine: A Russian View from Belarusian Eyes," *Www.iiseps.org*, March 31, 2016, http://www.iiseps.org/?p=4267&lang=en.

among majority of population with 65.7 % of respondents seeing Belarus as a branch of three nations in 2006, 66,5% in 2009 and 66,6% in 2015.[97] It can be observed that Belarusians identify on more separate terms from Russia as a result of the shift in the institutional identity discourse caused by lower level of economic support from Russia and change in the relationship between both states towards a chronically conflictual one.

There is little data available to confirm the level of support for the ethnocultural understanding of Belarusianness, however it can be observed that some aspects of alternative identity discourses began to provide a feasible source of identification for the Belarusian society. According to the National opinion poll conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic Studies from 1996, only 7,8% of surveyed speak predominantly Belarusian every day, nevertheless, more than three times more respondents (25,6%) consider cultural and linguistic markers of the Belarusian nation as the crucial for group identity and nation-formation.[98] In the survey carried out in 2009 by a sociological organization NOVAK, together with the cultural initiative Budz'ma Belarusami, 38,1 % of respondents indicated that the Great Duchy of Lithuania was the source of Belarusian nationhood, 12,4 % attribute Belarusian nationhood to the Principalities of Polatsk and Turau, while merely 12,4 % linked this issue to the BSSR. The data from public surveys indicate that the concepts of ethnocultural understanding of Belarusian identity promoted by opposition discourses are being mixed with the officially maintained narrative.[99] The identification patterns remained ambivalent during this next period and we can see a limited Belarusization of society, while the civilizational narrative remains to be shared by a majority of people. It can be observed that the increase of Western leverage parallels with the rising influence of oppositional identity discourses which gained some prominence over the next decade.

[97] Ibid.
[98] Bekus, "Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus."
[99] Ibid.

Both periods thus saw the institutional identity construction to be in the context of the competitive authoritarianism calculations when the Slavic and Soviet metanarratives and their overlap with the official national identity discourse did not present an immediate danger. The officially constructed image of Belarusian community as a component of an overarching civilizational identity has, on one hand, ensured the stability of Lukashenka's rule and on the other, constrained how its ability to shift. Furthermore, there was no need for Belarusian national identity to be built upon separate ethnic and cultural understanding of Belarusianness as long as the regime sustainment could be achieved. Although the official interpretation shifted into a more unique vision of Belarus, the overall image of Belarus remained stranded within Russian multinational identity space by the state's structural dependence on Russia's economic support.

It can be also observed that the presence of Russia as a countervailing power positively influenced Lukashenka's identity campaign that positioned Belarus in its civilizational space, weakening competing oppositional identity discourses. In this way, it ensured regime survival as well as support from people identified along these lines. During the period of increased engagement with the European Union and decreased economic support from Russia, it can be observed that not only the official identity discourse shifted as a result of competitive authoritarianism calculations, but also alternative identity campaigns began to receive more support from the Belarusian society.

4. Reinterpretation of Belarusian idea as a means of countering the Russian World

This chapter demonstrates that there has been another shift in the official identity discourse as a reaction to an intensified identification campaign from Russia that seeks to gain influence among Belarusians along an alternative identity cleavage that does not recognize Belarusians as a separate ethnic group and state. This goes against the efforts of the regime that have strived in recent years to instill a vision of Belarus in more independent terms from Russia.

After the Russian intervention and military involvement in Ukraine, Lukashenka realized that the membership in the Russian civilizational space comes with a price tag attached, which could potentially result in a loss of Belarusian sovereignty and threaten the regime survival. This chapter explores this issue via the lenses of situational nationalism and how the identity shifts are constrained by the shackles of regime resilience considerations.

4.1. Continuous structural dependence

The economic dependence of Belarus upon Russia has not changed substantially after 2014 and the country remains structurally dependent on Russia's economic help as is evidenced by a $1.6 billion worth of credits provided in 2015 from Russian banks and government. Another loan of $2 billion was provided from Eurasian Development Bank of Eurasian Economic Union dominated by Moscow, while the discussions with the West in 2015 and 2016 did not result in any deal on economic support from International Monetary Fund. However, Belarus has continued to receive the preferential energy trade conditions by receiving the lowest gas and oil prices for purchasing in the region.[100]

In this timeframe, the conflict-prone relationship between Russia and Belarus remains unchanged, as another dispute over energy subsidies unfolded in 2016. The conflict began in

[100] Arkady Moshes, "Lukashenko's 'Drift To The West': Why Moscow Should Not Be Worried," September 14, 2016, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/lukashenkos-drift-west-why-moscow-should-not-be-worried.

January 2016, after Belarus appealed to Moscow for a gas price reduction due to the declining global prices and the ineptitude of Belarusian industries to stand their ground in a competition on the market of the Eurasian Economic Union, stimulated by uneven energy prices.[101] This demand was denied by Russia, and as a result, Belarus unilaterally opted for paying less, accruing a $425m debt by December 2016. As a response, Russia put new conditions on this gas debt by curtailing the influx of oil supplies to Belarus, a fundamental resource for the Belarusian economy which is dependent on revenues from oil-processing.[102] The dispute was resolved in April 2017 after Russia consented to refinancing of the Belarusian debt, while Belarus committed itself to repay more than $720 million in the gas supplies debts. The oil supplies are to be renewed and discounts on gas prices will be provided by Gazprom in 2018 and 2019.[103]

The period after 2014 also saw another round of the EU's engagement with Belarus, after 2015 Lukashenka put himself into position of peace negotiator between the West and Russia in the Ukrainian conflict and strived to put Belarus in a neutral position between the two regional powers. The sanctions against Belarus were lifted in February 2016 and Brussels agreed to cancel the travel bans and asset freezes imposed against Lukashenka and other 169 individuals.[104] Partial relaxing of the EU policy towards Belarus was however not due to the increased leverage of the West, as no real reforms were performed and Lukashenka only made skin-deep gestures by releasing several political prisoners. The 2016 Human Rights Watch report notes that the positive human rights rhetoric of the Belarusian government remained unsubstantiated by actual improvements in the area of human rights. The disputed death penalty

[101] Vadzim Smok, "Does Belarus Stand a Chance in a New Oil War with Russia?," *Belarus Digest: News and Analytics on Belarusian Politics, Economy, Human Rights and More.*, January 13, 2017, http://belarusdigest.com/story/does-belarus-stand-chance-new-oil-war-russia-28644.
[102] Smok, "Belarusian Identity: The Impact of Lukashenka's Rule."
[103] Pinchuk, "Russia and Belarus Heal Ties in Shadow of Metro Bombing," *Reuters*, April 3, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-belarus-meeting-idUSKBN17525M.
[104] Robin Emmott, "Europe Ends Sanctions on Belarus, Seeks Better Ties," *Reuters*, February 15, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-eu-sanctions-idUSKCN0VO1TP.

continues to be in use and critical journalists and activists for human rights continue being persecuted by Belarusian officials. Some progress was recognized by the international observers with regards to the parliamentary elections in 2016, however, calls for additional reforms were made.[105]

There were some concessions made by the Belarusian government also in 2017. After the harsh crackdown on protests in Spring 2017 and subsequent arrests made, Lukashenka has been releasing members of certain groups of activists, cases of whom are believed to be closely monitored by the EU. Additionally, Belarusian authorities and human rights activists held a discussion regarding the 5th periodic report by Belarus to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations.[106] Belarus also introduced a 5-day visa-free regime for 80 countries of the World, including the EU member states and the USA in January 2017 as a sign of willingness to open up to the international audience.[107]

The concessions that the EU made towards Belarus were mostly of strategic significance and not due to major improvements in human rights situation, although there are signs that Lukashenka's regime is willing to compromise to a certain degree. As pointed out by Jarábik & Kudzko, it is of special significance for the EU that Belarus remains the only country of the Eastern Partnership policy preserving its territorial integrity. In the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and Russia's involvement, Belarus emerged in a new light as a capable, although repressive, state.[108] Nevertheless, the fundamental economic support still remains provided by Russia as Belarus did not make necessary reforms in order to fulfill the conditions

[105] Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2017: Belarus. Events of 2016," Country Summary (Human Rights Watch, January 12, 2017), https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/belarus.
[106] "Belarusian Authorities Manoeuvre between Repression and Liberalization to Retain Dialogue with Western Capitals," *Belarus in Focus*, May 22, 2017, https://belarusinfocus.info/international-relations/minsk-hopes-belarusian-western-normalisation-continue.
[107] "Belarus Introduces Five-Day Visa-Free Regime for Citizens of 80 Countries," *Belarusian Telegraph Agency*, January 9, 2017, http://eng.belta.by/president/view/belarus-introduces-five-day-visa-free-regime-for-citizens-of-80-countries-97763-2017.
[108] Alena Kudzko and Balázs Jarábik, "Belarus between Elections: Lukashenka Limited," May 20, 2016, http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/belarus-between-elections-lukashenka-limited.

for provision of the Western economic assistance. The role of Russia as a guarantor of Belarusian economic performance therefore still hinders the effects of the Western leverage and limits Belarus' engagement with the West.

4.2 Belarus in the sphere of the "Russian world"

Russia's perception of Belarusians as a part of the Russian political community began to be seen as a possible threat to Lukashenka's regime after Russia's annexation of Crimea in Ukraine in April 2014.[109] This threat manifested itself in the concept of the so-called 'Russian World' (or ruskii mir) which was used as a justification for the annexation of Crimea and military interference in Ukraine.

Marlene Laruelle traces the genealogy of the concept and points out that the notion of Russian World that came into spotlight after the annexation of Crimea when this idea was employed to justify Russia's military intervention, but has been present in the official Kremlin discourse since the late 1990s. It took off in the following decade and was gradually institutionalized through the Russian state agencies, representing the policy of Russia towards its Near Abroad and a public diplomacy tool towards other countries, especially the West.[110] Laruelle argues that this concept was developed by various actors around the Kremlin, and is infused with geopolitical imagination and fuzzy structure that allows for various regions of the world and their different connections to Russia to be laid down in a fluid manner. This structural fuzziness then allows for its reinterpretation in different contexts and discourses.[111] This notion is thus a flexible tool which is being used by different actors and exists within different discourses.

[109] Although some signs could be seen already during Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, when Russian military intervention was justified also by common historical and spiritual roots of both states
[110] Andrei Yeliseyeu and Veronika Laputska, "EAST-Media-Review" (East Center. Eurasian States in Transition: East Center. Eurasian States in Transition, 2016).
[111] Ibid.

The idea of the Russian World can be also understood as representing an identity of Russia that has been disseminated by various actors who are trying to mobilize people along this cleavage. The Russian World discourse advances a concentric idea of Russian identity, placing ethnic and Orthodox Russians at the core it, and identification along all possible lines, be it language, thought, religion, history or territory, is accepted.[112] Although the content of the Russian World idea is fairly incoherent, Feklyunina identified four key themes that are being reiterated: firstly, it is imagined as a civilizational community which exists naturally and is defined by broad cultural markers – Russian language, culture, and Orthodoxy; secondly, it utilizes a specific interpretation of the 'common' past based on shared origins of now-independent states that is juxtaposed to the current status quo of separated states; thirdly, the Russian World supposes a hierarchical relationship between members of this imagined community and Russia, with Russia seen at the heart of the community; finally, it was constructed to be a 'unique civilization' that is distinct, even superior, to the West.[113]

Belarus can be considered as an integral part of this civilizational idea considering that an overwhelming majority of population speaks the Russian language which has a status of an official language, the Orthodox church is a dominant religion among Belarusians, and Belarus is at the core of the narration of the three branches of Russian people. Moreover, the official national discourse has since 1994 focused with a differing intensity on the narrative of Belarus as a part of Russian civilizational space. Especially in the first years of integration process the official discourse greatly overlapped with the current interpretations of the Russian World.

In addition to that, the Kremlin's officials have long seen the policies pursued towards Belarus as an extension of Russia's principles of domestic order. This is a consequence of the

[112] Marlene Laruelle, "Inside and Around the Kremlin's Black Box: The New Nationalist Think Tanks in Russia," Stockholm Paper, Stockholm Papers Series (Sweden: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2009), http://isdp.eu/content/uploads/images/stories/isdp-main-pdf/2009_laruelle_inside-and-around-the-kremlins-black-box.pdf.
[113] Valentina Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian World (S),'" *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2016): 773–796.

fact that Belarus had been for a time a semi-endogenous element in domestic politics of Russia due to the Union State integration process in 1990s.[114] Therefore, as a result of the integration project that blurred the distinction between these two levels, Belarus has been occupying a liminal position between Russian domestic and foreign policy.[115]

Besides being used as an argument for Russia's interference into domestic affairs of its near abroad or as a public diplomacy tool, the idea of the Russian World represents a supranational civilizational identity that spills over the political boundaries of Belarus, imagining Belarusians as a part of the Russian political community. It creates an alternative source of identification for a portion of Belarusian society and weakens the official identity discourse which has been increasingly emphasizing distinctness of the Belarusian nation. In order to counter the effects/appeal of this identity on Belarusian domestic level, Lukashenka has been trying to shift the understating of Belarusianness.

4.2 Agents of the Russian World in Belarus

There are various ways how this supranational form of identity is being transmitted to Belarus and one of them is media. Russian mass media in Belarus have a vast coverage and a significant impact on Belarusian society. Although Belarusian authorities identified this threat early on, the censorship of Russian informational and analytical programs has been focused only on the criticism applied towards Lukashenka's regime which was crucial during previous disputes with Russia.[116] According to Igor Buzovskiy, the deputy head of presidential administration, 65 % of Belarusian media content originates in Russia, and therefore, it should be a subject of

[114] Hannes Adomeit, "Russia and Its Near Neighbourhood: Competition and Conflict with the EU," Natolin Research Papers (Poland: College of Europe Natolin Campus, April 2011).
[115] Nice, "Playing Both Sides: Belarus between Russia and the EU."
[116] Aliaksei Lastouski, "Belarus - In the Tight Embrace of the 'Russian World': Belarusian Reactions to Events in Ukraine - Cultures of History Forum," May 7, 2014, http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/focus/ukrainian-crisis/belarus-in-the-tight-embrace-of-the-russian-world-belarusian-reactions-to-events-in-ukraine/.

concern in terms of national and information security.[117] Furthermore, based on the findings of The Belarusian Analytical Workroom, 73,1 % of Belarusian respondents claimed in December 2014 that they trusted Russian media (to differing degrees), demonstrating the extent to which Russia is able to shape Belarusian public opinion.[118]

The power of Russian media over public opinion is important to consider, as Belarus has been since 2014 a target of an unprecedented Russian media campaign advocating the idea of Russian World, in which Russian media agencies such as Regnum.ru, Zapadrus.ru, or Sputnikpogrom.com, have been promoting the idea of Belarus as a part of the Russian World. Various ideas that fall within the flexible category of the Russian World are gathered on these websites. There are claims that deny the existence of Belarusians as a nation and positing that Belarusians are thus far only a project. This is taken even further by asserting that this project was created by Poles for the sake of dismembering Russian people.[119]

Further claims revolve around the idea that the Belarusian nation is seen as a fiction, for example, Belarusians are perceived as a local kind of Russian people, and the Belarusian language is either an artificial creation or a Russian dialect. These media outlets also claim that there is an overwhelming popular support of Belarusians for reunification with the great Motherland Russia or that Belarus, which is outside the political and cultural space of Russia, was reduced to a regional province.[120] The narratives these media outlets are dispersing do not see Belarus as a separate state, even nation. Rather, they deny the existence of Belarusian culture and envisage it as a part of Russia. In this way, the discourse of the Russian World

[117] Moshes, "Lukashenko's 'Drift To The West.'"
[118] The Belarusian Analytical Workroom cited in Olga Karatch, "Opinion: Four Russian Instruments of Control over Belarus," *Belarus Digest: News and Analytics on Belarusian Politics, Economy, Human Rights and More.*, September 13, 2016, http://belarusdigest.com/story/opinion-four-russian-instruments-control-over-belarus-27210.
[119] Andrei Yeliseyeu and Veronika Laputska, "EAST-Media-Review" (East Center. Eurasian States in Transition: East Center. Eurasian States in Transition, 2016).
[120] Ibid.

challenges the nationhood and statehood of Belarus and weakens the officially and unofficially produced interpretations of the Belarusian nation.

This intense media promotion is supplemented also by domestic activity of Belarus-located organizations that advance similar ideas from within the territory of Belarus. There are various active cultural, educational, and youth associations active which are involved in the advocacy of Russian language, culture and educational activities. Their general message resides in a claim that there are many ties between cultural and historical traditions of Belarus and Russia.[121] For instance, the agenda of a youth organization, 'Young Russia,' is to work with young Belarusians and arrange educational and sports events advancing the values of the Russian World. The report by Klysinski and Żochowski draws attention also to the Belarusian Orthodox Church and structures affiliated with it, which have an important role among the above mentioned pro-Russian organizations which operate in Belarus, being one of the primary vehicles that promote the notion of the Russian World.[122]

In addition to that, there are also military organizations increasingly active on the territory of Belarus which include Cossack organizations, patriotic military clubs such as Soldiers of Russian World, or unions of Afghan war veterans which are being mobilized around the idea of the Russian world.[123]

4.3 Patterns of identification in Belarus

The national opinion polls conducted during this period show that more than half of the population still continue to identify with the officially promoted metanarrative of East Slavic

[121] Kamil Klysinski and Piotr Żochowski, "The End Of The Myth of a Brotherly Belarus? Russian Soft Power in Belarus after 2014: The Background and Its Manifestations. OSW STUDIES 58 November 2016," OSW STUDIES 58 November 2016 (Warsaw, Poland: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2016), http://aei.pitt.edu/82183/.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Karatch, "Opinion: Four Russian Instruments of Control over Belarus"; Nasha Niva, "Voiny Khrista: Kak Otdel'nye Svyashchenniki I Ofitsery Na Grodnenshchine Gotovyat Soldat «russkogo Mira»," *Наша Ніва*, accessed May 29, 2017, http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=158906&lang=ru.

civilization, however the support for integration with Russia remains low. According to the opinion poll conducted in 2016 by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), over 65 % of surveyed expressed support over the well-advocated idea of three branches of Russian people and only 28% agree with the statement that they are three distinct nations.[124] The public opinion polls are however important to examine in the context of the identity discourse of the Russian World, as Belarusians due to previously mentioned factors could potentially mobilize around this identity campaign.

The opinion poll conducted by the IISEPS in summer 2014 showed that, when Belarusian respondents were asked "If Russia annexed Belarus or its part, what would you do?" only 14,2 % of surveyed said that they would "resist up in arms", a striking 47,7 % said that would "try to adapt to a new situation" and 16,5 % would "greet these changes."[125] When asked the same question one year later 18,7 % replied they would "resist up in arms", 52,8 % said they would 'try to adapt to a new situation' and 12,1 % responded they would "greet these changes."[126] Moreover, the survey conducted in 2015 revealed that 39 % of Belarusian respondents evaluated the idea of Russian World positively and 40 % remained indifferent towards it.[127] The support for the annexation of Crimea as a "restitution of Russian lands and reestablishment of social justice" oscillated between 62 – 57 % between 2014 - 2016.[128]

The results of the public surveys imply that there is a portion of society that identifies with the idea of the Russian World and this identity discourse is capable of influencing the domestic identification patterns. In addition to that, many of the military patriotic organizations

[124] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "March 2016."
[125] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "If Tomorrow War Breaks Out...," *Www.iiseps.org*, July 11, 2014, http://www.iiseps.org/?p=1438&lang=en.
[126] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "Paradoxes of the 'Russian World' in Belarus," *www.iiseps.org*, July 7, 2015, http://www.iiseps.org/?p=846&lang=en.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, "March 2016."

have already recruited members based on this supranational identity which does not consider the Belarusian sovereignty as something that should be necessarily maintained.

As a reaction to this, the Belarusian government has shifted the interpretation of Belarusian identity in a manner that would distinguish Belarus from Russia based on ehtnolingusitc markers which were previously neglected and securitized.

4.4. Ethnolinguistic markers in the official identity discourse

The Russian annexation of Crimea, the aggressive campaign of Russian media, together with the increased activity of organizations promoting the idea of Russian World in Belarus have directly affected how the national identity discourse has been articulated since 2014. Thus, a shift can be observed between April 2014 - February 2017, which is the period under scrutiny in this chapter.

In his State of the Nation Address which took place nearly a month after the annexation of Crimea, Lukashenka reacted with a proclamation "we are not Russians, we are Belarusians!"[129] Such a strong statement and the general condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine are in sharp contrast to Lukashenka's reaction towards Russia's military involvement in Georgia in 2008. After the initial silence, the Belarusian President expressed agreements with these actions commenting: "The President of Russia showed wisdom during the aggression. It was a quiet calm reaction. Peace has been established in the region for a very long time. It was done neatly, beautifully."[130] However, since April 2014 the official discourse shifted the way Belarusian community is imagined vis-à-vis Russia again. Lukashenka very clearly rejected the overarching identity of Russia that has been intensively promoted since then, by stating that

[129] Alyaksandr Lukashenka, "State of the Nation Address to the Belarusian People and the National Assembly," *President of the Republic of Belarus*, April 22, 2014, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/alexander-lukashenko-to-deliver-state-of-the-nation-address-on-22-april-8550/.
[130] Pravda.ru, "Lukashenko Schitaet Deystviya Rossii v Yuzhnoy Osetii Mudrymi Chitayte Bol'she," *Pravda.ru*, August 19, 2008, https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/formerussr/19-08-2008/279907-belarus-0/.
[all the translations from here on were made by the author from Russian to English language]

"Belarus is not part of the Russian World" and, furthermore, elements of opposition discourses began to be incorporated into the institutionally promoted vision of Belarusianness.[131]

The question of language figures quite prominently among his speeches which touch upon the issue of Belarusian nationhood. In his 2014 State of the Nation Address, he addressed the topic of Russian language as a reaction to Russia's use of the Russian World concept by stating that:

> We made Russian our official language in the period when Russia and Russians were routinely humiliated…More than that, we believe (and I reiterated it many times) that the Russian language is a common asset of the three brotherly nations – Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians…The language is ours. It is neither Russia's nor Ukraine's. It is ours. It is a living asset of Belarusians, too.[132]

Lukashenka underlined the messianic role of Belarus in saving the status of Russian language by adopting it as an official state language, while Russia's position on the global stage declined with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The emphasis on common civilizational roots of the three nations was present as well, as Lukashenka marked the role of Russian language as a part of the shared culture of the three brotherly nations.

However, what is also of importance is that Lukashenka gave equal footing to the Belarusian language, which was previously marginalized by these policies, by stating that "The great Russian language will be developing freely in Belarus alongside the native Belarusian language. If we lose the Russian language, we will lose our minds."[133] Even more interestingly, behind the seemingly equal position of both languages, the Belarusian President assigned a privileged position to Belarusian language. The head of the state proclaimed that: "If we stop speaking the Belarusian language, we will cease to be a nation." This indicated that the Belarusian language position has been elevated to a privileged one vis-à-vis Russian language; a trend which has been steadily reappearing and increasing in the official identity discourse.

[131] "Lukashenko: Belarus Is Not Part of 'Russian World,'" *Unian Information Agency*, January 30, 2015, //www.unian.info/politics/1038195-lukashenko-belarus-is-not-part-of-russian-world.html.
[132] Lukashenka, "State of the Nation Address to the Belarusian People and the National Assembly."
[133] Ibid.

The Belarusian President reiterated the importance of Belarusian language again at the 42nd congress of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union in January 2015. According to him, "culture is what makes a Belarusian a Belarusian, and not just a 'local,' no matter where in the world he is. It is not only our rich heritage: literature, music, architecture - but also the language we need to know, a history that we must remember, and values that we must respect."[134] The Belarusian language is seen increasingly as a characteristic feature of Belarusian nationhood, and a distinguishing marker of Belarusianness.

Later on, at a press conference in January 2015, the theme of Belarusian language appeared in his speech once again. He proclaimed:

> The Russian language, like the Belarusian language, is the property of our nation. Our people have suffered a lot to make our Russian language native. I consider him to be my native language, the overwhelming number consider him his native language. This is our wealth. But I also support the Belarusian language. This is what distinguishes us from the Russian people, from Russians. If you do not have a characteristic feature, your Belarusian language, then you are just Russian. But we are Belarusians. Therefore, along with the Russian language we have the Belarusian language, which distinguishes us from Russians as a nation. We should know the Belarusian language in the same way as Russian. Therefore, I do not want to lose this treasure. It is more expensive than any loans and billions.[135]

The language issue has become a recurring theme in the official identity discourse and the status of the Belarusian language continues to rise as it has become also a distinguishing feature of Belarusians not simply among the 'Russians' as in a civilizational meaning of the three branches of nations, but also as a feature which makes Belarusians special in comparison to Russians.

The language theme continued to resonate also in 2017 as Lukashenka claimed that he is "against flaunting the Belarusian language" and accordingly it is time for Belarusians to "learn how to speak the Belarusian language very well." However, attempting to balance out

[134] "Istoriyu Belarusi I Geografiyu Budut Prepodavat' Na Belorusskom Yazyke," *TUT.BY*, January 21, 2015, https://news.tut.by/society/432381.html.
[135] Belorusskiy partizan, "Lukashenko: Russkiy Yazyk - Eto Dostoyanie Nashey Natsii," *Belorusskiy Partizan*, accessed May 27, 2017, http://www.belaruspartisan.org/life/293604/.

its relationship with Russia, he stated that Belarusians should not give up on the Russian language at the expense of their native one and he will not allow any divisions to be made based on language.[136]

Since April 2014, the Belarusian President has delivered several speeches in thr Belarusian language and spoke about the need to implement 'Soft Belarusization' in juxtaposition to the 'Russian World'.[137] In addition to that, the erection of a monument honoring Algerd, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, in Vitebsk, a town close to the Russian border is also indicative of the shift in the national identity discourse. The symbolical meaning of this statue is important, as it runs in contradiction with the previously espoused narrative of historical unity and friendship between Russia and Belarus. This stems from the historical role of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as an enemy of Moscow and the Grand Duke Algerd, whose territory was doubled through the military confrontations with Moscow. The statue was erected despite the Vitebsk Communists and Cossacks appeals to Lukashenka not to do it.[138] It can be observed therefore that ethnolinguistic elements from competing identity discourses have begun to be incorporated into the official identity discourse, and seen as a viable source for reinterpretation of the institutional identity interpretation.

However, despite the presence of ethnolinguistic elements in the identity discourse which are mostly focused on the role of the Belarusian language, the President has still maintained the Russian civilizational metanarrative of common historical and spiritual roots of brotherly nations, which is structurally constrained by Belarus' dependence on Russia. Lukashenka claimed in his 2014 speech:

[136] Alyaksandr Lukashenka, "Vstrecha S Predstavitelyami Obshchestvennosti, Belorusskikh I Zarubezhnykh SMI 'Bol'shoy Razgovor S Prezidentom,'" 3 February 2017, *President of the Republic of Belarus*, (n.d.), http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-predstaviteljami-obschestvennosti-belorusskix-i-zarubezhnyx-smi-15509/.
[137] Vadim Mojeiko, "Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka's Domestic Policy?," *Belarus Digest: News and Analytics on Belarusian Politics, Economy, Human Rights and More.*, April 21, 2015, http://belarusdigest.com/story/soft-belarusization-new-shift-lukashenkas-domestic-policy-22434.
[138] Ibid.

> The three nations are united by a common historical background, great common victories, and common Orthodox spiritual traditions. Kievan Rus was our cradle. It was a powerful and proud European state with the capital on the Dnieper River. Three brotherly nations, distinctive nations, rose from this common spiritual Orthodox cradle. [139]

Continuing the trend of previous discursive strategy which emphasizes that Belarus has a distinct position among three branches of Russians, he did not fail to mention all the nations are independent and that: "each of these three nations now builds their own state."[140] Similarly, in his 2016 State of the Nation Address, Lukashenka emphasized the separate position of Belarus within Russian civilizational space by claiming that:

> …I want the Russians to understand, especially the leadership of Russia, that we will not be 'errand-boys.' We are an independent sovereign state, living with you in the same house, but having its own apartment, although small, but its *own* apartment.[141]

We can thus discern a shift in the national identity discourse which now contains also markers of an ethnolinguistic character, based on which Belarus is being defined not only within the Slavic framework, but in relation to Russia specifically as well. These markers are now, however, mostly limited to the Belarusian language and should be seen as a reaction to the dangers of situational nationalism, when part of the society could be mobilized around the alternative identity discourse of the Russian World that does not recognize the nationhood and statehood of Belarus. The overall discourse however still remains trapped in the Russian civilizational space and the transformation remains limited, as the Belarusian regime continues to espouse the ideas of common Slavic roots and spiritual proximity of the three branches of nations.

The official interpretation of the Belarusian idea continues to be constrained by the calculations of competitive authoritarianism, meaning that while Russia the position of a

[139] Lukashenka, "State of the Nation Address to the Belarusian People and the National Assembly."
[140] Lukashenka, "State of the Nation Address to the Belarusian People and the National Assembly."
[141] Alyaksandr Lukashenka, "State of the Nation Address of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko," *President of the Republic of Belarus*, April 21, 2016, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/alexander-lukashenko-delivers-state-of-the-nation-address-on-21-april-13519/.

countervailing economic power determines the regime survival, the institutional identity construction will continue to be embedded within Russian civilizational metanarrative.

Conclusion

The fluid identity setting of Belarus can be described as an arena of competing interpretations of Belarusian identity, where the successes and failures of particular players can be influenced by the forces outside of the playing field. The post-Soviet identity formation by President Lukashenka has been influenced by the considerations of regime sustainment that reflected institutional identity discourse embedded in Russia's civilizational framework as a means of maintaining close ties with Russia and limiting the democratizing pressure from the West. Popular support for the Russo-centric national identity was during this time strongest, as the presence of Russia enhanced its success, and ethnolinguistic version of Belarusian identity project received only marginal support. The low level of the Western leverage combined with a high degree of support from Russia during the first years of Lukashenka's rule created the highest level of popular self-definition via the institutionalized idea of Belarusianness and marginalized the alternative identity discourse.

At the beginning of the 2000s, economic aid from Russia declined and both countries got into a series of conflicts over the economic and trade issues which persisted throughout the whole period under scrutiny. This was paralleled by an increase of the Western leverage as the EU began to be more engaged via its policies towards the Eastern neighborhood, and a series of overtures were made by Lukashenka towards the West. In order to adapt to a new situation, Lukashenka shifted the identity rhetoric towards a more independent and unique idea of Belarus within the overarching Russian narrative. Although Lukashenka began positioning Belarus between Russia and the West, the institutional discourse remained leaning more towards the Russian vector, as the official idea of Belarusianness remained grounded in the Russian civilizational space due to the structural dependence of Belarus upon Russia. The combination of the medium level of Western leverage and lower level of support from Russia indicated that

Belarusians started to identify more distinctively vis-à-vis the concept of Eastern Slavic civilization and some ethnic characteristic started to be shared by a part of Belarusian society.

Another shift in the institutional identity discourse occurred in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in April 2014. While the third timeframe has continued with the cycles of conflicts with Russia and a small increase of the Western leverage, Belarus still remains overwhelmingly dependent upon Russian subsidies. Russia's military intervention in Ukraine justified by the idea of the 'Russian World' and an intense promotion of this discourse in Belarus, however, revealed the risks national identity embedded in the Russian metanarrative can produce in this fluid identity setting.

The idea of the Russian World appeals to the members of the Belarusian society through interpretations which deny Belarusian nationhood and statehood, calling for its incorporation into Russian political community. In this way, the Russian world's identity discourse weakens the institutionalized and alternative domestic identity interpretations. Constructing the Belarusian national identity in a Russo-centric framework now appears not only as a threat for the regime resilience, but also for the sovereignty of the state itself. As a reaction to this, the official interpretation of Belarusianness has been redefined in a manner which began interpreting it also in ethnolinguistic terms, for now mostly limited to the Belarusian language. The institutional identity discourse, nevertheless, remains constrained by the broader framework of Russian civilization metanarrative due to an overwhelming structural dependence of Belarus upon Russia. It is questionable whether a situation similar to Ukraine would unfold in Belarus, however the fact that Lukashenka's regime perceives it as a potential security risk is enough to stimulate a partial redefinition of Belarusian identity.

The broader implication of this case study is that the coalescence of distinct types of international pressures in a fluid and competitive identity setting can enhance and weaken particular types of national identity campaigns. A combination of different levels of

democratizing pressure and alternative support from a hegemonic power providing the means of the authoritarian regime maintenance has two effects. Firstly, it creates different patterns of self-identification among the society, and secondly, it affects how the national identity discourse is constructed. The stronger the support of an alternative hegemonic power is, the stronger the appeal of the particular national identity campaign is for the population. The patterns of identification are shifting based on the level of support this actor provides, in an environment where multiple identity discourses are competing with each other. Therefore, domestic actors construct and shift the interpretations of national idea based on the support from international actors, in order to adapt to differing conditions.

The presence of an alternative hegemonic power in the region may, however, also lead to a situational nationalism, as these actors can (like in case of Russia) offer an alternative source of identification, and therefore, reduce the identification of the society along the domestically promoted interpretations of national idea. As a reaction to this, the identity discourse shaped by a particular actor may transform in a way that would counter the effects of situational nationalism. The presence of a rivaling identity campaign beyond the borders of the nation state stimulates reinterpretation of a particular national idea in a fashion that would provide the state institutions or other nationalizing actors with a broader support base among the society.

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