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THE END OF THE "POST"? BELARUSIAN ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY AFTER THE SOVIET ERA

ETHNOLOGIA POLONA

INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY
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S P E C I A L I S S U E

INTRODUCTION: THE END OF THE "POST"? BELARUSIAN ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY AFTER THE SOVIET ERA[1]

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The idea for this issue was born in the summer of 2024, during a conference in Sanok, Poland, devoted to building dialogue between Polish and Ukrainian anthropologists[2]. The organisers invited Katarzyna Waszczyńska and Stsiapan Zakharkevich to introduce the participants to the situation of ethnology in and of Belarus, in the form of a discussion panel. Anna Engelking, a co-editor of this special issue, was also present during this conference. This special issue can be seen as an extension of this event.

We decided not to narrow the issue to a specific topic or issue, but to take a generalist approach. Our question has been: How diverse are the approaches among ethnologists, anthropologists, ethnographers – whatever they call themselves – who are engaged with Belarus both as researchers as well as citizens? What issues do they address? What methods do they use? What theoretical fields do they refer to? It is worth recalling Chris Hann's words in the preface to the now-classic book *One Discipline, Four Paths*:

> It seems to me undeniable that the diverse trajectories of anthropology (which, of course, we take as an umbrella concept, subsuming fields such as ethnology and ethnography, as well as folklore, museum studies, and so on) have indeed been deeply marked by their "national" settings, that is, by different intellectual contexts as well as different social and political environments. This is nowhere more evident than in East-Central Europe. (Hann 2005: VIII)

It was this notion that became the foundational idea for this issue. We have abandoned disciplinary distinctions such as ethnology, anthropology, folklore studies

1 This research was supported by EU4Belarus – SALT II grant number ENI/2021/423-841-0057

2 See conference report here: https://journals.iaepan.pl/ethp/article/view/3959

and others, although they do exist in contemporary Belarus. We have sought to preserve and convey what can be called the Belarusian intellectual context, in which researchers move and of which they are a part. We also wanted to show the spectrum of this intellectual context as it is reflected in the differences between the modes of writing articles in this volume, their themes, logic, methodology and theoretical approaches. We do not want to speculate about the relations of those differences to factors such as generational differences or the greater or lesser involvement of particular authors in Western academia. We leave all this to attentive readers. Our goal is to show the spectrum in which the academics who base their work on research in Belarus move.

Why does the title of this issue, *The End of the "Post"?*, end with a question mark? The prefix "post-" often denotes a theoretical or historical departure from the previous dominant paradigm. This does not always imply a complete rejection, but rather a reassessment and engagement with the legacy of the previous era. Examples include postsocialism, poststructuralism and postprocessual archaeology, each of which represents a departure from or critique of prior approaches. Our reflections and decisions were obviously influenced by the concept of postsocialism, used in reference to Central and Eastern Europe for over thirty years now. Postsocialism is not simply the period after socialism, it also reflects an attitude towards the socialist past, often implying the need to overcome its legacy (Humphrey 2002, Buchowski 2012, Müller 2019, Šliavaitė 2020). Our title signifies not only a recognition of the need for change in Belarusian ethnology and anthropology but also an actual shift in methodology, subject matter and critical reflection on the role of the past period. We did not seek to conceptualise the development of Belarusian scholarship in a unilinear, directed manner. The question mark signifies the ambiguity or impossibility of determining a specific chronological framework for the post- related changes. The issue also includes texts by authors who either no longer feel the influence of the Soviet era on the development of ethnology/anthropology in Belarus or have managed to avoid it, pursuing their academic careers outside of Belarus. The title problematises the theme of continuity, power and categorisation (Šliavaitė 2020, 12).

The release of the "Belarusian" issue of the journal *Etnologia Polona* coincides with the de facto centenary of Belarusian academic ethnology. While this was not the original intention, the issue ultimately has a symbolic and commemorative dimension. In March 1925, a separate structural unit, the Ethnographic Commission, was established at the Institute of Belarusian Culture in Minsk.[3] It was intended to become a centre for the development of research on the culture of Belarusians and other peoples inhabiting Belarus. In the summer of 1925, the Ethnographic

3 The first Belarusian academic institution (1922), which in 1929 was transformed into the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. In Belarusian historiography, it is commonly abbreviated as Inbelkult.

Commission announced its research plans and began its work that fall. The commission gathered those interested in the ethnography of Belarus at the time (a very small group, likely no more than a dozen people). It is worth noting that professional ethnographers (those with specialised higher education and a clear understanding of ethnographic research methodology) were virtually nonexistent at the time. Ethnography was primarily carried out by well-educated humanities scholars with backgrounds in history, philology or literary criticism. The commission brought together a small group of researchers – Isaak Serbov, Mikhail Meleshko, Alexander Shlyubsky, Nikolai Kasperovich, Vaclav Lastovsky and others. This largely represented a nationally oriented generation of humanities scholars who sought to formulate their own Belarusian national discourse through the ethnography of Belarus. Particular attention was paid to moving beyond Polish- and Russian-centric views of Belarusians and Belarus. This national discourse was made possible by both the changes in the general historical context as well as within the Belarusian ethnographic community. Firstly, the creation of a national state (the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic) within the Soviet Empire forced the Bolsheviks to agree to the creation of Belarusian national scientific and artistic institutions that developed language, literature, theatre, art, architecture and so on.[4] Secondly, in the early 1920s, a generational shift in ethnography occurred in Belarus – a nationally oriented generation replaced that of imperial ethnographers-officials, whose research was done within the Russia-centric colonial context.

Despite the small number of nationally – oriented Belarusian ethnographers and the fact that most of them were repressed by the Soviet regime, with many dying as a result in the 1930s, it was this generation that laid the foundation for the further development of ethnography in Belarus. Collections of folklore materials and articles on the material and spiritual culture of the Belarusian rural population were published. Attempts were made to create and develop ethnographic journals and collections. Research into the history of Belarusian ethnography began, and ethnographic expeditions were conducted. This activity inspired the emergence of a new generation of Belarusian Soviet ethnographers (the revolutionary Marxist generation), who received their professional training in Soviet academic centres (primarily at Leningrad State University) – Olga Boyar, Moisei Grinblat, Ivan Dyshchenko, Anton Supinsky and others. It was this revolutionary generation that, during the political repressions of the 1930s, carried out the epistemological transformation of the idealistic, nationally oriented ethnography of Belarus into the rigid framework of Marxist ideology, class struggle and also ideals of positivist science. The introduction of mandatory fieldwork expeditions, photographic documentation and artefacts

4 The process was called "Belarusisation".

sketched by artists, the division of culture into the material and the spiritual, the focus on the "remnants of the past" and "traditions", all were hallmarks of this period. A dramatic example of epistemological violence through physical violence is the fate of the only professional ethnographer of the nationally oriented generation of Belarusian ethnographers – Alexander Shlyubsky (Zakharkevich 2025). A sharp critic of Polonisation and Russification, he sought to identify and describe the uniqueness of Belarusian national culture in the 1920s. After two arrests and exiles (in 1930 and 1935), he was forced to change his scientific and political views and received the right to publish articles in an ideologically correct Marxist spirit in the central Soviet ethnographic journal *Soviet Ethnography*.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, repressions continued, ultimately cementing both ideological and epistemological control over Belarusian ethnography by the political authorities of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and the USSR, as well as the metropolitan Soviet academic centres. The academic career of folklorist Maria Meerovich was ruined, and one of the leading Soviet folklorists, Lev Barag, was expelled from Belarus. These repressions resonated widely within the Belarusian Soviet academic community and further strengthened control over ethnography and the academic community's self-censorship.

In addition to the ideological and theoretical restructuring of Belarusian Soviet ethnography, it was simultaneously integrated into the hierarchical imperial academic system, relegating ethnographers to the secondary role of "hardened field workers" with a deep understanding of local specifics. Essentially, centralisation and strengthening of epistemological control occurred in Soviet ethnography (as in other humanities and non-humanities sciences) through the creation of a power and disciplinary academic hierarchy with centres of power in the metropolis. This hierarchy had already begun to take shape during the Russian Empire, when various scientific societies were founded in St. Petersburg. Branches were then opened in the regions; for example, the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (1845) opened the Northwestern Branch of the Russian Geographical Society in Vilnius in 1867. Its research goals and interests covered the territories of modern-day Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia. In the USSR, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR was established, to which the Academies of Sciences in the Soviet republics were formally subordinate. A somewhat different, but similar, system was formed at universities. It was the branches of the USSR Academy of Sciences and the departments and faculties of Moscow State University and Leningrad State University that dominated the formal academic hierarchy. After World War II, the practice of holding annual ethnographic conferences in Moscow was established in Soviet ethnography. These conferences summarised the results of the fieldwork season and formulated theoretical and methodological frameworks for all the ethnographers in the USSR. Belarusian ethnographers

were required to participate, and they then disseminated the stated epistemological requirements among local researchers. The publication of final theoretical articles by Moscow and Leningrad scholars in the central journal *Soviet Ethnography* reinforced this practice. Subscriptions to the journal were mandatory for all relevant academic institutions, as well as for all leading researchers in all Soviet republics.

The institutional hierarchies were reinforced by disciplinary ones. After the heated debates of 1929–1933, ethnography took a position of an auxiliary historical discipline within the Soviet humanities – this significantly historicised ethnography. In Belarus, from 1930 to 1957, academic ethnography was part of the Institute of History. In 1957, a new institute – the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore – was created within the Academy of Sciences of the BSSR. This was an important step towards strengthening the subjectivity of Belarusian ethnography and its position within the hierarchy of the humanities in the republic. Ethnography emerged from the direct subordination of historical science, although it remained somewhat epistemologically and formally dependent.[5] After World War II, folklore studies in the USSR (and, consequently, in the union republics) gradually became part of philology, leading to a disciplinary divergence between ethnography and folklore studies. Gradually, ethnographers focused on the material culture of Belarusians, while folklorists concentrated on their spiritual culture. However, common ground certainly did not disappear.

The only university department that offered training in ethnography during the Soviet period in Belarus was located in the Faculty of History of the Belarusian State University in Minsk. This was the Department of Archaeology, Ethnography and Auxiliary Historical Disciplines (established in 1973).[6] A full-fledged university specialisation in ethnography did not exist in Belarus during the Soviet era. For a long time, Belorusian ethnographers were trained in Leningrad and Moscow. Only in the 1960s did a national Belarusian academic community of ethnographers begin to form (nine candidate and two doctoral theses on Belarusian topics were defended in the 1960s). In the 1970s, this trend continued, with twelve candidate dissertations defended. From the 1960s to the 1980s, scholarly collections and monographs on the ethnography of Belarus began to be published regularly, though the number of titles was small. It was during this period that the institutionalisation of Belarusian ethnography was finally completed. If we take 1925 as the starting point, it took roughly fifty years to create a sustainable system of knowledge transfer

5 For example, dissertations in ethnography were defended in historical councils, or those who defended them received a candidate's or doctoral degree in historical sciences. This formal relationship persists in Belarus to this day.

6 We are talking specifically about ethnography. Folklorists, as representatives of philological sciences, were trained in philological faculties.

and self-development. However, there was no epistemological independence for Belarusian Soviet ethnography.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Belarusian ethnographers focused on studying the culture of Belarus's rural population. Researchers examined the works of imperial nineteenth- and early twentieth century ethnographers (Pavel Shein, Nikolai Nikiforovsky, Evdokim Romanov, Vladimir Dobrovolsky, Isaak Serbov, M. Dovnar-Zapolsky and others), viewing their texts as authentic historical sources documenting the living culture of nineteenth century Belarusians. Concurrently, field expeditions were conducted during which ethnographers searched for traces of cultural elements or processes mentioned in nineteenth century texts. These were viewed as "remnants" or archaic features that allowed the evolution of Belarusian culture to be traced. Thus, the concept of a "traditional culture" of Belarusians gradually took shape theoretically, as a complex of material, spiritual and social features from the last third of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries. In the 1990s and 2000s, this concept became the dominant discourse in Belarusian ethnology and was adopted by other humanities; it continues to function as such to this day.[7] Contemporary Belarusian ethnology has yet to rethink the legacy of imperial ethnographers critically. However, we can see some initial signs of it, which are also visible in some of the contributions to this volume.

The secondary nature of Belarusian ethnology and its dependence on Russian academic centres started to be gradually recognised in the 2010s and 2020s. However, the process of emancipation is far from complete. Decolonisation is a conscious process which has to be embraced. This is particularly challenging given the limited size of the academic community of ethnologists/anthropologists in Belarus and the long-standing epistemological dependence of Belarus on Russian ethnology.

A century after the creation of their own national academic discipline in 1925, Belarusian ethnologists and cultural anthropologists remain a small group, where everyone knows each other personally and is familiar with each other's research topics. On the one hand, this fosters personal connections, which underpin the development of academic networks and information exchange. On the other hand, a significant number of important and relevant topics that are well established in global anthropology remain out of the spotlight. However, contacts with ethnologists and anthropologists from Western academia, the penetration of Western theoretical and methodological ideas (primarily through Russian or Polish scholarship) and the emergence of a new generation of Belarusian ethnologists and anthropologists who have been and are currently being educated at institutions inside

7 For example, the latest work by the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of Belarus, published in 2025, was titled *The Traditional Worldview of Belarusians. Book 3. Man*. The book offers no explanation of the concept of a "traditional worldview"; the authors assume it is self-evident.

the European Union and are actively and successfully assimilating into the Western academic community indicates changes in Belarusian ethnology/anthropology. Still, this process is neither unilinear nor certain.

This issue includes works by several generations of Belarusian ethnologists, from established ethnologists/folklorists schooled in classical Belarusian ethnology, to contemporary anthropologists fully integrated into Western academia. There are, however, commonalities between all of them. All authors are committed to active and ongoing fieldwork and a reliance on their own ethnographic material. We sought to bring together in a single issue authors who can present a variety of topics and approaches to interpreting various aspects of Belarusian culture. At the same time, the studies collected in this collection demonstrate processes and problems characteristic of the entire region of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. We see the relevance of the themes of war and violence, propaganda and ideology, and the desire to document and interpret fading rural cultures, their transformations and the reinvention of new practices and traditions on the symbolic or formal foundation of "traditional Belarusian culture". The topic of borders and their understanding and use by people living alongside them, as well as overcoming the limitations associated with them and the impact these borders have on many aspects of people's lives, sometimes even unexpected ones, is a pressing one. Women's social and cultural role in communities, power relations and religious relationships, as a social support system in difficult economic and political times, is no longer peripheral in Belarusian ethnology and anthropology. Themes of ethnic heterogeneity and religious practices remain important, especially in the historical and current borderlands.

Roman Urbanowicz's article, "Nonsense of Border and Ontologies in the Making: Production of Difference in the Belarusian-Lithuanian Borderland", examines the influence of the state border between Belarus and Lithuania, in many parts populated by Poles on both sides, on the concepts of difference circulating along and across it. The author focuses on the content of these differences. The state border between Belarus and Lithuania emerged where no meaningful boundaries or differences previously existed. The author reflects on the arbitrariness of the border's trajectory, which does not correspond to any preexisting cultural differences, leading local residents to perceive it as an absurd phenomenon. Roman Urbanowicz demonstrates how the border and its associated bureaucratic procedures successfully create mutual alienation through specific spatial regimes of uncertainty, instability and even humiliation, rebuilding local worlds and (re)territorialising communities according to the externally imposed contours of nation-states. This alienation created by the border works to eradicate once-existing emotional ties between friends and family. The internal logic of this distinction is largely determined by the conceptual assumptions of narratives of Europeanness and their analogues. In the postscript,

the author addreses the pandemic, the flight and migration of Belarusians following the 2020 protests and the migration crisis since 2021.

Uladzimir Lobach's article, "'Westerners' vs. 'Easterners': Soviet-Polish Borderland in the Anthropological Dimension of Belarusian History", examines the formation of regional identity and mutual stereotypes among Belarusians who found themselves within the Polish state and the BSSR following the creation of the Soviet-Polish border on Belarusian territory in 1921–1939. Drawing on oral history materials from borderland residents, the author argues that Soviet state ideology and propaganda, which relied on the geopolitical disunity of the Belarusian ethnic territory and the weakness of Belarusian national identity, exploiting the image of an external "enemy", contributed to the emergence of new forms of identity among the populations of Western ("Westerners") and Eastern ("Easterners") Belarus. According to the author, the social attributes of "Westerner" and "Easterner" were finally formed after the end of World War II. These notions are based on a "wealth-poverty" dichotomy, as well as a set of associated connotations: "individual farmer–collective farmer", "hard worker–slacker", "believer-atheist", "policeman-partisan", "individualist-collectivist" and "secretive-sociable". This fragmentation of Belarusian categorisations, according to the author, was due to the dominance of local and religious identities among (predominantly rural) Belarusians in the first half of the 20th century, which, for political reasons, could not yet develop into a national identity.

Volha Bartash's article, "How Many Miles to Warsaw? Popular Catholicism, Women's Agency, and Everyday Resistance in the Belarusian Soviet Countryside", explores a local example of the everyday religiosity of peasant women in the Catholic rural area of Little Warsaw (near the city of Molodechno in the Minsk Region of Belarus), so named by both local residents and the surrounding Orthodox rural population. Drawing on oral interviews and ethnographic fieldwork among Catholic women against the backdrop of a century of historical changes, the author examines the religious practices of peasant women in a Belarusian village as a way for "ordinary people" to resist state pressure. The article reveals the agency of rural women in Little Warsaw, who effectively organised an underground religious community amid the atheist struggle in the USSR. In her study, Volha Bartash emphasises the importance of faith and local religious practices to the identity and intergenerational continuity of Little Warsaw's older generation (born in the 1920s and 1930s). These practices created space for the expression of local solidarity and resistance. According to the author, silent resistance enabled the preservation of religiosity and its revival in the 1990s. Amid the Soviet collapse of formal religious structures, it was informal female solidarity that formed the basis for the silent religious resistance of Little Warsaw's residents.

Volga Labacheuskaya's article, "Women's Ritual Practices in the Culture of Belarusians", explores the dominant position of women in the symbolic space of Belarusian

rural culture from the nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries, studying the role of women's ritual practices, known among Belarusians as *abroki* and *abydenniki*. Women resorted to such practices from time to time during illness, epidemics, crop failures, natural disasters and wars, both individually and collectively. In some cases, these rituals took the form of annual ceremonies. According to the author, they helped maintain balance in the symbolic relationships between people, ancestors and the sacred. She also advances the crucial importance of women's shared spinning and weaving, which became a tool for shaping female identity through interaction with ritual knowledge and practices within the context of subsistence farming and intergenerational women's communities. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, the author demonstrates that home weaving persisted in the culture of the Belarusian collective farm village until the 1980s. It was in this context that distinctive forms of folk religiosity, combining Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, ideas and rituals, as well as women's ritual practices, remained relevant. The author demonstrates the process of cultural transmission from the folk culture of the first half of the twentieth century, through the practice of *abydzen* rites during World War II, to the present, when in 2020, during the pandemic, the *abydzen* rite was again performed in Minsk.

Tatsiana Valodzina's article, "Incantation Practices of Belarusians: Characterisation in Search of a Research Paradigm", aims to understand the trends and methodology of studying incantation practices in Belarus within a broad historical context and drawing on her own extensive ethnographic fieldwork. The author seeks to link the development of Belarusian folklore studies to the history of Belarus (pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet), as well as the political and ideological influence of the authorities. However, she simultaneously considers the influence of the Moscow and Tartu schools, European intellectual traditions and contemporary academic networks. Tatsiana Valodzina emphasises not just the importance, but the primacy, of ethnographic fieldwork in the study of incantation practices. She emphasises that new and unique ethnographic fieldwork material on Belarusian incantation practices is constantly accumulating in Belarus, which compels Belarusian folklorists to remain within their existing methodological frameworks, despite the importance of Western European experience and reflection. The author also draws attention to the emergence of new contemporary forms of conspiratorial practices through new media. These new manifestations, which must be documented and studied, enter into epistemological conflict with the principle of maintaining "archaic purity". The article concludes with the revealing statement: "time dictates new themes, but the old holds fast as well".

Yanina Hrynevich's article, "The Long Echo of Soviet Folklore: Composing and Performing New Songs in Modern Belarus", analyses new songs that are "disguised" as folk songs but have different performance pragmatics linked to the dominant ideology

and are largely addressed to officials. These songs have not previously been the subject of research in Belarusian folklore studies. The author believes that the origins of these songs are directly linked to the implementation of the "Soviet Folklore" project from the 1930s to the 1950s and the lack of subsequent critical rethinking. Contemporary members of folk ensembles continue to utilise old Soviet strategies and models. These new songs become part of living folk culture and acquire the status of "folk", not through anonymous origin (as was the case previously) but through collective authorship, ritual use and the emotional response of rural residents. Yanina Hrynevich points out that the new songs were created using a so-called "synthetic" technique, *perelazheniye* – the reworking and adaptation of well-known folk song lyrics to meet new needs. In modern Belarus, such creativity by rural folk ensembles is sought after by authorities and incorporated into propaganda narratives. The issue of the authenticity of such folk songs is resolved through collective authorship and public recognition. The author simultaneously raises the question of cultural "authenticity", the role of experts (scholars) in defining "folkloricity", correctness and other frameworks of Belarusian culture in the process of its research.

In her article, Alena Leshkevich analyses the symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe (*duda*) in the narratives of modern urban bagpipers. The article attempts to periodise these functions. The author distinguishes the symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe from its practical function of music-making: the bagpipe as a national symbol, as an artefact, as another art project, as an object of research, as a tool of entertainment and political protest and as an object of emotional attachment. In the article, the author offers her own periodisation of the functional use of the bagpipe, beginning with the revival of the bagpipe tradition in the 1970s. According to Leshkevich, the national symbolism and emotional connections of the Belarusian bagpipe have always been present. Its transformation into an artefact occurred during its revival in Belarus in the 1970s–1990s, thanks to artists and craftsmen. With the wider spread of bagpipes and modern technologies for reproducing ancient bagpipe recordings in the 2000s, the bagpipe gradually acquired the status of an instrument for entertainment.

In his article, "Smiles and Tears: Observations on the Current Changes in Belarusian Cemeteries", Siarhei Hruntou, studying the development of contemporary memory culture and memorial practices in Belarusian cemeteries, aims to clarify contemporary Belarusians' understanding of the afterlife. This is an interesting attempt at scholarly reflection on the contemporary Belarusian worldview. The author synthesises classical ethnological themes with contemporary anthropological approaches and concepts. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, Siarhei Hruntou emphasises that contemporary Belarusian views on the afterlife are diverse and contradictory. He believes this was influenced by the secularisation of society in the twentieth century. However, he

also finds numerous connections and parallels with nineteenth century ideas, which were already recorded by ethnographers at that time (dates of death, refreshments, tableware, alcohol, etc.). The author suggests that even in the context of Belarus's ongoing, slow secularisation, the practice of visiting cemeteries and bringing offerings to the deceased will persist. However, this practice will be more a matter of practice than of ideas about the afterlife. The author offers the following conclusions: the social status of the deceased is changing, and the strict memorial conventions common in the twentieth century are rapidly being lost; frequent depictions of the deceased in the context of their working profession testify to the continuing significance of labor for the identity of Belarusians; the organisation of burials is changing towards minimal care; the marking of graves with crosses (in the form of monuments or images) identifies their affiliation with a particular Christian denomination, but, at the same time, the model of the Christian afterlife is being simplified (Hell is usually excluded, and the dead inevitably end up in Heaven); and the popularity of cremation and burial in columbaria leads to an inevitable decline in traditional memorial practices.

Anton Dinerstein's and Todd L. Sandel's article, "'Power' as an Identity Category in the Russian-Language Political Discourse: The Case of Belarus", analyses ways of discussing politics in Belarus's Russian-language political discourse. The authors use cultural discourse analysis and the ethnography of communication to analyse the key cultural term "power". This term, in their view, describes the relationship between society ("people"), "country" and "state" in contemporary Belarus. It is based on the idea of a cultural clash between two parallel Belarusias – representing grassroots culture and state culture. Drawing on a significant database of media materials, the authors identified key cultural terms characteristic of Belarus during the 2020–2022 protests: "state", "country" and "power". Moreover, in their opinion, the cultural term "power" is the most important, as it is both a form and a means of identity. The authors explicitly state that the term "power" is a category of membership. This could become a key problem for the Belarusian political field, as power becomes an identity, not just a quality. This could mean that the transfer of power deprives the subject of their core identity: the loss of power means the loss of identity. This is made possible by the existence of metonymy in Russian-language political discourse – "state" is conceptualised in terms of "country"; "country" in terms of "those in power"; "people" in terms of a non-political entity that simply lives in the country; "sovereignty" in terms of "state", defined in terms of "country", which belongs to those "in power"; and so on.

Overall, this issue was not only intended to introduce Belarusian ethnology/anthropology to the Western academic community. Specialists are already well acquainted with it, and some authors are directly involved in these communities.

The Belarusian issue is inspired by the idea of the diversity of experiences and development paths of scholarship within historical and cultural contexts. This diversity allows us to recognise and understand theoretical and methodological limitations and decolonising opportunities. The national context and specific political and social conditions have influenced Belarusian ethnology/anthropology, but this is increasingly determined by the thematic choices of research and the interests of the scholars themselves.

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NONSENSE OF BORDER AND ONTOLOGIES IN THE MAKING: PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE IN THE BELARUSIAN-LITHUANIAN BORDERLAND

ROMAN URBANOWICZ

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The social sciences have long established that state borders produce, rather than simply reflect, social and cultural distinctions. Rather than examining the distinctions themselves, this article considers how perspectives on new differences are emerging. The state border between Belarus and Lithuania constitutes a distinctive example of a restricted geopolitical border, the external frontier of the EU, which emerged without any historical precedent and is still perceived as an absurdity by the locals who witnessed its emergence. I argue that the operation of the border's bureaucracy produces estrangement through specific spatialised regimes of uncertainty, undermining the reproduction of pre-border social connections. This growing alienation is often interpreted within the logic of the "civilisational projects" – the European one and its Belarusian counterpart – that the border is supposed to represent, sometimes appearing as accounts of substantial incommensurability. In other words, ontologies are produced from nonsense along the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, Lithuania, state border, Europeanness, production of difference

"I know the pieces fit,
'cause I watched them fall away."
Maynard James Keenan

In the summer of 2016, I was doing ethnographic fieldwork for my master's dissertation in Parojus (South-Eastern Lithuania), researching the local Polish ethnic minority. One day, I was invited to join the local folk choir on their tour to Poland, and after a day-long ride, we arrived at a resort in the Tatra Mountains. While most of us went to rest, some men were determined to procure more booze and keep the party going. After an hour, they returned to the place of our stay and were met with the following exchange:

– Finally! Good to see you're back safely, we were starting to worry!
– Ah, relax, man! That was easy, nothing like going down to the disco at Vieraščaki and not having the shit beaten out of you – *that* would be a real challenge!

Vieraščaki is a village seven kilometres from Parojus, separated by the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border since 1991. The person who mentioned it was about 40 years old, meaning he could visit it in his adolescence without obtaining a visa, introduced in 1994. Since then, the scale of trans-border contacts has declined significantly and is nowadays confined mostly to family visits and occasional refuelling with cheap Belarusian petrol. Today's teenagers from Parojus, while having been to places like London and Berlin via low-cost flights from the adjacent Vilnius airport, do not seem to have a clue about how to avoid trouble at Vieraščaki's discotheque.

Back in 2016, in Parojus, the subject of discontinued or hindered trans-border connections emerged vividly, taking different shapes and roles for people of different generations. Inspired by those conversations with my fieldwork companions, the article starts with the presupposition that no particular modern nation-state is a natural phenomenon, and hence none of its borders actually represents any "eternal truths" (Gourgouris 1996; cited by Green 2012, 576). Rather, state borders should be analysed in their historical dynamics, through how their ideational foundations produce and are reproduced by visceral emotions of belonging while their practical operation reshapes human lives, often violently, to reinforce the state's cultural hegemony and domination. Indeed, this assumption is somewhat self-evident in the case of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, which splits the region in half, where no barrier existed before 1991. This border, arbitrary in its trajectory and commonly seen as absurd by the borderland dwellers, gained geopolitical importance when Lithuania started its path towards European integration, joining the EU in 2004, while the Belarusian state assumed a sort of "anti-European" ideology. This kind of divergence, emerging from the meta-level of state-building, substantially affected the lives of borderland communities, imposing the "civilisational" distinction onto the historically fluid social landscapes.

This article examines what *kind of difference* the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border produces. Instead of addressing the content of the emerging social distinctions, I focus on local understandings of the very nature of the difference itself. To do so, I first outline the historical context of the region, focusing on the preceding structures of mobility, then address both emotional and semantic experiences of living next to the suddenly imposed state border, and finally take a closer look at the ways my interlocutors described the nature of the emerging difference. I argue that while the introduction of the state border was widely perceived as a harmful and absurd intrusion into local lives, its bureaucratic operation progressively fosters estrangement.

The ideological underpinnings of the two conflicting "civilisational projects" that supposedly collide at the border, in turn, contribute to the emerging local perception of profound, seemingly ontological difference resulting from that nonsensical phenomenon.

The research is based on interview and participant observation data from two ethnographic fieldwork trips in Parojus, Lithuania (2016), and Rojsty, Belarus (2018). Consequently, this ethnographic data is situated within a particular timeframe, capturing perceptions of the already well-matured border of the European Union, yet before the dramatic geopolitical escalations of 2020 and 2022. While the initial 2016 fieldwork in Parojus focused on other matters, the motif of trans-border sentiments and disconnections emerged vividly enough to become the focus of a subsequent master's thesis and a second field trip to Rojsty in 2018. Thus, in total, the analysis is based on forty semi-structured interviews with people, mostly older than 40, who witnessed the border's emergence. In this article, I predominantly analyse their "border talk" (Pickering 2006), focusing specifically on narratives of personal experiences of (dis)connection, contextualised through reflections on moral and (geo)political meanings of the border (or lack thereof).

The main locations in question are the small towns of Parojus and Rojsty, located twenty kilometres from each other, yet separated by the state border. Vieraščaki is a large village right between them, featuring a crossing point from the Belarusian side. In each of the towns, as well as in the adjacent villages, the vast majority of the population is Polish and Catholic. Whereas in Parojus Polish is one of the daily languages, alongside Russian, Lithuanian and occasionally Belarusian, in Rojsty and Vieraščaki people mostly speak either Belarusian, Russian or *trasianka* – a diverse mix of the two. Whereas the names of these three locations are given pseudonyms, there are several major cities located relatively closely and related to the research, such as Vilnius (the capital of Lithuania, with a population of more than 530,000 people, a few dozen kilometres from Parojus) and Grodno (a relatively distant centre of the *vobłaść*, a major administrative unit in Belarus, with a population of 330,000, located about 100 kilometres to the west)[1].

1 It is important to note that both Rojsty and Parojus are in the central part of the Belarusian-Lithuanian borderland, at the core of the historical Vilnius region. The situation could be different in other parts of the borderland. Near Grodno, for instance, where I grew up, there are no major cities other than Grodno itself, and the border between Belarus and Lithuania runs through a sparsely populated primeval forest, which historically served as a boundary between Slavic- and Lithuanian-speaking populations. Hence, the legitimacy of the state border is generally perceived somewhat differently, as it roughly corresponds to the linguistic divisions in those parts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Generally, boundaries are one of the most substantial categories we employ in dealing with the social world in its every dimension, including geographical classifications, since making distinctions and categorisations is one of the basic cognitive mechanisms human beings operate (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 170–71; cf. Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004). The very idea of a boundary in general implies the separation of self from other, which lends meaning to identity (Barth 2000, 17–20). A similar understanding can be applied to political borders, seen as a point at which the state's territorial competence finds its ultimate expression (Sahlins 1989, 2). Nation-states use this embeddedness of the idea of boundaries in our everyday cognition to impose the logic of mundane nationalism as a basic operational principle (Billig 1995, 13–26) that presupposes nation-states as the natural unit of cultural classification. Hence, it seems productive to pay attention to how boundaries drawn by distant policymakers are being endowed with meanings and how they are contested as well as defended by different actors in border regions (Pelkmans 2006, 14).

More specifically to the case in question, two contextual frameworks overlap: those of post-socialism and border studies. Some post-socialist borders have already received substantial attention in the social sciences (see Assmuth 2003; Pelkmans 2006; Follis 2012; Megoran 2005, 2006; Pfoser 2015, 2017; Reeves 2007, 2011, 2014; amongst others), and the other borders between Belarus and the EU have also been studied (see Grygar 2009, Joyce 2021, Blavascunas and Cope 2022, Bieńkowska 2023). The Belarusian-Lithuanian border, while also not bereft of scholarly attention (see Cegliński 2005; Bespamyatnykh and Nikiforova 2015; Daukšas 2014; Sasunkevich 2015, 2019), is still somewhat unique in this context, at least due to the sharp contrast between its insignificance before the collapse of the Soviet Union, as it barely corresponded to any other social division, and the geopolitical gravity it has acquired in recent decades.

This article contributes to the field of border studies by focusing on these dynamics, scrutinising the constitutive logic of a rather common process of bordering in a situation where many of its properties are amplified. Following the well-established tradition of studying the borders from below (Paasi 1998, Wilson and Donnan 1998, and many more), I focus specifically on the local visions of the organising logic of structural effects that the operation of the border has on the vernacular perception of difference, rather than on the content of those effects *per se*.

For that purpose, I suggest examining the effects of the border seen as an engine for the *production of ontologies as political projects* (Green 2012)[2]. In other words,

2 De Genova essentially phrased the same thing differently as the "definite metaphysics" of the border (2016, 50).

I aim to see how ostensibly incommensurable ("civilisational") divisions are constructed upon personal experiences of separation and discontinuity, and to see how the imposition of the state border turns similarity and commonness into difference that is supposed to reflect ontological alterity. Therefore, I pay particular attention to the internal logic of the big narratives that underpin the geopolitical dimension of the divide represented by the state border – predominantly, to the ideologies of Europeanness. Importantly, I use words like "ontology" and "ontological" in a broad yet conventional sense, meaning *discourses about* the nature of being, its essence and so forth. The whole conceptual debate related to the so-called "ontological turn" and its rather specific understanding of ontology – arguably, presuming its meaning to be akin to "reality", not "discourse *about* reality" – does not concern me in this work (see Graeber 2015, 15–16 on the importance of this difference). Thus, by "the production of ontologies", I mean the production of a specific perspective upon the emerging difference, the one implying different experiences of being in the world.

Finally, speaking of the particular processes and mechanics of separation, I engage with the affective aspect of the operation of the borders (see Reeves 2011), seeing it through the lens of social reproduction theory. Specifically, I employ the framework of reproductive labour, seeing it as the scope of activities and practices that are aimed at the reproduction of diverse forms of social organisation of different scales (see Fraser 2016, Bhattacharya 2017, Weiss 2021, Dowling 2021). Thus, I analyse morally-driven aspirations to maintain social connections (mostly based on kinship networks) predating the emergence of the state border as socially reproductive labour, which is in turn thoroughly counteracted by the bureaucratic operation of the state border apparatuses.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND PRE-BORDER SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

For most of its history, no political border existed in the Vilnius region, which in the Middle Ages was a Baltic-speaking core of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Ochmański 1990, 43–66; Gudavičius 1999, 33–530), later being a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries), the Russian Empire (19th century) and Poland (1921–1939). As the region was heavily influenced by Ruthenian and later Polish culture, respective languages (Belarusian and, to some extent, Polish) became dominant there by the late nineteenth century (Gaučas 1988, 195; Klimchuk 1981, 214), while Polish identity spread amongst the Slavic-speaking masses by at least the first half of the twentieth century (Kowalski 2013, 210–14; see Bardach 1999, 11–20). The current division emerged after World War II, when the region was arbitrarily divided between the Lithuanian and Belarusian Soviet republics.

Throughout the Soviet era, the border was merely a formal administrative line, which served to delimit spheres of governance between the Soviet republics, resulting in different cultural policies, "official languages" and so forth, while implying no restrictions on mundane human mobility (see Light 2012). Both short-term and long-term mobility of the borderland dwellers included Vilnius (as a regional centre) and adjacent villages and towns, regardless of their administrative belonging, especially as the vast majority of the population shared the same ethnicity, religion and cultural repertoire, being predominantly Polish Catholics, just as it mostly remains to this day (Shchiraya 2021, 111–12; see also Kowalski 2013, 214–20, 226–30)[3].

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the old administrative border became that between the two nation-states, and by the 2010s, given divergent political changes, had turned into the border between the European Union and Russia-affiliated and rhetorically anti-European Belarus. During that time, the border regime grew more and more restrictive, as the border "matured" (cf. Baud and van Schendel 1997, 224). Mutual visas were introduced in 1994, requirements for their acquisition were mutually restricted in 2003, and in 2007, Lithuania became a full-fledged border state of the European Union (see Sasunkevich 2015), regulated by the Schengen acquis. Lithuania's accession to the European Union in 2004, therefore, solidified this divergent trajectory, introducing additional discursive layers to both the moral meanings of the border ("Europeanisation") and its security matters. Thus, the border that emerged suddenly along the arbitrary administrative line happened to separate not only nation-states but "civilisational" projects as well.

To perceive difference, there needs to be a knowledge of sameness, and to account for disconnections, connections must exist within a familiar social repertoire: the process of bordering itself is a reaction to the prior fact of human mobility (de Genova 2016, 42). Indeed, many of my interlocutors described the current state border against the backdrop of the situation that predated its emergence. Two of its most important features were the persistent role of Vilnius as a regional centre and slight economic differences caused by different administrative policies implemented in the two Soviet republics.

During the Soviet times, Vilnius, located no farther than 80 kilometres from all the localities involved, maintained a significant symbolic status as a regional centre. One of my older interlocutors, for instance, mentioned how his father was disappointed back in the 1970s that his son started studying medicine in Grodno instead of Vilnius; the latter was "a real capital for his generation, while Grodno was a bit of a foreign land" (m., 60–65 y.o., Rojsty, BY). Similarly, the local priest in Vieraščaki highlighted the centrality of Vilnius for the Catholic religiosity in the region during

3 For the Lithuanian population distribution by ethnicity, see https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=0078cd86-acd6-46a8-9843-623bdf998aba#/ (Accessed 16 June 2025).

the Soviet era. He noted that due to a variety of close connections, Vilnius was by far the most popular destination for urbanisation-related resettlement, and "those who left our village to Vilnius never thought of it in terms of migration" (m., 40–50 y.o., Vieraščaki, BY).

Indeed, Vilnius remained a geographical centre of accumulation of resources in the region during the Soviet era, providing opportunities for education, employment and leisure. Many of those living in Soviet Belarus commuted daily to Vilnius for work, as the suburban bus network was arranged with no regard for the border between the two Soviet republics. Later, many of them received apartments from the enterprises they worked at, thus moving to Vilnius permanently. Amongst my interlocutors, many cases of extended families now separated by the state border emerged because of such resettlement. The dominant role of the Russian (and to a much lesser extent Polish) language in Soviet Vilnius was crucial, as no linguistic barrier could hinder mobility. The border was also crossed routinely for shopping purposes, since different administration regimes led to differences in supply. While numerous Belarusian interlocutors admitted during the interviews that the quality of goods was better in Lithuania, many of those who grew up in Lithuania also saw the difference as an opportunity to compensate for occasional local shortages.[4]

Thus, during the Soviet era, the administrative border between the Belarusian and Lithuanian Soviet republics was non-existent in terms of mobility, even if it enabled a certain number of social practices based on differences in policies. As one of my Lithuanian interlocutors aptly summed up, "We used to laugh back then, passing a border stone, like 'ha-ha, we are entering Belarus now'. But then it stopped being funny" (m., 65–70 y.o., Parojus, LT).

NONSENSE OF BORDER

As I have outlined, after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, for the first time in history, a firm political barrier emerged in the Vilnius region – the border between the two nation-states. In this section, I thus explore the "ordinary affect elicited by the border and boundedness" (Reeves 2011, 906) of the newly emerged barrier. For that purpose, I analyse practical, emotional and semantic

4 Another important difference for some was in policies regarding Polish language and culture. Whereas in Soviet Lithuania (in its Polish-populated south-eastern parts), central authorities provided the Polish community with cultural infrastructure, such as schools, higher education, newspapers, radio and so forth, in Soviet Belarus, the authorities aimed to eradicate Polish culture and language. Hence, some of my interlocutors shared stories of people moving to the Lithuanian side of the border so that their children could study in Polish instead of Belarusian.

experiences of the border by examining the vernacular constructions of its (non) sense and meaning(lessness). As ethnographic evidence shows, while people directly affected by the emergence of the state border struggle to make sense of it, the consequences of its operation are quite substantial, separating families and communities, and generating lasting alienation through diverse bureaucratic control mechanisms.

Practical Economies of Disconnection

An important dimension that affected experiences of disconnection was the economic and legal environment, which shaped rationalities of trans-border mobility. While this aspect was clearly distinguished from moral arguments, rational concerns established the setting for the extant moralities of (dis)connections.

First of all, there was the factor of visa fees. In the 2010s, a Schengen visa cost 60 euros for a Belarusian citizen, and one had to travel to major cities to apply for it. The price could have been a significant obstacle, particularly for people working low-paid state-provided jobs, retirees or single women with children.[5] While it did not prevent people from travelling "in case of need", the very notion of "need" was reshaped along economic rationalities. While living standards in Lithuania are generally higher than in Belarus, and Belarusian visas cost roughly the same, I often heard similar reasoning on the other side of the border. Remarkably, some of my Lithuanian interlocutors reported rather exorbitant Belarusian visa fees (from 120 to 300 euros) that simply did not match reality[6] – quite likely, as a rhetorical move to emphasise the inconvenience of the border procedures.[7]

Visa fees were often seen as something to be compensated for through shopping abroad. While there were people directly involved in trans-border mobility on an economic basis – semi-legal small-scale shuttle traders and smugglers – they were not

5 The average monthly income in the Rojsty district in 2017 was equivalent to 257 euros before taxes.

6 In 2024, Belarus abolished entry visas for EU citizens. Given Belarusian assistance in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, the authorities of the neighbouring EU states actively discourage their citizens from visiting Belarus.

7 It should be mentioned that there is a way for Belarusian citizens to circumvent this condition. Possession of the Karta Polaka (Polish Card), a document issued by Polish embassies starting in 2007 certifying one's "belonging to the Polish nation", allows one to apply for a Polish national visa without a fee, and since the mid-2010s, to acquire Polish citizenship within a year in case of relocation. For the purposes of this research, it suffices to say that some of my Belarusian interlocutors had the Polish Card, and their Polish national visas obtained free of charge were mostly used to travel to Lithuania. In Lithuania, the Polish Card is much less popular – and usually obtained for the symbolic purpose of signifying ethnic identity – since there is substantially less pragmatic advantage in obtaining it for EU citizens (see Fedorowicz 2020, 41–43; Gońda and Lesińska 2022).

at the centre of my interest.[8] Yet, concerns about compensating visa expenses were common. For quite a while, shopping in Lithuania was clearly profitable, as a diverse variety of goods was available in Vilnius at better prices. For those from the Lithuanian side of the border, the Belarusian petrol price was quite attractive, half of the Lithuanian price. Since the introduction of the euro in Lithuania (2014), consumer prices there have gone up, and the perception of inflation has grown even more (Jouvanceau 2021, 5–7, 15), thus diminishing the perceived profitability of shopping there for Belarusians.[9] Concurrently, the decline in earnings was mentioned quite often on the Belarusian side, especially by people working state-provided jobs, even though it scarcely corresponded to any "official" economic crisis in the late 2010s. On the other hand, the growth of consumer prices made shopping in Belarus more reasonable for Lithuanians in some cases (e.g., for pharmaceutical products).

Importantly, trans-border mobility was predominantly described as highly contingent upon pragmatic rationalities, even by those prone to emphasise its moral aspects. In many cases, people described the history of their trans-border mobility as relying on opportunities to engage in profitable activities, which led to re-establishing erstwhile neglected familial connections. One of my interlocutors, a middle-aged lady from Belarus, was eager to discuss the detrimental effect the border had on familial connections. Yet, she herself started contacting her Lithuanian relatives again after 16 years of hiatus, only due to the concurrent establishment of the clearer application procedure and a suggestion from a friend to join some trading activity. As she put it herself, "every tenth person here would get a visa to visit their relatives [in Lithuania], and every second one would do it to earn some money" (f., 45–50 y.o., Lida, BY).

Such discursive prioritisation of economic rationality illustrates how the practical constraints of the border make individuals weigh the worthwhileness of maintaining connections against the tangible costs and benefits of mobility. In other words, the operation of the border imposes a logic of calculation where the labour of social reproduction becomes linked to, and often overshadowed by, the economic conditions imposed by the border regime. Even in less illustrative cases, the discourse about trans-border mobility betrayed a certain hierarchical structuring of motivations, in which connections of kinship were subordinated to pragmatic needs. This is illustrated by phrases like: "If I am going there for any need, I naturally try to visit my uncle as well." Regardless of whether the importance of economic rationalities was explicit or not, it was always portrayed as defining the structure of mobility.

8 For an extensive analysis of this small-scale trans-border shuttle trade, which became increasingly unprofitable in the 2010s, see Sasunkevich (2015). The separate issue of organised cigarette smuggling falls outside the scope of this article (cf. Crawford 2016, Grygar 2009).

9 It was and remains very rational, however, to shop in Poland; journeys there for substantial purchases are sometimes undertaken across the Lithuanian border.

Emotions and Semantics of the Border

This way, the border, as an institution that establishes its own bureaucratic environments and signifies the contiguity of two different administrative regimes, has set up its own regime of mobility. Speaking of the emotional experiences of people who witnessed the emergence of this border, the main descriptive tropes were those of absurdity and externality. This extra-local meaning and intentionality of the border was consistently emphasised by my interlocutors: "No one ever asked us whether we wanted this border or not" (m., 55–60 y.o., Rojsty, BY); "in Minsk or Kaunas[10], they don't care about it" (f., 45–50 y.o., Lida, BY).

This incapacity to affect the external will that structures people's living conditions shaped attitudes towards the meaning of the border. It was widely treated as an institution of particular absurdity, in terms of both its bureaucratic procedures and the reasons that were supposed to lie at its foundation. Interestingly, even after twenty-seven years of living in two different states, the subject of the preposterousness of the border was often a topic for occasional small talk. I had multiple opportunities to overhear such small talk, for example, standing in line at the bus station in Rojsty, especially from people older than 40. In other words, the state border was considered unnatural by those who experienced its emergence. "No one wanted it, the border that severed the living body" (m., 65–70 y.o., Rojsty, BY), as one of my interlocutors in Belarus emphasised: the border *made no sense*.

Those tropes of unnaturalness preponderated in descriptions of the state border: a homestead where "a house [happened to be] in Belarus and a barn in Lithuania", "a lake separated between the two states" – all were instances of separation of what must not be separated naturally. The irritating absurdity of the border was often expressed through reference to its visible manifestations – its tiresome bureaucracy and long lines at the scarce crossing points. As one of my Belarusian interlocutors noted, "I could hear my cousin's dog barking from across the border, but to visit her I'd have to spend several hours [waiting at the crossing point]" (m., 60–65 y.o., Rojsty, BY). While almost everyone had those ridiculous stories to share, there were also urgent cases mentioned, when the inexorable logic of the border resulted in humiliation and embarrassment (cf. Bespamyatnykh and Nikiforova 2015, 98). Several people, for example, mentioned that they had to miss funerals of close relatives due to long queues or issues with visas; in one case, it was a story of two sisters unsuccessfully begging the border guards to let them bury their mother. Beyond mere inconveniences, these instances represent substantial emotional injuries to the people

10 Note that Kaunas (the second-largest Lithuanian city) is mentioned here as a metonymy for "Lithuanian authorities", not Vilnius (the national capital). It seems that my interviewee did not feel like using proximate, still familiar, and still quite multi-ethnic Vilnius to express meanings of externality.

affected by the border regime, as the working of the state apparatus directly impedes the ability to fulfil moral familial obligations.

These abundant experiences of precarity and indignity affect the emotional modality of relations between members of extended families across the border. As one of my Lithuanian interlocutors noted, the recurrent experience of waiting in queues for 6–8 hours killed all the possible joy of family holidays; his friend, present at the conversation, agreed, noting that through the years his family gradually started inviting Belarusian relatives less and less frequently, knowing they would most often be unable to come. Effectively, as he said, "I don't even know the children of my cousins anymore" (m., 40–50 y.o., Parojus).

Thus, the existing border between Belarus and Lithuania was widely seen by the people of the generation that witnessed its emergence and maturation as a border that makes no sense. The only source of idioms that locals had on hand to account for its existence was geopolitical rhetoric, which was often claimed to have nothing in common with any order of things that would concern local interests. This view was formulated by one of my middle-aged interlocutors from Parojus:

> So, the border is pure politics: *there is nothing human in it*. Two different political blocs, you know – a socialist bloc on the one side and a capitalist bloc on the other, as they call it. (m., 40–50 y.o., Parojus)

Production of Dissimilarity

As I have shown, the Belarusian-Lithuanian state border is preponderantly seen by people living next to it as making no sense and not reflecting any precedent reality it is normatively supposed to represent. The routine operation of the border's bureaucracy, however, shapes both practical and emotional aspects of human mobility by utilising the institutionalised precarity of an individual subject at the border to produce specifically organised landscapes of (un)familiarity and solidify the logic of (non) belonging. As it seems, the tiresomeness of border procedures produced the effect that is supposed to justify their existence – the land beyond the border was made less and less familiar. Once framed as border-crossing, natural human mobility is subjected to bordered social formations, through which difference is produced (de Genova 2016, 48). The biopolitical power of the border (cf. Megoran 2012) is exercised by making the process of getting to and being on "the other side" uncomfortable, tiresome and sometimes humiliating. By introducing the specific regime of controlled calculation of the worthwhileness of certain emotional experiences related to the border crossing (cf. Foucault 2007, 20–21), the state power is exerted and mutually reproduced through enabling some actions and precluding some others, operating

through "'*dispositif*' of (in)security" and exhaustion (see Miggelbrink 2016, 141–44; cf. Aydemir-Kundakcı 2024). Notably, my interlocutors seemed to be acutely aware of those effects, effectively recognising the border as overwhelmingly non-indexical – that is, as one that makes realities rather than reflects them, serving as an interface for a novel and alienating classification system, rather than an outcome of other human activity (cf. Green 2012, 578).

To counteract those effects of the border, as it seemed, required very concrete labour of social reproduction, i.e., labour that is located outside the sphere of capitalist accumulation and aimed at physical, emotional and moral reproduction of certain subjects of productive labour as well as of social forms and relations of various scales (see Fraser 2016, Weiss 2021, Dowling 2021). In this case, by labour of social reproduction, I mean the practical work put into maintaining pre-border connections – notably, predominantly based on kinship ties and thus normatively assigned to the private domain – against economic and logistical odds, to ensure reproduction of morally significant relations that preceded the imposition of the state border[11]. This labour, mounted against the bureaucratic operation of the state border, is essentially unsuccessful – people on different sides of the border gradually become strangers to each other. The diverse array of consequences of the bureaucratic operation of the border and its states makes cross-border mobility tiresome, impractical, sometimes overtly humiliating and often scarcely affordable in both emotional and material terms. The dissonances between pragmatic rationalities and social reproduction render kinship-based sentiments and demands appear excessive and emotionally charged; thus, the labour of maintaining connections, while motivated by the sense of moral obligations, is forcefully rendered as a matter of voluntaristic choice, and quite a taxing one (cf. Weiss 2023, 300–301, 305). Notably, while meagre profits gained through cross-border shopping or small-scale trade can hardly qualify as "capitalist accumulation", the emphasis on the primacy of economic factors for trans-border mobility is significant, both practically and discursively, reflecting the consequences of subordinating specific kinds of labour reproduction to economic rationalities.

The border's operation in this regard[12] can be termed as slow violence – "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011, 2; cf. Campbell 2022). By disrupting and reshaping the pre-border logics of social navigation (see Vigh 2009), this slow violence

11 For a not-exactly-similar yet somewhat comparable example of labour aimed at reproducing mobility possibilities and organised along the contours of national borders, see Tkach 2021.

12 Naturally, there are many other aspects of national borders where they exert very explicit and overt violence.

of the border imposes a certain belonging within the overall "national order of things" (Malkki 1992, 25), enacting a "principle of dissimilarity" (Mbembe 2021) through obscure workings of border apparatuses (cf. Feldman 2012). In this way, difference is produced in places where there used to be none.[13]

ONTOLOGIES IN THE MAKING

In the following section, I examine how people locate, perceive and evaluate the difference that emerged during the twenty-seven years of the existence of the state border; in other words, what properties are attributed to what kind of difference using what kind of rhetoric. The interest in "how people see what is on the other side" does not presume, in this case, an examination of the concrete content of each "other side". Rather, I scrutinise the binary perspective itself: what properties of the human condition are seen to be crucially shaped by the very emergence of "the other side" and the fact that previously intimately familiar people started belonging there. Since the most important and primary feature through which the emerging difference was discerned was the belonging to one or the other nation-state, the majority of conversations about this divergence were framed as discussions about those states, comparing differences in policies and ideological projects they were inspired by. In other words, the discursive landscape of the border was shaped by polarised imaginations of political space (cf. Pfoser 2017, 28).

Civilisational Projects

Today's Belarusian-Lithuanian state border, as an external frontier of the European Union, has become a point of collision for political projects that my interlocutors frequently described in terms that could be paraphrased as "civilisational": the European one and its Belarusian antagonist. While the border itself was overwhelmingly seen as an absurd phenomenon, the grand narratives of those projects offered a framework through which my interlocutors often made sense of the differences that emerged from decades of separation. To understand how those grand narratives affected local perception, one must first outline the underlying assumptions of the competing "civilisational" projects.

The case of Belarus is somewhat more complex. It is difficult to answer what kind of civilisational project the Belarusian state represents, as Lukashenka's regime

13 It is important to note, however, that during my fieldwork, this mundane production of difference operated through the "normative" bureaucratic procedures. After 2020, when the border was rapidly militarised, the official rhetoric on both sides (especially on the Belarusian side) started employing tropes of the imminent armed conflict, framed in geopolitical terms.

does not really have a consistently formulated state ideology (see Yakouchyk 2019). There is quite a bit of literature that phrases its de facto appearance in various ways, all in the spirit of something like "neo-Soviet" (e.g. Zarycki 2014, 20). It is not entirely false, but it does not feel true either, at least for me as a person who grew up in Belarus. In this article, I denote the official ideology of the Belarusian state as "anti-European", mostly due to the reactive nature of the state discourses. Anecdotally, a much-ridiculed quote from Lukashenka himself describes this kind of attitude quite aptly: "I won't lead my state towards the civilised world."

In the case of the "European project", things are somewhat simpler, as it is explicated in public discourses and a myriad of documents of the EU institutions (e.g. European Union 2012). In Lithuania (and, perhaps, everywhere else in post-socialist Europe), "Europeanisation", however diversely understood, was and is a project permeating social fields and wedded into many personal lives (see Vonderau 2007). That is to say, the main political aspiration of the whole nation as a collective moral subject (as it was purportedly intended by politicians and used in political discourses) was "to become European", implying a vaguely defined set of values such as human rights, individual freedoms, democratic political organisation, high living standards and so forth (cf. Subotić 2010). Yet, the project of Europeanisation does not have to be articulated as a coherent ideological framework to have a profound effect (cf. Dzenovska 2018, 7).

Although personal experiences of relations with different state institutions, ideological stances and preferences varied across my interlocutors, some people in Belarus liked their state and some did not, and it was the same with Lithuanian citizens: the general idiomatic array for deliberations on the subject, as well as the logic along which they were organised, was pretty much the same. It is through these geopolitical narratives that people who otherwise scarcely felt that they belonged to the projects of either nation-state, both to a different degree underpinned by the notions of homogenising nationalism, tried to make sense of the border and the entities the division between which the border officially represented.

Importantly, the political project of Europeanisation has many similarities with practices and projects of individual ethical self-cultivation (see Foucault 1988), albeit at the scale of the collective moral subject of the nation. Discourses of "transition" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999) and conditionality of accession (see Grabbe 2002, Czina 2024) enhance the ethical aspect – it is a project of formation of the subject deserving of inclusion. By "ethical formation" in this case, I mean something akin to "conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable social person, not only in the eyes of others, but also for oneself" (Zigon 2008, 165); but again, extended to the collective level of the nation. In the political context of Central and Eastern Europe,

the project of Europeanisation is often rhetorically constructed through negation of the ethical point of departure (*homo sovieticus* etc.), relying on the structure of discourses at the core of which lies a set of orientalist assumptions (see Zarycki 2014, 1–15 *et passim*). As a normative and civilising project (Dzenovska 2018, 12), it was and is, in a sense, a collective attempt to overcome what was perceived as the "civilisational incompetence" of Central and Eastern Europe (Sztompka 1993). Hence, its orientalist assumptions cemented thinking in hierarchies (Böröcz 2006), and while hierarchisation of cultures or races is not usually accepted in the broadly defined liberal discourses, hierarchisation of countries according to their economic performance, innovativeness and attractiveness is socially acceptable and is not seen as a reproduction of stereotypes or inequalities (Zarycki 2014, 6). Indeed, contested projects of remaking people and institutions in the name of political liberalism were an integral part of the "post-socialist transition", often appearing from the position of moral superiority (Dzenovska 2018, x). Thus, the morally formative nature of the political project of Europeanisation contributed to the localisation of its hierarchies at the level of fundamental human differences.

Rhetoric of Difference and Effects of Ethical Formation

While my interlocutors did not passively adopt those grand narratives, the logic of the nature of difference that they suggested shaped how people articulated their experiences and perceptions of the "other side", despite varying ideological stances and preferences. Besides the sheer effect of alienation, my interlocutors frequently noted the moral divergencies along the border. To paraphrase, not only did "we" not know "them" well enough anymore, but there was also some contrastive ethical formation taking place "over there". Some of those in Belarus noted how they gradually started feeling alienated in Vilnius, as "there's Lithuanian [language] everywhere nowadays" (f., 45–50 y.o., Lida, BY), including the daily speech of their nieces and nephews. One of my Lithuanian interlocutors, in turn, noted that familiar people in Belarus looked at him more and more suspiciously as the years passed, thinking (stupidly, in his view) of him as "a NATO citizen" (m., 50–55 y.o., Parojus, LT).

However, the most popular set of idioms to discuss those ethical projects of post-Soviet transition (or refusal thereof) was the exposure of their failed promises. The "European" project, perhaps due to the brilliance of its original promises, was the most frequent object of such critique. Some of my Belarusian interlocutors were particularly prone to caustic remarks about what they saw as real consequences of "becoming European": depopulation, neglect of urban development and inadequate salaries – all allegedly characteristic of Lithuania. As one of my Belarusian interlocutors summarised, "One guy from Parojus told me that Europe didn't give them much. It just showed them a promise and then gave nothing" (m., 65–70 y.o., Rojsty, BY). Similarly, many

of Parojus's dwellers – even those generally sceptical of the "European" project – noted that Belarus was increasingly lagging in terms of infrastructural developments. Simultaneously, there were many people highly critical of *their own* countries. As a friend of the aforementioned interviewee stated during the same conversation, "[Yes, but] surely, no normal person would want to stay in Belarus, especially a young person with some brain" (m., 60–65 y.o., Rojsty, BY).

Thus, different temporal orientations were of importance, as the "European project" was unanimously perceived as a departure from the previous condition, whereas the essence of its Belarusian alternative was seen to be a refusal of such a departure. This way, personal attitudes towards change often determined ideological stances that resulted either in nostalgia (for the past) and resentment (towards the novelties) or in frustration with the stagnation and absence of progress. As most of my interlocutors were at least middle-aged, it was perhaps somewhat natural that I heard more criticism towards the "European" political project. What is important here, however, is not the statistical disposition of opinions along the border, but their structural similarity, embodied in the failed aspirations of one of the two projects, the arbitrary collision of which constituted the border itself.

Often, such criticism extends into the moral sphere, framing the emergent difference as a harmful deviation. Such, for instance, was the stance of one of my interlocutors from Rojsty, who lamented the choice of his Lithuanian relatives, a young family unwilling to have a second child: "They want to live for their own pleasure, they say! That's the kind of bullshit they want to live by now, they are now Europeans!" (m., 65–70 y.o., Rojsty, BY). This comment frames personal and familial choices through a geopolitical lens, referring to the perception of moral formation rather than to numerical reality, as birthrates have been declining very similarly in both Belarus and Lithuania[14].

The topic of moralities of kinship emerged particularly often to illustrate the negative effects of the politics of ethical formation. The latter was aptly exemplified by one of my middle-aged Lithuanian interlocutors:

> Well, I can travel to Europe to work there. To earn some money. My brother works in Norway, for instance. That's nice; he can earn really big money. But his children are growing up without a father – is this good? That is what Europe has brought us. Families are falling apart, you know. First the border, then this. (m., 50–55 y.o., Parojus, LT)

14 See https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNTFRTINLTU (Accessed 17 June 2025) for Lithuania and https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNTFRTINBLR (Accessed 17 June 2025) for Belarus.

A very similar account of the border as a factor of substantial change in relations between familial morality and pragmatic reasoning – in a sense, an account of a perceived neoliberal rationalisation of the "European" terrain – is provided by Alena Pfoser (2017, 39 *et passim*). Similarly, it can be seen through the imposition of certain tropes of kinship and rootedness as a part of the internalisation of nation-state ideologies (Alonso 1994). That is, a forceful change in symbolic location and imposition of a common moral ontology of the collective subject – the nation – goes together with the abrupt severing of previously established ties phrased in terms of kinship as well.

Ontological Differences, Real and False

Such a condition creates a difference in "ways", a difference out of necessity. The moment the "ways" as a means of adaptation are perceived to be naturalised, they become a property of an ontological kind, of more substantial features of a person than mere learned habits to behave in this or that way due to functional necessity. Out of the cold, uninvited and forcefully imposed absurdity of the state border, a very real and meaningful difference emerged. Vernacular conceptualisations of that difference can also be rephrased as those of ontological difference, referring to distinct and sometimes problematically commensurable ways of being in the world.

Particularly, the notion of "them" being "different people now" dominated the descriptions on both sides of the border. Take Wiesław, a middle-aged entrepreneur from Parojus:

> I don't have many friends in Belarus, but we have business connections with them. *They are different people now, and they think differently now*. There are always problems with them, in terms of business, with their bureaucracy. And in general, they have a very different approach to human relations. (m., 50–55 y.o., Parojus, LT)

This notion of "different thinking" does signify a more substantial difference than that merely contingent on the environment. Nevertheless, it is precisely mundane practices established by the state's bureaucratic apparatuses that induce the emergence of this perception of the incommensurable difference. Nina, a woman in her thirties from Lida (Belarus), described her vicarious experiences of connections with "the other side". As I reached Nina through her second cousin from Parojus, she persistently referred to me as if I were a Lithuanian national, despite my expressly Slavic name and surname. This detail suggests that it was not ethnic, but precisely civic distinction – as she assumed that I was a Lithuanian citizen of whatever ethnicity – that mattered for her in the context of that classification:

> My husband works for a Lithuanian firm, and you know, it's not always easy for him. Sorry, don't take it personally, but I mean, with you lot […] *your brains are organised differently and weirdly* […] I mean, if you establish an enterprise in Belarus, you must understand that things are not done here in the Lithuanian way, but only in the Belarusian way. (f., 35–40 y.o., Lida, BY)

Quite importantly, I do not mean that people on different sides of the border see the difference between themselves as ontologically cemented in stone. Rather, I argue, there is a *process of formation of difference that is supposed to be ontological*, and people alongside the border are acutely aware of the gravity of its effects.

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Notably, those fundamental changes were often seen as contradicting the "true nature" of the people in question, as an abnormal deviation, contorting the essence of otherwise comprehensible human beings; a false ontology, so to speak[15]. It was particularly so when recent geopolitical clashes were discussed, which by 2018 meant the first stage of the Russian war in Ukraine, back then localised in the Donbas region. As one of my relatively older Lithuanian interlocutors noted, recalling his times in the Soviet Army spent in Ukraine:

> [Ukrainians] have deviated now, as their authorities at some point went very wrong. But I always adored Ukraine, and I hope they will sort things out. (m., 55–60 y.o., Parojus, LT)

Although those events in Eastern Ukraine and the more recent full-scale Russian invasion constitute a very different subject, they are mentioned here for a reason. After the occupation of Crimea (2014), the discursive field of "big politics" gained increasing prominence and sensitivity; this was also due to its inflamed use by Russian television, which enjoyed popularity on both sides of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. The main idiom for accounting for these events in Russian state media was that of "betrayal"[16] (Yurchak 2014). Similarly, Neringa Klumbytė indicates, describing discursive fields of Lithuanian politics, that many of those who supported a pro-European trajectory tended to see the Soviet period as a "historical parenthesis, that is, as a deviation from the normal, as lost years" (Klumbytė 2011, 844; cf. Subotić

15 That is to say, a way of being in the world that is evaluated as "false" or "unnatural".

16 Ukrainians allegedly betraying Russia and thus deserving military subjugation, that is.

2011). Thus, once again, descriptions of the geopolitical ("civilisational") trajectories in terms of fundamental inner change prompted an understanding of their effect in ontological terms, even if as something inherently false.

These notions of "false ontologies" reveal peculiarities in the perception of difference: the border-produced divergence was naturalised and accepted to be of substantial gravity; however, it was not yet seen as natural by the borderlanders, at least in 2018. In other words, those two "different worlds"[17] (a not very frequent, but persistent trope that I heard during my research), in the views of at least some of my interlocutors, should not really be different; there was no "eternal truth" behind the division. Rather, it was described as forcefully ingrained in local cosmologies and yet fundamentally absurd and abnormal.

CONCLUSION

The Belarusian-Lithuanian border stands as a distinctive example amongst other post-Soviet international borders. Initially drawn as an arbitrary administrative line after World War II, it traversed the historical Vilnius region, separating the two Soviet republics, neither corresponding to any antecedent cultural divisions nor imposing any mobility restrictions on the locals. Since 1991, however, the border has progressively matured, inhibiting human mobility through tightening visa regimes and cumbersome crossing procedures. While the younger generation of borderland dwellers sees it as a given fact of reality (Bespamyatnykh and Nikiforova 2015, 100), for those who witnessed its emergence, the border that cut right through their social networks and patterns of mobility was seen as an absurd thing, still making no sense as of 2018.

Although drawn randomly and seen as nonsensical, the border, signifying a novel belonging to the two independent states, began to produce difference through the production of alienation and estrangement, via the "slow violence" of the nation-state's biopower. Cumbersome bureaucratic procedures structure various social spaces and mobility-based activities according to different regimes of uncertainty and even humiliation, reshaping local worlds and (re-)territorialising communities along the externally imposed contours of the nation-states. Such border-produced estrangement works towards the eradication of once-existing emotional connections between friends and relatives. If "things happen in the course of conversation" (Orsi

17 Similar phrasing appears in an academic text on the comparable context, the one concerning the border between the Republic of Cyprus and the de facto state of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus: "Crossing was forbidden to Cypriots, who had *begun to develop quite different worlds* (emphasis added) on either side of that line" (Bryant 2016, 21).

2007, 174), then there are simply fewer and fewer things happening *across* the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. As the socially reproductive labour of maintaining pre-existing social and emotional connections is divorced from other social routines, it is ultimately rendered explicitly onerous and unsustainable. Consequently, two distinct normative life-worlds are being produced, and an otherwise absurd divide is surreptitiously naturalised, even if not accepted as normal.

Crucially, this border is also a place where two distinct "civilisational" projects collide: the European one and its reactive Belarusian alternative, both (but especially the former) underpinned by notions of ethical formation. To become European, in other words, means to stop being (post-)Soviet, assuming civilisationally framed allegiances to a certain set of values. This geopolitical framework provides a toolkit to account for post-socialist transformation and divergent trajectories assumed by the two states in question, and vernacular discourses of the emerging difference seem to be rich in ontological rhetoric exactly due to the ethical intensity of that normative geopolitical framework.

This ontological dimension is most vividly expressed through notions that might be called "false ontologies", where perceived differences in "thinking" or "brain organisation"[18] are seen as essential, but unnatural deviations from a once-shared "true nature". The border thus imposes a certain discursive order that organises the terms in which spatial and political dynamics are contemplated. Naturally, this sort of discourse must not be used for analysis; instead, it must serve as a normatively imposed ideological background for vernacular terms of practices. This kind of perception of difference does not entail either communicative problems or a coherent "image of the world" with any static slots for ontologically different "others". Rather, it reflects the relational dynamics of how this logic of incommensurability is appropriated and internalised – ontologies in the making, that is.

To account for the nature of change, it is necessary to establish what alters and what endures (Green 2016, 212). Within the dynamic of trans-border relations at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, peculiarly, almost everything has changed, and almost everything has remained the same, depending on the vantage point. As the discussed "civilisational" projects offer certain trajectories of collective ethical formation, the relational dynamics within each of them remain constant, even as the social environment changes, thus framing the dynamic within each project as the only natural kind of change. The change on the "other side", in turn, is seen as deviation; "*they* are different people now", not *us*.

The state border as an institution thus produces a division that presupposes thinking of itself in terms of ontological difference. This article demonstrates that things

18 Interestingly, words such as "mentality" or "mindset" seldom occurred in my ethnographic explorations, even though they would clearly fit into the overall framework.

commonly recognised as absurd, idiotic and externally imposed can still have profound effects, which, through the attrition of mechanisms of social reproduction, are naturalised by the very same people who recognise their utter absurdity. In this way, very real ontological differences are produced out of commonly recognised nonsense.

Post-scriptum

This text was not a hopeful one in 2018, nor is it such in 2025. As time has passed, things have only become worse – a gruesome lesson in the inexorable absurdity of nation-states. In 2020, a series of novel restrictive measures at the border came with the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them only escalated after the brutal suppression of the Belarusian protests in the summer of 2020 and the state's further assistance to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Already in 2021, the Belarusian-Lithuanian border became a site of extreme emotional intensity, as many Belarusians who fled from political persecution had to cross the border through forests and swamps, hoping for shelter in Lithuania. Simultaneously, the summer of 2021 was the beginning of the "refugee crisis" staged by the Belarusian state, as it facilitated flows of migrants from the Global South, promising them passage to the European Union. Amongst others, Lithuanian border guards met them with pushbacks, unlawful from the standpoint of international law, thus denying their legal right to seek asylum. Those very people were often forced by the Belarusian special forces and riot police onto the EU border infrastructure; some of them died in the forest, trapped between the border guards of both states. Although with somewhat lesser intensity, this "refugee crisis" on that border continues to this day, and some Belarusians still cross this border "illegally" as well, fleeing from repressions.

If there can be hope, then it is in the inevitability of change, whether natural or not. The Belarusian-Lithuanian border as we know it nowadays is a part of the "story so far" (Green 2012, 575; cf. Massey 2005, 12), just as any other state border is at any given moment. As the Persian Sufi adage goes, "this too shall pass".

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"WESTERNERS" VS "EASTERNERS": SOVIET-POLISH BORDERLAND IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF BELARUSIAN HISTORY[1]

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This article deals with the phenomenon of the Soviet-Polish border in Belarus in 1921–1939 as a factor that influenced the regional identity construction and development of mutual stereotypes among the Belarusians who found themselves within the Polish state and within the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Particular attention is paid to the analysis of oral history materials recorded in 2000–2010 in the area of the former Soviet-Polish borderland. The geopolitical rift of the ethnic territory and the low level of Belarusians' national identity became the basis for new forms of identity of the population of Western and Eastern Belarus ("Westerners" and "Easterners"). During the functioning of the Soviet-Polish border, the mutual representations of "Westerners" and "Easterners" are vague and are shaped mainly by state ideology and propaganda, where the image of an external "enemy" prevails.

A detailed filling of the images of "Westerners" and "Easterners" with social, economic, and ethnocultural characteristics occurs after the physical (1939) and actual (1944) elimination of the Soviet-Polish border. During the Nazi occupation (1941–1944), and especially in the post-war years, communication between the population of Western and Eastern Belarus became intense. The massive labour migration, as well as the flows of beggars from the devastated areas to the relatively prosperous Western region of the country in the early postwar years, also signified the formation of informational flows in both directions. According to the author, mutual stereotypical ideas of "Westerners" and "Easterners" were finally formed after the end of the Second World War. The core of these ideas is the antinomy of "prosperity–poverty", as well as a set of related connotations: "individual farmer–collective farmer", "hardworking–idler", "believer–atheist", "policeman–partisan", "individualist–collectivist" and "secretive–communicative".

KEYWORDS: Soviet-Polish borderland, Belarusians, identity, sociocultural stereotype, "us-them", traditional culture, local rural communities.

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The phenomenon of the "border" in any form of its representation (physical, mental, symbolic) is a relevant subject of research for various humanities and disciplines, since the "border" to a significant extent concretises and formalises the basic antinomy of culture, "one's own–another's". The exceptional significance of the "border" in the structuring and functioning of the semiosphere was emphasised by Yuri Lotman:

> Every culture begins with the division of the world into internal ("one's own") space and external ("theirs"). How this binary division is interpreted depends on the typology of culture. However, this division itself belongs to universals. A border can separate the living from the dead, the settled from the nomadic, the city from the steppe, have a state, social, national, religious or some other character. (2001, 257)

Almost all studies in the field of studying the picture of the world, ritual (symbolic) forms of behaviour, inter-ethnic and social relations in various cultural communities invariably appeal to the concept of "border" in all possible variants of its configuration. At the same time, it is important to consider that the categories of *miazha* (boundary) and *granitsa* (border) differ in folk culture. While a symbolic boundary status in the traditional worldview can be attributed to a house threshold, a fence, a crossroads or a riverbank, the concept of *granitsa* refers to state-political realities.

> In the oral narratives of the inhabitants of the former Soviet-Polish borderlands, there is a significant difference between the concepts of *miazha* (boundary) and *granitsa* (border). While the former could be perceived as an abstract concept and was not always identified by respondents, the latter was usually understood as a specially designated piece of territory that separated one state from another, or one group of people from another. (Ivanova 2015, 81–82)

Anthropological understanding of state-political borders, from the point of view of the generation and construction of new cultural meanings and identities among the borderland population in post-Soviet historiography, represents a certain gap. In particular, the situation where the border is a significant factor not in inter-ethnic but in intra-ethnic relations is poorly studied. According to Lorina Repina, in recent times, the study of the images of "ours" and "alien" has been reduced almost exclusively to inter-ethnic issues, "while the broader layer of mutual reflections at the level of social groups and subcultures remains poorly studied" (2011, 252).

The subject of this study is the Soviet-Polish border (1921–1939) in the structure of the Belarusian cultural landscape as a factor and mechanism for the formation of regional identity and mutual stereotypes of "Westerners" and "Easterners". The factual

basis of the work is made up of expeditionary materials recorded in the period 2000–2020 by the Centre for Oral History and Field Research of Polotsk State University in the zone of the former Soviet-Polish borderland in the Vitebsk region. The geography of the research covered both the Western areas of the former borderlands (Braslavsky, Gluboksky, Dokshitsky and Miorsky) and those located in the Eastern part of the studied zone (Verkhnedvinsky, the Eastern part of Dokshitsky, Polotsky and Ushachsky).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Field research was conducted in the format of comprehensive ethnographic expeditions, which were stationary in nature and lasted 15–18 days. The field research team consisted of 2–4 lecturers and 10–14 students from Polotsk University. The comprehensive nature of the expedition meant that the field research focused not only on the issue of borders but also on other topics, such as ritual practices, folk medicine, sacred geography, folk healing and witchcraft, ethnic stereotypes and more. The research was conducted using a radial principle, where field groups (two people each) initially interacted with the local population in nearby settlements and later in those farther from the base camp. Dialogue with people took place in the format of thematic but unstructured conversations. Biographical interviews were used only partially, as they proved to be of low effectiveness for most ethnographic topics. Initial processing and systematisation of materials were carried out promptly at the base camp, followed by transcription of audio recordings and their analysis in laboratory conditions. The majority of respondents were women born in the 1920s and 1930s, local natives, Belarusian, with primary or secondary education, mostly former agricultural workers (collective farm workers) by profession and belonging to Orthodox (80%) and Catholic (20%) denominations, which generally reflects the current ethno-confessional situation in the studied area. The predominance of women among the interlocutors largely ensured the informational richness of the meetings, as the female narrative, compared to the male one, always stands out as more sincere, substantive, vivid, emotional and free from borrowings uncharacteristic of tradition, as was noted back in 1927 by the renowned Belarusian ethnographer Ales Shlyubsky (1927, 1).

Most of the field materials, including those recorded by the author, are being published for the first time. Sources on this topic published in the last decade by the Belarusian Archive of Oral History were also used (Smaliančuk 2015, 2019; Ivanova 2015). The methodological approach to this problem can be figuratively presented as the work of an anthropologist who creates an ethnographic story (Engelking 2012, 37), thanks not only to field research, but also to the scientific interpretation of the memories of rural residents using the methods of sociocultural anthropology, ethnography, ethno-semiotics and history.

Various aspects of the relationship between Western and Eastern Belarus have recently been actively examined by both Belarusian and foreign researchers (Voĺha Ivanova, Eduard Maźko, Aliaksiej Radziuk, Iryna Romanova, Alieś Smaliančuk, Elżbieta Smułkowa, Anna Engelking, etc.). Most works postulate an "anthropological turn" in historical research, which in the methodological dimension means a special role for "oral history". The idea of an "anthropological turn" in historical science and the "rehabilitation" of narrative have been actively discussed and implemented in American and Western European historiography since the 1970s (Lawrence Stone, Franklin Ankersmit, Jim Sharp, Paul Thompson and others). The subject field of the "new historians", as Lorens Stone designated it, includes issues that were considered the classical "domain" of cultural anthropology, ethnology and ethnography.

> Views on youth, old age, illness and death; sex, marriage, concubinage; birth, contraception and abortion; work, free time[…], the relationship between religion, science and magic as models for explaining reality[…], family, clan, community, nation, clan and race; the power and significance of ritual, symbol and custom as ways of strengthening community. (Stoŭn 2008, 19)

In this sense, the proposed study is an attempt at an anthropological analysis of the sociocultural and mental response of rural inhabitants in northern Belarus to the establishment and functioning of the state border between Poland and the USSR. This occurred when a relatively ethnoculturally homogeneous population was forced to become an actor in the existential and worldview antinomy of "us-them".

1921–1939: THE SOVIET-POLISH BORDER IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE BELARUSIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

According to the terms of the Riga Peace Treaty (18 March 1921), which marked the end of the Soviet-Polish War of 1919–1921, a significant part of the Belarusian ethnic territory with an area of over 112,000 km^2 and a population of about 4.6 million people was included in the Polish state. Soon, the Belarusian lands within Poland were unofficially called "Western Belarus" (Kasciuk et al. 1995, 214–215). The border of 1921 marked not only the division of the Belarusian ethnic group based on the principle of inclusion in two different state organisms, absolutely antagonistic in socioeconomic and ideological terms, but also served as a kind of catalyst for the processes of self-identification, when the image of the other living on the other side of the border played a significant role. The antinomy of "us–them" was

apparent and concrete in the border zone, for whose population the "border" category had no abstract meaning but real and concrete content. The geographical position of the border in the structure of the local landscape, its attributes (border posts, outposts, control and tracking strip), and character code (border guards, smugglers, defectors, people on "the other" side) have significance only in a border situation. The geopolitical rift of the ethnic territory and the low level of Belarusians' national identity became the basis for new forms of identity of the population of Western and Eastern Belarus ("Westerners" and "Easterners").

In the context of the Belarusian peasantry's low level of national self-awareness, the state-political split of the ethnic territory led to the formation of new forms of identity: the local population became "Westerners" and "Easterners" faster than they recognised themselves as Belarusians. It is significant that in the memories recorded on both sides of the former Soviet-Polish border, Poland and Soviet Russia (the Soviets) most often appear as the main state actors in the pre-World War II period, while Belarus is absent as a subject of history:

> And the border went the way the road goes from the village, right through the neutral zone. They were there, and we were here. This is Poland, and the Soviets are there. (FA PSU 2009–23; W. 1932[2])

> This was the border. It went near here. We belonged to Poland, the Poles. Under Poland, as we lived then, as the Poles were here. And after the war, there was only Russia. (FA PSU 2019–25; W. 1933)

> After all, we were in Poland, and the Polotsk district was in Russia. (FA PSU 2019–27; W. 1935)

The geographical and geopolitical antinomy "West–East", especially in the border zone, has acquired such self-sufficient significance that it has become fertile ground for self-identification of the local population: "Yes, this is the Dvina River, it used to be the border. We were the Easterners, and here, in Disna, were the Westerners" (FA PSU 2019–3; W. 19375). A similar form of self-identification was characteristic of the residents of Western Belarus, and in some cases, it has remained relevant to this day.

> And right here, the border was nearby: this side was Poland, and over there was Russia. And then, when the Russians came, that border disappeared. That's how we used

2 The respondent's gender (W/M) and year of birth are indicated.

> to say: we are the Westerners, and you are the Easterners, that's how it was called. (FA PSU 2010–1; W. 1928)
>
> We considered ourselves the Westerners, and they were the Easterners. (FA PSU 2018–3; W. 1929)

This type of self-identification vividly highlights the blurred, "half-formed" nature of national consciousness. The primary significance lay in a person's belonging to a local community, a specific state and its institutions, as well as to a particular religious denomination (Orthodoxy – "Russian faith" or Catholicism – "Polish faith"). The "flickering identity" which was not stable and could change depending on political, religious and socioeconomic circumstances becomes especially clear in the attempt of a rural person, born and raised in Poland but now living in modern Belarus, to define their national affiliation:

> (And how do you consider yourself?) Well, sort of, Polish. (Because you go to church?) Well, no. We lived under Poland, were born there. And in our youth, we spoke Polish. Here, everyone is like that — neither fully Polish, nor fully Belarusian, neither a candle to God nor a poker to the devil. Half-and-half — we're not truly Belarusian, nor are we Polish. Our language isn't purely Belarusian. For example, we say "глядзелі" (looked), but in Belarusian, it's "бачылі" (saw). (FA PSU 1993–14; W. 1924)

In cases where an Eastern respondent identified their own cultural affiliation as Belarusian, their compatriots across the border were unequivocally considered "Westerners" or "Poles", "Pshieks" (a colloquial term for Poles). "You are Poles, you are Westerners – that's what we call you. This is Western Belarus. And we, Belarusians, are Easterners, from Eastern Belarus" (Maźko 2009, 346). In turn, if a "Westerner" identified as Belarusian, then the "Easterners", in their view, were representatives of another people – "Russians". "Well, when they would scare us at school [Polish school – U.L.], I would come home and ask my father: "So, what are those people like? Are they like us or not?" – "They are people just like us, only they are Russians, and we are Belarusians" (Za pieršymi savietami 2019, 196).

The Soviet-Polish border, which in 1921 divided the Belarusian cultural landscape into Eastern and Western parts, became both an object and a subject of semiosis, especially in the border zone. The concept of the "border" as a zone of dynamic semiosis was developed by Yuri Lotman, who understood the border as a mechanism for translating texts of foreign semiotics into the language of "our" semiotics, a place where the "external" is transformed into the "internal" (Lotman 1996, 183).

In a practical sense, the borderland as a zone of generating new meanings, active linguistic and cultural contacts, specific forms of identity, and inter-ethnic interaction, exemplified by the Belarusian-Polish borderland and the Braslav district of Belarus, was studied by Elżbieta Smułkowa, who emphasised both the cultural situation in the border zone and the methodology of its study with the term *novum* (new) (Smułkowa 2016, 16).

In the context of a traditional rural society and a relatively homogeneous cultural landscape, the sudden emergence and institutionalisation of a new state border also gave rise to new meanings which shaped various connotations (socioeconomic, cultural, mythological, ideological) of the fundamental opposition "us-them".

A border, in any of its material representations (threshold, house fence or state border), in traditional mentality, can model the opposition of "one's own–someone else's" world, where the latter always represents a potential danger, including of a mythological nature, but at the same time possesses extraordinary resources and potentials. The border between worlds and its crossing as a way to achieve the desired result is a common line of behaviour for fairy-tale heroes. A successful journey to the other world allows one to obtain what (fame, wealth or high social status) is practically impossible to achieve through ordinary labour in the human world. This folklore scheme had a very real embodiment in the widespread practice of cross-border smuggling, the total volume of which in the Belarusian section of the Soviet-Polish border between 1921 and 1939 amounted to about 100 million roubles (Kuz'mich 2019, 58). The delivery of scarce goods from Poland brought the participants in illegal activities fabulous profits (up to 200–400%) (Naščyniec 2018, 95).

In the minds of the peasants of Western Belarus, the Soviet borderlands were associated with the idea of incredible, albeit extremely risky, enrichment, the equivalent of which in folk culture was traditionally gold. The supposed profits of smugglers were folklorically exaggerated and measured by nothing less than "bags of gold":

> And some people carried gold in sacks, my mother used to tell me. Well, they did. And our grandfather went too. Look, he got frostbite on his fingers when he went on St. Nicholas' Day[…] And they were chased, and they left that gold behind, and everything else. (FA PSU 2019–7; W. 1934)

> They brought gold. One person brought back a full sack and went again but never returned. (FA PSU 2010–9; W. 1926)

In the perceptions of the local rural community, the state border could be interpreted in a mythological sense even after its physical removal, acquiring the status

of a dangerous, demonic place. A telling case is when a village witch was buried not in the cemetery but at the "Border" – a site where the Soviet-Polish border passed before the war, that is, in a place where a village cemetery could not be.

> There was a woman who did witchcraft, and she said, "Well, when I die, I'll come back to visit you!" But she didn't die a natural death — she was struck by lightning[…] She was buried, but she came and showed herself to people. And then her nephew came here to fish and asked, "Uncle Petya, can you take me home? After all, that's where the 'border' is. Where Staroselye was, there was Poland, and here was Russia[…]" And he said: "Mishka, you're already an independent person and you're afraid to go without me." — "Don't you know that Aunt Volya meets everyone who comes to the 'border'? There was a border there, and this place is still called the 'border'". So, do you know what people did? Everyone got tired of her[…] They went at night, dug her up, cut off her head and put it at her feet, then buried it again. (FA PSU 2009–3; W. 1926)

In the 1930s, a time marked by the collectivisation of agriculture (liquidation of private farms and their unification into collective farms – *kolchoz* – controlled by the state), mass political repressions (arrests, expulsions) and the final consolidation of a totalitarian state-political apparatus in the USSR for the Eastern part of Belarus, the image of "Easterners" in the minds of the residents of the Western borderlands changed significantly. Agricultural activities on both sides of the Soviet-Polish border were carried out close to the demarcation line, creating conditions for close visual contact between the inhabitants of the two states.

The most frequent theme in the memories of the residents of the Western part of the borderland is the inexplicable "silence" and "blindness" of the Easterners when working near the border. The categorical unwillingness of Soviet peasants to speak or even look in the direction of their relatives, acquaintances and former neighbours caused the "Westerners" to feel deep bewilderment and confusion about what was happening:

> And right here, a chapel used to stand, right in front of the border. We always went there to pray on holidays, along with the priest and all the believers. But those Easterners would dry hay there in the summer or something, and as soon as they saw us, they would quickly leave everything behind and flee into the bushes. They were hiding. Because they weren't allowed to speak. If anyone talked or said anything, those people would be punished. (FA PSU 2018–11; W. 1934)

The demonisation of the bourgeois foreign countries in the 1920s–1930s was an integral part of Soviet state ideology, which had a distinctly mobilisation-oriented character. After the end of the Civil War in Russia (1918–1923), the West (the capitalist countries of Europe) gradually acquired a stable characteristic as an external, "dark" zone located beyond the directly developed territory, a zone of danger where forces hostile to humanity operate and dominate. Unsurprisingly, the image of the border (first and foremost, of course, in its everyday sense) was an important component of the mass consciousness of those years (Golubev 2019, 114).

The image of the "fearsome enemy" living in Soviet Russia was also constructed in Polish schools during the pre-war period.

> When we lived in Poland, we were scared by the Bolsheviks at school, they said they had horns (laughs). But who saw them (Bolsheviks)? No one saw them. We were so afraid of them![…] When we were afraid at school, some were afraid to even look in that direction, not even to see what was abroad. (Za pieršymi savietami 2019, 196)

The fear that "Westerners" and "Poles" instilled in the residents of the Soviet part of Belarus was driven not so much by the ideological and propagandistic clichés of the state, but by an instinct for self-preservation in the context of mass political repression and surveillance. The "Westerner" represented a deadly danger for the Soviet citizen in the case of any contact or connection with them. First and foremost, those suspected of espionage in favour of "bourgeois Poland" included those who had relatives in Western Belarus.

> They were quickly arrested, even those who had sisters who married Poles before this war. So, those brothers were taken and imprisoned. They were sent into exile somewhere, and they served time in prison. I know about these brothers — there were three of them, and their sister was married to a Pole in Poland, and they were taken away. (FA PSU 2019–13; W. 1930)

People with relatives in Western Belarus (Poland) were considered likely spies and anti-Soviet elements. In the absence of real relatives abroad, NKVD[3] officers fabricated their presence in order to fulfil plans from above to identify "Polish spies".

3 *Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del* (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), the main repressive organ of the Soviet state in the 1930s.

> In 1937, they took (my father), I hadn't even started school yet[…] Well, they falsely claimed we had relatives in Western (Belarus). My father was a tractor driver, and even today, we still don't have those relatives. The border was close to us back then. Someone reported, wrote something, and that was it — they took him away. I remember my brother and I were running, crying. But they, the NKVD, were "kind": "Children, don't cry, your father will be back by evening." And he's still coming, my father. (FA PSU 2019–36; W. 1929)

The NKVD's purge of the Soviet section of the border zone from "unreliable elements" was carried out both through arrests and by mass deportation of rural families to remote regions of the USSR[4]. The Soviet-Polish border in the 1930s was guarded much more strictly than in the previous decade, which largely sealed the tragic fate of those who tried to escape to Poland: "There was all sorts of things. People were crossing. At the border, they even shot some of our people, killing two. They were fleeing from here because they didn't want to join the kolkhoz" (Za pieršymi savietami 2019, 213).

In Western Belarus, many wanted to enter the "Soviet paradise". The "Eastern Borderlands" (*Kresy*) were the most economically backward region of the Polish state, where unresolved agrarian issues (such as the problem of small landholdings) were compounded by social and national-cultural discrimination against Belarusians and Ukrainians. Between 1936 and 1939, Belarusian schools, organisations and newspapers were completely shut down (Vabishchevich 2011, 11).

Stories of people crossing into "Soviet Russia", mostly young people who believed in communist propaganda, are now recorded in nearly every village located in the "Polish" part of the borderlands. However, those who crossed into the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in search of a better life disappeared forever from the lives of their relatives and fellow villagers, or they returned many years later with tragic life experiences from Stalin's labour camps.

> I had two brothers who crossed the border. One ended up all the way in Magadan. He was tortured there for a year and a half, and that was the end of him. He crossed the border dressed well, in a suit. He had high-quality boots, and he also had matches because he smoked. He had matches with him. They labelled him a spy. He went to find a better life, but they decided he was a spy. The other brother crossed the border and spent eight years in prison. (FA PSU 2009–17; W. 1925)

4 In the summer of 1935, the NKVD of the BSSR conducted a "cleansing of the border districts and regions" of the republic, resulting in the deportation of "600 families to Northern Kazakhstan and 1,400 families to the Northern Region" (Politburo 2006, 436–438).

In the context of sociopolitical terror, the reaction of peasants in the Soviet borderlands to the appearance of defectors from the Polish side was predictable. In this case, a "Westerner" was clearly associated with an "enemy" (spy), and any contact with them carried a deadly threat. It is no coincidence that in the memories of defectors, they are often described with "animalistic" characteristics, which were the result of the mental impact of Soviet propaganda:

> There was a border; it was the Dvina River here. The border was harrowed, about two metres wide, and then soldiers would watch for defectors. And Poland was on the other side. They, those sly foxes, knew how to cross — they would walk backwards. They crossed backwards like this, but the defectors were caught[…] There was one farmer in our village, in Zamoshye, who woke up and came outside. And there, lying on the hay, was a defector. He grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and took him to the border outpost. (FA PSU 2019–13; W. 1930)

In the childhood memories of Western Belarus residents about the search for and exposure of "Bolshevik spies", these events are often perceived as a kind of game or adventure, rather than the strict fulfilment of government demands:

> I remember there were stones here under the cemetery, and an old woman sat on those stones. We, as kids, were running around, running[…] Then the old woman went to where our police station was. She went, sat near the border outpost, and prayed. They shooed her away and said, "This isn't a church, go pray elsewhere." They kept shooing her away, but she still came back. We also noticed that this old woman had a man's hands. We were kids and said that her hands were like a man's. Well, they took her away, and it turned out she was a spy, a Bolshevik spy. (FA PSU 2019-15; W. 1929)

Children on the Polish side of the border had a similar attitude toward the state border itself – it both scared and attracted them. Crossing the border was not seen as a crime but as an adventure, a test of courage, something unimaginable for an adult in terms of motivation. A telling example is the case where girls cross to the Soviet side to see if the ritual "beard"[5] they left on the harvested field is visible to the Bolsheviks:

5 A "beard" is a bunch of the last ears of grain in the field, decorated in a certain way and intended to ensure the harvest of the next year; an obligatory ritual attribute of the end of the harvest in the northwestern regions of Belarus.

> I remember my cousin sister and I went to finish reaping the rye. We went to finish reaping and made a "beard". You know, when you finish reaping the rye, you need to tie the "beard" and put bread and salt there. So, we decorated this "beard". And I said, "Rosa, let's cross to the other side. Can the Bolsheviks see our beard?" And we just climbed over to that side, and suddenly, there he was from the bushes – a Soviet soldier. "Oh my God, we flew back over that wire!" (FA PSU 2010–9; W. 1926)

Despite seeming lighthearted, children's descriptions of the borderlands were contrasting and symbolic. They highlighted the difference between the overgrown, unkempt Soviet territory and the order on the Polish side. This emphasised the fundamental opposition between "nature" and "culture".

> We used to take our cows to graze there — it was all overgrown. You see, under Poland, wow! There was order on the streets, and the fields were neat, the meadows and little forests — everything. But there, when we crossed over, it was overgrown. The road was overgrown, and there were just random bushes. It surprised us. That territory, compared to ours in Poland, was wild and untended. (FA PSU 2019–29; M. 1934)

The oral history material suggests that from 1921 to 1939, mutual perceptions of life on either side of the Soviet-Polish border, by both "Westerners" and "Easterners", were rather vague and undefined. Judgements about life across the border were a complex blend of personal impressions gained in the border zone, their folkloric or even mythological interpretations and ideological constructs imposed by state propaganda.

"WESTERNERS" AND "EASTERNERS" DURING THE NAZI OCCUPATION AND POSTWAR YEARS

Despite the incorporation of Western Belarus into the BSSR in the fall of 1939 and the formal elimination of the Soviet-Polish border, in reality, an insurmountable barrier between the two parts of the country continued to exist until the beginning of the war between Germany and the USSR and the arrival of the German army. Until 1941, contacts between the populations of Western and Eastern Belarus were actively suppressed by the Soviet authorities. "Free movement was prohibited. Soviet border guards remained at the old outposts" (Smalenchuk 2015, 18).

The reaction of the population of Western Belarus to the establishment of Soviet power is not the subject of this study. However, in this case, the perception of Red Army soldiers and officers, who became representatives of the "Easterners" and the Soviet state as a whole, is particularly symbolic. In almost all childhood

memories of encounters with Soviet soldiers, attention is drawn to seemingly trivial external details: uniforms, gear, weapons, vehicles and even the smell of the previously unseen army.

> Polish soldiers were well-dressed: uniforms, boots, but when the Russians came[…] We asked our father, "Papa, what are Russian soldiers like?" He said, "They're just like ours." But when we saw them, we were frightened! The Russians were used to quilted jackets, while our soldiers had little jackets, round caps like they wore in Poland, but the Russians had *pilotkas* [side caps] so we didn't know what that was. (FA PSU 2019–23; W. 1933)

The appearance of Soviet soldiers shaped a corresponding perception of life on the Eastern side of the border. "The residents of Western Belarusian lands perceived the appearance of people arriving from the Soviet Union as a kind of civilisational code, the deciphering of which led to disheartening conclusions" (Yelenskaya 2011, 117).

The actual opening of the Soviet-Polish border, which had already disappeared from the political map, occurred during the Nazi occupation of Belarus. From this time onwards, the former state border acquired the status of a "phantom border", which, although existing only in people's perceptions, "play[ed] an important role in the mobilisation of ethnic and other groups, as well as in the reinforcement or transformation of their identity" (Kolosov 2017: 5).

During the war, the first visits to "Poland" began from the burned and devastated villages of the Eastern regions. As a result of direct contact between "Westerners" and "Easterners", the previously vague division of "us versus them" began to take on a more concrete meaning:

> We went there during the war (to Western Belarus), when the Germans headed to Moscow[…] Those Poles, those from the West, they aren't like us. Ours will give you something, and they'll invite you into the house, take you by the hand, and lead you in. And whatever they have, maybe some broth — they'll say "eat until you burst". They weren't good people. They were greedy and didn't respect us. (FA PSU 2019–20; W. 1928)

However, under the conditions of Nazi terror, partisan resistance and punitive actions by the occupiers, the mobility of the rural population was quite limited, and it is difficult to speak of widespread contacts between "Westerners" and "Easterners" during this period. The only exception is the interaction between the people of Western Belarus and Soviet partisans. By the fall of 1942, only 6.7% of Belarus's total number of partisans were operating in the Western regions. To remedy the situation,

the Belarusian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement (BHPM)[6] intensified the deployment of partisan units to the Western areas (Musial 2018, 221–222). However, the attitude of Soviet partisans toward the "Westerners" was far from ideal. BHPM documents reveal numerous instances of looting, extortion, murder and rape, often committed by partisans under the influence of alcohol (Musial 2018, 435–441). Similar incidents are recounted in oral history materials: "When the partisans were with us, they came and looted, took things. They came from the East, robbed people and left. They came to us and killed our pigs. In winter, they'd come, take and carry everything away" (FA PSU 2008–22; W. 1934).

Such incidents created a negative image of partisans among the civilian population, which in turn could be extrapolated to all "Easterners", including women and children.

> We went begging with my mother[…] We came to one house — it was so clean! I remember it so clearly; it was clean, with a white floor and clean rugs[…] "Well, why have you come? Where are you from?" My mother said we were from the (Eastern) side. "Oh, you're partisans! Get out of the house!" I remember that so well. "Get out of the house!" My mother cried. When my mother cried, I cried too. And so we left. (FA PSU 2018–11; W. 1937)

The analysis of historical sources shows that the main factors influencing the formation and preservation of mutual sociocultural stereotypes between "Westerners" and "Easterners" were World War II and the scale of its consequences for the residents of Western and Eastern Belarus. In the Vitebsk region, the Soviet-Polish border during the war had a "reincarnation" as the border between the rear area of the Wehrmacht Army Group Centre and the General District of "Belarus", which almost literally coincided with its predecessor. This is not about a formal territorial division carried out by the German administration but about fundamentally different living conditions during the Nazi occupation in the former Polish and Soviet areas of Belarus. In the first case, the occupied territory was under strict military control. The "Belarus" General District had a civilian administration that was more loyal to the civil initiatives of Belarusians. The active partisan movement in the Eastern region also had the tragic consequence of large-scale punitive actions by the occupiers, who employed a "scorched earth" tactic[7]. The Western districts also suffered dur-

6 The Belarusian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement is a republican body of military leadership of the Soviet partisan movement in occupied Belarus, created in Moscow in September 1942.

7 All 36 regions of the BSSR recognised as having suffered the most from the Nazi occupation belong to the Eastern, "Soviet" part of Belarus (NARB: F. 4-p. Op. 29. D. 267. L. 10).

ing the occupation, but most of the major Nazi punitive operations (*Winterzauber* [Winter Magic], *Waldwinter* [Forest Winter], *Schneehase* [Snow Hare], *Greif* [Griffin], *Frühlingsfest* [Spring Festival], etc.) were carried out specifically in the Eastern part of the region, where the partisan movement was particularly intense. The only salvation from starvation for the population of war-devastated areas was the mass pilgrimage to the more prosperous Western Belarus, where any seasonal work, exchange of the last possessions or begging served the same purpose: to obtain food.

It was precisely in the postwar years that a basic stereotype formed in the collective consciousness on both sides of the former Soviet-Polish border regarding the wealth, abundance and prosperity of the "Westerners" compared to the poverty and destitution of the "Easterners". In most cases, the residents of the Western side treated the suffering visitors from the East with compassion, understanding the reasons for their destitute situation – the collective farm system and the horrific losses inflicted by the war: "Easterners would come to us, poor things. Their villages had all been burned. As soon as they stepped over the threshold of our house, they would bow to the floor, to the waist and cross themselves: "I can't cross myself with my right hand – I've got this injury here" (FA PSU 2018–9; M. 1926).

At the same time, there were not infrequent instances of harsh and even cynical attitudes toward starving people, which reinforced their belief in the saying "the full do not understand the hungry", and also formed a negative image of the "Westerner" in each specific situation:

> They came from Rossony, begging for alms. My father never refused anyone; he gave a little potato or something. And there was a neighbour who told these people: "Let Stalin feed you". And the people were poor[…]. (FA PSU 2019–15; W. 1929)

The manifestation of compassion and unrequited giving on the part of the "Westerners" did not cancel, but only strengthened the sociocultural and mental distance between them and the "Easterners". "Hospitality based on the principle of unrequited giving demonstrates a special relationship with the 'other', the essence of which is that no community arises with the 'other', allowing the 'other' to remain 'other'" (Pakholova 2011, 32).

The radical difference between the devastated East and the relatively prosperous West of Belarus required interpretation in the collective consciousness of the inhabitants of the devastated Eastern regions. The explanation for the well-being of the "Westerners" in the context of a horrific war was built quite straightforwardly: the Germans did not touch those who were loyal and served them. The antinomy of "us-them" in the consciousness of the "Easterners" acquired a new formulation: "partisans–police", where the image of the "other" was equated with the category of "enemy".

> But still, when the Germans came, they treated the Westerners better. They did not beat them there[…] They burned the village before retreating, before the front, but they did not touch the people, unlike us. In our country, they burned both people and everything. Here, there were partisans everywhere, and there — only police. (Radziuk 2008, 112–113)

Intensive contacts between the "Westerners" and "Easterners" significantly supplemented their mutual perceptions with characteristics of an ethnocultural nature; differences in everyday life, rituals, language and religious practices became significant. In the mythological sense, the "danger" emanating from the "Westerners" was reflected in ideas about their inclination to harmful witchcraft. "Well, beyond the Dvina there were many witches. Well, here, in Leonpol, right beyond Leonpol. They cast spells[…]" (FA PSU 2018–14; W. 1927). The stereotype about the witchcraft abilities of the "Westerners" persisted in the post-war period, when a native of Western Belarus had to move and live among the "Easterners": "And she knew how to cast spells, she was from the West, this woman" (FA PSU 2017–4; W. 1943). Such ideas had a stereotyped, generalised character in areas remote from the Soviet-Polish border, where personal experience became less relevant than a stereotypical understanding of the difference between Western Belarus and its residents: "There, in the West, they do more magic" (FA PSU 200–1; W. 1924).

In the case of witchcraft, when residents of the Eastern regions accused "Westerners", the action of the "mirror stereotype" becomes obvious, which conveys more about the mentality of its bearers than about those it describes. It describes the "otherness" of another sociocultural group through cultural categories relevant to the local community, where the symbolic marker assigned to residents of Western Belarus may not reflect reality but successfully forms a stereotypical idea of "Westerners" through familiar definitions.

Familiarity with the ritual traditions of their "foreign" neighbours strengthened mutual perceptions of differences in ritual practices, especially those significant for the rural community.

> We go to the graves on Easter[…] But the Westerners only go on *Radonitsa* [the Orthodox memorial day for the dead]. (FA PSU 2011–5; W. 1935)

> And I was at one wedding there in the West; it wasn't like ours. They didn't treat people well. They gave gifts to the bride and groom. But they have this law: the groom must give gifts to his mother and father, then to his brother and sister-in-law, then to his sister and her husband, and then to the uncle and aunt. I told them directly: "You're just robbing people! For us, it's all about the newlyweds!" We were so surprised. That's how weddings are over there. (FA PSU 2009 – 24; W. 1940)

The persistence and resilience of the mental antagonism between the "Westerners" and "Easterners" are evidenced by the fact that subjective perceptions of the counterpart's "otherness" are reinforced not only by memories but also by references to facts that supposedly exist in contemporary reality.

> (How are the Easterners different?) There were lazy people there. (Lazy people?) There were lazy people; my son-in-law is from there. Oh, they don't want to work! They're no good people. (FA PSU 2019–21; W. 1937)

> (How are Easterners different from Westerners?) Well, maybe they aren't baptised […] My daughter said there's a village near Vitebsk where all the people are unbaptised. There's never a priest, and they never bury anyone with a priest. They take a person, lower them into the grave, and that's it, like an animal, and they bury them with dirt. But we don't do that. No one is ever buried without a priest. (FA PSU 2019–18; W. 1931)

A common denominator indicating the modality of mutual grievances between the "Westerners" and "Easterners" is "dislike", which evidences the opponents' absence of basic human feeling.

> For some reason, they don't like us. They called us Easterners *vastygals* [вастыгаламі][8], and we called them "Poles". (FA PSU 2007–12 W. 1927)

> No one liked us. And to this day, do you think the Westerners like us? (FA PSU 2019–14; W. 1937)

> Well, they also called us "Westerners". We were considered the worst under the Soviets. (FA PSU 2009–6; W. 1930)

Thus, an analysis of narratives recorded in both the Eastern and Western regions of Belarus shows that the mental divide in the worldview of Belarusians, inspired by the state border between Poland and the USSR from 1921 to 1939, significantly intensified during World War II and the early post-war years. The division into "Westerners" and "Easterners" was finalised and acquired distinct sociocultural contours. Mutual perceptions evolved from relatively unreliable, semi-folkloric assumptions into stable stereotypes that retained their viability even in the early twenty-first century. The relevance of the opposition "Westerners" and "Easterners"

8 The word "Easterners" distorted into a swear word.

among the inhabitants of the former Polish-Soviet borderland is currently confirmed by research by other scientists.

> The "Westerners", as residents of the territory west of the former Soviet-Polish border, are attributed with cultural distinctiveness, industriousness and piety. They are still considered wealthier today. The "Easterners" are usually characterised as less cultured, materially poorer and generally non-religious. This difference, to a greater or lesser extent, is still evident in various regions of Belarus today. (Ivanova 2015, 92)

In turn, residents of the Eastern regions attribute traits such as individualism, secrecy, lack of collectivism and mutual assistance, greed and even a tendency towards witchcraft to the "Westerners".

A distinctive feature of the studied region is that the phantom Soviet–Polish border has acquired its real reincarnation in the form of administrative boundaries between the Western (Hlybokaye, Myory) and Eastern (Verkhnedvinsk, Polotsk, Ushachy) districts of the Vitebsk region. These administrative boundaries, which were finally established between 1944 and 1962 and follow the configuration of the former state border, are completely transparent and unmarked in physical space (except for road signs), yet they remain important for local communities both in a practical sense (district systems of trade, healthcare and social services) and in a symbolic sense – as the current administrative division reinforces the memory of the now non-existent (phantom) Soviet–Polish border.

> We lived under Poland. Over there, that's the Polotsk district, and here is ours, the Myory district, on this side. There was a border, and along the Dvina, there was a border too. Well, we lived under Poland[…]. (FA PSU 2019–18; W. 1931)

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the "phantom border" does not exist by itself, but only becomes relevant when, in the mental map, it distinguishes two groups of residents of the imagined borderland who perceive real or imagined differences between themselves. In the absence of such differences, the meaning of symbolic demarcation disappears.

CONCLUSION

The concept of "Belarusianness" in its modern sense began to crystallise in the nineteenth century during the national revival movement, which, however, was

fragmented and faced the policies of Russification, and later Polonisation and Sovietisation. Notably, for many rural inhabitants, identity remained local and confessional rather than national in the modern sense of the word. The main basis that unites the various historical and regional versions of Belarusian identity is the shared linguistic and cultural heritage and the collective experience of life in an inter-state borderland. An important component is the ethnographic and folklore tradition, which, through language, song culture and the folk calendar, allowed the sense of distinctiveness to be preserved even in the context of imperial or Soviet unification practices.

A second core element is the common historical narrative, which in the twentieth century became increasingly linked to the traumatic experience of partitions, wars, repressions and the collective memory of them. Against this backdrop, the division into "Westerners" and "Easterners" represents an adaptation of this common identity to the different political and social regimes that existed in both parts of the territory between 1921 and 1939.

The state border, which existed for only eighteen years, significantly changed the sociocultural landscape of Belarus. In the context of the not yet formed national consciousness of the Belarusian peasantry, the border acted as a trigger for a new regional identity, where the geographical antinomy of "West-East" was only a formal marker of the difference between "Westerners" and "Easterners". The substantive content of this difference covered several important aspects: different historical experiences of communities (living in Poland and in the BSSR), completely different socioeconomic models of life (private farming in the West and collective farming in the East), different levels of religiosity of the population and differences in ritual and everyday culture.

In the "West", Polish state and cultural influence dominated, with a strong Catholic and Polish-language component, which contributed to the formation of an identity closer to the Western European discourse of nationhood. In the "East", the Soviet project of Belarusisation initially took the form of cultural development within the USSR. Later, it became increasingly subordinated to the ideology of the Soviet "new historical community".

Thus, the "Westerners" and "Easterners", in a sense, represent two models of integration into different civilisational spaces: one more connected with the Polish and Catholic context, the other with the Soviet and Orthodox – and in some cases secular, atheistic – narrative. Yet both groups retain a common cultural and linguistic "foundation", which provides grounds to speak of a shared Belarusianness despite its internal fragmentation.

However, mutual stereotypes are most characteristic of the older generation, especially those who still remember the Polish-Soviet border and its significance as a "phantom border" during the Nazi occupation and the early post-war years.

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HOW MANY MILES TO WARSAW? WOMEN'S AGENCY AND UNDERGROUND CATHOLICISM IN THE SOVIET BELARUSIAN COUNTRYSIDE

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This article draws on oral history interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with Catholic women in the Belarusian countryside. Using a gender lens, it offers a fresh perspective on how rural women under Soviet rule organised themselves into an underground religious community in Little Warsaw. Through their religious practices – family rituals, secret gatherings and Marian devotions – these women showed resilience and agency despite state pressure and anti-religious propaganda. The study highlights the unique leadership role women played in the underground community. It argues that female religious solidarity flourished in the countryside as male religious authority weakened and as rural women were marginalised within Soviet structures. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how these women's quiet but determined efforts sustained religious life during Soviet times and paved the way for the religious revival of the 1990s.

KEYWORDS: popular religious practices, silent resistance, Belarusian Soviet countryside, underground church, women's agency

On the evening of 17 May 2015, three elderly women met in the centre of Brohauschyna, a small Belarusian village, and slowly made their way to the cross at its entrance. They stopped to fix fallen flowers and decorations and, after making the sign of the cross, began praying in Polish in front of the cross. They carefully enunciated each verse of the long Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a sense of ceremonial reverence. After reciting the litany, the women began to sing the old Polish Catholic hymn "Serdeczna Matko" ("Beloved Mother"):

Serdeczna Matko, Opiekunko ludzi,
Niech Cię płacz sierot do litości wzbudzi!

Wygnańcy Ewy do Ciebie wołamy,
Zlituj się, zlituj, niech się nie tułamy…[1]

They interrupted their singing with short pauses to take a breath and, obviously, strained their ears to hear other voices. Normally, neighbouring village prayer groups would sing simultaneously with them. But the women did not hear their fellow prayers and were less enthusiastic. After an anthem, they decided to cease and agreed not to meet any longer, since two of them were no longer physically capable of coming to the cross every day.

For more than twenty years, the Catholics of Little Warsaw had gathered at the crossroads to devote their May prayers to the Virgin Mary, whom they respected as their main patron. By the time I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork, the outdoor Marian devotions tradition was dying out. The popular religious practices I will discuss in this paper are the phenomenon of a sole generation – people born in Little Warsaw in the 1920s and 1930s. Their parents were members of the congregation belonging to the St. Anthony of Padua Church in Khazhova, where some of my interlocutors attended catechesis classes and received their First Communion before the war. The annexation of Western Belarus from Poland in 1939 and World War II put an end to their religious education. After the war, the Soviets reestablished their power structures and started anti-religious propaganda. The church had been used as a storehouse but was eventually fully deconstructed.

In the absence of a priest, the Catholic community around the church went underground, giving birth to several village communities that secretly gathered for group prayers in their homes, celebrated religious holidays and observed family rituals. Going underground, the local Catholicism also acquired a more popular interpretation and spiritual nature. The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by a religious revival in the 1990s, which gave visibility to the local religious practices. The generation of old believers initiated the establishment of new crosses on the roads, gathered for group prayers outside and took an active part in the religious education of the youth.

Ethnographic fieldwork for this paper was carried out in several Catholic villages in central Belarus (Minsk region, Maladzyechna district), which have been locally known as *Malaya Warszawa* (Bel. Little Warsaw) since the mid-2000s. A starting point for my research is that the Soviets had never succeeded in entirely suppressing

1 Beloved Mother, Guardian of the Nation,
Hear orphans weeping in their supplication.
We are Eve's exiles. Do you hear us praying?
Show us your mercy when we begin straying…

religion in the countryside. Throughout the Soviet period, places like Little Warsaw remained islands of tradition in a sea of state-sponsored atheism.

In her *The Wedding of the Dead*, Gail Kligman shows how Transylvanian peasants of Greek Catholic background use the ritual to "express a certain resistance" to state pressure (Kligman 1987, 275). Along the same research line, this paper intends to address whether everyday religiosity in an atheist state may be seen as a form of resistance. Answering this question would advance our understanding of the historical role of the rural population. Many anthropologists have proposed viewing peasant conservatism and "stubbornness" as a self-defence mechanism against both conservative and progressive orders (Hann 1993, Pine 1993, Scott 1985). According to James Scott, everyday peasant resistance is "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interests from them", and it may take such forms as "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott 1985, xvi). Peasant resistance is often less visible but may be effective in the long run. In her ethnographic study of the *Górale,* a population of the Podhale region of the Tatra Mountains, Frances Pine demonstrates how the local inhabitants make the state sector of the economy work for their family and community interests (Pine 1993, 236). Likewise, my study reveals the variety of ways in which the population of the Soviet countryside escaped state policies, including anti-religious propaganda.

The study of popular religious practices in the Soviet countryside could potentially contribute to our understanding of ritual and silence as means of agency. According to the definition by Anthony Giddens (1979), agency refers to the power of an agent to act in a transformative way. Nevertheless, most studies associate agency with having a public voice that allows for the articulation of social problems. Based on her fieldwork among members of an informal Catholic fundamentalist group and a new religious movement, the Brahma Kumaris, Agnieszka Kościańska (2009) discusses silence in ritual and everyday life as a form of agency. Along the same research line, my study shows the agency of Catholic women from Little Warsaw who never gave visibility to their religious practices and social activities. Given that the underground church was primarily a women's initiative, gender appears to be an important analytical category of this study. In my paper, I will try to interpret this phenomenon and answer the question: how did women become founders and leaders of the underground religious community in Little Warsaw?

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork and combines participant observation, informal daily conversations and in-depth interviews with elderly women from Little Warsaw. The research focuses on women's intergenerational experiences, religious practices and the roles of faith and identity in their lives.

My engagement with the community spans several decades. Some of my earliest observations date back to the 1990s and early 2000s, when I spent my summer holidays in Little Warsaw. During this time, I participated in seasonal celebrations and family rituals alongside elderly women from the village. These experiences offered me an intimate introduction to local traditions and the ways in which women maintained cultural and religious practices.

In the summer of 2015, I returned to Little Warsaw, driven by both academic and family circumstances, with the intention of conducting a more systematic study. This paper focuses on three key respondents, all born in the early 1930s, who shared their life stories – recounting their childhood and youth in interwar Poland, wartime experiences, years of labour and motherhood in the Soviet countryside, and their reflections on life "in the old days", "under the Soviets" and in the present day. Although their *vera* ("faith") was not the explicit focus of the interviews, it emerged organically in their narratives, revealing a set of values that framed their understanding and evaluation of life events (for more on the significance of faith in the identity of rural Belarusians, see Engelking 2013).

Additionally, I interviewed two women born in the 1950s and 1960s, representing the generation of children who did not receive formal religious education due to Soviet policies but learned prayers and holiday observances from their mothers and grandmothers. Once they left their homes and integrated into Soviet society, religion faded from their daily lives. However, the reopening of churches in the 1990s prompted their re-engagement with religion, grounded in the religious knowledge they had inherited in their youth. When I conversed with them in 2015, these women were actively involved in church life.

The return of religion in the 1990s not only reshaped the spiritual landscape but also reactivated the memories of the older generation. Their religious practices suddenly became valuable resources for a new community of believers seeking to reconnect with their faith.

The study also benefits from insights gained through conversations with a broader network of participants linked to the main interviewees by family and religious ties. My participant observation extended to various religious settings, including ceremonies and masses held in a makeshift church in Khazhova, a former *selsovet* (from Russian *selskiy sovet*, meaning "rural council"). Notably, during these events, I observed intergenerational interactions among women – with almost no men present – offering a striking example of the gendered nature of religious practice in the community.

In this article, I situate my analysis at the intersection of gender, agency, religiosity and silent peasant resistance. I explore how women in Little Warsaw navigated their roles within Soviet society and how faith, even when suppressed, continued to inform their identities and actions. By bringing together ethnographic vignettes, life

stories and observations of contemporary religious practices, this article aims to illuminate the nuanced ways in which women have preserved, adapted and reclaimed their spiritual heritage.

LITTLE WARSAW AND ITS POPULATION

On the map, Little Warsaw appears as a five-kilometre-long chain of villages, separated from other settlements by vast fields and forests. Today, these villages are part of the Maladzyechna district in the Minsk oblast, located thirteen kilometres away from Maladzyechna. Under Polish rule – a period often mentioned by my interlocutors in their narratives – this distance felt even greater, as the city expanded significantly following Soviet transformations. The fact that my interlocutors often crossed this distance, for instance, to visit the local market, mostly on foot, added a further sense of separation between the city and Little Warsaw.

Geography clearly played a significant role in shaping its destiny. As this article will demonstrate, Little Warsaw's relative remoteness limited its female residents' access to the Soviet distribution system, healthcare and leisure facilities. At the same time, however, it afforded them greater freedom to practice their beliefs within an atheist state.

It would be difficult to describe the twentieth-century history of Little Warsaw better than Longina Bryleuskaya (Zakharkevich), a native of Little Warsaw and, later, an active member of the Belarusian community in Florida, did in one of her interviews: "My grandfather Jacob and my dad were born in Russia. My brothers and I were born in Poland. My brothers' children were born in the USSR. Their children were born in independent Belarus. But just imagine that most of these people were born in the same house" (Gardzeenka 2008).

Like many other inhabitants of Little Warsaw, Bryleuskaya experienced and, later, followed the rapid transformation of the micro-region from abroad. Nevertheless, the history of Little Warsaw in the first half of the twentieth century was, to a certain degree, a swift reiteration of its historical past. After more than two centuries in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), these lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire, which proceeded with its assimilation policies throughout the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of Little Warsaw found itself under Polish rule yet again due to the Soviet-Polish War and the Treaty of Riga (1921). However, World War II and Soviet transformations changed the micro-region's landscape forever.

If a religious map of Belarus were drawn, Little Warsaw would be marked as a small Catholic spot in the heart of the country. Though the percentage of Catholics in present-day Belarus is approximately 15 per cent of the total population,

most concentrate in the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian borderlands. As Catholicism is strongly associated with Poland and the Polish language in the Belarusian popular imagination, the name "Little Warsaw" does not seem surprising. Nevertheless, the fact that the six villages – Bruskauschyna, Zharlaki, Drani, Machynouschyna, Brohauschyna and Kuleuschyna – were labelled "Little Warsaw" during Soviet times is remarkable. From 1959 to 1965, the villages were part of a larger rural administrative district or a *selsovet* with a predominantly Orthodox population. The story goes that the head of the *selsovet*, who often visited the Catholic villages on business, was the first to call them Little Warsaw. This unofficial name remained popular and is still used by both residents and inhabitants of neighbouring places, for instance, when saying "*paehat' na Warszawu*" (Bel. "to go to Warsaw").

The history of the villages currently united under the name Little Warsaw can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when they became part of the Russian Empire. According to records from that time, the overall population of the micro-region was as many as 250 people; an average village consisted of several households of extended families. The villages were owned by several noble families for whom the local peasants continued to work until 1939. From an agricultural viewpoint, the soils of Little Warsaw are sandy: farming demands significant effort, and thus, harvests were quite poor. For a long time, the region remained underpopulated. The first significant population increase happened only at the beginning of the twentieth century when Little Warsaw doubled in number, reaching 600 people (Pashkou 2002, 727-760).

The population increase, however, gave rise to new social problems such as poverty. Households with a limited amount of land were unable to provide for growing families, and according to local inheritance rules, the land was divided among married sons. For many young women who had not succeeded in marrying, this meant that they would stay in their brothers' households and work for them. In search of a better future, young people left Little Warsaw en masse for work in North America and Western Europe, where they settled. It is difficult to say how many people left Little Warsaw in the first half of the century, but its population decreased from over 600 in 1909 to approximately 450 by 1939.

It is worth noting that in the 1920s, the area was home to a significant Belarusian population. In the village of Bruskauschyna – the "border town" of Little Warsaw, marking the beginning of a gradual shift toward a predominantly Catholic region – there were 178 residents, of whom 132 were Orthodox and 46 Roman Catholic; 129 identified as Belarusian by nationality, while 49 declared themselves Polish. In the nearby village of Zharlaki, this shift toward Catholicism becomes even more apparent: of the 155 inhabitants, 107 were Roman Catholic and 48 Orthodox, with 104 identifying as Polish and 51 as Belarusian.

These figures also underscore the influence of religion on national self-identification: Catholics typically identified as Poles, whereas Orthodox Christians tended to identify as Belarusians. In the Belarusian countryside, the terms "Catholics" and "Poles" were often used interchangeably well into recent times. However, a closer look at the local names for religious holidays – as well as the fact that all my respondents consider Belarusian their mother tongue – suggests that they were likely Belarusians of Catholic faith rather than ethnic Poles.

The geographical remoteness of Little Warsaw largely determined its plight during World War II – its population suffered equally under German occupation and from requisitions by Soviet partisans and other partisans of various pro-nationalist orientations. Because of the rapid approach of the German troops, not all men from Little Warsaw had been drafted into the Red Army; some of them later deserted and formed armed groups in the forests. Several young people from Little Warsaw were driven to Germany for forced labour, and a few peasants were killed in the village of Zharlaki, a centre of the occupation administration (Pashkou 2002, 743). Nevertheless, the demographic situation of Little Warsaw was severely affected by the war, as well as by the postwar anti-Soviet resistance and Soviet counterinsurgency. Every household was regularly robbed by the fighting parties, fourteen houses were set on fire and all the villages suffered from typhus and pneumonia epidemics.

It took decades for the population of Little Warsaw to recover. Only in the late 1960s, when Soviet society had achieved a certain degree of well-being, did the population of Little Warsaw reach its pre-war numbers (Pashkou 2002, 727-761). However, the 1970s marked a turning point in the local history as many young people began to leave the countryside. Most moved to the nearby city of Maladzyechna to work in industry, and a few continued to pursue further professional training and studies. The first generation of urban dwellers maintained their family, emotional and even economic bonds with their small homeland throughout their lives. Nonetheless, their decision to leave proved to be a crucial moment in the history of Little Warsaw, the full effects of which are only now becoming visible. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the local older population continued running private subsistence agriculture, helping the new urban families of their children survive the economic challenges of the 1990s. Little Warsaw looked especially lively in summertime because of the children who came for holidays.

When I returned to Little Warsaw in 2015, I found its cultural landscape largely transformed. The region's cultural peculiarities, including the local dialect of Belarusian, had gradually been disappearing along with their last representatives. Once a predominantly Catholic region at the beginning of the twentieth century, Little Warsaw gradually transformed into a typical post-Soviet countryside beset by demographic problems such as falling birth rates and alcohol abuse among younger population groups.

According to the older generation of Little Warsaw, the religious homogeneity of the local population was previously maintained through marriage rules – marriages within one denomination were preferred. Several typical family names – Zakharkevich, Bazhko, Chartovich, Shupliak – can be found inscribed on the gravestones in the old cemetery; my interlocutors also bear these names as their maiden names. The first significant change in the religious makeup of the micro-region occurred in the post-war years. Due to a shortage of men in the local households, the geography of marriage began to extend to nearby Orthodox villages. Most newcomers, however, did not mind marrying and having their children baptised in the Catholic Church. A third wave of change in Little Warsaw's population occurred between the 1960s and 1980s, with the arrival of several Orthodox families and families of other religious backgrounds from other Soviet republics.

Nevertheless, most current inhabitants of Little Warsaw are somehow related to the natives of these villages and have inherited their homes through family ties. Purchasing properties without any local mediation is a relatively recent development – a few young urban families have recently moved to Little Warsaw because of the low cost of living, and several houses have been purchased for summertime use.

FEMALE VOICES OF LITTLE WARSAW

It is a phenomenon well known to oral historians that our memory of the past is greatly shaped by our present (see, for instance, Thompson 1978). In her study of Holocaust survivors from Belarus living in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Anika Walke (2015) demonstrates how their unfulfilled hopes for better lives in the Soviet Union, as well as post-Soviet transformations, lead them to look back nostalgically on their youth in pre-war Soviet Belarus. Similarly, the older generation of Little Warsaw perceives the decaying countryside as their personal tragedy, which prompts endless reflection and nostalgia for the "good old days" and the "old-style" people who cared for their land and families and lived dedicated religious lives.

The biographies of elderly women from Little Warsaw begin with accounts of "life before", referring to life under Polish rule (1921–1939). World War II and the post-war Soviet transformation of the countryside, which began in the western Soviet borderlands in 1946–1947, ended the "good old days". They usually portray this time as hard but simple, when each family worked to provide for themselves and family well-being depended on the amount of land, workforce and effort put into working the land (see also Engelking 2013). Some of my interlocutors were considered well-off, meaning they did not know hunger and could sell extra produce from their households at the farmers' market. Children from less well-off families worked as herders for landowners and spent the grazing season away from home, receiving payment in grain and cash in the autumn.

My interlocutors' socialisation in eastern Poland included a significant religious component. Together with their parents, they attended St. Anthony of Padua Church in Khazhova, several kilometres from Little Warsaw, where they also received their First Communion. As part of their preparation for this sacrament, the children of Little Warsaw travelled to the church in large groups, enjoying each other's company along the way.

For children who had not yet started school, church services were often their first exposure to the Polish language, as they spoke Belarusian at home. Those who attended school learned to read and write in Polish since Belarusian schools were scarce in the Second Polish Republic during the 1930s. Religion lessons were part of the school curriculum.

The year 1939, however, put an end to their religious education and the "good old days". For most of the women I talked to, several years of either Polish or "Russian" (Soviet) schooling became their background in life, as they did not manage to continue their education after the war.

The war, obviously, brought chaos to the daily lives of people under occupation. It remains unclear whether there were any services in the church during the war because my interlocutors do not recall attending church themselves. Church records and the memoirs of the priest's sister show that Piotr Pupin served in Little Warsaw throughout the war, trying to protect his parish from both the occupiers' and partisans' robberies (Iz istorii gonenii katolicheskoi tserkvi 2013). The priest, who spoke German fluently, persuaded the Germans not to set the village of Haj on fire (Shukela 2013). Otherwise, the inhabitants of Little Warsaw remember the war as a competition for resources among several parties – invaders, partisans and other armed groups based in the local forests.

Even though the war slowed down the religious activities of the local Catholic community, faith and Christian solidarity persisted among the peasants during this time. The collective memory of Little Warsaw preserves miraculous episodes that happened to believers in these times of hardship. In 1943, for instance, many inhabitants were sick with typhus and suffered symptoms such as a high fever, hallucinations and a rash. As this disease is highly contagious and quickly transmitted through shared utensils, entire households were incapacitated for months. In the Chartovich family, ten people were sick. The mother remained the only healthy person to care for the entire family as other villagers did not dare to come into contact with them. With only one bowl and one spoon to eat from, she first fed her family, then crossed herself in front of icons before having the rest of her meal. The people of Little Warsaw believe that the faith and prayers of this woman protected her from the disease and gave her the strength to care for others.[2]

2 As ethnographers working in Belarus have pointed out, such miraculous sensibility is typical of the local Catholic population (See Zowczak 2013).

Because of the typhus and pneumonia epidemics and the lack of medical aid, many adults passed away, leaving behind multiple children. Although parentless children constituted a social issue in post-war Little Warsaw, none ended up in public orphanages. Extended families gathered to decide who would become a guardian for each child. The decision was based on available housing and the number of children in relatives' households. However, aunts and godmothers of orphans were more likely to become guardians. Families who had lost their homes to fire were also accommodated and supported by relatives and neighbours. One interviewee recalled how her mother went from one relative's house to another with a large basket, gradually replenished with sausages, eggs, bread and dairy products.

For my interlocutors in their early twenties, the post-war hardships and collectivisation coincided with significant changes in their personal lives. Finding a good match in post-war Little Warsaw was very difficult as there was a shortage of men of marriageable age – a consequence of the war and a broader nationwide phenomenon. Young women were often married off to other localities or, in some cases, married against their will to older house owners and widowers with children.

The story of three sisters, Regina, Janina and Józefa, who lost their home and both parents during the war, is rather typical. Their relatives gathered to decide where the girls would stay, and everyone pointed to their childless aunt, who had a house. Immediately after the war, the sisters' aunt, together with their godmother, tried to arrange marriages for the older girls. Regina, the eldest, was married off to a man in the city who was with a mobility impairment and much older than her. She was obviously married against her will, but her bitter lamentations did not stop her relatives. Józefa, the middle sister, was more stubborn. Before the war, she had been in a romantic relationship with a local man who subsequently joined an armed insurgent group and perished during one of the postwar clashes with Soviet forces. After surviving this personal tragedy, Józefa refused all attempts by her aunt to arrange her family life. She chose to leave Little Warsaw to search for work in the city and never married. The wedding of the youngest sister, Janina, was arranged by her stepbrothers. She was married to a young man from another locality who came to live at her aunt's house and thus became head of the household.

Susan Bridger (1987), who conducted research in Soviet Belarus during the 1980s, pointed out that women in the countryside were involved in every kind of work – labour on collective farms, childcare and subsistence food production and agriculture in their home. Although women's labour constituted a significant portion of the Soviet economy, working conditions were very poor. In the post-war decades, most of the food produced by collective farms remained inaccessible to rural dwellers, and collective farm workers were paid in equivalents of *trudodni*, conventional workday units. A brigade chief was responsible for registering *trudodni* for each worker by drawing sticks in a registration book. As my interlocutors recalled their

early years on collective farms, "What a life it was in the kolkhoz… They would draw those sticks and give us some grain at the end of the year."

Besides their main jobs at collective farms, peasant women maintained household subsistence farms to meet their families' needs. Despite their official roles in collective agriculture, Soviet peasants never fully relied on collective farms to sustain their families; they continued to cultivate their orchards and raise farm animals throughout the Soviet period. The state's stance on subsistence agriculture was ambivalent. While the government expected collective farming to gradually suppress individual domestic economies and launched several campaigns against private farming, it simultaneously permitted regulated household plots (*sotki*) to help villages partially supply themselves with food. Thus, people did not work on their plots *against* the system but rather within the boundaries it set.

The second aspect of women's labour, as noted by Susan Bridger, was the lack of facilities and social benefits for working mothers in the countryside. The first two decades after collectivisation were especially difficult in this regard. There was no paid maternity leave, and the daycare situation in the Belarusian countryside was among the worst in the entire Soviet Union (Bridger 1987, 114). Working mothers had to rely on traditional family and social structures, arranging childcare with the help of the *babka* (Belarusian for grandmother) and other female relatives. One of my interlocutors, who gave birth to her fourth child in 1960, recalled, "After Josef was born, I stayed home until noon, nursing him and washing nappies, while my aunt was in the field. In the early afternoon, she came home, and I took her place in the field."

Rural women's access to medical aid was also limited. Until the mid-1960s, most women in Little Warsaw gave birth at home, particularly in winter when ambulances could not reach their villages due to heavy snowfalls. Women had to be assisted by a local midwife or arrange transport to Khazhova, where they could be picked up by ambulance. Since there were no qualified paediatricians at the local medical point, families had to rely entirely on themselves to care for sick children. Parents brought doctors and nurses from the city, but many cases went without proper treatment. Several women in the village are remembered to have lost young children during epidemics of pneumonia, measles and other childhood diseases in the 1950s and 1960s.

Poor living conditions and a lack of social benefits led many young peasant women to retreat into family life; few left the village for the city, and even fewer became Soviet activists. While at least some men pursued opportunities for training and took positions in the kolkhoz, finding a degree of self-realisation there, most women remained confined to the domestic sphere. Stripped of its public significance, religion was also pushed into the private, largely female realm. Throughout the Soviet period, women acted as transmitters of religious tradition to younger generations,

teaching children prayers and ensuring religious observances at home: "With the closure of churches the role of women has been extended in the unofficial church. At the same time women believers continue to play an important part in preserving religious belief in their own families" (Bridger 1987, 186).

IN THE UNDERGROUND

According to Anna Engelking (2012, 720), state atheisation and collectivisation were interconnected. In line with this view, this article argues that the underground movement of the local Catholic community was a response to both these state campaigns.

Until 1939, the region was under Polish rule and thus remained untouched by Soviet reforms, unlike Eastern Belarus (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic). A few years after World War II, the Soviets began pressuring local peasants to give up their land and join collective farms. First, they were required to lend money and grain and, later, to bring their horses, dairy cattle, pigs and agricultural equipment to the collective farms. The methods of persuasion used in Little Warsaw were rather typical, ranging from village meetings and psychological pressure, such as threatening one's children's future and night visits to peasants' homes, to physical abuse, arrests and the forced resettlement of well-off families (for a more detailed discussion of the methods used to persuade peasants, see Kligman and Verdery 2011). One of my interviewees recounted collectivisation in their village:

> The kolkhoz took everything from us – a horse, a cart, a plough, a threshing-floor, everything… and endlessly "lent" moneys, bread, eggs, meat, etc. Of course, they exerted huge pressure on us to make us sign those loans. They had appointed a village headman, and he arranged meetings in his home. Our aunt had to attend them as head of our household. One time, she had refused to sign a loan and came back home. They came to our home at night. As we did not let them in, they knocked on our door and on our windows all night long. In the morning, our aunt was back to sign the paper. There was no other way. We did not have any rights.

The peasants' responses to collectivisation were very diverse, ranging from delays and endless negotiations to occasional killings of Soviet activists. For instance, the agent responsible for food requisitions in Little Warsaw was found dead on the road from Brohauschyna to Kuleuschyna in 1949 (Pashkou 2002, 503). Official sources attributed such crimes to the activities of "bandits"; however, local collective memory points to acts of resistance.

The inhabitants of *khutors* (remote farms) were among the most difficult to convince and, ultimately, the most affected by collectivisation. They were forced to leave their plots of land and move to villages. Were they to refuse, the families were denied "all the advantages of civilisation", such as electricity at home, and their children were not admitted to school. Nevertheless, several families avoided collectivisation and remained outside the kolkhoz throughout the Soviet period. For example, one childless couple continued to live in their *khutor* without modern facilities, earning their living from domestic agriculture and natural resources. Another couple, who had not joined the kolkhoz, was known for actively participating in the underground church in Little Warsaw. Respected as knowledgeable people, they often acted as advisers on customs and family rituals. The wife was a locally renowned singer of religious anthems, while the husband was frequently invited to lead funeral processions carrying a cross.

The history of the underground Catholic community in Little Warsaw begins with the closure of the St. Anthony of Padua Church in Khazhova. The wooden church, where my interviewees attended catechesis classes and services, was erected in the first half of the eighteenth century. At that time, there was also a hospital and a school supervised by the Trinitarian order. After the Kastus Kalinowski uprising (1863), the tsarist government handed the church in Khazhova over to the Orthodox Church, as happened elsewhere in the western provinces of the Russian Empire. The Catholic community reclaimed the church only in 1919, and it remained open until 1947. In the post-war decade, the building was used as a kolkhoz store. It was eventually deconstructed in 1956 (Pashkou 2002, 694).

Father Piotr Pupin was arrested in 1949 and sentenced to ten (according to some sources, twenty-five) years in labour camps for "anti-Soviet propaganda" and "anti-partisan activities". He was sent to work in Vorkuta, near the Arctic Circle. After Stalin's death, the priest was rehabilitated and returned to Belarus. Until his death in 1978, Piotr Pupin served in the church in Rubiazhevichy and several other churches in the surrounding region (he was not allowed to return to the Maladzyechna region). Local authorities repeatedly fined him for such "violations of the law" as performing baptisms at home, erecting crosses and making religious inscriptions (Iz istorii gonenii katolicheskoi tserkvi 2013).

This situation reflects the ambivalent position of the church in the Soviet Union. It was not a matter of complete liquidation but of tightly controlled existence, operating within strict state-imposed limits. In 1946, there were officially 238 Catholic churches in Belarus (Shybieka 2003, 374). However, as it was across the entirety of the Soviet Union, the state closely monitored priests' activities – from their financial dealings, such as collecting money for religious causes, to their interactions beyond local communities (see also Bohn and Einax 2018, Khiterer 2020). Gatherings

of believers were also surveilled, ensuring that urban residents, especially party members and those with secure jobs, were discouraged from participating in religious life.

The old church as well as other sanctuaries for the local Catholics were destroyed, such as smaller chapels and roadside crosses. The wooden cross at the entrance to the village of Brohauschyna was perhaps the only one that survived the Soviet era, standing in the shadow of a lilac tree. During the Soviet period, the inhabitants of Little Warsaw did not dare to pray outdoors, their homes seeming to provide a safer haven for community prayers. A woman born in 1931 recalled how the *malenne* (Belarusian for praying) had begun:

> Earlier we did not go to the cross but devoted our May and June prayers from homes. For instance, we [our family] hosted *Maiovyia* [May devotions] many times. We arranged a table with a cross and decorated it with flowers. It was our altar. Everyone from the village would come to our place; only those who were away for some reason would not. For instance, we would host the May devotions, while someone else would host the June devotions. Before Easter, people also gathered to recite litanies. So, we prayed at home and did not go to the cross.

According to the interviewee, from the 1950s to the 1970s, neighbours gathered to pray on Sundays, major Christian holidays and every evening during May and June. Since the mid-1970s, Sunday prayers have gradually shifted to the family circle, but May devotions have retained their communal significance.[3]

Nevertheless, the local cult of the Virgin Mary was not confined to May devotions. Mary was also celebrated during another important holiday — the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, or Our Lady of Herbs into Heaven (15 August). In local popular tradition, this holiday is known as *Aspazha*, a term that could be etymologically connected to both *Haspazha* (Belarusian for "Mistress") and *zhat'* (meaning "the act of harvesting"). This holiday, rooted in both agricultural and Christian calendars, was also considered a kind of women's day in Little Warsaw.

Throughout the Soviet era, local women maintained the tradition of a small pilgrimage to the church of Krasnaje (built in 1912), where an annual *Aspazha* feast took place and homegrown crops and herbs were blessed. In the collective memory

3 May devotions to Mary are an old Catholic tradition popular throughout Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Believers were encouraged by the Church to gather in small groups and families to sing Marian anthems and read from the Scriptures, reflecting on the life of the Virgin Mary. A distinctive feature of these devotions is the May altar, arranged in churches and homes with a Marian image, candles and May flowers. The devotions culminated at the end of May when the image of Mary was crowned (Mrówka 2010).

of local Catholics, this church holds a special place. Not only was it dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, but it was also the only church that remained open in the entire Maladzyechna region during Soviet times. Several generations of local Catholics were secretly baptised and married there.

Women from Little Warsaw did their best to attend the *Aspazha* celebration in Krasnaje, a major social event. On this occasion, they wore their finest garments and prepared baskets filled with garden flowers, fruits and vegetables. Travelling in groups of up to twenty, they either walked the approximately fifteen kilometres to Krasnaje or hired kolkhoz drivers. Given the distance and the season's heat, this journey was often a considerable effort, especially as the women were also involved in kolkhoz harvesting. As a result, planning and preparation for the event began well in advance. During the pilgrimage, the women chatted and sang Marian anthems.

Unsurprisingly, the underground religious community of Little Warsaw chose the Virgin Mary as their patron. Women were more active than men in sustaining everyday religious practices and organising family rituals and holiday celebrations, but they also served as leaders within village communities – as was the case in Brohauschyna. A woman named Jadviga is remembered as having led the local Catholics for several decades, acting "as a priest" during Sunday prayers and May devotions and overseeing religious observances in the village. After her death, Jadviga was succeeded by another female leader.

Women from Little Warsaw who worked in the city often served as mediators between their village and the church in Maladzyechna, which was housed in a barrack. These female mediators were asked to contact priests on behalf of their rural relatives, provide ritual food and objects and accommodate visitors from Little Warsaw coming for religious purposes. For instance, they might obtain holy water and bless *Svianconka* (Easter food) before Easter, purchase icons or lockets for children or arrange baptisms or funeral services with priests. Food and objects were usually delivered to the countryside through common acquaintances and distributed among relatives. Such networks were extremely important and helped maintain religious rituals since rural dwellers rarely had the opportunity to attend church themselves.

EVERYDAY RELIGIOSITY AND SILENT RESISTANCE

For Belarusian peasants who had earlier given up their land, their faith and traditions were the last things they refused to renounce. For the generation of my interviewees, these elements formed the cornerstone of their identity and served as a key component in continuity between generations. At the same time, religious rituals, as well as everyday expressions of faith, created a space for local solidarity and subtle resistance.

Observing major Christian holidays was essential to local religiosity during Soviet times. According to my interlocutors, they deliberately avoided working on these important days, despite the fact that such holidays were officially regular business days. They would arrange to be replaced by Orthodox acquaintances or simply not appear at work on those days. Local kolkhoz functionaries mostly turned a blind eye to these absences, with the harshest penalty being the denial of bonuses to their monthly wages. Because the decision to skip work was collective, the women felt secure and unafraid of facing consequences.

On the one hand, peasants occupied one of the lowest rungs within Soviet society, a fact they were fully aware of. On the other hand, this marginal position granted them a certain degree of freedom that employees in urban enterprises could not enjoy. Urban dwellers feared losing their jobs, party membership and social standing if they stepped out of line. In contrast, rural people generally were not party members. Among the entire older generation of Little Warsaw, only one man was a member of the Communist Party. He worked as an "ordinary" watchman, and the community did not take his party affiliation seriously. Another man is said to have been a party member for just one night – a story his wife recounted with a mix of humour and disbelief:

> No, there were no party people among us [dwellers of Little Warsaw]. My husband was in the party for one night. He worked as a storekeeper in Khazhova, and they harassed him there. One day, the main agronomist of the kolkhoz came to our place by car and took him away. When he returned home, I understood everything (that he had applied for membership in the party). I could not talk to him without crying. I did not want it: what was the purpose of being in the party for an ordinary storekeeper? It was unnecessary, it was a shame… and he changed his mind. In the morning, he took his application back. The party was for those in the cities who held important posts, but not for ordinary people.

The above interview is remarkable for several reasons. First, it again reveals women's agency and ability to stand up for traditional values in a critical moment. Second, it demonstrates the solidarity among local peasants and their own perception of their role in Soviet society – the woman does not want her husband to be a party member because the party is "not for ordinary people" and none of their neighbours are members either.

Other, more invisible, signs of solidarity among the local peasants were present throughout the Soviet period at a more everyday level. In Little Warsaw, older believers greeted each other with the words "*Niech będzie pochwalony Jezus Chrystus"* (Pol. "Praised be Jesus Christ"). Most children born in Little Warsaw between

the 1950s and 1970s were given Catholic names, such as Czesława, Katarzyna, Helena, Władysława, Józefa, Teresa and Irena for girls and Walentyn, Mieczysław, Stefan and Józef for boys.

A Christian greeting, crossing children before letting them go to school in the morning, or even marking a loaf of bread or freshly made butter with a cross – all were small demonstrations of faith that took on great meaning in extraordinary times. Repeated daily by believers, they not only fostered cultural identity but also clearly marked the boundaries between the local Catholic community and the outside "atheist" world.

Nonetheless, two questions that arise from my material are (1) what the state policy was towards the rural population and (2) how the state coped with demonstrations of religiosity, such as the refusal to work on religious holidays. It seems there were two levels in the organisation of Soviet atheist propaganda: the state level and a more everyday, local level. While official anti-religious policies mandated special atheist education in the countryside, local propagandists generally did not concern themselves with older believers. They assumed the tradition would die out along with its last representatives and therefore preferred to focus on children and youth. For instance, schoolteachers carried out their Sunday duty at church entrances, making lists of schoolchildren who attended Sunday services with their parents. While the whole family gathered at home for Easter breakfast, the schoolchildren had to leave for a *Voskresnik*[4] to perform work tasks for their school or kolkhoz. Though the women continued teaching prayers to their children and made sure they prayed before going to bed, the atheistic education also bore fruit. My interviewees recall receiving critical remarks about their religious observances from their growing children. Combined with the absence of religious institutions and the lack of quality time spent with parents, this gradually led to the decline of religious education among those born in Little Warsaw after World War II. As some of my interlocutors have acknowledged, "We observed everything at home but failed to bring our children to church."

1990S REVIVAL

In his introductory essay on religion in the post-Soviet space, Douglas Rogers (2005) emphasises the interconnection between economic transformation and religious

4 In the Soviet Union, *Voskresnik* (from Russ. *Voskresenje* – Sunday) was a form of (obligatory) volunteer work, often carried out on weekends. Unlike *Subbotnik* (from Russ. *Subbota* – Saturday), *Voskresnik*s were also used as a tool of atheist upbringing and were deliberately scheduled on major Christian holidays.

revival through the expression "religion as marketplace". Indeed, religion provided a rescue from material hardship and social turbulence for many former Soviet citizens, and the competition among religions and denominations often resembled the post-Soviet developments in the local markets. The religious "marketplace" offered a lot of flexibility in the city, where conversions from Orthodox Christianity to Catholicism or Protestantism and vice versa were not rare (for a discussion of religion after socialism, see Naumescu 2007, Hann 2010 and Halemba 2015).

All of the above, however, cannot be fully applied to the countryside. The main change that occurred in Little Warsaw with the fall of the Soviet Union was that the residents started making their faith visible. Starting in the 1990s, May and June devotions were held before newly placed crosses on the roads. Those early wooden crosses were raised on the initiative and through the efforts of local Catholics. For the local women, the 1990s and the accompanying freedom of belief marked the beginning of a competition – every village woman not only arranged a home altar with old and recently obtained icons and a crucifix but brought something of her own (for instance, garden flowers) to decorate a village cross. After being blessed by a priest, the new crosses of Little Warsaw became small centres of local religious life, where May and June devotions took place, funeral processions stopped, and every believer, coming or going, paused to cross herself or himself.

In the 1990s, the local Catholicism retained its female face – the majority of devotion participants were elderly women who brought their grandchildren. Several grandmothers with up to ten grandchildren were a typical praying group. For my interviewees, the collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with their retirement. Though they still practised small-scale subsistence agriculture, they had more time to devote to their faith and family, including the religious education of the young. They rarely had a chance to bring their grandchildren to church. However, they did their best to convince the parents of the necessity of taking catechesis classes as preparation for First Communion.

In the middle of the 1990s, the development of the local Catholicism began a new phase. In 1995, Little Warsaw was included in the St. Josef Church District and, later, in the St. Kazimir Church District with a centre in Maladzyechna. The priests would visit their elderly parishioners at Christmas time, pray at the local cemeteries on All Saints' Day and come to their homes on various family occasions. Because of their age and health issues, elderly inhabitants of Little Warsaw could not go to church. A solution was found in the 2010s by establishing a makeshift community church in the former *selsovet* building in Khazhova. For the older generation of Little Warsaw, this has been especially meaningful, symbolising the return of the community centre to where an old church stood before the war.

According to the official data from January 2002, the overall Catholic population of Little Warsaw numbered approximately a hundred people, residing in fifty-nine

houses (Fibek 2002). During my fieldwork, the local Catholic community was even smaller. Nevertheless, many of today's parishioners of the churches in Maladzyechna and Krasnaje come from Little Warsaw. The generation of my interviewees' children, who are in their fifties and sixties now, is currently re-entering the church, viewing this process as their way of reconciling with the past and reconnecting with the generations that preceded them.

The underground efforts of my interlocutors during the Soviet period eventually bore fruit: on the morning of 15 August 2015 (*Aspazha*), I watched several women – none of whom had been known as believers in Soviet times – leaving their mothers' homes for the annual feast in Krasnaje. On their way, they shared memories of their mothers and grandmothers, for whom this day had been important.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on earlier scholarship on peasant resistance and forms of agency, this paper raises two main questions: first, whether everyday religiosity in an atheist state may be seen as a form of resistance, and second, how women became the founders and leaders of the underground church in Little Warsaw. Analysis of the collected material provided a positive answer to the first question. Despite the atheistic propaganda and anti-religious actions initiated by the state, ordinary people from the countryside continued praying individually and in groups, celebrating religious holidays and practising family rituals. These acts were also quiet demonstrations of solidarity, as community members supported one another in reproducing their shared values. Their silent resistance proved effective in the long run – the older generation of Little Warsaw, through their collective perseverance, managed to keep their family and religious traditions alive and thus secure generational continuity and the religious revival of the 1990s.

The second question requires a more elaborate discussion. Based on my analysis, two interrelated interpretations of female religious leadership may be offered. The first was suggested to me through the work of Agnieszka Kościańska, in which she makes the statement: "When men are present, women keep silent" (Kościańska 2009, 59). The Catholic community that existed through the old church in Khazhova was led by a priest and, to a great degree, was based on male authority. When those structures were removed, women might have felt more freedom in launching "their own" church. The Soviets also organised their work in the countryside through traditional male structures (for instance, the institute of eldership). They saw men as potential Soviet cadres, whereas women were often left aside. The religion that was no longer in demand by the state was gradually relegated to the women's space, along with family and child-rearing. Being denied a proper position within Soviet society,

rural women withdrew into their families and female circles, joining together in underground religious communities. From this viewpoint, the underground church appears as an embodiment of female solidarity in the Soviet countryside.

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WOMEN'S RITUAL PRACTICES IN THE CULTURE OF BELARUSIANS

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This article aims to highlight the dominant position of women within the symbolic space of Belarusian rural culture from the nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, and show the specific features of women's ritual practices known among Belarusians as *abrok* (a votive offering) and *abydzennik* (a one-day communal ritual to avert misfortune). The cultural anthropological analysis of these practices is based on the author's long-term field research and ethnographic literature. The study takes an ethno-sociological approach, and draws on concepts from gift and ritual theory, as well as gender studies. The first part of the article examines the status of women in rural society and their social responsibility within the symbolic field of relations among humans, ancestors, and the sacred, as well as the connection between women's rituals and traditional activities, such as spinning and weaving. The second part describes and interprets the votive ritual of offering textile gifts (*abroki*) at roadside crosses, other sacred sites and in churches, a practice which is still carried out today. The following section analyses the practice of making *abydzennik* and its associated rituals. The article emphasises that this ritual was revitalised in Belarusian villages during the Second World War and in Minsk in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. A conclusion is drawn about the significance of traditional women's socio-cultural experience and the need to consider its existence in culture and collective memory when assessing the social potential of modern Belarusian society.

KEYWORDS: folk culture, rural culture, women's ritual practices, abrok, abydzennik, Belarus.

The 2020 Belarusian revolution brought women onto the political stage and showed them as a force, not in the form of dominant leadership, but in its collective identity. The role of the three women who united and became the leaders of the new democratic movement, female white-and-red marches with flowers, symbolic women's actions that became media artefacts, the "imprisoned" Eve, a painting by Chaïm Soutine, which was arrested and became a symbol of resistance, as well as other manifestations of the new feminist force in the political field during the explosion

of social aspirations for democratic change and after its suppression in Belarus in recent years have become the subject of reflection by political scientists, sociologists and cultural anthropologists outside Belarus (Bekus 2021, Shparaga 2022, Kirshbaum 2023, Shitcova 2024).

The explosion of creative energy in 2020, the manifestations of which were filtered out of the social and media spheres in Belarus, is further amplified by numerous creative initiatives and projects in the emigrant community. Among them, one cannot ignore women's voices, whose narratives are becoming increasingly loud and visible. While it is not the purpose of this article to elaborate on this topic, I will point out what interests me as a researcher of traditional forms of women's culture in the Belarusian village: the increasingly evident trend in women's discourse is the reversion to the experience of their predecessors, to their rural cultural origins, searching for and rediscovering them. This is perhaps most vividly reflected in the words of Belarusian women writers. In this relation, one can recall the stories of female writer Eva Viežnaviec (2023) in *What Are You Coming for, Wolf?* and the debut by Golya z Opolya (2024), *My Granny – The Funeral Director*, written in the Polesian dialect. The authors embodied their childhood and adolescent experience of belonging to a rural women's community, absorbing knowledge from their grandmothers, including the sacred experience of traditional rituals and secret practices. Taking into account the materialised interest in books, albums and exhibitions (Leskec' 2022) devoted to women's practices of incantations and whispering, lending personality to village whisperers, it becomes clear that the public consciousness, manifested by the voice of the artists, exercises its interest in a topic that has never been a subject of attention or in demand as a cultural value before, nor has it been conceptualised or articulated in the Belarusian scientific discourse.

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To this day, the Belarusian countryside has preserved cultural forms and relics that developed in ancient times under an agrarian, pre-industrial society. The patterns of the traditional culture of Belarusians were passed on mainly through the female line. The patterns, symbols, canons and norms of the culture of traditional rural society were preserved in women's cultural memory, reproduced by women and passed on to the younger generation. Along with the function of keeping traditions, the woman's prerogative in traditional society included keeping the social balance at the level of family and kin, communication between the living and ancestors, helping the dead during their transition to the netherworld, as well as symbolic relations with the sacred.

The role and place of women in traditional culture have not been addressed in Belarusian ethnology and have not been confirmed as a subject of cultural and anthropological research. My previous publications were devoted to the traditional

activities of a rural woman – spinning, weaving and creating a beautiful visual environment in the form of clothing, interior and ceremonial fabrics. In analysing the phenomenon of women's creativity, I sought to present it as a distinctive form of female existence within traditional culture (Lobachevskaja 2003, 2013). This article aims to show that women dominate the symbolic space of Belarusian rural culture and to reveal the specifics of women's ritual practices, which are called *abrok* and *abydzennik*. Of course, this can be achieved only partially, as a rough estimate, within the framework of this article. Uncovering some aspects and forms of the gender specifics of the traditional culture of the Belarusian countryside, which is characterised as a peasant agrarian culture that has retained many archaic elements, and the significant role of the Belarusian women in it, allows us to gain a better understanding of the important social and political processes currently taking place in Belarusian society.

The concept of "traditional culture" is not a generally accepted scientific category. In Belarusian and Russian ethnology, cultural studies and folklore studies, the concept is synonymous with the term "folk culture" or "rural culture". The concept of traditional culture characterises a specific way of organising life activities based on the inheritance of collective meanings, values and norms. I use the concept without any ideological connotations to refer to village culture both in terms of the past and to its relics (rituals, folklore and mythology) in contemporary rural culture.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on an extensive body of field material collected by the author as part of a comprehensive study of folk culture across all regions of Belarus, conducted during the 1990s and 2000s by the Belarusian State Institute of Cultural Studies, the Belarusian State University of Culture and Arts and the K. Krapiva Institute of Art Studies, Ethnography and Folklore of the Centre for Belarusian Culture, Language and Literature Research at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. The numerous oral testimonies gathered by me throughout almost the entire territory of Belarus regarding the existence of ritual obligations and the creation of everyday textiles have been partially summarised in the relevant sections of the multi-volume series of collective monographs *Traditional Artistic Culture of Belarusians*, volumes of which are devoted to six historical-ethnographic regions of Belarus: Poozerye, Eastern and Western Polesie, Ponemanye, Podneprovye and Central Belarus (Varfalameeva 2001–2013). Rich material on women's ritual practices was collected by me and under my supervision by participants of the International Interdisciplinary Humanities School of Central and Eastern Europe of the Centre for the Study of Traditions of Ancient Culture at the University of Warsaw (MSH OBTA) during

the implementation of the project "Belarus and Its Borderlands: History, Culture, Language" (2004–2006). The materials were collected through oral interviews with respondents – rural women of older and middle age – in the Gomel and Mogilev regions of Belarus and Belarusian settlements in the Podlaskie Voivodeship of Poland (audio recordings and their transcriptions are stored in the MSH OBTA archive in Warsaw).

At the beginning of my field research, my respondents were women of the older generation, born at the end of the nineteenth and in the first decade of the twentieth century, many of whom were illiterate. They conveyed the memories of their mothers and grandmothers regarding the practices of the *abydzennik* ritual in the second half of the nineteenth century. Subsequent research included the *kolkhoz* (Soviet collective farm) generation of rural women born in the 1920s to 1950s, who mostly had primary and secondary education. The research was conducted using a refined questionnaire and supplemented the previously collected materials with new details and testimonies, including numerous accounts of the *abydzennik* ritual during World War II.

In my independent research in recent years, the focus has been primarily on ritual practice, which continues to be consistently practised by rural women of the older and middle generations regardless of their education level and occupations, as well as by urban women originating from rural areas. Audio recordings of narratives, their transcriptions and visual documentation of contemporary ritual tradition are preserved in the author's archive. The material on the female ritual culture of the Belarusian countryside, gathered in the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, describes facts and requires analysis and contemporary interpretation.

Unlike the ritual of making *abydzonnaya* fabric (ritual fabric woven in one day), which was described by Belarusian and Russian ethnographers such as Adam Bohdanovich, Vladimir Dobrovolsky, Dmitry Zelenin and others in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the women's practice of *abrok* has only recently attracted the attention of researchers, notably Tatsiana Volodina (2023).

The ethnographic material gathered serves as a foundation for understanding the broader issues of the role of women in traditional culture and their ritual functions in society which have not been thoroughly explored in Belarusian anthropology. Nevertheless, studying it is an important task, as it may provide us with key insights into the nature of current social processes in Belarusian society.

The research methodology is grounded in the cultural-anthropological approach. To determine the nature of folk religiosity, of which the women's ritual practices studied are a part, I have employed an ethnosociological approach (Obrębski 2022), principles from gift theory and work on ritual theory (Mauss 2000, Cassirer 2011, Turner 1983, Eliade 2001), including contemporary studies on disaster rituals and gender studies by Russian scholars (Adonyeva 1998, 2004, Kabakova 2001).

STATUS OF BELARUSIAN WOMEN IN THE CULTURE OF RURAL SOCIETY

In order to understand the cultural and social nature of women's ritual practices, it is necessary to outline, at least in brief, the status of Belarusian women in traditional rural society, as described in ethnographic literature.

The social status of Belarusian women in rural society until the beginning of the twentieth century was characterised by relative independence, the consolidation of certain freedoms in customary law and the established gender order: possession of dowry as property, leaving the marriage relationship through *prochki* (divorce as a result of a disagreement) or through *razluchyny* (breakup, when a woman could leave her husband's house permanently without any formalities and return to her parent's house) (Lastouski 1928, 40–42). After *prochki* or *razluchyny*, the woman retained the right to that part of the dowry, which consisted of fabrics and clothes she had made herself, inviolable since the Middle Ages, and all her personal property (Dovnar-Zapol'skij 1897, 117).

Divorces were not uncommon in peasant society, for which there were various reasons, including bigamy. This was encountered, for example, by members of a research expedition in 1927 in the villages of Stamagyli near Starobin and Knyaz-Voziera[1] (Mikitinski 1929, 31, 40). Recognising a woman's property rights under customary family law gave her a certain freedom as the mistress of the house, not as a servant of her husband. Although the man was officially considered the head of the family, in practice, the woman's role was very significant. The historian and ethnographer Mitrofan Dovnar-Zapolski wrote that in a "normal" peasant family, the wife enjoyed respect and equal rights with her husband, and "cases of cruel treatment of the wife by the husband are extremely rare and are explained by some exceptional circumstances" (Dovnar-Zapol'skij 1897, 106). In 1880, the priest Felix Stsepura wrote about family relations in the town of Semežava, emphasising the role of women: "The woman in the house is not a slave who must obey her husband's will and satisfy his whims, but a full-fledged mistress of the house. In all the most important points of domestic order, the husband will never do anything without his wife's consent and advice" (Stsepura 1880, 367). With male dominance in the public sphere, the relatively independent status of Belarusian peasant women in the family had a definite positive impact on their gender identity and the fulfilment of special cultural functions in traditional society.

Until the early twentieth century, the relics of the matricentric form of social organisation were preserved in the ritual sphere of the Belarusians. Ethnographer Vladimir Dobrovol'skij described a rare Belarusian wedding custom, when the groom allowed the bride to tumble over him three times during the wedding if he agreed that his wife's

1 Former village in the Pervomayskiy village council of Soligorsk district, Minsk region.

authority in the family would be higher than his and as a sign of consent to participate in the couvade ceremony. He believed: "This rite undoubtedly expresses subordination to the woman: a preliminary agreement for this rite is concluded only when the woman's authority exceeds that of the man" (Dobrovol'skij 1893, 370, 372).

The custom known as the *kuvada* involved a man, during his wife's pregnancy, demonstrating or asserting his rights to the child by dressing in women's clothing and, imitating the physical act of childbirth, "assisting" the woman with moans. Sometimes, the midwife who delivered the child made the man, against his will, but with the help of magic, feel the pangs of childbirth synchronously with his wife (Dobrovol'skij 1893, 369–371). According to an existing Polesian legend explaining the origin of the rite, in the past, all husbands could take upon themselves the labour pains of their wives.

The story of how it happened was recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century by ethnographer Alexander Serzhputovski: "Before giving birth, the husband would stare into his wife's eyes for a long time and then disappear from the house, go into the forest and there scream and beat himself against a tree" (quoted in Kabakova 2001, 68). There was also a preventive reason for a man's agreement to participate in the couvade rite, that is, in this way he protected himself from possible magical actions performed by the woman in case of his *perelub* (adultery) (Dobrovol'skij 1893, 371). The materials of the Polesie archive[2], to which the Russian anthropologist Galina Kabakova refers, testify that the archaic rite of *kuvada* was widespread in Polesie even in the twentieth century.

In anthropology, there are different approaches to interpreting the rite of couvade (Głażewska 2014, 83–192). However, I would like to underline the fact that the description of the Belarusian couvade emphasises the man's empathy towards the woman and his voluntary sharing of family suffering with his wife by "suffering" himself. Observers of nineteeth century Belarusian folk life noted cases when a husband wholly obeyed his wife in the family and everyday life (Dovnar-Zapol'skij 1897, 107).

The gender relations of traditional Belarusian society stipulated the unconditional dominance of women in the ritual sphere and their responsibility for maintaining the life of the family, especially children, symbolic sacred relations with ancestors, as well as with supernatural beings and supreme divine patrons. The knowledge transfer in the female collective ensured these functions, and the process itself was naturally connected with labour and household activities.

In the common cultural space of traditional village society, until the middle of the twentieth century – until the completion of collectivisation and the socio-cultural

2 The database "Polesie Archive" is maintained by the Department of Ethnolinguistics and Folklore of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The material was collected from the 1970s to the 1990s under the direction of Russian ethnolinguist Nikita Tolstoy.

modernisation of the Belarusian village – there was an exclusively female segment, filled with specific female practices aimed at preparing young girls for female work in spinning, weaving and marital relations, as well as preparing married women for mastering magical healing practices and specific forms of ritual communication with the world of dead ancestors and the higher sphere of divine presence.

The social life of a peasant woman took place in the space of the female collective and centred around the main female occupations – harvesting, flax processing and spinning. Even in the middle of the twentieth century, the collective nature of such work was still preserved in villages. In Soviet collective farms, women also worked together on jobs requiring a large number of workers.

The autumn stage of raw flax processing, which included spinning, took place in women's collectives in the villages. This cycle of women's labour took up a significant period of every village woman's life. The exceptional importance of spinning for women of all social classes is reflected (Sikorskaja-Kulesha 2003, 63) in the term of kinship in the female line, *pa kudzeli* (by flax), which was used by the nobility in our lands together with the definition of origin in the male line, *pa miachy* (by the sword). This reflects not only the attributes of the basic activities of women and men but also symbolically embodies the gender opposition of female and male character, softness and metal, pliability and strength.

The complete spinning cycle of women's labour took place at evening sit-ins, talks or spinning parties when women of different ages gathered in a large, specially rented house. Here, their social and spiritual unity was formed. It was a closed sphere of women's lives, isolated from the male part of village society and patriarchal authority. The exception was the youth evening – spinning meetings with young men that had a marital intentions.

While mastering the spinning craft and improving their skills in this important business, the girls of the women's collective learned from the older women the secret knowledge of charm and protection magic with the use of spinning thread and woven cloth. Joint spinning for young girls was of initiatory and educational importance, preparing them for marriage and sexual life. Paremic folklore texts – riddles about weaving with erotic overtones, in which spinning tools were identified with female and male reproductive organs and sexual acts – served as tools of sexual education. In such riddles, the whole process of weaving, from flax processing to the production of cloth on looms, is described metaphorically, through the symbolism of bodily experience, as an act of the union of female and male, necessary for the continuation of the human race (Lobachevskaja 2007, 53–55).

With a woman's transition to a new social and age group and, thus, a new social status, a married woman received new knowledge and was vested with new responsibilities. Marriage and childbirth inducted a young woman into the community

of women who had children, allowing her to receive practical and magical knowledge from older women on caring for and raising children. At the same time as getting married, a woman assumed her first ritual responsibility, the scope of which was initially limited to her family. If young women knew the ritual practices necessary to preserve themselves and future children, older women were responsible not only for their children and grandchildren but also for all members of the family and kin, both living and deceased, as well as for everything that surrounded them: house, land, animals and household. Having become a housewife, the chief woman in the house, the eldest daughter-in-law in a large or undivided family unit, a woman became responsible for the distribution of work among other women and unmarried boys, and the upbringing and care of children. She also assumed broader ritual responsibilities to mediate between the world of the living and deceased ancestors.

The Russian researcher Svetlana Adonyeva, based on the material of the Russian North, has determined that the transmission of magic and ritual traditions was carried out not by kinship but by "attribute", that is, from the eldest woman of the family, who was the mother-in-law (Adonyeva 1988, 27). Old women who no longer shared a bed with their husbands or were widowed undertook all of the ritual activity of the peasant community in regard to organising the everyday life of its members (childbirth, weddings and funerals), as well as organising "public opinion" about the normative or non-normative behaviour of its members.

Weaving activity modelled the personal life of the peasant woman herself and, at the same time, allowed her to symbolically model a significant segment of rural culture for which she was responsible. It is worth noting that a woman's clothing used its own "woman's measure", a textile system of measuring threads, warp and cloth.

> While spinning, laying out the threads, weaving the cloth and cutting it into garments, our rural women do not use the measures adopted in the cities and among the "cultured" and commercial classes, but rely on their own – by fingers, by the palm, by the cubit, by the arm's length, by the waist, by the *sazhen* [about 2 metres], or even by a wall's width or a bolt of cloth," wrote Vatslau Lastouski in 1927[3]. (Czarniauski 1927)

The woman devoted a significant part of her life to textile production. Weaving was a source of ritual items and artefacts, which she used in magical practices. Women's textile magic was based on mythological ideas about the sacredness of flax, threads and fabric, which emerged as a result of the craft of weaving, considered sacred in all cultures of the world and one of the oldest layers of culture (Lobachevskaja 2013,

3 The article was published under the pseudonym Daniil Czerniawski.

41–46). All components of textile production: threads, cloth, ends (non-woven remnant of warp); threads used to tie a weft or reed when they were handed over or passed on to someone; fluff left over from weaving, as well as a belt, shirt and apron made of woven cloth, acquired ritual and symbolic status in the context of women's rites.

In a patriarchal society, women were assigned many functions to maintain community life: both those of their family members and at the level of the whole village society. Specific female rituals and magical practices served as tools for this. These include those related to women's textile activities: spinning, weaving and textile magic, *abrok* and *abydzennik* rituals; as well as producing wedding and family rituals, incantations and healing magic, witchcraft, memorial and funeral rites and customs. These types of women's ritual practices existed outside the sphere of institutional religion, were not regulated by the church and official authorities and were virtually unaffected by them and their bans.

Christian religiosity, as the subject of the church institution in its Orthodox, Uniate or Catholic forms, was nominally common for the entire population, which was introduced to them through the sacraments of baptism and marriage. With the adoption of Christianity, church rites became compulsory, although their normativity was introduced into the lives of people in our regions asynchronously, with different levels of temporality. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the degree of Christian religiosity of Belarusian peasants remained very low and preserved many pre-Christian elements. Many authors wrote that Belarusian peasants were poorly versed in religious dogma and faithfully performed pagan and Christian rites and rituals, often combining them and explaining that the elders were told to do this (Tokts 2016, 103, 206). This is confirmed by my field interviews with rural women, who state that this is the customary way to do it, that their grandparents and great-grandparents did it this way, and that it should still be done the same way today. "Who said it should be done this way? Oh, it was the old, old people, those who were older than us. They taught us. And we did as we were taught."[4]

Parallel to the official institutions of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, including priests and church-calendar festivities, a folk religiosity existed in the active practice of rituals, magical actions, and belief in their efficacy, operating independently of external regulation. Various rites were woven into everyday life and accompanied the sacred time of feasts. They belonged to those foundations of religious life rooted in the mythical consciousness of a person. With the adoption of Christianity, there was no complete replacement of the former mythopoetic picture of the world in the folk worldview, and Christian saints did not replace the sacred functions that had previously been assigned to the mythological beings of the supernatural world,

4 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2005 in the village of Kharomtsy, Aktsyabrski district, Homel region, from a woman born in 1915. Author's archive.

nor did they fully take their place in the regulation of human life. Because folk Christianity was flexible and adaptable – especially Eastern Orthodoxy – it produced various syncretic forms of belief, which coexisted within local folk culture. Folk religiosity issues represent a promising direction for the development of Belarusian cultural anthropology. Belarusian researchers have gathered a substantial amount of unique factual material that requires synthesis (Boganeva 2010; Valodzina 2021).

In this article, to determine the nature of national religiosity and to understand the high degree of preservation of female ritual practices among Belarusians, let us use the approach of Polish ethnosociologist Józef Obrębski, which he formulated during his research in Macedonia in the 1930s. He concluded that, along with religious rites, there is a class of ritual actions with a purely magical character: practices and traditions initiated only in emergencies. This category includes magical rituals such as drawing away hail clouds, a ritual intended to cause rain during a drought, and the ploughing of a village against the plague. The aim of these magical practices was to banish and protect against diseases and to counteract witchcraft. According to Józef Obrębski, their effectiveness is determined by the fact that they were given as a special privilege to the first people in the mythical cosmogonic period by God, who created these practices together with other skills and put them at the service of man. They are transmitted from generation to generation to this day, remain unchanged and cannot be initiated at the will of man. They are interpreted as part of the divine intervention in the affairs of this world, which God has granted humans as a prerogative, and they can influence the world through magical rituals. They differ from witchcraft and are always aimed at benefiting people (Obrębski 2022, 237, 239). Magic and religious rituals are necessary in places where the most vital desires of a person concentrate or in events beyond a person's control.

Obrębski's observations and conclusions provide a certain key to understanding the sustainability of Belarusian women's ritual practices unrelated to official religious forms, which were aimed at maintaining the life of an individual and the survival of the whole community in the face of existential peril.

RITUAL PRACTICE OF WOMEN'S *ABROK*

Belarusian material on traditional culture shows us that turning to the supernatural world and performing certain ritual activities at critical existential moments of life or aligning them with the days of the church calendar allowed the maintenance of a balance in the symbolic field of relations among humans, ancestors, and the sacred.

In peasant society, this sphere was assigned to the social responsibility of women. Human communication with the higher powers and ancestors as patrons of the living in the afterlife traditionally takes place through the ritual that Belarusian women

call *abrok* and *abrakannye*, which remains a living practice to this day. Women use the term *abrok* both for the object of the offering itself and for the act of making it, which they call *abrakannye* or *abrakatstsa*.

These symbolic relations materialise in a distinctive feature of the Belarusian cultural landscape – *abrok* crosses, upon which specially made aprons or ready-made towels, aprons or shawls are tied as offerings, or *abrok*. These can be pieces of homemade cloth, purchased fabric or parts of used clothing. *Abrok* cloths on crosses are an unfailing means of ritual communication between a woman and the sphere of the divine and the netherworld in crisis moments, especially when a woman or her family members are ill and on holidays determined by religious tradition. *Abrok*s serve as intermediaries, manifesting the sacred nature of the relationship between humans and supernatural forces. By addressing the sign of the divine presence, the *abrok* cross, or praying to icons at home or in church, a woman takes upon herself the obligation to fulfil her vow and give thanks for the favours granted. The fulfilment of the request is a condition for fulfilling the promise. Thus, ritual communication with the divine recipient is an exchange: a reward is promised for a granted favour, and a gift is given in return, which in the Christian tradition are called votive offerings – *ex-votos*.

Abrok is a tradition, a stereotypical reproduction of the standard female behaviour in a traditional society, on which the behaviour of each woman is superimposed. This is what older women did, and this is what should be done in the future. When asked why it is necessary and acceptable to perform *abrok*, women answer eagerly and tell stories from their own lives and about the misfortunes that have befallen their families. Here are some statements of women about the intention and reasons for *abrok* collected by the author during her field research[5].

> Why did you offer an *abrok*? Maybe God will grant, maybe he will grant [something] good to you. You give to the church, and God will give to you. Well, from one to another, from old to the young, that's how it went.[6]

> Well, if someone was sick or something, they would make an *abrok* and hang it on these crosses. Towels, *rushnik*, that sort of thing. They put money on them…[7]

5 Given the limited scope of the article, I do not present a sample of quotes representative for all historical and ethnographic regions of Belarus.

6 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2006 in the village of Novaya Niva, Červień district, Minsk region, from a woman born in 1913. Author's archive.

7 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2003 in Batsvinava village, Čačersk district, Homiel region, from a woman born in 1939. Author's archive.

Photo 1. A ritual apron with a cross. Yaminsk village, Lyuban district, Minsk region, 2007. Photo by V. Labacheuskaya.

> They say *abrekliasia* [performed an offering of *abrok*]. If something is wrong with the animals or with the children, the person performs an *abrok* so that everything is good. She carries it to this cross or brings it to the church or collects candles to light them on. She would bring either cloth, a *rushnik* [a ritual towel] or handkerchiefs.[8]

> *Abrok*, *abrakalisia* – even my mother told me to perform *abrok* so that I would perform *abrok* already, so that I would perform *abrok* with something. Bring to the church this and that, it will be there. If you help me there or something, I will praise God, I will pray to God, and I will bring a beautiful *rushnik* towel, I will embroider it, or I will make a *nabozhnik* towel [towel for God] and bring it, I will hang it on an icon.[9]

> I just performed an *abrok* ritual. I don't remember, I felt some pain: maybe one breast hurt and it was so black … So I *abraklasia* [vowed] that if I get cured, I'd hang a *rushnik*. So it was healed, and I went to my mother, it was 1991, and I went there and hung it on [the cross]. And I brought it into the church: my grandson died, probably, he was thirteen then, so I brought one to the church, too. I embroidered it and brought it, too.[10]

Among the reasons for performing *abrok*, women named their diseases and the illnesses of children, other family members and animals. *Abrok* served as a preventive measure to ward off evil and evil spells and to avert the harmful influence of the devil and evil spirits. The existential reason for *abrok* could also be the infertility of a woman praying for a child. In the widespread practice of venerating stones in Belarus and Lithuania, women's ritual offerings of textile items, mainly homemade cloth, to these sacred objects with requests for a quick marriage or for children if a woman is childless stand out. Ethnographer Adam Bogdanovich described women's ritual sacrifices of cloth, flax and wool to the holy stones Demjan and Marya near the village of Pierażyr in the Igumen district[11]. He noted that "the offerings were so numerous that they were taken out in wagons" (Bogdanovich, 1895, 24).

The semantics of the word *abrok* contains such deep meanings as promise, oath and feeding, which gives a key to understanding the semantics of the abrakannye ritual, dating back to ancient mythological notions and practices of sacrifice to the gods.

8 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 1999 in the village of Dvarec, Luninets district, Brest region, from a woman born in 1945. Author's archive.

9 Recorded V. Labachevskaja in 2003 in the village of Jesipava Rudnia, Kalinkavičy district, Homiel region, from a woman born in 1936. Author's archive.

10 Recorded by V. Labachevskaja in 2003 in the village Marozavičy, Buda-Kašaliova district, Homiel region, from a woman born in 1945. Author's archive.

11 Today Červień district, Minsk region.

It is indicative that in the Belarusian psalm about Yuri (George) and the Dragon, recorded by the researcher of the *Belarusian Folk Bible*, Alena Boganeva (2010), the lexeme *abrok* is used precisely with the meaning of sacrifice: "Give a gift to the Dragon, give an *abrok* every day / Give an *abrok* every day, give it to a man" (cited in Volodina, 2023, 155).

The universality of sacrificial acts in culture is explored in the works of the French sociologist of culture Marcel Mauss, who considered gift-sacrifices as objects with a special spiritual meaning, which gave a person the right to benefit through the sacrificial ritual of transferring those gifts to the gods (Mauss, 2000, 17). Russian researcher Svetlana Adonyeva interprets *abrok* as a sacred/holy contract between the giver and the divine recipient; an obligation that the former voluntarily imposes on him/herself to be relieved of illness and misfortune (Adonyeva, 2004, 487). Following Ernst Cassirer's definition, the *abrok* embodied in the fabric can be understood as, "a religious means of expression, a means of establishing a connection between oneself and the deity", which goes back to the Vedic formula for addressing the god during a sacrifice: "Give to me – I give to you. Offer to me – I offer to you. Make me an offering — I will make you an offering" (Cassirer, 2011, 234).

The tradition of offering *abrok* existed within a narrowly female sphere. It was never subordinated to institutions or ideology or regulated by official decrees that governed the social life of peasant women at various times. In their ability to engage with the sacred communicant, women remained free at all times. These practices were regulated solely by their own volition and their spiritual needs for higher assistance. The *abrok* tradition was silently maintained during the Soviet era, when, in the BSSR (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic), practically all churches were destroyed first in the 1930s and later in the 1960s. People believed that offering an *abrok* with a towel, for example, on a cross near a spring, was "like going to church".

Abrok is a living ritual practice of women in Belarusian villages today. In addition to individual occasional *abrakannye*, in Eastern Polesie, there is a collective tradition of *abrakannye* on a common village cross. Women of the older and middle generations take part in the collective ritual. In our time, the living practice of offering *abrok* to stone crosses – known as "stone maidens" – can be observed in the villages of Danilevichi and Borovoye in the Lelchitsy district of Gomel region. This is done on the day before Easter, corresponding to the custom of putting on new clothes for Easter, either sewn or bought in advance. Similarly, the cross should also be dressed with new clothes – *abrok*. One version of the etymology of the word *abrok* suggests that donations were made *ab rok* (annually), probably in the spring, during a holiday that, in ancient times, celebrated the sun and the beginning of the agricultural season. This festival was later combined with the Christian holiday of Easter, yet among Belarusians it retained its ancient name: *Vyalikdzen*. This may indicate the deep archaic roots of the *abrok* ritual, which initially bore a collective female form.

Photo 2. A woman removes ritual fabrics on Red Saturday, the day before Easter, from the "stone girl" and from the ritual cross to burn them. Danilevichi village, Lelchitsy district, Gomel region, 2009. Photo by V. Labacheuskaya.

Meanwhile, the practice of offering *abrok* did not escape certain historical transformations caused by social and economic factors, as well as changes in material life during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This explains why pragmatic intentions, rather than spiritual aspirations, often underlie the reasons for making *abrok*. Women frequently say that a cross must be cared for and should not stand without *abrok*: "the cross is not meant to be bare", "it is a sin for the cross to stand naked". There were also opinions expressed by women about the *abrok* tradition, such as "We ourselves don't even know why"[12]. Here we have an example of an ancient tradition, its form and mode of expression transmitted and preserved, while its former sacred meaning has already been lost.

ABYDZENNY RITUAL – A STRATEGY FOR COPING WITH CRISIS

The most archaic female ritual practice is making a special *abydzenny* cloth. This is a collective ritual for overcoming total disasters such as drought, epidemics, epizootics or war, which affect society as a whole. The complete absence of Christian symbols in the *abydzenny* ritual was noted by its first researcher, D. Zelenin (1994, 196).

The *abydzenny* ritual is connected with the tradition of weaving and has brought us the integrity of the ancient weaving system as a craft and mythological worldview. The *abydzenny* ritual manifested itself in the symbolic attribute of metaphysical communication with divine forces: *abydzennik*. The names of the ritual fabric – *abydzennik, bydzennik* (a dialectal variant of *abydzennik*) and others are formed from the adjective *abydzenny* (daily) and the basic adverb *abydzen* (daylong). The word's etymology is explained by the term used by Belarusians to define the time parameters necessary for the ritual of making such a cloth – *ab adzin dzen*, that is, to make it in one day, in twenty-four hours. This characterises the ritual object as daily or every day (*abydzennik*). According to the tradition, the cloth made in one day had special sacral purity and was used for magical purposes to purify people, animals and spaces.

The ritual was performed collectively by a group of women, preserving the full cycle of traditional weaving activities involved in making the cloth, including spinning flax threads at the very beginning, to warping the *krosny* (a traditional Belarusian loom) and weaving the fabric, *rushnik*, or *namitka* (a thin headcloth worn by women). The size of this fabric varied, approximately 150–250 cm. Simple linen fabric was decorated with several red stripes. All of this occurred within the ritual time limit of one day, *abydzen* (from sunrise to sunset, or vice versa). The process concluded with further ritual actions, such as walking around the village with the newly woven cloth, placing it on the *abrok* cross or in the church, passing people beneath it, or driving livestock through it.

12 Heard in 2004 in the village of Rog, Salihorsk district, Minsk region.

The *abydzenny* ritual was practised in Belarus until the middle of the twentieth century. During World War II, women wove abydzennik in almost every Belarusian village threatened with destruction by the Nazi invaders, praying that their sons and husbands would return alive from the front. The *abydzenny* ritual acted as one of the survival strategies for everyday life amidst the war (Lobachevskaja, 2010).

The *abydzenny* ritual was directed towards the entire kin group and village community, and it required the collective strength, labour and spiritual effort of a group of women. The ritual was resorted to only in emergencies that threatened the life of the community: during drought, during the threat of hailstorms, epidemic diseases, particularly those affecting children, epizootics of livestock, natural disasters and war. When misfortune happened in a family, such as the illness of its members or the death of children, they sometimes also made *abydzennik* cloth individually or as a family group.

Making a special *abydzenny* cloth is culturally linked to the symbolic and technological weaving cycle. The ritual of creating cloth was carried out according to mythical ideas about the cosmic creation of the world, symbolically re-enacting it. The activities within the spinning and weaving cycle were an integral part of women's craft knowledge, tactile skills and everyday bodily experience. They allowed them to ritually reconstruct the act of creation and its image: the new material of ideal primordial purity. The mythical notions of the cyclical, reversible nature of time manifested themselves in the ritual with the help of clear and mastered spinning and weaving techniques, which transformed into a way of overcoming the deterioration of the world and the state of chaos that appeared in it and made it possible to return to the original state of order as a necessary prerequisite for the existence of all being. This explanation of the ritual derives naturally from the theory of myth, the persistence of the mythical component in the human worldview and its significance in culture. Following Mircea Eliade, the *abydzenny* ritual involves the "re-actualisation of the 'absolute origin' through the reproduction of the original time of creation, the creation of the world, which is the only thing capable of ensuring the total renewal of the universe, life and society" (Eliade 2001, 63).

Abydzenny cloth, as a product of a ritual, acquired sacred, magical properties and became a protective tool in situations of crisis. Livestock was driven through it, and people themselves passed through it. It became an intermediary, a mediator in the sacred communication of man with the forces of nature in calling rain, eliminating the threat of hailstorms and a metaphysical channel for ensuring the beneficial influence of the higher forces on people's lives.

All the above-mentioned reasons caused crises in the community and required overcoming them. At the same time, they were standard and periodically reproduced. Droughts, epidemics, epizootics and other threats to human life, such as natural

disasters and wars, are constantly repeated throughout the history of humankind. In traditional societies, human behaviour in such crises was typical and followed the norms of the ritual, which had to be performed. Every society that cares for its integrity develops a system of social behaviour codes (programmes) to be followed by its members. When there was a necessity to restore the lost norm, other programmes were used, distinct from everyday practices, in which ritual strategies for overcoming the crisis became relevant.

The gender specifics of the ritual that involved creating ritual cloth, abydzennik, are closely linked to spinning and weaving as women's occupations and women's magical practices aimed at ensuring reproduction. The male responsibility was to make and install the wooden cross for the abydzennik. Gender-divided ritual activities united the whole village community at the final stage of the ritual: the protective and magical rites, which consisted of the driving of livestock and the passage of people through the *abydzenny* cloth, fumigation of all participants with the smoke of the purifying fire, etc. The joint completion of the ritual indicates its shared social function aimed at the whole village community.

Belarusian ethnographers were the first to draw attention to the *abydzenny* ritual. The Russian ethnographer Dmitry Zelenin generalised the accumulated facts and made a scientific interpretation of the *abydzenny* ritual in his famous article "*Abydzenny* Towels and *Abydzenny* Temples (Russian Folk Customs)" (1911). Based on the descriptions of Belarusian ethnographers Pavel Shein, Michał Federowski, Adam Bogdanovich, Iulian Krachkovskij, Konstantin Tyshkevich and Ivan Eremich, the ethnographer called the ritual a "Belarusian custom" and "exclusively Belarusian" (Zelenin 1994, 193). Modern studies by the author (Labacheuskaja 2009, 837) and her Ukrainian colleagues (Vasjanovich 2022, 47) confirm the Belarusian ethno-cultural character of the *abydzenny* ritual, the area of which extended to the border and neighbouring areas of ethno-cultural interaction: Belarusian-Ukrainian Polesie and Polish Podlasie.

The memory of *abydzenny* rituals belongs to the common reservoir of collective cultural memory of local communities. It is preserved by the participants of the ritual and its witnesses. The performers included women of different age groups, with children and teenage girls carrying out some activities. Witnesses of the ritual were often children watching the rites. The extraordinary nature of group activities, performed quickly and in a particularly intense psychophysical atmosphere, sharpened the memory mechanism, and once seen in childhood, it was firmly stored in memory throughout life. This is evidenced by the narratives of witnesses to the ritual, which I recorded during field research. Stories about the exceptional events that once saved the village from disaster and calamity were passed on to their children and grandchildren, who also became inheritors of the collective memory.

The *abydzenny* ritual accounts recorded by researchers have captured a large layer of the folk collective memory, which preserved the perception of catastrophic events and incidents of local history for more than a century and a half. Only in a few cases, during conversations with people, was it possible to establish the exact date when the ritual was performed in their locality. The last instances of turning to the *abydzenny* ritual while preserving its full technological cycle of *abydzennik* creation (from spinning thread to making cloth on a loom) belong to the post-war years. For example, in 1953, when there was a severe drought in the village of Kazly in the Nesvizh district of the Minsk region, women conducted *abydzennik*, processing around the village in a cross procession and hanging them on three crosses. In the village of Bychyn in the Berezinsky district of the Minsk region, the ritual was performed in 1957 to invoke rain. Later, when the ritual was preserved in some places in the form of an annual *abrok* custom, the woven cloth was replaced by a purchased white cloth, which took on the role of a similar core of the ritual and symbolically assumed the properties of the cloth woven in compliance with all ritual requirements. For example, this was the case in the village of Bayary, Dokšytsy district, Vitsiebsk region, where the last time the annual *abrok* was performed with a purchased cloth on St Yuri's [St George's] Day in 1970, as recorded by ethnographer Uladzimir Lobač (Lobach, 2011, 284). This is also the case today in the village of Papšyčy, Hlybokaje district, Vitsiebsk region, where the ritual of "Carrying a namitka" received the status of intangible cultural heritage and was included in the State List of Historical and Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Belarus.

The social and anthropological approach to the study of "disaster rituals" was inspired by social anomie and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russian researcher Svetlana Adonyeva interprets rituals of this kind as follows: "Negative events, such as epidemics, fires and others, seemed to be the consequences of a contract violation made within the group or carried out by the whole group: society assumes responsibility for the disaster. Accordingly, for the situation to change, the group performs an act that restores the contract between the human world and either the natural world […] or the divine world […] As a result, the contract-covenant is restored" ("Rituals of Disaster" 42). This interpretation of the causes of the *abydzenny* ritual and its consequences is based on the theory of gift exchange and approaches of social anthropology, which broadens the prospects of conceptualising it as a social and cultural phenomenon.

In 2020, humankind encountered the previously unknown COVID-19 virus and a global pandemic. The declared state of emergency has brought changes in all spheres of human life: private, social and cultural. At the same time, in a crisis, the community may activate a special mobilisation mode, which the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner defined as *communitas* (Turner 1983, 170, 202).

Photo 3. Rushnik-abydzennik, woven on March 28th, 2020, in Minsk as a response to the COVID-19 epidemic. Photo by T. Valodzina.

Resorting to the *abydzenny* ritual amidst the pandemic in Minsk on 28 March 2020 is a unique present-day example of the community activating this mobilisation mode. On that day, twelve girls and women weaved a protective *rushnik-abydzennik* for twelve hours, and in the evening, having spread it in the open window of the car, drove it around Minsk along the ring road. This fact is not just one of the curious moments of pandemic life; rather, it makes researchers take a new approach to understanding archaic defence mechanisms of culture and the collective experience of its re-creation.

The initiators of the ritual were members of the non-governmental organisation The Student Ethnographic Society[13], who decided to perform an *abydzenny* ritual by reproducing the complete weaving technological cycle. The *abydzennik* was created from 8 am to 8 pm on Saturday. A consultant and one of the participants in preparing the ritual was ethnologist and folklorist Tatsiana Valodzina. According to her, first, the group spent three hours spinning a warp of 360 threads, then took turns weaving the cloth. Some threads were brought with them, and some were spun on-site. The cloth ended up being more than three metres long. At the end of the ritual, the cloth was taken around Minsk: they encircled the metropolis with a magic circle in the course of the sun and brought it to the Museum of Boulders in the capital's Uručča neighbourhood, where they tied it on the Dzed stone, a sacred object that is revered by the youth members of the Student Ethnographic Society[14].

Natalia Yarmolinskaya, who gathered a group of women in her weaving workshop: shared her experience of the collective ritual:

> We all found ourselves in a situation of uncertainty in the spring of 2020. The beginning of the epidemic was very frightening, and it was unclear what to do. There was a kind of collective and irrational fear, where you understand that something needs to be done, but you don't know what. People were dying, and it was uncertain how to live further. It was chaos, panic and shock.
>
> The idea was there, and it needed to be realised right away. We literally made the agreement the day after. And somehow, a bunch of people gathered. We didn't specifically invite anyone: we just threw out a call for anyone who wanted to come at any time. We would be weaving there, approximately, from that time. From the beginning to the end, meaning from the moment we started warping the loom to the moment we removed the fabric from the loom, exactly twelve hours passed. From 8 am to 8 pm. We sang while weaving and while spinning. There was a feeling that we were creating

13 The statutory activity of the society is to support traditional crafts and ensure their transmission to young people in urban settings.

14 https://svajksta.by/archives/32821/ (Date of reference: 01.05.2023).

> something magical: it wasn't just sitting down to weave. This wasn't a master class. What we were doing was to change what we couldn't change. That year, at least, no one got sick with COVID-19.
>
> For me, as an educator, it was an experiment – whether it was physically possible to weave such a towel in a limited amount of time.[15]

The creation of a ritual object – an everyday item in today's urban environment among nationally oriented youth – serves as an example of the actualisation of cultural heritage and a return to ritual as a means of overcoming the existing social crisis. The experience of women's crafts in spinning and weaving was interpreted by the ritual's participants as an effective cultural legacy. The social significance of this fact also lies in its testimony to the community's ability for purposeful collective action, which was vividly demonstrated during the women's actions of the Belarusian revolution in 2020.

CONCLUSION

Women's cultural role in Belarus's rural communities has traditionally involved maintaining symbolic connections with the sacred realm – that is, with higher powers and ancestors – in order to safeguard the lives of children, family members, kin and the village community. One of the traditional ways in which this humanitarian and social responsibility has been fulfilled is through ritual practices, such as votive offerings (*abrok*) and the *abydzenny* ritual. Women turn to these practices individually and collectively, regularly or occasionally in times of illness, epidemics, threats to the harvest, natural disasters and war. In some cases, these rituals have taken the form of annual ceremonial observances. These practices help maintain balance in the symbolic relationship between humans, ancestors and the sacred.

This tradition developed within a patriarchal society in which peasant women nevertheless enjoyed a relative degree of freedom and independence. They had rights to property in the form of dowries and self-made textiles, as well as the right to leave a marriage – rights that were reflected in weddings and birth-of-a-child rituals such as the couvade. The formation of female identity through engagement with ritual knowledge and practices took place within the context of subsistence farming and intergenerational women's communities, where they engaged in spinning and weaving together. It also occurred within large, undivided peasant households (based on kinship), and was marked by age-based differentiation.

15 Recorded by V. Labacheuskaya in 2025 in Minsk. Author's archive.

In the culture of the Belarusian collective farm village, where domestic weaving persisted until the 1980s and where a distinctive form of folk religiosity – combining Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, concepts and rituals – was preserved, women's ritual practices retained their relevance. The *abydzenny* ritual, for example, was practised during the Second World War and remains a living cultural relic today, as seen in individual votive offerings at roadside crosses, in churches and at other sacred sites, as well as in annual votive ceremonies.

The bearers of this tradition are rural women of the older and middle generations, regardless of their level of education, who inherited it from their mothers and grandmothers, as well as urban women who were born and raised in villages. The example of an *abydzenny* ritual performed in Minsk in 2020 should be viewed in the context of modern modes of cultural transmission, as an expression of the specific cultural and gender identity of the Belarusian youth community, which is oriented towards embracing national traditions. In the context of the global crisis during the pandemic, the traditional ritual served as a tool for restoring individuals to a familiar social and psychophysical order. These factors should be taken into account when assessing the social potential of contemporary Belarusian society.

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INCANTATION PRACTICES OF BELARUSIANS: CHARACTERISATION IN SEARCH OF A RESEARCH PARADIGM[1]

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This article communicates experience characterising Belarusian verbal healing magic by describing my own scientific pursuits. The development of scientific thought, both mine personally and that of my colleagues, with regard to incantation practices in general, has echoed the path of Belarusian folkloristics. A retrospective look emphasising research stages and corresponding results demonstrates the difficult path of deliverance from previous ideological principles that the Belarusian humanitarian science has gone through. Interest in previously forbidden topics – folk religion, magic, eroticism and so on – increased drastically with the country's independence in the early 1990s and the slackening of ideological control. Step by step, an understanding of the dialectic of traditional culture, its integration into the broader European context and close ties with book culture came about. It was not easy to overcome the gap between the pre-Christian and Christian features in the structure and semantics of incantation texts. Post-Christian or neo-pagan influences have barely affected Belarusian tradition, and the influence of Internet sources is becoming much stronger. Turning to the experience of Western colleagues has contributed to the complicated process of including Belarusian incantations in the sphere of folk Christianity as a cultural category in contrast to institutional church doctrine. The concept of vernacular religiosity shifts emphasis to the study of religion as a living practice.

KEYWORDS: incantation, charm, Belarusian folklore, vernacular religiosity, science and ideology

In real life, there are spheres of importance that leave no doubt when considering the political, economic and religious domains of life, as well as any other areas. This, first of all, includes the sphere associated with the preservation of health, or to be

1 The article was translated from Belarusian into English by Maryja Pyžova.

more exact, getting rid of illnesses, because the prevention of illnesses and a healthy lifestyle in particular have encompassed a rather limited number of people, especially in recent decades. As far as we can look back in time, healing in the Belarusian village, and probably in small towns and estates, came to pass as part of magic practices and folk medicine as a whole, which involved phytotherapy, the use of animal and mineral products and the like. Folk medicine formed an integral part of traditional village culture, was interpreted along the lines of a mythopoetic worldview and maintained strong ties with calendar and family rituals. Proclaimed "superstitious" and "the harmful remnants of the past"[2], magical medicine existed throughout the atheistic Soviet era, albeit in the form of underground activities for the most part[3]. Since the time of restructuring and diminishing of ideological pressure (the 1990s), it has gained certain legitimacy and is actively practised today, although, of course, in a much narrower scope. To this end, I undertook expeditions to various regions of Belarus, where, as a result of interviews with the holders of traditional culture and folk healers in particular, as well as by way of participatory observation, more than a thousand records of ritual and magic healing units were collected.

A wide palette of folk medicine practices in the records of ethnographers of the 19th century, but, first of all, in the records of the turn of the millennium, is presented in the volume, *Folk Medicine: Ritual and Magical Practice* (Valodzina 2007).

2 The themes of folk religiosity, both pre-Christian and Christian beliefs and incantations, were assessed precisely in that connection and were banned in Belarusian official ethnography for many years. Even in the post-war period, in cases where Soviet ethnographers mentioned folk medicine, it was exclusively in a condemnatory context. Thus, Leanid Minko (1969, 1971) completely built his works on the stereotypes of "the dangers of quackery" (Minko 1971, 16). The authors of the educational publication *Belarusian Oral and Poetic Writings* declare incantations "an unpromising folklore genre" (Kabašnikaŭ 2000, 112). On the other hand, when the Soviet authorities supported the study of Belarusian culture in the 1920s, a strong transformation and mobilisation of Soviet society by the Bolsheviks took place by way of collectivisation and repression in the 1930s. This led to the total destruction of ethnography and folklore, the only exception officially approved being the study of the Soviet lifestyle and the folklore of the Great Patriotic War.

3 Hundreds of field expedition records from different regions of Belarus, which are stored in the Archives of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, allow us to draw similar conclusions. This archive is the richest repository of field records of Belarusian folklore in the country, existing in audio and text format and with representation of song ritual and lyrical creativity, folk prose, small genres, etc. The pre-war collection was almost completely lost during the occupation, but already in 1944, the first records of the front-line folklore of the Great Patriotic War started coming in. After the establishment of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore in 1957, large-scale field research began; hundreds of thousands of texts of various folklore genres were collected. During the last decade, the archive has been actively replenished with photographs and video records. Although the study of folk medicine was not included in state plans, collectors could not help but pay attention to that living and vibrant layer of folk culture, and by the 1990s, the targeted collection of incantations commenced.

As an essential part of everyday life and at the same time a sphere surrounded by a halo of mystery, mysticism and something supernatural, folk medicine constantly grabbed the attention of ethnographers and folklorists[4]. Magic medicine in general and its verbal part in particular refer to topics that depend highly on the ideological environment, where the activation of research interest is replaced with a ban on printing materials and institutional investigation. Thus, Soviet atheistic science attributed folk medicine to the results of ignorance, superstitious beliefs and "backwardness", and its study was simply forbidden[5].

> Let's recall the eradication of charms in Belarus in the 1930s and post-war years, a torrent of accusations against researchers and the collectors of charms; accusations bordering on political denunciations, which inflicted a big blow not only to the study of that important layer of popular folklore and traditional culture, but also to its preservation, saving it as part of household practices. (Bartaševič 1992, 12)

The last decades have been characterised by a rising interest in the issues of traditional healing and charms in particular. Normally, an increasing interest in magical practices is observed in those periods when society undergoes a transition from one historical stage to another. In the post-Soviet space, such a period included the collapse of the USSR, the attainment of independence by a number of republics and so on. Similar upswings in seeking alternative therapy occurred in the past as well:

> A particular belief or custom can demonstrate the symptoms of fading for centuries, when suddenly we begin to notice that society, instead of suppressing it, promotes its new growth. A completely extinct custom is spreading again so strenuously that it is sometimes as astonishing as deleterious. (Taylor 1983, 103)

Professional doctors, alongside humanitarians, in assessing such situations state that former views cannot be eradicated by being declared erroneous, but "it is possible and necessary to study, read comprehensively and unravel hidden myth", which "requires a detailed and thorough study of the mythologising principles of an illness" (Tkhostov 1993, 13).

4 Yevdokim Romanov (1891), Nikolay Nikiforovskiy (1897), Franciszek Wereńko (1896) and Michał Federowski et al. (1897) have left the most notable collections of records.

5 The same situation was typical for other countries of the socialist camp, where the first serious works on Russian or Ukrainian (Agapkina 2010) and even Lithuanian (Vaitkevičienė 2008) incantations appeared after 2000.

It is folk medicine, with an emphasis on its verbal part in recent years, which constitutes my main professional interest. My own understanding of incantation practices followed the development of academic folkloristic thought in general, although in many ways it was adjusted based on the best practices of foreign colleagues[6]. This article describes Belarusian verbal healing magic practices by illustrating my scientific pursuits. A retrospective look, emphasising research stages and corresponding results, shows a difficult path of liberation from previous ideological attitudes that Belarusian folkloristics went through. However, the issue of research prospects is most acute under the pressure of internal and external factors. The state scientific programmes of the Republic of Belarus stipulate that certain issues that do not always coincide with the desire of a researcher are addressed, and moreover, the study of magical practices is not currently encouraged. Externally, in modern international research, emphasis is shifting towards the social aspects of quackery in place of medical ideas in solving social conflicts[7].

FIRST EXPERIMENTS AND DIVERSIFYING SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORKS

In fact, after the seminal publication of one of the most prominent ethnographers of his time, Yevdokim Romanov (1891), and the selection of charms in the publications of Pavel Shein (1893), Vladimir Dobrovol'skii (1891) and Alaksandr Šliubski (1927), charms used to appear in print sporadically, and "all the decades of the 20th century, pre-war and post-war, thanks to vulgar sociological criticism, embodied a period of destruction of scientific thought in this field" (Bartaševič 1992, 12). The scientific study of charms in Belarus began with the country's independence and the diminishing of ideological pressure. The separate volume *Charms* (1992), prepared by Halina Bartaševič within the series Belarusian Folk Art[8], demonstrated

6 The works of Russian researchers T. Agapkina (2010) and A. Toporkov (Agapkina and Toporkov 2014) allowed us to place Belarusian material in the pan-Slavic context and for the Russian scholar M. Zavyalova (2006) and the Lithuanian researcher D. Vaitkevičienė (2009) – to see commonalities with Lithuanian incantations; the works of German scholars A. Spamer (1958), M. Schulz (2000), Ch. Haeseli (2011), W. Ernst (2011), etc., made it possible to identify German and, more broadly, Western European influences. The works of English researchers J. Roper (2004, 2005), D. I. Waller (2015), D. E. Gay (2004) and L. Olsan (2003); Bulgarian F. Badalanova Geller (2018); Serbian Lj. Radenković (1982); Estonian M. Köiva (2007); and Italian E. Cianci (2022), etc., enriched the methodological basis of my scientific investigation.

7 In Belarus, the separation of folklore and ethnology still exists to this day, with folklore studies being directed towards the philological scrutiny of incantations.

8 The series Belarusian Folk Art (published since 1970 by the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus) presents the folklore of Belarusians in its genre variety. To date, forty-seven important volumes have been published.

both the richness and diversity of verbal texts and a number of areas not covered by expeditionary experiments, but also the lack of a well-founded classification of illnesses themselves and verbal magic in general. It also revealed many unexplored aspects, primarily the social functions of such texts.

The study of incantations is not that popular in Belarusian science, which is explained by the absence of a domestic school due to the long years of their prohibition and ideological restrictions during the Soviet period (1930–1980s), as well as the difficulty of recording such texts since you need to establish communication with a special group of respondents – village healers – whose knowledge is classified as closed. To a certain extent, the underdevelopment of the topic of verbal magic in the Belarusian tradition prompted me to study it.

Interest in the field of folk medicine and a desire to understand it comprehensively, both within the scientific thinking of Belarus and for me personally, underwent several stages, and each required going beyond the boundaries of folkloristics as a predominantly philological discipline (within the Belarusian academic space), as well as using the methodology of related sciences. In fact, until the end of the 20th century, incantations were considered poetic texts with their own aesthetics or a reflection of pre-Christian ideas beyond their correlation with the social context. The compilation of factual material has continued, with anthologies appearing. (Vasilievič and Salaviej 2009; Viarhiejenka 2013). In recent decades, interest in the anthropological and psychological aspects of verbal magic has revived, but there are no noticeable generalising works yet. Attention to the folk names of illnesses determined experiments in the ethnolinguistic and dialectological planes. However, the actual first step was an effort to discover the worldview foundation of folk medicine practices and the ritual context of verbal magic. As a result, another volume *Folk Medicine: Ritual and Magical Practice* (Valodzina 2007) was prepared from the series *Belarusian Folk Art*. A number of hindrances accompanied the release of the volume; among them were the officials' concerns about the publication of "magic recommendations" under the aegis of the Academy of Sciences. It was necessary to obtain authorisation from the Ministry of Health, where the "cultural-historical", but not practical, nature of the book was provided. Such vicissitudes highlight the rigidity of academic science and the persistence of the same ideological stereotypes: that "throwbacks" and "superstitious beliefs" are problematic, and that folk medicine is a marginal aspect of healthcare overall.

As the compendium demonstrated, the folk medicine of Belarusians, as well as that of other peoples, singles out a relatively small number of illnesses, paying huge attention to some and practically ignoring others. It is important that a number of symptoms, which for modern people are signs of completely different illnesses, could be attributed to one illness in traditional medicine. Clearly, the symptoms

determined the primary classification level, which was based on evident, objectively observable changes and deviations from the body's normal state.

In fact, the key actors of the rite – village quacks, whisperers – remained outside the volume. When creating the portraits of particularly remarkable ones, the research moved into a more cultural and anthropological framework. A desire to see a man of knowledge in a social context among society and during a certain historical period of time became the main goal of the biography of perhaps the brightest person in the history of 20th-century Belarusian medicine – Michail Dalamanau[9] (Valodzina and Lobač 2021). The subjectivity of Belarusian folk medicine, despite individual publications, is still awaiting its researcher.

Set against a background of the active accumulation and publication of texts, their analysis unfolded primarily within philological study, bearing fruit and revealing important patterns as a separate genre of folk art. It was becoming evident that incantations reach extraordinary time depths, have a special ability to absorb and reflect the winds of time, respond to changes in nature and society, directly blend with quotations from other oral and written traditions and, simultaneously, preserve that inner integrity, which, through centuries, distinguishes an incantation as an independent and self-sufficient phenomenon. The categorical pragmatics of charms, their utilitarian need and, at the same time, particularly touching aesthetics, emotional colouring and sensory-specific nature contribute to the preservation and even development of the genre.

DIALECT DIVERSITY OF CHARMS

The Belarusian tradition of incantations and charms remains a living and relevant practice even today: see the impressive publications of incantations by Vasilievič and Salaviej (2009) and Viarhiejenka (2013), as well as extremely rich archival collections[10]. In the settlement territory of Belarusians, however, the picture of charms is quite heterogeneous: the differences start with quantitative representation and continue at thematic and mythopoetic levels. According to our own calculations, the number of charms recorded in the southeast of the country exceeds the number of charms

9 Michail Dalamanaŭ, a Russian nobleman by birth, was famous in the 1930s and 1960s for his highly effective medical activity. According to rumours, the first female cosmonaut, Tereshkova and relatives of the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, L. Brezhnev, came to see him. A railway station was specially built in his village.

10 The author of the article recorded more than two thousand charms in various regions of Belarus. The records are kept in the Archive of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (Fund 8 and Fund 23).

from the northwest by more than a hundred times. Even today's expeditions bring dozens of records from the Gomel or Mogilev Regions and a handful from the west of the Grodno Region. Assuming that the western regions of Belarus were not lucky enough to have an interested collector of the 19th century is not the case, as the obsessed ethnographer Michał Federowski worked in today's Voranava and Slonim Districts. However, his comprehensive collection of Belarusian folklore includes only a few examples of verbal magical medicine (Federowski 1897). There is no reason to talk about the dependence on climatic or economic factors: the quantitative disparity in the records of charms in no way indicates a large-scale "gap" in the standard of living or economic conditions. Such a sharp inconsistency raises an issue related to topics, details and dominants not only in folk medicine but also from a broader perspective – strategies and tactics of interaction with the sacred world and the structure of relations within society. A more apparent and deeper level of folk religious devoutness of the villagers of western Belarus[11] determined the search for appropriate ways to resolve conflict situations.

An attempt made in scientific literature to divide incantations into "Polesian" and "Belarusian" (Agapkina et al. 2003) has weak grounds: the dialect division is more complicated. For example, in comparison with the incantations recorded in the northwest of the country, the majority of incantations from the Padniaproŭje Region show more differences than similarities (see the detailed review of Valodzina 2018).

Each area is characterised by its own and relatively stable set of functional types, plots and characters. The features of the structural organisation are also different (the presence/absence of beginnings, punctuations, figures of speech, etc.). Many factors played their role in such heterogeneity, including other ethnic impacts, the degree of prevalence of a book incantation tradition and so on. Attributing the tradition to Slavica Ortodoxa or Slavica Latina also plays its role. Thus, appealing to Holy Scripture up to the reference to separate plots is more common in the western part of the country, in places where there is a dense Catholic population. First of all, we are talking about the inclusion of the theme of the Passion of the Christ and His Resurrection into magical texts. Among Western Belarusian incantations, there are references to stigmata and retellings of Christ's life path that are uncommon for the Belarusian ethnic territory but are widespread and popular in Western Europe.

One of the possible ways to search for such motive heterogeneity and the formation of habitats could be the collation of both Belarusian and European material, which is possible along axes: the length of fixation/relevance; written/oral forms

11 Although the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was formed in 1921, Western Belarus (actually half of the Belarusian territories) became part of the USSR in 1939, which means that religious institutions legally functioned there for longer time. It is in Western Belarus that the largest number of Catholics live, and the Catholic Church is more intolerant of magical practices than the Orthodox Church.

of existence; the relationship between Christian and pre-Christian and so forth. Quantitative indicators are relevant as the indicators of the preservation and relevance of tradition only when the time factor is taken into account. If Belarusians have the absolute majority of incantations known in the records of the 20th century, and there are none from the 15th century, this does not mean that there were not any at that time. In the same way, earlier records of certain European regions[12] do not serve as solid evidence of the greater archaic nature of their incantation tradition. Moreover, observations of their different temporal fixations create prerequisites for thinking of possible ways to spread a plot. For example, the *Corpus der Segen und Beschwörungsformeln*[13] includes 23,000 items, and a notable place among them is occupied by materials from medieval manuscripts and printed magical books. The *Archives of Latvian Folklore* hold close to 50,000, but include a large number of copies, mostly from one source[14]. The Belarusian material looks modest against that background. According to my preliminary calculations, there are about 10,000 fixations. However, among the Belarusian texts, there are practically no duplicates, as among the Latvians or Germans, which is due to the predominantly oral form of the existence of incantations and the lack of written sources for copying. The plans also include the creation of a full-text database of Belarusian incantations, which will allow a more accurate assessment of their qualitative and quantitative composition.

BELARUSIAN CHARMS IN THE EUROPEAN SPACE

Despite sociocultural and political changes in the country, publicistic and, to some extent, scientific discourse continued the Soviet ideology stereotypes. Apart from the "pagan" label, similarly outdated theses about the "special uniqueness" of the Belarusian folklore tradition and its outstanding place in the European space were spreading. Exaggerated originality and an emphasis on special archaism still accompany the description of most folklore genres, and a more or less regular comparative study has yet to be conducted.

Charms are one of those genres of folk art that reveal a high degree of internationality within the boundaries of semantic features and structure. It is among

12 For example, the earliest records of German charms date back to the 9th century (Ernst 2011, 278); and Polish ones date back to the 15th century (Brückner 1895, 332).

13 The corpus of German incantations, mostly collected by Adolf Spamer, is kept at The Institute of Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology; available for use at https://digital.slub-dresden.de/werkansicht/dlf/343387/1/

14 The Archives of Latvian Folklore (LFK) https://humma.lv/en/collection/index?CollectionSearch%5BpersonId%5D=1427569

incantations where those formal and semantic elements considered universal stand out particularly clearly since they are based on the archaic system of ideas, the psychophysiological affinity of human nature, as well as the similar principles of text composition (Schulz 2000, Agapkina 2010, Ernst 2011 et al.). First, neighbouring traditions are amalgamated by actual belief in the magic power of words to impact the things around us, restore lost harmony and remediate all kinds of deviations. The most basic magical laws, shared across vast territories, produce virtually identical magical effects. Each ethnic collection is full of strategies for removing illnesses, cleansing the body and making healing appeals to characters of various kinds. A large complex of charm motifs in European traditions refers to the fund of mental and semantic universals that manifest themselves in similar pragmatic contexts. Another thing is that, while preserving the schemes, formal embodiments and the details of mythopoetics and imagery differ. In understanding universality, it is interesting to look at motif-figurative convergences, where typologically close characters with similar sets of functions act in charms – for example, the supporting characters of non-Christian origin.

The archaic layer of enchanting magic has a number of parallels in the traditions of neighbouring nations. As Dajva Vaitkevičienė explains, the Baltic and Slavic equivalents were not always the result of contacts. Still, it is more probable that they were based on more ancient cultural traditions, which, in some cases, probably date back to the division of the Balto-Slavic culture (Vaitkevičienė 2009, 208). It is indicative that practically all Lithuanian-Latvian parallels put forward by the researcher have very close Belarusian analogues as well (Valodzina 2020). When describing the Balto-Slavic world of charms, Maryja Zavyalova states:

> Almost all cases of the concurrence of plots combine East Slavic, West Slavic (Polish) and Baltic (Lithuanian or Latvian) traditions, but almost no similarities between East Slavic (or West Slavic), Baltic and South Slavic incantations have been recorded. Thus, it appears that we may talk about some common plot area uniting the East and West Slavs with the Balts, although, as already noted, there are more differences than similarities in the Baltic and Slavic traditions (Zavyalova 2006, 201).

A comparison of Belarusian charms with those of neighbouring Slavic countries has already been undertaken and brought rich results. A great work was conducted Tatyana Agapkina, who puts forward the following criteria for establishing East and West Slavic concordance: for the most part, these are complex narrative plots that can be reliably identified when comparing records from different traditions; charms with such plots retain the same function (the motif of three roses is part of the charm against erysipelas) and are represented by a set of variants outside the North Russian

tradition. They are not recorded in the Balkans either, but are popular among the Germanic peoples (Agapkina 2010, 658–659). Comparisons of the Belarusian (mainly Western Belarusian) and Polish incantation traditions made it possible to identify a shared Polish–Western Belarusian incantational space at some point (Valodzina 2021).

The functioning of a number of Western European plots and motifs among Belarusians has already been well-described, including the plot of the First Merseburg Incantation; the motifs "Christ was walking (another Christian character) carrying three roses"; "Stay blood in the wound, like Christ/water in the Jordan"; turning to trees in the case of toothache, to the moon with a request to cleanse the body/give health; etcetera. (Agapkina 2010, 339–344, 416–418; Valodzina 2023, 90–95, 177–179). In this case, it is important to note that for Western Belarus, they are the most widespread and dominant in the corresponding functional groups (for details, see Valodzina 2021).

Belarusian and Western European folklore traditions show interesting differences and similarities that have developed under the influence of several sociohistorical factors, including those that partly date back to Indo-European unity and are partly the result of the cultural interpenetration and general patterns of historical development[15] (refer to Valodzina 2023 for details).

Western European tradition had a certain influence on the formation of the Belarusian corpus of incantational texts and ritual practices. A number of motifs came to Belarusians through West Slavic mediation, but once on "local soil", they were supplemented with authentic details. It is possible that the copying of verbal material from the same, more often Latin sources, took place in different parts of Europe. A book of home cures, a book of herbs and compilations of magical and medical advice came to us from German lands through Poland. One of the ways of spreading German texts to Belarusian lands was their use by local Jewish doctors whose activities included borrowed and local elements that were closely intertwined. The Jewish historian of the early 20th century, Michał Rabinovič, told Zmitrak Biadula about a rare 18th-century manuscript with more than three hundred sheets of parchment paper written "in Hebrew, Jewish and Belarusian with the Jewish transcription" and included a collection of data about folk medicine's nature, including charms,

> which were used in those times by warlocks, quacks, saints and sorcerers for various ailments, "black power" and the evils of the daily life of the masses. This manuscript

15 The field material published by Belarusian researchers is quite actively described by Russian researchers. The Belarusian texts are not yet sufficiently integrated into European studies. Single publications in European specialised editions (*Incantatio. The International Journal on Charms, Charmers and Charming*; *Folklore*) belong to the author of this article.

> is of special importance for Belarus as it was written here, in our region, close to Minsk. And not only the charms that were produced here on the site, and the names of herbs, roots and potions were conveyed in the Belarusian language, but even those of the very Old World, so-called "international" charms, which were published in various medicinal books many years ago in Middle Germany and later came to us – even those are highly altered in the manuscript; they have lost their German "face" and formed a purely folk Jewish-Belarusian character and image at their core through new words and expressions (Biadulia 1922, 34–35).

A significant, if not greater, part of Belarusian–Western European parallels is occupied by charms with clear Christian motifs and images known, with varying degrees of intensity, in different corners of the Christian European world. Undoubtedly, the plots and formulas of Christian themes are not just similar but are the local variants of a single plot-motif fund and demonstrate a direct affinity with the texts of other European regions, first among them, German. There are many reasons to talk about the migratory fund of Christian charms. In some local traditions, this migratory fund has non-homogeneous special significance. It is incomparably smaller among Belarusians than, for example, among Latvians. There, historical circumstances determined the widespread expansion not only of the German language itself, but also of specific German literature, which included magical texts. As we can see, a number of Latvian incantations show similarities with those of German origin at the level of plots, motifs and formulas. As Kencis writes, most narrative forms of Latvian incantations were directly influenced by Germany (Ķencis 2019, 63). Naturally, the existence of such a compendium nearby could not pass without influence on Belarusian incantations.

An affinity with written sources determined that the charms of that group are much more compact in terms of motifs. Such charms, like their large number of counterparts in Western Europe, are more stable in structure and are quite strictly regulated in style.

The research focus on the Western tradition of studying verbal magic resulted in a monograph (Valodzina 2023) that presents an overview of German healing, incantation and enchanting tradition in its main thematic and figurative solutions. The study of German verbal magical practices made it possible to look into the depths of the ages and see how individual secret plots and motifs known to Belarusians as well emerged and spread. Comparative studies reveal that some Belorusian charms are of Western European origin and allow today's aetiologies and therapy to be seen from a different perspective.

For example, a central idea in traditional culture – then as now – was that illness could be caused by an external influence, whether through the intrusion of a stranger

into the body, a demonic attack or the envious gaze of ill-wishers. While a contemporary person might attribute all illnesses to "nerves", our predecessors across much of Europe sought the cause in harmful creatures that inhabited their surroundings as well as their own bodies. The folk healing practice of the Germans offers, primarily, the idea of provoking various illnesses through the penetration of worms into the human body. In addition, the oldest incantation in the German language, which goes back to the nineth century, was intended to expel worms, and the image of a worm becomes almost central in medieval German folk medicine. Each part of the body is imagined to have its own special worm, and there cannot be a person without worms in general. Added to that are the deep mythological meanings behind the image of a worm among the Indo-Europeans – it is precisely in this form that illness itself appears, but also the inner other world characteristic of each of us. Let's immediately note that in Belarusian traditional medicine, a hair is the semantic opposite of a worm, and illness is depicted more often in a snakelike hairy embodiment. Today's sceptics would consider such ideas naive and ridiculous, but replace worms with microbes, bacteria or viruses, or designate them as voguish "pathogenic agents", and the aetiology appears wise and adequate to the knowledge of the time.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND PRE-CHRISTIAN

The complex nature of charms and the preservation of the features of multi-stage layers caused different attitudes towards such works. The first label carried by incantations was that they were referred to as "the relics of paganism". The scientific space was dominated by claims that incantations under the influence of Christian ideology adapted new concepts under a pagan foundation […]. Charms felt the influence of Christian ideology, which led, in many cases, to the formal inclusion of Christianised elements in them. At the same time, the works, where ancient tradition and Christian paraphernalia were closely interwoven, appeared (Bartaševič 1992, 29)[16].

Actually, charms, as works of archaic culture, contain information about various aspects of the life of our ancestors and features of their mindset in the early stages of social development. Collected over the past thirty years, many texts with clear Christian symbolism and biblical themes scarcely fit into the scientific paradigms of the previous era[17]. The works of Western European authors, conversing with

16 Also refer to related articles in textbooks (Łarčanka 1979) and common writings (Salaviej 2003, Viarhiejenka 2013).

17 Such texts are available in collections prepared after the 2000s (Salaviej 2009, Viarhiejenka 2013). A significant number of incantation records with clear Christian motifs are kept in the Archives of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus.

the history of medicine, led to a change in research optics and attention to the development of the incantational tradition in European areas (refer to Spamer 1958, Schulz 2000, Roper et al. 2005).

The earliest magical enchantments in the Western European regions adjacent to Belarus were found mainly in theological manuscripts. At that time, charms mainly belonged to the religious and medical sphere of early medieval culture, where they developed in the context of monastic medicine. The issue of the distribution of medieval codices and other manuscripts is not fully resolved, but it is indisputable that monasteries played the most important role in the development of early medicine (Riecke 2004, 39–40). Originating in monastic circles, charms were based, on the one hand, on collections of ancient scientific texts, and on the other, on folk medicine practices. Thematically, they constitute magical and medical or (para-) liturgical and ritual written collections (Haeseli 2011, 126). It is thanks to the ministers of religion that many samples of the late antique and early Christian Mediterranean corpus of incantations were not only preserved but also spread. The duties of monks in the early Middle Ages included the reception of works in Latin, and to a lesser extent in Greek, as well as using them in medical practice, as hospitals were often opened at monasteries. Along with the natural philosophical achievements of ancient authors, a large layer of ancient magical medicine was also being expanded in the same way. Therefore, it is usually difficult or even impossible to conclude whether a Latin text is an ancient legacy that came through the activity of the clergy or whether a particular text was written somewhere in a monastery.

In studies of ancient medicine, there is still a temptation to break down healing into the categories that we, from our height in the 21st century, would call rational, religious or magical. Attempts to distinguish texts based on a correlation with religious criteria appear artificial, as they are based on a forced, ideologically engaged division of magical-pagan and Christian-religious contexts. The concept of a dichotomy of pagan "magic" and Christian "religion" does not reflect the deep and complex involvement of a Christian image, gesture, word and ritual in the needs of daily life. Moreover, it bypasses the medieval Christian worldview's inherent "magical" features and most religious practices, which rely on the person's ritual interaction with invisible characters or the embodiment of power (Luizza 2007, 321). Only a look at those medicines through the eyes of their creators or scribes would prove that everything that works justifies itself; everything is rational, necessary and spiritual. Thus, charms in those first manuscripts were placed next to recipes or prayers (in our understanding of these terms). "In the medical context, enchantments and prayers can be considered a separate kind of *empirica*," Lea T. Olsan adds, writing further that "both enchantments and prayers act in the light of belief in their ability to heal, and that this power ultimately goes back to God's power, so is the power of herbs" (Olsan 2003, 351, 357). Therefore, the artificial separation of incantations from neighbouring

texts, whether descriptions of decoctions or exorcism formulas, is rather hypothetical (Haeseli 2011, 29). All those recommendations were in the area of mutual influence of magic, medicine and religion.

In the Latin West, from the 5th to 8th centuries, in the sphere of contact between the traditional culture of the local population and Christianity, the type of a healing practice that its creators themselves considered Christian, although the official Church was by no means always of the same opinion, began to form. The structure of magical rites included Christian symbols and elements of worship, healing rituals with relics and the involvement of priests. As a result, what we call medieval medicine represented a wide range of practices and ideas: from the archaic pre-Christian, classified by the Church as *maleficium* (sorcery), to healing, using church *sacramentalia* (Arnautova 2004, 211).

Latin contributed to the spread of such texts in the wide European space, so it is very problematic to state the territory of their origin. Among medieval texts, many large ones are inconvenient for oral transmission and unsuitable for use by ordinary people since they are saturated with a high style of worship. Eventually, the Catholic Church itself introduced exorcisms and blessings, which brought the official forms of magical texts even closer to the folk ones. It is the church that blesses the house and the farm, the field and the fruit, the vineyard and the meadows, the animals and the stables. Its exorcisms expel parasites and pests from fields and houses, scaring away the spirits of illnesses and demons (Hampp 1961, 113). Thus, the church itself incorporated the elements of the magical mindset, and when it began its struggle against enchantments, it could only do so half-heartedly.

Early healing texts aimed at freeing a person or animal from illness, rescuing them from critical situations and protecting them from demons. Caring for the sick body (attacked by demons) was directly related to caring for the soul in religious practices, as is evident from the example of charms, which notably implies the interference of medicine and religion.

The absolute majority of charms represent mixed or transitional forms, variations and overlaps, so the mechanical division of incantations into "pagan" and "Christian" becomes very problematic and, strictly speaking, unnecessary; the same text can be both a prayer and an incantation depending on the context of use.

It was precisely the work of Western colleagues, including David Elton Gay's emphatic assertion that "no Christian culture is complete without a discourse of sorcery and magic" and that "enchantments are a key part of belief and practice" (Gay 2004, 32), that contributed to the complicated process of including Belarusian charms into the sphere of folk Christianity. Leonard Norman Primiano effectively questioned the two-tiered binary model of high and low religion that separated clerical orthodoxy from folk belief. He coined the term *vernacular religion* and stressed

the significance of ethnographic methodology, defining it as the study of religion "as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (Primiano 2022, 6). While it does not replace older concepts such as folk religion, it does signal a shift in the study of religion, "with the people becoming the focus of study and not 'religion' or 'belief' as abstractions" (Primiano 2012, 384).

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, after peering into the incantation tradition in its contextual and intertextual connections, defining the dialectal membership within the ethnic territory and placing it in the European context, the internal figurative characteristics of the texts turn out to be understudied. Having described their Christian component, I understand that the characters, in their most archaic content and form, were left out of the analysis. All these incantational "heather old fellows"; "thick-lipped, cheeky, cow-eyed girls"; Samson and David with "seven wives each"; a guy whose "legs are wooden, belly is waxen and head is iron"; "Mom's dislocations and hairs" and many other distinctive characters require semantic reconstructions and mapping. Such characters clearly date back to the times when the surroundings were mythologised and reflect the close interactions between worlds that are essential for the mentality of Belarusians. But, are we not witnessing a return to the 19th century, with its adoration of archaism?

With the publication in 2007 of a collection of ritual and magical practices (Valodzina 2007), it seemed that the folk medicine system was covered for the most part. However, tens of thousands of field records have since revealed not only new healing practices but also whole blocks of ideas about new illnesses. Therefore, the identification and description of narrow local complexes associated with this or that illness and its magical and verbal healing is on the agenda. There is a lack of ethnolinguistic analysis of illnesses with rare names, such as *schop*, *supory*, *nudźha* and so on. Belarusian researchers face the task of creating an ethnolinguistic atlas where local complexes of folk medical ideas and practices will be presented using maps and detailed comments.

Naturally, the reception of scientific developments in neighbouring and especially Western European countries modifies accepted views; however, the primacy of field research, regular rich finds and understandings of vast and unreflected material force us to remain in the previous methodological framework. Observing the constant saturation of incantational repertoires among today's healers with internet products and the blurring of narrow local complexes (copying texts that are not typical for local cultures or even fictional into manuscript collections, including incantations against modern diseases such as depression or COVID; switching the linguistic

and cultural codes of text creation in general) lead to an understanding of the next stage of development of the verbal-magical tradition – and this stage must be recorded and described immediately. However, at the level of emotions, it is accompanied by an internal protest, in the style of the mid-19th- or early 20th-century romantics, who lamented the loss of "archaic purity".

In general, the development of scientific thought, both mine personally and that of my Belarusian colleagues regarding customary practices, echoed the path of Belarusian folkloristics as a whole. With gained independence and weakened ideological control, an interest in previously forbidden topics – folk religion, magic, eroticism and marginal phenomena in everyday life – has increased sharply. The natural process of accumulating material in such conditions was accompanied by its classification and description, primarily within the scope of philological science. The ideas of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School and the ethnolinguistic school of M. and S. Tałstych had a significant impact, making it possible to map the material and structure and describe it within the principal codes of the mythopoetic picture of the world (action, sound, spatial, digital, etc). Acquaintance with the developments of foreign folkloristics and participation in numerous international forums have determined comparative contexts and attention to the issues of village religiosity and subjectivity. The idea of creating an international database of custom motifs has emerged. And, for all these years, expeditionary activity continues, the corpus of Belarusian charms is replenished every year, and there is an acute issue related to its arrangement, preferably with modern digital technologies. Time dictates new topics, but the old hold hard as well.

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THE LONG ECHO OF SOVIET FOLKLORE: COMPOSING AND PERFORMING NEW SONGS IN MODERN BELARUS

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This article considers a group of new songs that have appeared in the repertoires of folk ensembles in recent decades. The themes of these new songs are local and national holidays, glorification of the native village and the rural way of life and the wealth and prosperity of villagers, and they also include ironic *chastushkas* (short humorous folk songs) created on "the topic of the day". These songs are "disguised" as folk songs, but have different performance pragmatics, connected with the dominant ideology, and are largely addressed to officials. Their origin is directly related to the implementation of the Soviet Folklore project in the 1930s–1950s and its consequences. We argue that the reconceptualisation of folklore's social function – and the concurrent elevation of performers to authorial status in this period – represented a pivotal transformation, providing the framework for the subsequent flourishing of songwriting within folk ensembles. It was also facilitated by state support for amateur artistic activity. The study has revealed that a lack of critical rethinking of the Soviet Folklore project led to members of folk ensembles currently continuing to use the old Soviet strategies and models for creating new songs. New songs become part of a living folk-type culture and gain "folk" status not through anonymous provenance but via collective authorship, ritual deployment and emotional response among rural residents.

KEYWORDS: Belarusian folklore, Soviet folklore, new folk song, repertoire, holidays, amateur activity, ensemble.

The idea for this article came during field work in Hrynki village, Svislač district, Hrodna region, where I was studying the current song repertoire of folk singers. This place is famous for the recordings of folk songs made here in 1936 by Ryhor Šyrma, a well-known Belarusian folklorist and choir conductor. In Soviet times, there was a choir consisting of sixty-eight people. Later, the Spadčyna (Heritage) Ensemble was created. In 2020, nine local senior women sang in it. This folk ensemble has toured and participated in various

concerts and festivals. Their repertoire includes about three hundred songs and *chastushkas*, a third of which are self-composed songs about current topics. These are songs by individual authors, which both singers and listeners classify as folk based on a number of other characteristics: theme, melody, performer and so on. More than twenty songs were dedicated to the theme of the native village. This experience became the impetus for understanding the phenomenon of the *new folk song*.

There is no special term for these songs because they were outside the scope of research interests and were not the subject of folklore studies. In this article, we will use the term "new folk song", which refers to the concept of Soviet Folklore, which was, for the most part, a song by an individual author on current topics, to some extent, loosely based on folklore.

New folk songs have attracted little scholarly attention for several reasons. First, despite the significant changes that have taken place in folklore studies in the last two decades, namely the anthropological turn and the study of modern folklore forms, the attention of Belarusian researchers is still focused on old, classical folklore. It is still sought out and recorded during field work, while "new" songs are not recorded due to their non-folkloric nature and, often, ideological bias. Even literary works of amateur authors of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) of the 1940s–1950s, who represented Soviet Folklore, are not included in the research fields of modern folklore and literary studies (Hulak 2020, 93). Second, the study of folk songs is carried out within the framework of the scientific paradigm that was formed in Soviet times, when folklore studies were attributed to philological science. It is the text that continues to be the object of study or serves as a source of information for further research into social, mythological and other aspects (Valodzina 2018, 7–13). Songs in academic studies did not represent a person: the singer's private repertoire rarely became the subject of research. A rare exception is A. Lis's essays on folk singers (Lis 1989, 3–8; 9–36). Thus, for researchers focused on authentic folklore, the informant became a "folklore bearer". Despite many prerequisites, the anthropological turn in Belarusian folklore studies did not happen.

The research's theoretical background relies on Sovietological works dedicated to the culture of the Stalin era and its shaping of Soviet Folklore and literature. Frank Miller's study, *Folklore for Stalin. Russian Folklore and Pseudo-folklore of the Stalin Era* (Miller 1990), plays a key role in revealing the mechanisms of new Soviet Folklore creation, its relationship to traditional folk art and its transformation after Stalin's death.

The study also applies Czesław Robotycki's concept of *kultura typu ludowego* (folk-type culture) – a model that captures how symbolic thinking and performative practices rooted in folk traditions continue to function in post-socialist societies (Robotycki 1992). Robotycki defines this concept as a hybrid cultural formation in which symbolic thinking, stylised performance and aesthetic continuity persist

beyond traditional folk boundaries. Within this framework, rural Belarusian song practices are not merely residual traditions or ideological artefacts, but expressive tools shaped by collective memory, heritagisation and post-Soviet ritual use.

In *Performing Russia: Folk Revival and Russian Identity* (Olson 2004), Laura Olson demonstrates how post-Soviet folk revival in Russia involves the creative reinvention of tradition shaped by Soviet cultural legacies, where stylised performances and curated repertoires serve as vehicles of identity and symbolic continuity. Her observation that staged folklorism and amateur creativity coexist within a politicised landscape resonates strongly with Belarusian ensemble practice. Olson's approach reinforces the idea that contemporary folklore is not merely inherited but actively constructed through recognisable codes, communal emotion and performative loyalty.

Ulrich Morgenstern's article (Morgenstern 2022) offers a nuanced reinterpretation of Soviet engagement with traditional music, emphasising its dual character as both restrictive and generative. He argues that, while Soviet authorities sought to control and reshape folklore for ideological purposes, they also inadvertently created spaces for its adaptation and survival within amateur and institutional frameworks. His perspective complements analyses of Belarusian ensemble practice by revealing how state cultural policy could stimulate the creation of enduring symbolic forms that remain active in post-Soviet cultural expressions.

To understand the phenomenon of new folk songs, it is essential to consider the history of Soviet amateur artistic activity. This cultural practice provided a framework for musical creativity that shaped both the aesthetic and social dimensions of song-making during the Soviet era. Amateur ensembles functioned as key sites of localised cultural production and ideological negotiation (Rumyantsev 2000).

This article also draws on the works of Konstantin Bogdanov (Bogdanov 2009), Alexandra Arkhipova and Sergei Neklyudov (Arkhipova and Neklyudov, 2010), who analyse the intersection of folklore and state ideology in a totalitarian society. Research by Aliaksandr Hužaloŭski (Hužaloŭski 2018; Hužaloŭski 2020) and Anastasija Hulak (Hulak 2019; Hulak 2020; Hulak 2021; Hulak 2022) provides crucial insights into the Belarusian cultural landscape, especially the legacy of Soviet folkloristic discourse.

The study of new folk songs is conducted within the anthropological paradigm, employing folkloristic methods to interpret three cases of song creation on topical rural issues. Analysis of over thirty interviews with members of folklore ensembles reveals both motivations for composing new songs and the models and methods of their creation.

This article is based on materials collected by the author during fieldwork from 2011 to 2024 in all regions of Belarus. During fieldwork, sixty singers without musical education were interviewed. Most were women (56 out of 60) aged 50 to 93. Ten leaders of folklore groups and directors of rural cultural centres were also

interviewed. The interviews with the singers were built around the theme of song culture in the village, part of which was a block of questions about new songs and their place in the repertoire. The archives of the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus were also used.

This article focuses on the lyrics of new folk songs, since this is the area where the creativity of folklore ensemble members is primarily manifested – they work on writing the text. Most of the new songs are written in *Trasianka* (a mix of Belarusian and Russian), while old folk songs were performed in Belarusian.

THE ORIGIN OF NEW FOLK SONGS

To understand the ongoing processes, it is necessary to turn to the experience of the past, namely, to the implementation of the Soviet Folklore project under state control in the 1930s–1950s. In the ideological discourses of this period, a special place belonged to folklore (Bogdanov 2009). During this period, the role of folklore and the status of the folklore performer changed. Frank J. Miller's detailed study of Stalinist folklore shows: "During the early 1930s, Iurii Sokolov, Russia's leading folklorist, analysed the nature of folklore and asserted its value in promulgating party doctrine among the masses. As early as 1931, in an article in 'Literatura i marksizm', he argued that the development of folklore should be controlled and that folklore should give direction to the newly developing poetry of the masses" (Miller 1990, 7). Then, "he emphasized the kinship of literature and folklore, pointing out the creative role of the singer in the performance of a work and asserting that the performer was at once creator and author" (Miller, 1990, 7). Thus, folklore performers were encouraged to create texts on contemporary themes. Folklorists helped performers become singers of contemporary life. Such creators received various benefits from the state: they became members of the Union of Soviet Writers, and their work was widely published in newspapers, literary magazines, traditional folklore collections and separate publications. In addition, they received monetary rewards. Competitions and festivals were held to stimulate the composing of new works, and valuable prizes were awarded for participation. The first two "new songs" appeared in *Pravda* – one in December 1935 and the other a year later (Miller 1990, 11).

Although Frank J. Miller conducted his research on the material of Russian Soviet Folklore, his conclusions are supported by Belarusian material. Belarusian folklorist Anastasija Hulak examined the establishment of an extensive project known as Soviet Folklore in the academic and cultural discourse. She concluded that Belarusian folklorists were claimed to be incorporated into finding and representing the work of new Soviet Folklore art, authorised and ideologically defined by those in authority. The strategies of adherence among intellectuals to the socialist discourse

during the 1930–1950 period included various forms of compromise between science, bearers of traditional culture, mass recipients of Soviet culture and the authorities. The methodological crisis in socialist science has expressed itself through the unification of folklore and the established canon (i.e., the corpus of texts of explicit ideological modality), the elimination of an entire layer of uncensored folklore texts from the scope of study, the ignoring of the dialectal nature of traditional culture in collection and editing practices, the blurring of the research subject in folklore studies due to the legitimised role of an active amateur artist, as well as amateur art and publication integrated into the research paradigm (Hulak 2019, 633–640). Many of the author's conclusions are also true in relation to military folklore of WWII (Hulak 2022).

Archival materials also indicate the close collaboration of Belarusian folklorists with folklore performers. Thus, during the first postwar decade, Michail Hrynblat, the leading ethnologist and folklorist in the BSSR, supervised several authors and performers of *skazy*[1]. The most famous of these was the storyteller Safija Sackievič. This researcher prepared the book Сказы Сахвеі Іванаўны Сацкевіч (The Skazy of Sachvieja Ivanaŭna Sackievič) for publication in 1946 (Hrynblat, M. 1946-1948). Despite the fact that many items of Stalinist folklore were never performed repeatedly or were never performed at all, rural performers learned that writing such items could be encouraged by the state (Cybikava, 1948).

It soon became clear that Soviet Folklore had poor artistic quality. Folklorists noticed that "the use of antiquated poetic forms such as the *bylina* [a Russian oral epic], the historical song, the magical tale and ceremonial poetry as a basis for the description of twentieth-century life had resulted in works devoid of artistic merit" (Miller 1990, 93). After Stalin's death in 1953, Russian folklorists attempted to redefine Soviet Folklore and to distinguish it from literature. In doing so, they abandoned the principle that a work of folklore is not essentially different from a work of literature and that the performer of a folk piece is at the same time its author (Miller 1990, 93). Most Russian folklorists regarded collectivity as the prime criterion of folklore, while a second group believed that all amateur artistic activity should be regarded as folklore (Miller 1990, 95). Eventually, scholars reached a consensus in discussions of Soviet Folklore – it began to be understood as authorial literary work of varying degrees of success (Miller 1990, 94). However, its connection with folk art remained, and the ideas about the kinship of literature and folklore and the performer-creator concept firmly took root not only among folklore researchers, but also among performers.

There was no critical rethinking of the concept of Soviet Folklore and its main characteristics in Belarusian scholarship. Belarusian folklorists continued to repeat

1 The new poetic works on contemporary life composed by folklore performers.

the thesis about the kinship of folklore and literature in the following decades (e.g., Kabašnikaŭ 1958, 159; Bartaševič 1969, 15). At a conference devoted to the results of studying Belarusian folk art, which took place in February 1969, the main focus was on modern folklore (especially in its two most popular genres – songs and chastushkas). According to researchers, the key to the development of Soviet folk song was the continued rapprochement with literature and the strengthening of their relationships (Achrymienka 1969, 15), creative exchange in the field of the song cultures of different peoples and constant innovation, strengthening the connection of songs with life and reflecting modern processes in them (Skidan 1969, 10). To confirm these theses, an example of a new group of songs about native towns and villages was given:

> Many songs (for example, "*Niasviž Lyrical", "Kapyĺ Lyrical"*) appeared precisely as derivatives of professional works, many of which use the melody of well-known songs and the rhythm of modern verse. Such works are not folklore in a 'chemically pure' form. Rather, they are the individual creativity of more or less talented representatives of the people, and it is possible to attribute them to folk art only on the basis of their wide distribution, the extent to which such works have become an integral part of the artistic life of the working masses. In general, in folk art, the individual beginning is gaining increasing importance (Bartaševič 1969, 6).

When discussing the chastushkas, the first genre of new Soviet Folklore, researchers draw attention to another aspect – its dynamism and involvement in the current political agenda:

> Working selflessly in the agricultural cooperative, the collective farmers simultaneously demonstrate their abilities in artistic creativity. Oral and poetic creativity develops in the collective farm. Modern folk poetry has become more meaningful and ideologically rich. By expressing the thoughts and feelings of Soviet people, it glorifies their creative spirit and reveals the typical character traits of a person in a socialist society. The most common form of mass poetic creativity, along with songs, is the chastushka, which is especially respected among the collective farm youth. ... In our time, the laconic song form of the chastushka has proven to be very convenient for quickly responding to various political events, which are so rich in the life of the Soviet country. Dynamism and topicality are two of the most essential features inherent in the chastushka as a special genre of song creativity. The repertoire of chastushkas existing in the collective farm is enormous. As if on wings, it flies here in different ways: on the radio, through the newspaper, songbooks, and from neighbouring collective farms. Many ditties are created right here, by the collective farmers themselves (Hrynblat and Malčanava 1958, 95).

These characteristics made chastushkas in demand in the sphere of agitation and propaganda, but also "the first 'repressed' oral genre – the first censorship campaign was directed specifically against chastushkas" (Arkhipova and Neklyudov 2010, 87).

To substantiate the concept of Soviet Folklore, Halina Bartaševič, the famous Belarusian folklorist, proposed the concept of *artelnost* (an ethos of collectivity, cooperation and teamwork). Artelnost refers to the collective process of creating songs together within an ensemble. "More often, collectivity manifests itself in the finalisation of a song, in bringing it to the 'right condition', in its performance, and in its assimilation by the masses" (Bartaševič 1969, 9). An example of artelnost was the composition of a song by members of a folklore ensemble. When justifying the concept of artelnost, Bartaševič relied on the example of the creative work of the Azierščyna Folk Choir, one of the most famous at that time in the BSSR. The choir was created in 1936 in Azierščyna village, Rečyca district, from a family singing group. It consisted of 25 singers and worked under the direction of the village house of culture. The choir's repertoire included folk songs in the regional Polesie style, songs of Belarusian composers and songs of their own composition (Babič 2010, 77). Here, the poetic texts of new songs were created by a group led by a teacher of a seven-year school, and the melody was created by another group. "But only after creative processing by the entire ensemble does the song come to life," emphasised Bartaševič (Bartaševič 1969, 9).

In the 1970s, folklorists focused their attention on authentic folklore. This happened in connection with the preparation of the multi-volume series *Беларуская народная творчасць* (Belarusian folklore)[2]. Despite the fact that the first volume in the series was Песні савецкага часу *(*Songs of the Soviet era) (Kabašnikaŭ 1970), all the other volumes were devoted to traditional folklore genres. Since the late 1980s, during perestroika, under the influence of the Belarusian national revival, interest in the revival of folk traditions and holidays has appeared. The history of Soviet Folklore seemed to be exhausted. Researchers stopped recording, and singers stopped performing such songs on stage.

In the 1990s, folklorists tried to understand what was happening outside the established ideological framework. Speaking about the past, they only briefly mentioned the issues of the authenticity of some works of Soviet Folklore:

> Unfortunately, until recently, we did not have an objective description of post-war folk art. Noting the emergence of new songs, chastushkas and other works, researchers

2 The series "Беларуская народная творчасць" (Belarusian Folklore) has been published by the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (formerly the Academy of Sciences of the BSSR) in Minsk since 1970. It contains almost all the basic genres of oral folklore. The series was awarded the State Prize of the BSSR for 1986 and, today, has about fifty volumes. Its publication continues today.

> kept in sight only a certain part of them, leaving everything else out of their attention. The subject matter of new works, especially in the first post-war decades, was associated with the events of the past war, with some events of local, national and international scale. In the conditions of a complicated and contradictory life and the dominance of ideological dogmas, the folklore process turned out to be just as complex and contradictory, in which one can notice both the official, largely falsified direction and free, uncensored creativity. [...] Works that corresponded to the official ideology were published in numerous collections, the purpose of which was to glorify the existing order, its leaders, their policies and real and imaginary achievements. [...] The artificiality of the overwhelming majority of works of the official direction is colourfully confirmed by the fact that they remained the individual creativity of famous and unknown authors (storytellers, professional and amateur poets and composers) and did not go beyond the pages of these publications or official amateur concerts and were not folklorised. The people did not accept them. Another fate awaits those new works that did not correspond to the official ideology and even opposed it (Kabašnikaŭ 1993, 16–17).

Until the early 1990s, the concept of Soviet Folklore and the principles for its composition were not critically rethought. Its role in Belarusian culture has not been fully studied to this day.

FOLKLORE ENSEMBLE AS A PERFORMER AND CREATOR

The practice of creating folklore ensembles was widespread in Belarus after the beginning of the twentieth century during the national revival period (Hrynevich 2024, 94). However, it reached an unprecedented scale during the Soviet period. Folklore ensembles were created and worked within the club institutions whose tasks included organising the leisure time of workers and their communist upbringing, education and development of creative abilities. They include clubs, houses of culture, houses of creative workers, teachers' houses, leisure centres and so forth, which organise leisure for residents of a particular area, the activities of amateur folk art groups and other club formations. In the late 1990s, well after the collapse of the USSR, new forms of club institutions appeared in Belarus, such as folk art centres, and some cultural and leisure institutions were re-profiled (Voronich 2007, 87–88). However, their functions have remained the same. At the present stage, ensembles continue their activities under the guidance of cultural centres and rural clubs, which in turn are subordinate to the state departments of culture at city/district/regional executive committees[3], which largely inherited the Soviet system of cultural administration.

3 The executive committee is the executive and administrative body on the territory of the region, city, district, village or village council (Kramnik 2006, 806).

Folklore ensembles are predominantly female, which is determined by the demographic situation in Belarusian villages[4]. They usually consist of women of pre-retirement and retirement age. 56 and older. As a rule, these are residents of one or more nearby villages. These are women who run the household or do ordinary village work – work on a private or collective farm, at the post office or in a village store. Singing is their way of spending their free time and is not financially rewarded.

The ensemble is headed by an artistic director, whose place is often taken by the most experienced and knowledgeable singer. The singers do not have any special musical education (the only exception could be the music directors) but have learned to sing in natural conditions from their closest relatives, older people (mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc.): "They went to work in the field, or went to the forest, where they collected cranberries or strawberries. They grew up on these songs. It was not necessary to teach them"[5]. Olson's ethnographic observation underlines the fact that those older women in village ensembles function not only as performers but as living repositories of memory and identity (Olson 2004).

The desire for public performances manifested itself early – many participants of folklore groups note that from an early age they were involved in amateur art activities in amateur ensembles at the level of school, technical school or their first workplace. The performers not only experienced Soviet practices and principles of managing amateur cultural activities, but also largely formed as singers under them. Basic ideas about the official repertoire for mass public events were also laid here. Thus, such ensembles were more than performative collectives: they were laboratories of cultural negotiation, where participants internalised prescribed narratives while subtly reshaping them through personal emotions and collective practice (Rumyantsev 2000).

REPERTOIRE OF THE FOLKLORE ENSEMBLE

The repertoire of folk ensembles is based on local and regional folklore, which the participants know and perform well. It includes calendar and family ritual songs, as well as folk song lyrics, ballads and chastushkas. Often these are songs that the singers have known since childhood.

> – And how do you choose folk songs: from the Internet, from books, or do you remember them yourself?

4 National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. *Population by age, sex and locality type, 2019 Census data.* Retrieved from https://census.belstat.gov.by/saiku/?guest=true&lang=be&default_view_state=edit#query/open//public/F101N_be.saiku

5 Recorded by S. Doŭhušaŭ in the village of Smalianica, Pružany district, Brest region.

– First, we remember who, where, when and what was sung.
– What my mother used to sing, what my aunt used to sing (Hrynevich, Hruntou. 2020).

Two distinct modes of song preservation emerge from ethnographic interviews. Some singers rely solely on oral memory, associating songs with personal experience and long-standing emotional resonance: "I know these songs from youth, they never leave the head. These are songs of my early years" (Hrynevich, Vnukovich, Shrubok 2019). Others maintain curated songbooks, including regularly performed items and new compositions intended for future use. These archives encompass a diverse thematic range: folk songs and songs by individual authors, ballads and chastushkas.

The repertoire is not static: ensembles actively expand it in response to public and seasonal needs. As one informant explained:

– And how many songs do you have in your repertoire?
– Oh, my dear, a hundred!
– What?! There were a hundred and one songs in the repertoire seven years ago! Perhaps there are already two or three hundred songs. Some of them we sing only once, and there are also many humorous songs, chastushkas (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020).

Ensemble members and artistic directors collaboratively serve as collective censors, determining which songs are appropriate for public performance.

The informants put the songs they compose themselves into a separate category: "Oh, and what songs do we sing! Well, first of all, we sing folk songs, we sing asongs by individual authors. We have sung a lot of songs like 'Na Mamayevom Kurgane' [On Mamaev Mound]. These kinds of songs we sang in the past. We compose our own songs" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020). The singers distinguish between the modern and Soviet repertoire by the presence of Russian folk songs in it: "Here I say, we used to sing a lot of songs by individual authors and even Russian folk songs, but now we sing mostly Belarusian ones" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020).

The singers make a clear distinction between the official, public and private repertoire. Unlike the private repertoire, which is performed independently or in the company of relatives or close friends, and through which there is an unlimited expression of intimate feelings and experiences associated with personal destiny, the "official" one allows less freedom and is limited by stricter frameworks. There is a group of songs, well known and loved by all informants, which is rarely performed on stage, although it is present in the official list of songs from the repertoire of the folklore group (Hrynevich, 2014). These are the so-called "pitiful" songs

– romances – the plots of which revolve around family and love stories that have a tragic ending: murder, suicide or death from grief. The romances "Matrasenok na reke" (Sailor boy on the river), "Kalasilas' v pole rozh' gustaya" (Thick rye was sprouting in the field), "Na Varshavskom stolichnom vokzale" (At Warsaw Central Railway Station) and others have long been popular among rural inhabitants. These songs have been recorded in almost every folklore expedition over the past ten years (e.g., Hrynevich, Vnukovich, Shrubok, 2019, Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020, Hrynevich, Vasiljeva, 2020, etc.)

Folk ensembles face an imperative to renew their repertoires in order to stay meaningful within changing public and ritual contexts. To expand their repertoire, they use different strategies. One common strategy involves processing and adapting the text of a well-known folk song to new needs (so-called *perelazhenie* (the adaptation of a well-known folk song to create new lyrics or fit a specific occasion):

> And also ... if we need a song for some event and we don't have enough, we can make it ourselves. In short, let's take a well-known melody, this one "Iz-pod kamnya, iz-pod belogo ..." [Out from under the stone, from under the white stone], there is such a "Techet Rechen'ka" [The stream flows]. We didn't like the line "The husband took his wife to drown", and composed a song specifically for the victory, for the war. We simply wrote the lyrics ourselves, and in the end, we got such an interesting song (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020).

Reworking the text leads to too much "swaying" of the message's meaning, which can lead to a partial or even complete loss of the transmitted information (Neklyudov 2013). Thus, the songs in the ensemble's repertoire are supplemented with new themes and models of text creation that are not typical for folklore.

An important strategy for repertoire replenishment in Belarusian folk ensembles is the translation of foreign folk songs, especially Ukrainian ones. In Hrynki village, for instance, singers deliberately seek out "cheerful and life-affirming" Ukrainian melodies to offset what they perceive as the predominantly melancholic tone of Belarusian songs. One ensemble member explained:

> Belarusian folk songs are all so sad – unhappy love, marriage – and she suffers there, poor thing. Ukrainian songs are all cheerful, and we take some interesting Ukrainian song, our author translates it into Belarusian, and we sing it. And a dispute arises. Here, Ukrainians do even say "This is our song." And we say, "No, you took it from us." (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020)

Once integrated into the Belarusian ensemble repertoire, these translated songs undergo a process of aesthetic and functional transformation. According to Chistov, they "not only lose their distinctive local features and broaden their social reach, but they also cease to vary and, most importantly, come to inhabit non-traditional contexts – non-everyday, non-ritual settings such as staged or professional performances, printed editions or media broadcasts – and in so doing acquire new meanings, structures and functions that they never had before" (Chistov 1986, 10).

Another significant source of replenishment of the repertoire is the writing of new songs. Ensemble members routinely collaboratively compose new lyrics for local festivals, state holidays and anniversaries. They highlight several dominant themes: the native village, or local or state holidays. The song's appearance about the native village is timed to the village festival, which does not have a single date and is held in large villages once every four years. Among the state holidays, the most important for amateur artistic activities are Victory Day[6], the Day of the Elderly[7] and Mother's Day[8]. Songs dedicated to these events are always included in festive concert programmes. We also recorded songs, composed by folk group members, which were dedicated to the harvest festival, which has been of national importance for the last twenty-five years. This practice underscores performers' active role as both bearers and creators of symbolic culture, reinforcing Czesław Robotycki's notion of folk-type culture as a living system in which tradition and invention coexist.

These strategies for forming and replenishing the repertoire highlight ensembles' creative agency and the fluid boundaries of "folk". The status of a song as "folk" derives not from its anonymous origin or a fixed tradition, but from communal recognition, ritual utility and symbolic resonance. Translated Ukrainian tunes and newly authored works alike attest to a living folk-type culture, continually replenished through performative adaptation and shared memory transmission.

CELEBRATION OF THE BEGINNING OF THE HARVEST IN THE FIELD

Since 1996, the traditional Dažynki[9] Harvest Festival has received a stronger ideological context. In its new format, Dažynki is held as a fair where the best grain growers are awarded. The festival began to be viewed by propaganda as a report of rural

6 Celebrated on 9 May.

7 Celebrated on 1 October.

8 Celebrated on 14 October.

9 Traditionally, rural communities celebrated the beginning and end of the harvest. Today, the most important of them is Dažynki, which marks the end of the grain harvest.

workers to the authorities, to the president. The nationwide festival has been held annually in one of the major regional centres. In 2014, the concept changed: Dažynki began to be held in agro-towns, and at the regional level – in one of the district centres of each region, with the exception of the regional centres.

Every year, the authentic Chatovičy Folk Ensemble[10] from Chatyničy village in Hancavičy district, Brest region, known for preserving the local authentic manner of singing, takes part in the celebration of the beginning of the harvest – *Zažynki*. The festival is attended by combine harvester drivers, the head of the district, the head of the village council, the head of the agricultural cooperative, the priest and a folklore ensemble. A ritual is performed on the field. First, the singers greet the field, and second, while singing songs, they manually reap the first sheaf. After that, the first sheaf is handed over to the "master of the field" – the agricultural cooperative chairman and the district head. On this occasion, a new song appears in the ensemble's repertoire. Despite the presence of a large corpus of folk songs dedicated to this holiday, among them there are no lyrics addressed to important participants in the event – representatives of the authorities: "We sang to our combine drivers and the chairman. This is what we composed ourselves, our ensemble"[11]. The basis of such relations between the working female reapers and singers with the chairman is the peasant/lord model described by A. Engelking. In her research, she came to a conclusion about the long duration of cognitive structures that, on the threshold of the twenty-first century, continue to categorise social reality according to pre-modern, deeply archaic models belonging to the era of feudalism (Engelking, 2014, 254–272). The new song describes what happens in the field during the ritual:

Jduć kambajny ŭ polie žyta zažynać
A žonki z sierpami kalasy źbirać
A žonki z sierpami kolosy źbirać
Našy kombajniory chlopcy-molojcy
Ubirajuć žyto do samoj nočy
J ubirajuć žyto do samoj nočy
Predsiedacieĺ jedzia j ulybajecca
Joho rož hustaja j ubirajacca
Joho rož hustaja j ubirajacca
Joho rož hustaja j ubirajacca
Žyź taka prekrasna prodalžajecca
Žyź taka prekrasna prodalžajecca[12].

10 Chatovičy Folk Ensemble was created in 1976.

11 Recorded in 2018 by S. Doŭhušaŭ in the village Chatyničy, Hancavičy district, Brest region.

12 Recorded in 2018 by S. Doŭhušaŭ in the village Chatyničy, Hancavičy district, Brest region.

Combine harvesters go to harvest rye,
And the wives go with sickles to collect ears of corn
And the wives go with sickles to collect ears of corn
Our harvesters are good guys
Rye is harvested until nightfall
And rye is harvested until nightfall
The chairman of the collective farm is driving and smiling
His thick rye is reaped
His thick rye is reaped
His thick rye is reaped
Such a beautiful life goes on
Such a beautiful life goes on.

Although the singers attribute the song as "harvest, modern", it is based on the melody of a well-known drinking song. To compose the song, the authors used perelazhenie – processing and adapting the text of a well-known folk song to new needs. The songs are enriched with new themes, not typical of folk art. Songs composed on the model of folklore or stylisation are perceived by singers as "folk".

The local manner of performance does not allow an unprepared listener to recognise the song as new. However, the text inherits the folk harvest song. Its content is concentrated around the field that gives bread: ripe rye; the main character is a working person, a female reaper, who appears against a broad natural and social background (Lis 1993, 6). In this example, the traditional harvest song's glorification of the hard-working reaper who worked late in the field is replaced by the glorification of new characters – the combine operators and the chairman of the agricultural cooperative. The usual images taken from the agricultural sphere are replaced by a more relevant and appropriate situation to express a new meaning – a demonstration of symbolic loyalty to the authorities in the person of the chairman.

SONGS ABOUT THE NATIVE VILLAGE

Songs about the native village, which began to gain popularity in the 1960s, are today the most widespread group of new folk songs. Their creation is dedicated to the celebration of Village Day, which is usually held once every four years. The only exceptions are villages with a large number of residents, where the holiday can be held annually.

This song was performed at a song contest and is a vivid example of new songs about the native village:

Himn Dukory
Miž luhoŭ šyrokich, miž liasoŭ zialionych
U siaredzinie minskaj voĺnaje ziamli
Ty staiš pryhoža, rodnaja Dukora,
A vakol runiejuć rodnyja pali.
Ty bahata chliebam, malakom i miasam,
Dobra rodzić buĺba i na buraki,
A jašče bahata rodnaja Dukora
Čystymi damami, dobrymi liudźmi. U-u-ch!
Na vajnu z fašyzmam ty synoŭ paslala –
Baranić radzimu, rodnyja pali.
I ŭ centry vioski ŭzniali my pomnik
Tym, chto pachavany ŭ čužoj ziamli. U-u-ch!
Kab žyla ty viečna, darahaja vioska,
Bahaciei-liudzi ščasliva žyli.
Kab byli štotydzień u sialie viasielli,
A ŭ damach pryhožych i syny rasli,
Kab byli štotydzień u sialie viasielli,
A ŭ damach kab dočki i syny rasli.

Anthem of Dukora
Between wide meadows, between green forests
In the middle of Minsk free land
You are beautiful, dear Dukora,
And native fields are ripening around.
You are rich in bread, milk and meat,
Potatoes and beets give a good harvest,
And you, dear Dukora, are full of
Clean houses and good people. Whoah!
You sent your sons to the war with fascism –
Defending the homeland and native fields.
And we erected a monument in the centre of the village
To those who are buried in a foreign land. Whoah!
We wish that you live forever, dear village,
That rich people live happily.
To have weekly weddings in the village,
And sons to grow up in beautiful houses,
To have weekly weddings in the village,
And daughters and sons to grow up in houses.

The song is involved in creating the image of the village and the region, which determines its content and form. These are descriptions of local nature, the village

way of life, which is, as a rule, idealised. Simple plots are made up of lists of things that symbolise prosperity, wealth as understood by the villagers and historical events in which the village was involved. Often, the song ends with wishes for the village to continue to exist and to increase the number of young families and children.

Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – častujuć usich "puščankaj",
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – jaječki jesć i škvarka
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – smiatana i miadočak,
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – pad kožnym pniom hrybočak,
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – usie dzietki jak malinki,
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – i matablok-mašyna,
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – žyvuć usie bahata,
Bo *ŭ* Hrynkach – što ni dzień to sviata.
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – karovy tut pasucca,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – usie kurački niasucca,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – kabančyk u kožnaj chacie,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – by kvietki dziaŭčaty,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – rascie ŭsio ŭ aharodzie,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – zabavie čas znachodziać,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – usie samahon smakujuć,
A *ŭ* Hrynkach – spiavajuć i tancujuć.

Because in Hrynki, locals treat everyone with *pushchanka*[13],
Because in Hrynki, there are eggs and lard,
Because in Hrynki, there is sour cream and honey,
Because in Hrynki, there are mushrooms under every tree stump,
Because in Hrynki, all children are like raspberries,
Because in Hrynki, there is a walk-behind tractor,
Because in Hrynki, everyone lives richly,
Because in Hrynki, every day is a holiday.
And in Hrynki, cows graze,
And in Hrynki, all the chickens are laying eggs,
And in Hrynki, there is a boar in every house,
And in Hrynki, girls are like flowers,
And in Hrynki, all plants grow in the garden,
And in Hrynki, everyone finds time to have fun,
And in Hrynki everyone tastes moonshine,
And in Hrynki, everyone sings and dances.
(Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020)

13 The local name for moonshine, a strong alcoholic drink.

Songs about the native village can become the calling card of folklore ensembles over time. Such songs often begin performances at various concerts and festivals. Field materials show that people try to learn new songs by heart. Learning them happens rather quickly and easily, since the theme of the native village, their homeland, is very close to the villagers.

The performance of such songs evokes a feeling of community and local patriotism, which unites people. An expeditionary case related to the implementation of this work is indicative in this regard. The leader of the Spadchyna Ensemble first began to sing the piece several times because she could not hold back her tears, and then explained that "I'm just getting sentimental with my old age" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020). During the interview, the woman returned to the song several times and emphasised that it accurately describes the local nature, which she missed so much while living abroad.

The singers are constantly looking for new lyrics to create songs about their native village: they follow the publication of poems by local poets in regional newspapers (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2021; Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020). The newspaper *Друг пенсионера*[14] (The Pensioner's Friend) is extremely popular among the older generation. The last page contains popular songs and poems, including those dedicated to the homeland and the village. A significant part of these songs entered the repertoire from external sources, the main one today being the Internet: "And now the Internet is a great force! We find songs there. There are some interesting videos from the feast" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020). When preparing a song for inclusion in the repertoire, a certain amount of textual work takes place, and the musical side of the song is also processed – new arrangements are created. Radio and television continue to be important sources of new songs. For example, the TV show *Наперад у мінулае* (Forward to the Past) is dedicated to the song culture of Belarus. Each programme is a weekly report on an expedition to a village where folklore heritage is still preserved. Belarusian folk songs acquire a modern sound through a new arrangement by pop singers.

Popular foreign folk songs and their translations into Belarusian take a special place when creating songs about the rural way of life: "Ukrainian songs are cheerful, and we take an interesting Ukrainian song, our author translates it into Belarusian, and we sing it" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020).

In the absence of a special song about their native village, singers used the song "Derevnya moya, derevyannaya dal'nyaya" (My Wooden and Distant Village) to the words of the Kazakh poet Vladimir Gundarev. This song has firmly entered the repertoire of the older generation of singers, as expedition materials show. Another group of original works performed as songs about the native village are works

14 A weekly newspaper for seniors with a TV programme. Published since 21 October 2003.

dedicated to Belarus ("Naš kraj" (Our Land), "Bielaruś maja" (My country Belarus), "Kraj suničny, kraj rabinavy" (Strawberry Land, Rowan-Coloured Land)). In addition, we recorded Russian-language songs from the repertoire of Russian vocal groups, which are used as songs about the native village ("Derevnya moya zateryalas'" [My Village was Lost]), "Zhdut v derevne garmonista" [The Village is Waiting for an Accordion Player], "Zhivet selo rodnoye" [My Native Village is alive], etc.). They reflect themes of homesickness, regret for a youth and childhood that have passed quickly, the desire to return to those times and the simultaneous awareness of the impossibility of this. The images of the village, its inhabitants and the peculiarities of rural life are idealised and contrasted with the city and its way of life. Often, such songs end with a call to return to the place of birth.

At the same time, some collectives introduce well-known works about the village into their repertoire, varying the songs during the tour according to the state of the village. For example, in large villages they sing about well-being and prosperity, and in sparsely populated ones, about decay (Hrynevich, Vasiljeva, 2020).

CHASTUSHKAS

Today, as in Soviet times, the chastushkas remain one of the most productive forms of folklore. Singers prefer chastushkas of their own authorship over already known and published ones. If composing a new song is a long process involving several members of a folk ensemble, then composing a chastushka is more of a quick reaction to current local events or some socio-political issues, which does not involve serious work on the text: "And we have many of these chastushkas, satirical ones. And even on the radio they say 'crisis'. He gives us this crisis, and we give chastushkas!" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020).

Rankam voču adkryvaju,
tut i radyjo hučyć,
prezident naš vystupaje,
navučaje jak nam žyć.
Pra dabaŭku nie pytajcie,
bo z hrašyma nie viazie,
tužaj pojas zažymajcie,
kryzis užo da nas paŭzie.

I open my eyes in the morning
The radio is playing here
Our president speaks
Teaches us how to live.

Don't ask for extra payment
Because he was unlucky with money,
Tighten your belt,
The crisis is already creeping up on us.
(Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020)

Despite the fact that this chastushka is included in the Spadchyna Ensemble's concert repertoire and is often sung at concerts, its performance to folklorists caused sudden embarrassment in the artistic director of the ensemble and a refusal to repeat or discuss its text

According to the singers, chastushkas are very popular at concerts, which stimulates the creation of new texts: "And when we travel, and we travel a lot with these concerts in the regions, everywhere they always ask us to sing these chastushkas 'on the topic of the day'" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020). The members of this ensemble sang the most popular chastushka:

Oj, i hora biez nudy,
a ja baba choć kudy,
haryć usio u maich rukach,
toĺki treba mužyka.

Oh, and grief without boredom
And I am a capable woman
Everything burns in my hands
I just need a man.
(Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020)

Some chastushkas contain a critical message that is understandable to local residents, but addressed to the heads of the district administration: "Until they built a highway for us", Seryoga wrote to us: "The road twist[ed] and turn[ed] making teeth chatter ... When we were driving, our road was so disgusting, and we sang, because we live in a dead end and no one comes to us" (Hrynevich, Hruntou, 2020). The singers note that the audience reacts positively to such works. The performance of such chastushkas, which touch on sensitive topics for local residents, makes the folklore ensemble's repertoire relevant and not clichéd.

CONCLUSIONS

The origin of new folk songs is directly related to the project known as Soviet Folklore. Its implementation in the 1930s–1950s, which involved folklorists, folklore performers and the government, led to long-term consequences. We argue that the reconceptualisation of folklore's social function – and the concurrent elevation of performers to authorial status – during the 1930s–1950s represented a pivotal transformation, providing the framework for the subsequent flourishing of amateur creativity within folk ensembles. The idea of the role of folklore in society changed significantly: its value began to be directly related to assistance in the growth of socialist construction. The concept of folklore has been redefined, and the idea of its authorship and the attitude towards the performer have changed. Despite the criticism of the term Soviet Folklore after Stalin's death in 1953, performers did not forget the experience of pseudo-folklore creativity. Pseudo-folklore works continued to be published and performed on stage by folklore ensembles. Later, in the 1960s–1980s, state support for amateur creativity contributed to the enduring popularity of writing new folk songs.

There was no critical rethinking of the term Soviet Folklore in Belarusian Soviet science. Folklorists continued to repeat the thesis about the kinship of folklore and literature and the growth of individual authorship in folk art in the following decades. The growing interest in authentic folklore and rituals left the results of the experiment in creating Soviet Folklore outside the scope of research attention.

Even after the collapse of the USSR and the acquisition of independence in Belarus, the consequences of implementing the Soviet Folklore project were not critically assessed, and the management practices of amateur cultural activities were not revised. This provided space for the further development of amateur creativity based on old models.

Under the new political and socio-cultural conditions, folklore ensembles continue to compose and perform new songs. They continue to use models learned during the Soviet era to produce new songs for official public events. Such creativity stimulates demand in cultural amateur activities and the appearance of new dates in the holiday calendar (according to field research, the most important for rural areas are Village Day, Mother's Day, Elderly Persons' Day, Victory Day and harvest holidays).

The largest group of new songs are songs about the native village. Songs about the native village become the calling card of the ensemble and represent the village and the singers at official events, concerts and festivals. Songs about the native village construct narratives about the homeland and idealised rural life, directly appealing to folk tradition and realising the authors' ideas about beauty. The plots of such songs are created through the description of prosperity and wealth, including natural wealth – important in the mind of a villager. The songs also include Soviet codes about the absence of war, peaceful work, soldiers who died in battle, monuments and obelisks. Their transmission is an act of loyalty both at the level of action and at

the level of content. Songs about the native village are local phenomena that exist within the boundaries of specific villages and regions.

Another group of songs inherits ritual songs and is performed during the celebration of holidays associated with calendar rituals. Stylised as a folk song at the level of text or melody, it has new meanings and has different pragmatics of performance, largely focused on representatives of authorities.

Composing chastushkas, the most productive folk genre today, is the result of a positive reaction from the public. Their themes cover local events, holidays and issues from socio-political life. The performance of ditties related to local realities, which have a critical message, makes the repertoire in demand among the local public.

When creating new songs, the authors use already known techniques and models. They compose new texts to well-known folk melodies, adapt the texts of folk songs or translate them from one language to another. Songs created on the model of folklore works or stylisation are perceived by singers as "folk". Newly composed "folk" songs are recognised as such, not because their origins are anonymous, but because they satisfy the formal, functional and social criteria of folk-type culture.

These songs reproduce the melodic patterns, formulaic language and ritual pragmatics of folklore repertoire. By setting fresh lyrics to familiar tunes, adapting stock motifs (village, harvest or community) and deploying them at specific points in the calendar or at official ceremonies, performers weave new material into existing folk-type templates. Audiences hear the same rhythmic and stylistic features that mark folk songs.

Second, authorship remains collective rather than individual. Although specific ensemble members draft texts or arrange tunes, the songs emerge through collaborative rehearsal, oral transmission and iterative local validation. They are learned by heart, taught in village clubs and passed down alongside older repertoire – just like "real" folk tunes.

Finally, the performance context and emotional response of rural residents confer authenticity. These pieces are sung by folk ensembles at festivals, anniversaries and public gatherings where the symbolic power of folk music is mobilised. In Robotycki's terms, they achieve "folk" status through communal recognition, ritual deployment and emotional investment. In other words, they become part of a living folk-type culture by doing exactly what traditional songs do: binding community, commemorating shared experience and continually renewing themselves through performance.

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SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS OF THE BELARUSIAN *DUDA* (BAGPIPE) IN NARRATIVES OF MODERN URBAN BAGPIPERS[1]

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This article analyses the symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe in the narratives of modern urban bagpipers and attempts to periodise the revival of the instrument, that is connected with those functions. In the narratives of bagpipers in mass media, social media and private conversations, some common motifs concerning their musical instrument are observed. I call them *symbolic functions* to separate them from the practical function of the bagpipe – to play music. The modern urban tradition of playing the *duda* (bagpipe) has only an indirect continuity with village musicians. Since the 1970s, the bagpipe tradition has been revitalised. Different symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe were relevant at various stages of its revival. This article analyses the following symbolic functions: the bagpipe as a national symbol, as an artefact, as another art project, as an object of research, as an instrument for entertainment and for political protest, as well as an object of emotional attachment.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, bagpipe, duda, traditional music revival

In 2024, Belarusian bagpipe culture was nominated for the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity, previously being inscribed in the National ICH Inventory (Rudak 2023, Ministierstvo kultury 2024). The anthropologist Stsiapan Zakharkevich considers such processes a way of legalisation of the traditional culture as cultural heritage (Zakharkevich 2023, 46).

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In the narratives of bagpipers in mass media, social media and private conversations, there are some common motifs concerning their musical instrument. I call them *symbolic functions* to separate them from the practical function of the bagpipe – to play music. Different symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe were actualised at various stages of its revival. This article analyses symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe in the narratives of modern urban bagpipers and makes an attempt to create a periodisation of the actualisation of those functions.

Aliaksandr Surba has proposed the following periodisation of the Belarusian bagpipe revival:

– the 1970s: a *sumiezhny* (border) or an "experimental" period, when instrument makers tried to build a bagpipe while experimenting with different approaches and materials;
– the 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s: a "romantic" period, when the artist Ales Los started his experiments with bagpipe building;
– the early 1990s to the early 2000s: an "ethnographic" period, when craftsmen began to build bagpipes based on an ethnographic artefact (a one-drone instrument kept in the Lepel Local History Museum);
– since the early 2000s: a "new" bagpipe period, which is characterised by the appearance of two schools of bagpipe building represented by the craftsmen Ales Los and Todar Kashkurevich. The researcher himself is a follower of Ales Los (Surba 2013; Surba 2020, 149–154).

Aliaksandr Surba's periodisation is based on the peculiarities of building the instrument, not on its symbolic functions, and covers the time period until the beginning of the 2010s only. Zmitsier Sasnouski has also addressed certain aspects of the periodisation of its revival. For example, he mentions a "romantic period of bagpipe tradition restoration (the 1970s to the 1990s)", when many instrument makers made bagpipes with fantasy elements not based on ethnographic sources (Sasnouski 2010, 367). Eugen Baryshnikau supposes 2017 to be an important year for the periodisation of the bagpipe revival, as during that time McDonald's created a marketing game referring to playing the bagpipe. The researcher considers that game to be an indicator of the bagpipe becoming a part of Belarusian mass culture (Baryshnikau 2025).

I would like to present a new attempt at periodisation, this time based on the various symbolic functions of the Belarusian bagpipe that were relevant at different stages of its revival.

Photo 1: The bagpipe from the Lepel Local History Museum. Photo by Volha Hryń, 2020. Source: Facebook group Belarusian Bagpipe Club

METHODOLOGY

The history of the Belarusian bagpipe revival movement is described in the publications of bagpipers and researchers Zmitsier Sasnouski (Piâtrėnka 2012; Restauracyja 2012; Ziâmkevich 2012)[2] and Aliaksandr Surba (Surba 2013; Surba 2020, 149–182) and in interviews with Todar Kashkurevich (Kashkurevich 2002, 2012) and Eugen Baryshnikau (Baryshnikau 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Several other publications about bagpipes in mass media and social media groups were used as sources for research. Scientific texts written by bagpipers were also analysed as their narratives.

I have conducted several interviews with bagpipers and wrote some articles about the bagpipe revival as a journalist and published them in mass media in 2016–2019 (Leshkevich and Antanovich 2016; Leshkevich 2017a, 2017b; Leshkevich 2018b; Leshkevich 2019; Lity Taler 2018; Voranau 2018 and others). Besides media analysis, structured interviews and unstructured conversations with bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers, I have used my own field materials (photos and videos made during bagpipe music events). Participant observation and auto-ethnography were also used as research methods: I participated as a dancer in weekly dance meetings in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, and in music and historical reconstruction festivals in Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia. It is important to mention that I do not have any musical education, so my research lies exclusively in the domain of cultural anthropology and not ethnomusicology. I did my research while living in Minsk from 2005 to 2020. Due to the political repressions after the 2020 protests against the falsification of the presidential election results, many bagpipers have left Belarus. I have lived in Warsaw since 2021 and continue researching by participating in bagpipe music events (dance evenings and concerts). Writing this article, I tried to play the bagpipe from January to February 2025, attending Warsaw Bagpipe School and taking private online lessons from the bagpiper Eugen Baryshnikau. Unfortunately, my effort was not successful. Hence, this article offers not only the perspective of a researcher, but also that of a dancer and bagpipe music lover, as well as a journalist who has been observing Belarusian bagpipe revival since 2005.

In this article, I use the term "revival" as it is understood by Western and Polish researchers (The World 1996; Bithell and Hill 2014 as cited in Nowak 2022; Nowak 2022). "A music revival comprises an effort to perform and promote music that is valued as old or historical and is usually perceived to be threatened or moribund" (Bithell and Hill 2014, 3, as cited in Nowak 2022, 22). Belarusian bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers sometimes use the term "revival" as an emic one. Following Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, Polish ethnomusicologist Tomasz Nowak assumes that

2 A large proportion of publications in the first issue of the *Dudar* (Bagpiper) magazine (2012) were created by Zmitsier Sasnouski using different pseudonyms.

> revival issues include six basic topics: activism and the desire for change, the valuation and reinterpretation of history, recontextualisation and transformation, legitimacy and authenticity, transmission and dissemination and post-revival outgrowths and ramifications. (Bithell and Hill 2014, 3–5, as cited in Nowak 2022, 22)

Belarusian researchers do not use the term "revival" in scientific publications. They adopt the concept of *post-folklore* from the Russian semiotician Sergey Neklyudov (1995) and develop it to describe rural traditional culture revitalisation in Belarusian cities in the second half of the twentieth century. Post-folklore is used in a rather similar way to Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill's (2014) concept of revival; however, there are several important moments for my research that I would like to emphasise. The philosopher Engels Darashevich notes that post-folklore is neither the institutionalised amateur art of the USSR nor part of professional culture, nor is it proper folklore – it only quotes the latter (Darashevich 2010, 13). In opposition to highly institutionalised amateur and professional folk groups in the USSR and the Republic of Belarus, "the creativity, communication and self-expression of post-folklore bearers must necessarily include the spontaneity of self-organisation and the individual's personal creative contribution"[3] (Darashevich 2016, 44). In my research, I concentrate on the informal bagpipe revival movement and focus less on institutionalised ways of playing the bagpipe, such as teaching in music schools and the Belarusian State University of Culture or the participation of bagpipers in state musical ensembles.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BELARUSIAN BAGPIPE REVIVAL

In Belarus, the modern urban tradition of playing the bagpipe has only an indirect continuity with village musicians. The last documented public performance of a Belarusian rural bagpiper took place in 1954 (Baryshnikau 2025)[4]. After that, the bagpipe gave way to other instruments in public spaces. The process of replacing the bagpipe with other instruments began in the nineteenth century and was typical for all of Europe (Shejn 1887, 530; Nikiforovskij 1892, 175; Przerembski 2007, 48–49).

Since the 1970s, the bagpipe tradition has been revitalised, but modern urban musicians have not had the opportunity to play with rural ones. The only exception would

3 Here, and subsequently, the translation of citations was made by Alena Leshkevich.

4 The information about the performance in 1954 discovered by Eugen Baryshnikau has not yet been published in any scientific article. Inna Nazina wrote that the last public performance of a rural bagpiper took place in Polatsk in 1951. Further research has shown that there was also a later performance in Minsk the same year (Nazina 1979, 120; Sasnouski 2010, 365–366; Sasnouski 2013, 255; Baryshnikau 2016–2).

be the meeting of musicians of the band *Stary Olsa* (Old Olsa) with Mikola Karatkievich in the village of Asinauka in the district of Hlybokaye during their field research in 2007. Karatkievich played the bagpipe as a child, learning from an older bagpiper, Piotr Burets (Voranau 2020). Thus, the revival of Belarusian bagpipes took place independently of living village culture, as a purely urban phenomenon. It is, therefore, possible to consider actual bagpipe playing an invented tradition. Eric Hobsbawm distinguishes three types of invented traditions; the Belarusian bagpipe revival can be classified as the first type, which establishes or symbolises "social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities" (Hobsbawm 1983, 9).

Belarusian bagpipers reconstruct instruments and bagpipe music using the following sources that originated from the territory of contemporary Belarus and neighbouring territories: ethnographic descriptions published at the end of the 19th to the first half of the twentieth century (Shejn 1887, 530; Nikiforovskij 1892; Romanov 1910; Pryvalaŭ 1928 and others[5]); memories about bagpipers written down at the end of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century; nearly 30 bagpipes or parts of bagpipes made until the beginning of the twentieth century (artefacts stored in museums in Belarus (Lepiel and Grodno) and in neighbouring countries; one is stored in a private collection); nearly thirty photos of rural bagpipes and bagpipers and some artistic images (reliefs and paintings) dated to the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries (Baryshnikau 2013; Baryshnikau 2014; Baryshnikau 2025; Sasnouski 2010, 149–154, 266, 355–369; Surba 2020, 45–97); a 5-second video fragment filmed in 1939 (Kalatsej and Remishevskij 2013; Chavus 2018); and more than fifty archival audio tracks of bagpipe music recorded in 1908, 1931, 1939 and possibly in 1925, only part of which was published either in notations or as sound materials (Blagodatov, Vertkov and IÂzovitŝkaiâ 1975; Nazina 1979, 112–114; Nazina 2014; Lietuvių 2007; Eduardo 2011; Žarskienė 2011; Dudarskaiâ 2011; Morgenstern 2012b, 196–197; Baryshnikau 2025). Not all those sources were available at the beginning of the bagpipe revival. They were gradually discovered by instrument builders and musicians, as described below in the section "The bagpipe as an object of research".

According to most of those sources, it is possible to state that the basic design of the Belarusian bagpipe consists of a *miekh* (sewn bag) with a *soska* or *sapiel* (mouthpiece), a single *pierabor* or *zhaliejka* (chanter), one drone each ending in a *rahavien (*upturned bell carved from wood). It is the main type reconstructed by contemporary instrument builders. The best known example of such a bagpipe is the specimen from the Lepel Local History Museum in Belarus (Surba 2020, 59–66). The only preserved bagpipe with three drones and without upward-curving bells originates from the former Lucyn county of Vitebsk province (the territory of contemporary Latvia close to

5 For a full review of such kind of sources, please see Nazina 1979, 107–120; Nazina 2014.

the Belarusian border) and is stored in the Lithuanian National Museum. This bagpipe specimen is called a *ma(o/u/y)cianka* and is also reconstructed by contemporary Belarusian instrument builders (Romanov 1910, 126; Surba 2020, 34, 92). The bagpipe with two drones appears in written and pictorial sources from the nineteenth century; however, there are no artefacts of this type preserved (Surba 2020, 88–90). Nikolaj Nikiforovskij wrote that the two-drone instrument was the most popular type of the Belarusian bagpipe in the nineteenth century (Nikiforovskij 1892, 9). Different contemporary instrument builders tried to reconstruct such an instrument (Surba 2020, 157, 162), but the participants of the revival movement do not actually use this type. There is some information about bagpipes with four to eight drones, but no such artefacts are preserved (Nazina 1979, 108; Biarbierau 2013, 233). Anthony Baines (1960, 70, 80) puts Belarus in the zone of West Slavic *bock* (goat) bagpipes, which also includes Polish, Wendish, Bohemian, Slovakian and Lithuanian instruments. Aliaksandr Surba clarifies Baines' classification writing that "the Belarusian bagpipe territorially belongs to the western type of Eastern Europe bagpipes, which have a few peculiarities: a single chanter, one or a few drones and, possibly, bells" (Surba 2020, 45).

The bagpipe revival went hand-in-hand with the Belarusian national rebirth in the 1980s–1990s. Miroslav Hroch mentions the essential role of people's desire to feel a sense of belonging in this process. "National aspirations of the 1990s emerged after the collapse of the systems of political control […] In the situation of general uncertainty and distrust, people were looking for any kind of certainty – and they found it in national identity, i.e., in sharing the national destiny with others" (Hroch 2020, 118–119).

The second half of the 1980s was a time of economic and governmental reforms in the USSR (Perestroika). On the wave of the increased social activism, the Belarusian youth organisations *Majstrounia* (Workshop) and *Talaka* (Communal Work) were founded. Some of their members started to be interested in folklore. They were young people born in big cities who tried to search for their Belarusian roots in a Russified Soviet society. Although the Belarusian language and culture were declared to be important, people in Belarusian cities spoke Russian, and Belarusian national culture played a rather limited role. As the historian Tatsiana Astrouskaya writes, the Soviet principle was "to encourage national diversity as an outer layer to support the multinational Soviet society, which in reality led to homogeneity and the erasure of particularities". The researcher also mentions that the Soviet state approved of "purely staged folklore traditions". On the other hand, participants of the informal folklore movement (grassroots, not connected with official culture institutions) "sought to return to their roots and uncover an authentic tradition that they believed had survived only in rural areas" (Astrouskaya 2022, 129). Such a tendency was not a Belarusian peculiarity. As Owe Ronström mentions,

> the folk revival in Hungary and other parts of Eastern Europe can be explained as a heretical opposition to the state-supported (if not appropriated) revival of 1940s[…]. While the opposed institutionalised forms of folk music and dance were geared towards making folk traditions a part of national high culture or "the great tradition", the revival of the 1970s was rather aimed at making the folk traditions again a part of everyday life, "the little tradition". (Ronström 1996, 11)

The invention of tradition in cities showed the gap with rural culture: as Hobsbawm mentioned, "Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented" (Hobsbawm 1983, 8). The bagpipe playing revival was a part of that national rebirth and the turn to folklore. Researching those processes is important for understanding the actual state of Belarusian nation-building.

It is important to emphasise that the Soviet or Belarusian post-Soviet state and Communist Party did not invest in the bagpipe and the wider folklore revival, so we are talking about an informal movement not connected with state cultural institutions. As the sociologist Larissa Titarenko mentions, there were two political projects of constructing a new Belarusian national identity: one supported by Belarusian intellectuals and the leaders of the Belarusian National Front political party, and another by the official pro-regime ideologists (Titarenko 2007, 52). The bagpipe revival is part of the former. The role of traditional rural culture in this approach is quite important. As the philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich writes, a village (meaning rural culture and people of rural origin) within a city "completes the process of consolidating Belarusians and formalising their own state" (Akudovich 2007, 67). Therefore, the folklore revival in Belarus in the 1980s was a bottom-up process, which could be linked to the opposition and the need for reforms in Soviet society. It is consistent with the opinion of Miroslav Hroch, who writes that the new national movements in the 1990s "had a goal similar to that of the classical national movements of the nineteenth century: to acquire all the missing attributes of a full national existence: a distinct culture, political autonomy and – gradually – unequivocal statehood" (Hroch 2020, 118).

The independent Belarusian state did not show any interest in the bagpipe revival until the second half of the 2010s. After the presidential elections in 2015, a relative liberalisation of Belarusian society took place. The apogee of liberalisation was the concert dedicated to Liberty Day on 25 March 2018[6], which state authorities allowed opposition forces to organise in the centre of Minsk near the Grand Theatre

6 It was a celebration of a hundred years of proclaiming the independence of the BPR (Belarusian People's Republic) on 25 March 1918. The BPR was part of a nationally oriented project of state building opposed to the Soviet project. March 25 is supposed to be the main holiday of the Belarusian opposition forces since the end of the 1980s. Activities dedicated to that day are usually suppressed by

of Opera and Ballet. Bagpipers were also invited to perform at that concert, but, in the end, they did not due to a lack of stage time (Leshkevich 2018a). The period of liberalisation ended before the presidential elections in 2020.

In 2016, the first attempt to begin working on inscribing Belarusian bagpipe culture on the UNESCO Representative List of ICH happened, in collaboration with bagpipers involved in the revival movement (Leshkevich and Antanovich 2016). However, Belarusian bagpipe culture was inscribed in the National ICH Inventory only in 2023 (Rudak 2023) and nominated to the UNESCO List in 2024 (Ministierstvo kultury 2024). As mentioned in the National ICH Inventory, "Today this tradition is supported by community and state efforts" (Zh͡yvaiâ). However, this is not entirely true. The state exclusively supports musicians operating under official cultural institutions (those listed in the National ICH Inventory), while the informal movement of the Belarusian bagpipe revival exists on its own. Many bagpipers participating in this movement took part in the 2020 anti-government protests against the falsification of the presidential election results in Belarus.

Aliaksandr Surba proclaims the existence of the bagpipe subculture in Belarusian cities (Surba 2010, 150). In my opinion, Belarusian bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers form an informal urban community, established by the invented tradition of the first type in Eric Hobsbawm's terminology (Hobsbawm 1983, 9). Owe Ronström mentions that "revival movements can be directed towards creating a larger national community or towards smaller ethnic, regional or group communities" (Ronström 1996, 15). It is worth emphasising that the Belarusian bagpipe revival community consists not only of musicians, but also involves dancers and music lovers, who are also an important part of the *musicking*[7] (Small 1999) process.

At present, there are presumably more than 600 Belarusian bagpipes in Belarus and abroad: Dzianis Sukhi has built 300 bagpipes up until April 2025 (Sukhi 2025), Viktar Kulpin has built nearly 200 bagpipes, as reported in 2019 (Surba 2020, 159), Todar Kashkurevich has built nearly 50 bagpipes for Belarusians and 50 for Lithuanians[8] (online interview with the author, 7 January 2025). There are also other

state authorities. Officially, National Independence Day in Belarus is 3 July, the day of the Soviet liberation of Minsk from the Wehrmacht in 1944.

7 "If there is anything that is clear about performing and listening, it is that they are actions, they are something that people do. As I thought about this, I realised that if music isn't a thing but an action, then the word 'music' shouldn't be a noun at all. It ought to be a verb – the verb 'to music'. Not just to express the idea of performing – we already have verbs for that – but to express the much broader idea of taking part in a musical performance" (Small 1999, 12).

8 Lithuanians often play bagpipes built by Belarusians, as instruments in Southern-Eastern Lithuania were of the same type as in Belarus. There are different opinions on how this instrument should be called: a Belarusian bagpipe, a Lithuanian bagpipe (referring to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania

craftsmen who build custom-made bagpipes (Surba 2020, 155–179). A bagpiper can possess more than one bagpipe. There are more than 50 bagpipers who perform Belarusian music in public spaces, as counted by the Bagpipe Club (an informal organisation of Belarusian bagpipers), but only 30 bagpipers connected to state cultural institutions were mentioned on the nomination form for inscribing Belarusian bagpipe culture in the National ICH Inventory. It is worth mentioning that members of the Bagpipe Club, whose narratives are mostly researched in this article, have almost no connection with state cultural institutions and are hardly familiar with bagpipers who operate in such institutions. Therefore, it can be stated that in Belarus, there are two groups of bagpipers, almost unrelated to each other, and their total number is more than 80.

The ICH nomination form also includes a list of folk groups that use the bagpipe and operate under state culture institutions. It concludes, "In total, about a hundred people are involved in the ancient tradition" (Rudak 2023). I tend to believe that there are many more people involved, as dancers and bagpipe music lovers are also a significant part of the bagpipe revival movement. As Christopher Small notes,

> To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance. That means not only to perform but also to listen […]. We should certainly include dancing, […] and the cleaners who clean up afterwards, for what they do also affects the nature of the event, which is a musical performance. (Small 1999, 12)

As of 29 April 2025, there were 991 subscribers to the Bagpipe Club's page (Dudarski klub n.d.b) on Facebook and 3,045 subscribers to its page (Dudarski klub n.d.a) on the social media site Vkontakte. Partly, they are the same people, so it is reasonable to say that the Belarusian bagpipe revival movement has at least 3,500 members.

THE BAGPIPE AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL

According to the bagpiper and researcher Eugen Baryshnikau, the bagpipe as a symbol of Belarus has existed uninterrupted since the first half of the nineteenth century, although the musical instrument itself was not very popular for a time, giving way to the squeezebox and the *cimbal* (a hammered dulcimer-type folk instrument)

Commonwealth, the state that existed from the thirteenth century to the late eighteenth century and included the territory of modern Belarus and Lithuania), or a Baltic bagpipe (Kashkurevich 2008, 102). There are also such variants as a "Belarusian-Lithuanian bagpipe" and a "Bagpipe from the Dzvina River region" (Baryshnikau 2025).

(Baryshnikau 2016a). The end of the bagpipe playing tradition correlates with the neglect of the Belarusian language and national culture in the USSR. Thus, the bagpipe revival can be considered one of the components of the Belarusian national rebirth. The bagpiper and researcher Todar Kashkurevich even compares the bagpipe to Belarus itself: "The fate of the bagpipe is somewhat reminiscent of the fate of our land, whose name – Lithuania[9] – was replaced by a name foreign to this land, coming from beyond the eastern border – Belarus" (Kashkurevich 2008, 102).

The motif of the bagpipe as a national symbol also appears in the narratives of other bagpipers. Ales Los tells us about his hope: "God bless me to live to the time when the bagpipe turns from a folk symbol into a national one. The bagpipe is a crucial symbol for our land" (Restauracyja 2012, 48). Zmicier Sasnouski assumes that the long-term goal of the bagpipe revival is "to develop the idea of once again making the bagpipe the main[10] musical instrument in Belarus" (Piâtrėnka 2012, 121). The motif of the bagpipe as a national symbol appears not only in private, but also in official communication. For example, organisers of the Dudarski Fest (Bagpipe Festival) wrote: "The bagpipe is the soul of our nation. It is the voice of our land itself" (Dudarski Fest 2017).

Bagpipe culture is considered to be a national treasure, a part of cultural heritage, by Belarusian state authorities, as it was inscribed in the National ICH Inventory in 2023 (Rudak 2023), and nominated for the UNESCO Representative List of ICH (Ministierstvo kultury 2024). The example of bagpipe culture illustrates Stsiapan Zakharkevich's argument that the narrative of traditional culture binds together a politically divided Belarusian society (Zakharkevich 2023, 46): the bagpipe has a symbolic value both for the Belarusian state authorities and for the informal community of bagpipers and bagpipe music lovers, who would rather stay in opposition to the government (as seen below in the symbolic function of the bagpipe as an instrument for political protest).

Thus, the bagpipe's function as a national symbol has been relevant since the nineteenth century and throughout the bagpipe playing revival since the 1970s.

THE BAGPIPE AS AN ARTEFACT

In the 1970s, instrument makers saw the bagpipe primarily as a material artefact. It was challenging to make it, but they had no intention of playing the bagpipe actively in public spaces at that time. Scientific research of the bagpipe was theoretical:

9 Todar Kashkurevich is referring to the polytonym, which is a short version of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

10 Underlined by Alena Leshkevich.

ethnomusicologist Inna Nazina referenced written sources from the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century with descriptions of bagpipes. However, she did not examine the old bagpipes from the collections of museums. Nor did the instrument makers (Surba 2013, 255; Restauracyja 2012, 43). Eugen Baryshnikau notes the great value of Nazina's monograph (1979) for the beginning of the bagpipe's reconstruction (Baryshnikau 2016b). The first attempts to build an instrument in the 1970s were not very successful: bagpipes made by Ivan Lychkovsky, Aliaksandr Zhukovsky and Uladzimir Hrom could hardly be played (Restauracyja 2012, 43).

The informal folklore movement in Belarus was not massive at first. Researchers write that, in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly intellectuals participated (Dubavets 2004; Zakharkevich 2023, 45). Siarhej Dubavets mentions traditional calendar holiday celebrations and singing folk songs among the activities of folklore movement members during those decades (Dubavets 2004). There is no information about instrumental music or folk dance reconstruction. Tatsiana Astrouskaya emphasises the role of singing among the Majstrounia youth organisation's folklore activities (Astrouskaya 2022, 129).

The reconstruction of bagpipes and other aspects of Belarusian folklore in the 1970s–1980s was inspired by professional research on traditional culture. As mentioned above, the monograph by Inna Nazina (1979) was important for bagpipe reconstruction. As an inspiration for traditional calendar holiday celebrations and singing folk songs, a series of archive and field materials publications called *Belarusian Folk Art* was used. The series has been edited since 1970 by the Institute of Art History, Ethnography and Folkloristics of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (Zakharkevich 2023, 45). Another inspiration was a book by the ethnomusicologist Zinaida Mozheiko *Kalendarno-pesennai͡a kultura Belorussii: opyt sistemno-tipologicheskogo issledovani͡a* (Calendar and Song Culture of Belarus: Experience of Systematic and Typological Research) (1985). As the ethnophilosopher Engels Darashevich mentioned, the book was "an absolute bestseller among the national intellectual elite in the 1980s" (Darashevich 2015, 12).

Thus, in the 1970s, individual craftsmen built musical instruments, including bagpipes, but did not play for the public and had hardly any connection with the informal folklore movement.

THE BAGPIPE AS ANOTHER ART PROJECT

In the 1980s, such Belarusian musicians and instrument makers as Ales Los, Uladzimir Hrom, Ivan Lychkovsky and Uladzimir Puzynia considered building a bagpipe and playing it to be just one form of their creativity, another art project. They built and played other musical instruments as well. Ales Los was also involved

in non-musical activities – *batlejka* (traditional puppet theatre) revival and painting. There is a difference between the musicians mentioned above and the bagpipers who have joined the revival movement since the 2000s and later. The latter often did not have an education or a professional interest in music or the arts, and they played the bagpipe as their only or their main instrument.

The symbolic function of the bagpipe as another art project was still relevant in the 1990s, when artists Todar Kashkurevich and Ales Zhura began to learn how to build and play bagpipes from Ales Los. Todar Kashkurevich said in one of his interviews: "Yes, I have an art degree. But one day I realised that I could not allow myself to think in terms of aspects of only one type of art" (Kashkurevich 2002). Todar Kashkurevich also worked in monumental art, painting, book graphics and design. Ales' Zhura studied architecture.

The symbolic function of the bagpipe as another art project is still relevant for the older generation of bagpipers who joined the revival movement in the 1990s or earlier. The majority of the younger musicians who started to play the bagpipe in the 2000s or later consider it to be their main or only artistic activity.

THE BAGPIPE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR ENTERTAINMENT

Some dancing events with bagpipe music were organised in the 1990s: Ihar Mikhno played Belarusian, Lithuanian and Latvian dance melodies performing in different Belarusian cities (Restauracyja 2012, 46), Siarzhuk Vinagradau built a bagpipe and accompanied singing and played during the events of the Talaka youth organisation in Homiel (Surba 2020, 157), but it has only been since the 2000s that the bagpipe has become a popular instrument for entertainment. This function of the instrument is older than the revival, as the bagpipers played dance music in the time of the rural bagpipe playing tradition (Nikiforovskij 1892, 9, 12; Romanov 1910, 127; Pryvalaw 1928, 19). Nikolaj Nikiforovskij mentioned that playing dance music was the main activity of a rural bagpiper (Nikiforovskij 1892, 12). Inna Nazina supposed that making people happy was the social purpose of bagpipes (Nazina 1979, 111).

Using the bagpipe to play in the "medieval" style was to a large extent inspired by the German band *In Extremo* (in the extreme). Ethnomusicologist Ulrich Morgenstern proposes to place the Belarusian bagpipe revival alongside the folk and medieval movement in Western European countries (Morgenstern 2012a, 13). The music band Stary Olsa, formed in 1999 by bagpiper Zmicier Sasnouski, had the bagpipe as one of its leading instruments. The band became very popular in the 2000s. Many bands copied their style, including the bagpipe playing. At that time, experiments with various styles and directions began (e.g., playing rock hits with the Belarusian bagpipe or Belarusian dance music with medieval bagpipes). Experiments

continued later. The bagpiper Dzianis Shmatko said: "We force the bagpipe to do such things[…]. We squeeze the unsqueezable out of a diatonic instrument. The bagpipe acquires a new sound; it is not the main instrument anymore, but if it is completely absent from the compositions, that does not sound right" (Lity Taler 2018).

Photo 2: The bagpiper Antoś Bielski holds a Belarusian bagpipe while the bagpiper Mikola Stoliar plays the dudelsack. Dance meeting on Korch in Minsk, June 27, 2018. Photo by Alena Leshkevich

Starting in the year 2000, bands *Vetakh* (The last quarter of the Moon) and *Stary Olsa* organised several dance parties in Minsk clubs. In the first half of the 2000s, dance parties with bagpipe music took place in the open air during the summer in Minsk. Since 2006, such open-air dance parties have become regular (called *Korch* or *Koriaga*[11]), and then in the colder season of 2007/2008 (October-April) regular weekly parties with bagpipe music were organised in clubs, cafes and pubs. The popularity of such parties can probably be explained by their free atmosphere:

> About half of the dances are in couples, most of them in a circle or a chain. You can invite anyone to dance at the party, so it's not scary to come without a partner. You

11 Named after the Belarusian "корч" or Russian "коряга" – a gnarled piece of wood that once sat on the place of such meetings near the *Uskhod* metro station in Minsk.

> can join the circle without hesitation, but it is desirable, if the number of dancers allows, for the guys and girls to take turns. If there are fewer guys, they should at least stand between the girls, not next to each other. It is not customary to refuse an invitation to a couple dance, but this is not a strict rule: no one would force anyone to dance. (Leshkevich 2019)

Starting in 2006, Dudarski Fest (founded in 1992) was held annually and continued until 2013, when the format changed to biennial (Mukhamor 2013, Ziâmkevich 2012). In 2007, the *Dudarski klub* (Bagpipe Club) was founded. As mentioned on social media, it is an "informal community of Belarusian bagpipers and their sympathisers" (Dudarski klub n.d.b). Among the preconditions of the Bagpipe Club's founding, a sharp increase in the number of bagpipers is noted (Piâtrėnka 2012, 119).

Eugen Baryshnikau mentions dancing to bagpipe music as a Belarusian peculiarity: "To have a systematic, many-years' tradition, and to have the bagpipes lead the way in dancing – at least, I don't know of such a thing anywhere else. I remember my Lithuanian friends being surprised when they saw that one could dance to the bagpipes. For them, it was (and mostly remains) an instrument of pathos and beauty"[12] (Leshkevich 2017a). Summarising the 2000s, Todar Kashkurevich said "Belarusian bagpipe no longer appears exclusively in folklore forms; it has penetrated the jazz, modern folk projects and hard rock. This is our success. We managed to reach youth subcultures. The bagpipe has not become a part of subcultures in Lithuania, Ukraine or Russia. It only happened in Belarus" (Kashkurevich 2012, 101).

The bagpipe as an instrument for entertainment also remained relevant after the 2000s. Dance events and music festivals continued to be organised. In 2017, the bagpiper Vital Voranau founded the International Festival of Bagpipe Regions: Dudarski Rej (Bagpiper's Reign) in Hlybokaje (a town in northern Belarus) (Voranau 2018). The same year, McDonald's issued a smartphone application with a marketing game *Dudzim pa-pansku* (Play the Bagpipe Like a Nobleman). Users were to play the virtual bagpipe to get bonuses for buying burgers (The bytheway 2017). Eugen Baryshnikau draws attention to the role of the game, considering it to be an indicator that the bagpipe has finally been revived and has become a part of Belarusian popular culture (Baryshnikau 2025).

Thus, the bagpipe's function as an instrument for entertainment was relevant for old rural bagpipers and reappeared in the bagpipe revival movement in the 1990s.

12 In this and the next quote the musicians probably compare the situation in Belarus only to the revival in neighbouring countries. Of course, they know about a big role of the bagpipe in Ireland, Scotland and Estonia, for example. It is worth to mention that in recent years the bagpipe has become more and more popular in Latvia (including playing during traditional dance events).

It became a trend in the 2000s and is still relevant: there are dance evenings with the bagpipe music in Belarus and abroad for diaspora.

Photot 3: The bagpiper Mikola Stoliar performs with the band Trollwald on the festival „Kupalskaje Koła" in Minsk. June 23, 2018. Photo by Alena Leshkevich

THE BAGPIPE AS AN OBJECT OF RESEARCH

Until the 1990s, bagpipers and craftsmen did not conduct their own scientific research. They used the publication of Inna Nazina (1979) for their experiments with building and playing bagpipes. At the beginning of the 1990s, Todar Kashkurevich and Ales Zhura visited the Lepel Local History Museum to study the bagpipe made in the nineteenth century and preserved there. That research was practically oriented: they tried to understand how to make such a bagpipe. Aliaksandr Surba attaches great importance to this event as the beginning of a new stage in his periodisation of the bagpipe-building neotradition: the researcher dates the early 1990s to early 2000s as an "ethnographic" period, when craftsmen began to build bagpipes inspired by the instrument kept in the museum in Lepel (Surba 2013, 256; Surba 2020, 150–152). From 1997 to 2000, Ales Los and Todar Kashkurevich conducted fieldwork in northern Belarus, recording the local people's memories of rural bagpipers (Surba 2013, 256; Kashkurevich 2008, 108). Valuable information about old bagpipers'

playing position, repertoire and the role of a bagpiper in rural society was recorded. Those materials were not easily accessible. Ales Los published a part of them on his Facebook page in 2023 (Los n.d. 2023), thus, it is still too early to say to what extent this information has influenced the bagpipe revival.

In 2002, Todar Kashkurevich noted the lack of sound sources for bagpipe music reconstruction, although the instrument itself had already been studied (Kashkurevich 2002). At that time, only some musical notations of Belarusian bagpipes were published, but audio recordings were not accessible to bagpipers. Nowadays, more than fifty rural bagpipers' melody recordings are known. Most of them were found in the archives or discovered in publications made in neighbouring countries by bagpipers themselves (not by professional researchers). The first of such discoveries was made by Dzianis Sukhi at the end of the 2000s (Sukhi 2019; Leshkevich 2017b). Those findings changed craftsmen's approach to bagpipe tuning and fingering. First, at the very beginning of the revival, bagpipes were built in the key of G (drone and the tonic note, which was played when all the chanter holes are closed), open fingering was used (starting with all holes covered, to play a note, a bagpiper opens a certain hole on the chanter and all the holes below). After discovering archival audio materials, it became clear that traditionally the Belarusian bagpipe had closed fingering (the fingers cover holes until a finger-lift is needed to get a particular note). The bagpipe of Gauryla Slauchyk from Haradok district, recorded in 1931, was in the key of C with the tonic (drone) note on the second chanter hole from down. Nowadays, the fingering of his instrument is used to build new ones, but bagpipes in the key of G are also still popular.

Using open fingering, a bagpiper produces smooth transitions between notes. Closed fingering allows for a more ornamented style of playing; with all the chanter holes closed between notes, it also produces what is called a phantom drone. Nowadays, most Belarusian bagpipers use open fingering. Closed fingering is used by nearly fifteen bagpipers. Musicians with bagpipes of the Western European style (*dudelsacks*) and with Scottish bagpipes often play during Belarusian bagpipe music events. There are serious debates about what is traditional and what is Belarusian in bagpipe music. The bagpiper and researcher Stanislau Chavus explained the situation of the bagpipe revival in 2016, which is still partly relevant: "What is now perceived in the media as the Belarusian bagpipe tradition is a very motley thing. There are Scottish bagpipes, German dudelsacks and medieval repertoire in it. This is our living tradition today, no matter how much individual bagpipers try to work with ethnographic material" (Leshkevich and Antanovich, 2016). It is hard to say that archival audio recordings of the bagpipe are widely used by contemporary urban musicians. They reconstruct some tunes, but not all of them. Most of their repertoire is dance melodies learned from the recordings of other instruments and adapted for the bagpipe.

In the 2010s, the study of Belarusian bagpipes intensified: scientists, bagpipe builders and musicians were engaged in it. Bagpipers found more and more archive recordings of bagpipe music and discovered museum artefacts[13]. Knowledge was disseminated through social media, academic publications and private conversations. Eugen Baryshnikau organised a section on bagpipes at the International Congress of Belarusian Studies in 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2022. Aliaksandr Surba defended his thesis in art history, "*Belaruskaia duda ŭ kantėkstse ŭskhodneeŭrapeĭskaĭ tradytsyi: typalohiia, kanstruktsyĭnyia i dėkaratyŭnyia asablivastsi*" (The Belarusian Duda in the Context of Eastern European Tradition: Typology, Constructive and Decorative Features) in 2016, and published a book with the same title in 2019 (the 2nd edition was published in 2020) (Surba 2020). Many research-based books, articles and even a glossy magazine were published by bagpipers in the 2010s (Sasnouski 2010; Dudar 2012; Kalatsej and Remishevskij 2013; Surba 2013; Baryshnikau 2013, 2014; Chavus 2018; Voranau 2019 and others). Dzianis Sukhi emphasises the role of the internet in researching archival music recordings (Sukhi 2019).

The function of the bagpipe as an object of research is noticeable in the bagpipers' narratives. Here is a fragment of an interview with Eugen Baryshnikau:

> – What is necessary for the practical embodiment of the [bagpipe] myth to be successful?
> – It seems to me that there are three components crucial for mass success. The first is a factual musical tradition, the second is a myth that arises based on this tradition, and the third is the real use [of the bagpipe] in the present […] In the case of Belarus, we possess not only a strong myth but also enough information about the authentic tradition and the foundation of the myth. So far, this is perhaps the weakest point of the three: serious research work is necessary, the analysis of available materials, tools, sources and modern field records. (Baryshnikau 2016b)

13 Giving a presentation on the topic of the article in St. Petersburg, the author received a comment from the keeper of the collection of musical instruments at the Russian Ethnographic Museum, Aishat Gadzhieva. She said that she had noticed the trend of "the bagpipe as an object of research" in her work. No country has shown such curiosity about the instruments it looks after as Belarus.
The assumption of one of the reviewers of this article is worth quoting: "The implication seems to be that interest in bagpipes is higher in Belarus than elsewhere in northeast Europe, but that might be an erroneous conclusion. Some other countries have more extensive collections of bagpipes of local origin to study, or have relatively easy access to museums in nearby lands (besides Russia) with specimens from the researcher's land, so the need to visit the St. Petersburg museum is not as urgent as it is for a Belarusian researcher who can study[…] fewer specimens in Belarus". Separate research is required for verification of this assumption.

Bagpiper Vital Voranau states, "It is not just an instrument. It's one thing to learn how to play the bagpipe by medieval standards, or to make covers of some well-known tunes, and it's quite another to delve into authentic folklore and a closed, traditional manner of playing, while simultaneously studying historical and literary sources" (Voranau 2018).

"What attracts people to the bagpipe is that it was restored slowly and with difficulty. Reconstructors still argue about what it should be like. It is ours, something that has been here. If we had waited a little longer, nothing might have survived; there would have been nothing to argue about", notes Zaryna Shauko (Lity Taler 2018).

Thus, the research on the bagpipe started by bagpipers in the 1990s intensified in the 2010s and continues to do so.

THE BAGPIPE AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR POLITICAL PROTEST

In 2020, massive street protests against the falsification of the presidential election results were happening in Belarus. The music band Irdorath and their friends played at the protest in Minsk on 16 August 2020. As a result, the musicians were imprisoned for two years. Now, after being released, they live in Warsaw and Berlin. The members Irdorath do not use Belarusian traditional bagpipes, but those modelled on German dudelsacks. At the same time, their music has become an integral part of the bagpipe revival, as medieval and Belarusian tunes are often played at the same events. In general, the revival movement is open to other cultures. For example, Dzianis Shmatko noted that having learned to play the Belarusian bagpipe, one can easily learn to play the bagpipe of any country in the world (Leshkevich 2022).

The bagpipe is so important for the musicians of Irdorath that they played it right after being released from prison. The bagpiper Uladzimir Kalach recounts meeting his wife Nadzeja:

> When we met for the first time after prison, on the 21st [of April 2023], we took our bagpipes and went to play near the lake. We just hugged everybody and greeted everybody. Nadia asked, when I met her with my bagpipe, "Where's mine?" I gave her the instrument, and we just went to the lake to play, to see if we remembered the old programme. (Irdorath 2024)

The bagpiper Dzianis Shmatko had a similar approach: the main thing he thought about after being released from prison was a concert his group *Lity Taler* (A Cast Thaler) was going to perform at:

> We hadn't played anywhere for a long time because of the coronavirus, so it was the only chance. And it hurt me a lot that I wouldn't be there, because I was in prison. Well, I also told the judge about the concert. And she sentenced me to three days (counted from the moment of detention), so I was released two hours later.
>
> I called my girlfriend and said:
> – That's great, I'll play at the concert.
> – What concert are you talking about? It's good that you are alive after prison! All the concerts are cancelled. (Shmatko 2022)

Besides Irdorath and their friends, other bagpipers have also left Belarus and are now leading active social lives in exile. Bagpipers accompany almost every action of the Belarusian democratic forces in Warsaw, take part in music festivals and perform at dance parties. Musicians living in Warsaw learn Polish traditional melodies and play them on the Belarusian bagpipe, for example, the song *Lipka* (A Small Linden Tree), widespread all over Poland, different kinds of *oberek* (a typical Polish dance) or dances from the *Wielkopolska* (Greater Poland) region in the western part of the country.

Repressions after the 2020 presidential elections led to the termination of a large proportion of the music festivals organised by non-state actors, as well of those where bagpipers performed. Some dance events with bagpipe music now take place underground in Belarus. At the same time, bagpipers connected to state cultural institutions participate in concerts organised by such institutions as well as in other official events, for example, performing during the propagandistic All-Belarusian People's Assembly. As Eugen Baryshnikau mentions, for some musicians, the bagpipe is an instrument for political protest, while for others it is an instrument for obeying state ideology (Baryshnikau 2025).

Some bagpipers had participated in the actions of Belarusian democratic forces in Minsk before 2020; however, their participation was not as noticeable and important as in 2020 and, after that, in exile. For example, bagpipers were invited to perform in a concert dedicated to Liberty Day in Minsk on 25 March 2018[14], organised by democratic forces, but in the end, there was no time for it because of changes in the programme (Leshkevich 2018a). Rock performances seemed more important to the organisers than those of bagpipers.

14 See footnote 6.

THE BAGPIPE AS AN OBJECT OF EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

The instrument has a great significance not only on a national level, which is illustrated by the bagpipe's function as a national symbol, but also on a personal level. The latter involves the bagpipe's function as an object of emotional attachment. For many people, the first acquaintance with the bagpipe was accidental and at the same time serendipitous. For example, Dzianis Shmatko recounts: "He saw a bagpipe – and the man couldn't be stopped" (Lity Taler 2018). "My fascination with the bagpipe sound began as soon as I first heard it. […] I didn't play any music in my adult life; I thought it wasn't right for me, but the bagpipe has changed everything," Vital Voranau recalls (2018). As the last quote demonstrates, when first getting acquainted with the bagpipe, its distinctive sound is very important. This is what Denis Sukhi (2019) also says: "The bagpipe has fascinated me with its powerful sound and its timbre from the moment I first heard it."

Many musicians say that playing the bagpipe helps them to maintain emotional balance and that a prolonged lack of playing depresses their mood. Here is a very representative quote from Dzianis Shmatko:

> I'll be honest to say that I don't always play for people. Fifty to sixty per cent of the time I'm playing for myself […] Once I lost the reed. And it's impossible to play the bagpipe without it. I was looking for the reed for a week, and the whole week, everything fell out of my hands. When I found it, I played all day, not letting go of the bagpipe […] To learn to play the bagpipe well, you have to live with it. When you breathe in the air into her[15], she comes alive. If she breathes, she lives. And if you don't breathe, you will die. And when you learned to breathe together with the bagpipe, live with the bagpipe, absorb it into your life […] Then, in the morning, it's a family: mom, dad, daughter, wife, bagpipe, cat, dog – that's how it should be. (Lity Taler 2018)

Almost every bagpiper has an artistic photo with a bagpipe and a romantic landscape or a sunset background on his or her social media pages. Often, such photos are bagpipers' profile pictures.

The bagpipe's symbolic function as an object of emotional attachment was also relevant at the time of the living tradition of rural bagpipe playing. "The musician I heard played a lot of Belarusian tunes, mostly dance ones, and he was fanatically attached to his bagpipe and considered this music the best in the world" (Pryvalaŭ 1928, 19). With even dancers demonstrating such a high level of emotional attachment to the sound of the instrument, it seems that a nineteenth century Belarusian folk song is still relevant:

15 The word *duda* in Belarusian is feminine.

Oj, biez dudy, biez dudy,
Chodziuć nožki nia tudy,
A jak dudku počujuć,
Sami nohi tancujuć[16].
(Shejn 1887, 530)

The bagpipe's symbolic function as an object of emotional attachment is hard to connect to any particular period of time. It was relevant to the living tradition of rural bagpipe playing and has stayed important during the bagpipe revival.

CONCLUSION

The bagpipe playing revival in Belarus has already experienced an almost 50-year history. The instrument has various symbolic functions for musicians that are obvious from their narratives and the historical facts. Some of those functions can, with a certain degree of conventionality, be called trends with specific time intervals:
– the bagpipe as an artefact – a trend in the 1970s;
– the bagpipe as another art project – relevant since the 1980s for bagpipers who joined the revival movement in the 1990s or earlier;
– the bagpipe as an object of research – relevant since the 1990s , especially a trend in the 2010s;
– the bagpipe as an instrument for entertainment – relevant since the 1990s; and
– the bagpipe as an instrument for political protest – a trend in the 2020s.

The functions of the bagpipe as a national symbol and as an object of emotional attachment are not connected strictly to any particular period of time. The former arose among intellectuals in the nineteenth century but was unimportant for rural bagpipers. However, it became essential for urban musicians during the bagpipe playing revival. The bagpipe's symbolic functions as an object of emotional attachment and as an instrument for entertainment are important not only for modern urban musicians but also for the traditional rural ones.

The bagpipe revival in Belarus was initiated from the 1970s to the 1990s by artists and instrument makers who first regarded the bagpipe as an artefact (just trying

16 Oh, without the bagpipe, without the bagpipe,
My legs go in the wrong direction,
My feet don't go right,
And when they hear the bagpipe,
They dance by themselves.

to build it) and considered it just one of their art projects. An increasing number of manual labourers and IT specialists among modern musicians who started to play the bagpipe in the 2000s and later. They use modern technologies for research and the reproduction of old bagpipe recordings. Almost all bagpipers declare a high emotional attachment to their instruments.

The Belarusian bagpipe revival movement became more substantial in the 2000s: there were more bands using the bagpipe, more musicians, bagpipe makers, dancers and lovers of bagpipe music. Perhaps this surge in popularity is due to the bagpipe's symbolic function as an instrument for entertainment. Another possible explanation is the increasing role of the internet and social media, and hence the increased awareness among potential participants of the bagpipe revival movement about the existence of the instrument, concerts and dance events. The internet has also facilitated research since the 2010s.

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SMILES AND TEARS: OBSERVATIONS OVER THE CURRENT CHANGES IN THE BELARUSIAN CEMETERIES

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Until now, Belarusian cemeteries have attracted the attention of ethnologists, folklorists and historians from two main perspectives: places where historical tombstones are preserved and where traditional memorial practices can be observed. The huge new cemeteries founded outside the boundaries of growing cities in recent decades remained a "blind spot" for Belarusian researchers. This article aims to show how observation of contemporary Belarusian cemeteries and the changes taking place in them can help to understand contemporary Belarusians' ideas about the afterlife and the development of cultural memory and memorial practices. Five characteristic examples were selected for this purpose: the spread of tombstone portraits with smiling deceased persons, the tendency to demonstrate the profession of the deceased on the tombstone, the gradual disappearance of traditional grave designs, methods of depicting and articulating ideas about the afterlife and the tradition of bringing toys to children's graves. Interpretations of these examples are proposed. Thanks to this, we can see in the change a complex system that directly reflects the development of Belarusian society and understand what great epistemological potential modern Belarusian tombstones contain for ethnology and other social sciences.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, cemeteries, tombstones, practices of remembrance, culture of memory, tombstone portraits.

The number of publications devoted to the historical cemeteries of Belarus has steadily grown over the past quarter-century. Historians, art historians, ethnologists, philologists and local historians turn to a variety of aspects, exploring the historical necropolises of Belarus (Ramaniuk 2000; Lewkowska, Lewkowski and Walczak 2000–2008; Hruntou 2022). During this time, we have made significant progress in understanding the history of cemeteries, the semantics of tombstones,

the linguistic features of epitaphs and commemoration traditions. This list could easily be continued. However, for the current article, it is important to point out the following: the modern development of Belarusian cemeteries remains a "blind spot" for authors of various disciplines. Two focal points mainly attract researchers to study Belarusian cemeteries: folk culture and heritage protection (Sudnik 2023, Skvarčeŭski 2018). Neither of these can be easily found in the huge modern cemeteries on the outskirts of every Belarusian town, with their monotonous landscape and similar, repeating monuments. Thus, we need to take the time to understand that the cultural landscape of Belarusian necropolises has been undergoing significant changes since the mid-1980s, as will be described below. This process has not only not been completed but has accelerated in pace.

The goal of this article is to study some of the significant changes that have occurred in modern Belarusian cemeteries and how these changes correspond to commemoration practices, identities and ways of imagining the afterlife. The central part of the article is divided into five main sections that examine current tendencies to place the portraits of deceased persons with smiles on their tombstone as well as depict the deceased's work identity, the growing disappearance of burial mounds over graves, the depiction of afterlife perspectives on the modern gravestones and the practice of brining toys as a commemoration gift to children's tombstones.

In many ethnological works concerning cemeteries and commemoration rituals in Belarus and, more broadly, the East Slavic region, it was customary to speak about the conservatism and even "archaism" of this type of cultural landscape and the ritual practices associated with it (Aŭsiejčyk 2016, 445; Ramaniuk 2000, 11; Sedakova 2004, 17). We will leave aside the question of how correct this thesis is regarding historical cemeteries, but it is clear that this does not apply to the modern Belarusian cemeteries. Though dead people are still mainly being buried under wooden crosses, and tombs are visited a few times per year by relatives with candles, flowers and ritual food, the frame that helped to understand traditional commemoration practices and cemetery development is no longer relevant. The contemporary Belarusian cemetery is an area where many innovations occur. It is no longer organised solely by the logic of conservative tradition but also by modernisation processes that cannot be ignored when analysing this field.

We may ask ourselves why this break in tradition occurred, leading to such rapid change. What can the modern appearance of Belarusian cemeteries and their tombstones tell us about the attitude of Belarusians towards death, their ideas about the afterlife, their strategies for preserving the memory of deceased relatives? It is the broad range of questions I will try to clarify in this article while examining some of the most significant trends in modern cemeteries and tombstone development.

In my opinion, it is precisely the study of the monuments themselves and the cultural landscapes of modern cemeteries that can answer these questions. This does not

mean that classic field interviews are irrelevant. Respondents eagerly answer questions concerning their habitual commemoration practices. However, they are usually uncertain about their beliefs about the afterlife and the posthumous fate of the deceased's personality. This is rather predictable and not something novel. Belarusian folk culture researchers in the second part of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century had to admit that attempts to tie peasant imaginations of the otherworld to an uncontroversial system were doomed to fail (Sedakova 2004, 37; Vinogradova 2012, 9). All the moral and ideological collisions of the twentieth century, with their vacillations between atheism and religious revival, could hardly clarify this issue, making people's opinion of the otherworld even more controversial. The situation of being asked, in which respondents find themselves, only increases the confusion. Given this, we may treat modern burial monuments as firm statements on what people do believe when confronted with the death of their close ones. This does not mean that analysing the variety of modern monuments will not yield an uncontroversial view of contemporary beliefs in the otherworld. However, we can trace some important trends in how people regard the memory of their dead and how they represent them in the tombstones and practices around it. What is needed is an epistemological effort to understand tombstones as answers to important questions about human personality and its posthumous fate. Themes such as faith, identity, self-presentation and memory come into play here. Thus, this article will show the practical possibility of applying this effort and the potential of such an approach.

The methodological approach used in this article is based on the three different intellectual traditions. The first is formed by cemetery studies within social history and is represented by such authors as Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle and James Stevens Curl (Ariès 2011, Curl 1972, Vovelle 2008). The second is a set of methods mainly use cemetery inventory making, including monument description, inscription collection, photography and so on (Lewkowska, Lewkowski and Walczak 2000–2008; Czyż and Gutowski 2020). The third tradition is semiotic studies based on the works of Roland Barthes and Juri Lotman (Barthes 2000, Lotman 2001). It teaches to regard every object within culture as a text deserving of our interpretation. The tombstone, which mixes visual and textual parts, is a perfect object for this approach.

I started my studies of the Belarusian cemeteries about twenty years ago but only focused on modern monuments beginning in 2018. In the ensuing years, I have collected data from urban and village cemeteries in all six regions of the Republic of Belarus. Field interviews collected in 2020–2024 are used here as an additional source. Thus, about 120 cemeteries were visited in the warm season, both on working and remembrance days. Throughout this time, I took numerous photos of historical and contemporary monuments and copied epitaph examples. Burial practices and temporary wooden monuments over the new graves are beyond the focus of this

study. For approximately 25 years, I have made annual visits to several cemeteries where my close relatives are interred. These sites, located in Belarus's western and eastern regions of Belarus (specifically the Brest and Vitebsk oblasts), have inadvertently become longitudinal observation fields. The gradual transformations I have witnessed over the years have significantly contributed to the formulation of the central theses presented below.

The modern Belarusian cemeteries discussed in this article arose primarily as a result of the Soviet secular practice of creating *obshchegrazhdanskikh* (general) cemeteries, first using historical Orthodox cemeteries and then establishing them on new plots of land outside the city without any confessional context. The Russian language dominated and continues to do so through the epitaphs in these cemeteries. This is partly a result of the Orthodox tradition in the region and partly a result of the Russification policy of the authorities throughout the twentieth century. Some exceptions are areas where the population is predominantly Catholic, such as many parts of the Hrodno region. Here, epitaphs in Polish are not uncommon, with Russian still more dominant in cities; a small number of epitaphs are in Belarusian. In addition, Jewish and Tatar cemeteries have historically been present in Belarus, but modern burials in them are few in number, and they also bear evident traces of Russification since the midtwentieth century.

Three major factors have influenced the development of Belarusian cemeteries from the mid-1980s to the present day: the growing professionalisation of the funeral industry, the development of a market for a new type of tombstone and the continued growth of cities and the establishment of new cemeteries far beyond city limits. The growing professionalisation in the funeral industry meant a decrease in local community involvement in burial and memorial practices. Traditional funeral and memorial rites experienced a gradual reduction and loss of some elements, such as washing the body, producing coffins and crosses by hand and cooking traditional dishes for the wake (Mokhov 2020). The development of a market for a new type of tombstone in the form of black steles with an engraved image of the deceased's portrait and accompanying elements has led to fundamentally new possibilities for the visualisation of memory and grief. Finally, establishing new large cemeteries far beyond the boundaries of the expanded cities and their microdistricts created a new type of unified memorial space, almost entirely filled with monuments of the new type. These new spaces, as far removed as possible from city centres, are often adjacent to industrial zones and city dumps. These spaces rarely attract the attention of Belarusian ethnologists, anthropologists or sociologists, although many ideas about prestige, status, emotions and the afterlife are presented here explicitly (Warner 1959). It is possible to analyse these sources from dozens of different perspectives, and our observations and conclusions can be just as numerous and varied. Here, I will focus

only on some of the main trends that dominate Belarusian cemeteries today and will likely determine much in their development tomorrow.

THE SMILING DEAD

From the first examples of tombstone photography in Belarus in the 1870s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, one principle has remained virtually constant for this type of image: the deceased never smile in their photographs (Hruntou 2023, 173). This can be explained on several levels. Firstly, the cemetery is traditionally perceived as a place of grief and memory, where cheerful emotions and smiles are considered inappropriate (Lobač 2013, 400–430). Secondly, the basis and standard for the tombstone photographs was often a formal portrait, such as an ID photo. It is not customary to smile in such images where the recipient is the "authority" or an imaginary collective "other" (Bayburin 2017, 314–326). In this sense, a tombstone photograph, especially a man's, belonged to the same order as the deceased's suit, obligatory jacket and tie. Finally, until recently, movement was also impossible in a tombstone photograph; the frozen poses were inherited from examples of nineteenth century cabinet portraits. Stillness defined everything in the photographs, from facial expressions to gestures, and seemed to correspond to the stillness of death and the dead that it depicted.

Although this standard cannot be said to be no longer present, a new trend is gradually coming to the fore: more and more often, in tombstone photographs, we see people who are smiling and whose poses are more relaxed than was previously common. The question is how these changes should be interpreted.

The photographs themselves have changed: in the digital age, their number has increased many times over, while static poses, on the contrary, have become a rarity. People in today's photographs smile, move, behave freely; formal photography, mainly represented by ID photos, is becoming unusual. Often, when choosing a photo "for a monument", people face the problem that a "good" photo of the deceased cannot be found. Digital photo editing comes to the rescue: faces are corrected, a smile often appears, and clothes are frequently changed. In many cases, the portrait of the deceased on a monument today is not so much a reproduction of a photograph as the standardised result of an image editor.

But this explanation in itself is insufficient. Yes, there are indeed many informal photos. Yes, the possibilities of image editing allow you to add a smile. Nonetheless, formal photos, such as passport photos, are always available, and photo editing can easily make a picture "formal". The answer may be sought in the explanations of relatives who choose the photograph for a monument. When interviewed, they often say that they would like to remember their deceased loved one as alive and happy. This

solution is especially common for monuments over the graves of young and middle-aged persons. The recent possibility of creating colour portraits also helps the people depicted on them seem more "alive".

The proposed explanation often given by relatives of the deceased seems highly credible but requires interpretation. The questions are why these changes occurred and why they took this form. It is possible to assume they are connected with the mentioned reduction of funeral rites and the decrease in death's social significance in post-secular society. If, in traditional cultural models, death meant a change in the social status of the deceased through rites of passage, then these rites are increasingly losing meaning in modern times (van Gennep 2019). For many today, death has primarily a biological dimension and is not often perceived as a situation in which the deceased changes his or her social status. In a biological sense, death is now no less certain than ever, but in a social sense, it turns out to be an unfinished event. As a result, this leads to the desire to see and remember deceased relatives alive and smiling. The latest means of visual representation help us in this task.

Contemporary memory studies emphasise the increasing significance of death's digital mediation and the concomitant blurring of bodily boundaries. The remembrance of the deceased, both in terms of personality and corporeality, is subject to forms of editing analogous to those routinely employed in everyday life. In this context, social media platforms and tombstones converge as sites of curated self-representation. Both tend to promote idealised portrayals of the individual, often emphasising cheerful expressions, regardless of whether the subject is living or deceased (Arnold 2017, Sisto 2020, Walter 2017).

If this interpretation is correct, then the smiles on the people depicted on the monuments are evidence of a crisis affecting the funeral rite in its modern form. The inability to die completely, which caused fear in traditional culture, embodied in numerous stories about ghosts and the walking dead, now finds a new, much more widespread form, reflected in the smiles on the portraits of the dead (Levkiyevskaya 2012, Ovseychik 2022).

THE WORKING DEAD

The visual structure of monuments is becoming increasingly complex in many regions of Belarus today. This is especially obvious in the east and southeast of the country (Homel and Mahilou regions), but numerous examples can be found in the cemeteries of all major cities. Often, the portrait of the deceased is accompanied by various attributes, and his or her image can be adjacent to others. Frequently, it is not just the front side of the monument that is used for applying images but also the back side, which, in these cases, contains less formal images of the deceased or

various associated attributes. For example, if, from the front, we can see a serious man in a jacket, then from behind, he will be holding a recently caught fish in his hands and smiling. Examples of using two sides of a monument for formal and informal information about the deceased could already be found in Belarus at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly, in cemeteries in Grodno; however, these were few in number until the end of the twentieth century (Hruntou 2023, 148–150).

Nowadays, up to half of all monuments in these cemeteries may have images on two sides, and this tradition is developing further. In some cases, one can observe a tendency to lose the boundary between the specificity of the front and back of the monument. Back and front images could be informal in the same way. In other cases, the front of the monument is actively used for informal images, so the need for images on the back side disappears; the latter trend is particularly well represented in the Mazyr region. Here, even in traditionally more conservative village cemeteries, we find dozens of new monuments where the deceased can be depicted on the front of the monument in an informal setting and relaxed pose. This tendency in contemporary tombstone design is prevalent in both Russia and Ukraine and has become particularly widespread in the eastern and central regions of Belarus.

Even a cursory analysis of the iconography of this type of monument would require a separate article. Thus, here we will focus only on one important feature – the depiction of the deceased's profession. It is presented in two main ways: clothing (for priests, military personnel, police officers, doctors, etc.) or special attributes. Examples of such attributes include an aeroplane for pilots, a submarine for submariners, a globe for a geography teacher, the periodic table for a chemistry teacher, a car for a driver, a cow for a milkmaid, an accordion or other instrument for a musician and so on. Of course, it is not uncommon to see fishermen with fish and hunters with ducks, but it is professions, not hobbies, that dominate this type of iconography in quantity. References to the occupations of the deceased were not uncommon in nineteenth century epitaphs, but they remained relatively infrequent and predominantly concerned professions such as priests, soldiers, engineers and teachers. Contemporary tombstone portraiture has expanded upon this tradition, rendering occupational representation far more widespread and visually explicit.

To explain this, it is worth turning to Anna Engelking's book *Kołchoźnicy*, where she examines the identity of the Belarusian peasant (Engelking 2012). According to the researcher, one of the specific features of Belarusian peasants is their self-identification with the work. Belarusian peasants worked hard and long, which became an important part of their identity, at least for the generations of people who lived in the twentieth century. Observing modern Belarusian cemeteries, we could conclude that this thesis is still relevant both for village and town dwellers, or, at least, for their tombstones. The desire for visual representation to represent belonging to

a profession and being remembered with that status reminds us that the cemetery is not only a place of private memory for the family, but also a place of social representation before the eyes of the entire local community. Even in the anonymity of large city necropolises, this mode remains preserved and manifests itself in the same type of tombstone, referring to one profession or another.

When speaking about gravestones with the depictions of portraits associated with one profession or another, we must also acknowledge that the large number of portraits that include Belarusian folk costumes belong to this trend. The Belarusian language epitaphs or other sings of Belarusian identity are still seldom seen in our cemeteries. Thus, when we see a person in the Belarusian folk costume on the grave portrait, it rather means that he was a member of a folk song collective, that was this person's work or hobby, rather than declaration of his commitment to national identity.

DISAPPEARING GRAVES

The word "grave" (*mahila*) in the Belarusian language refers to both the burial pit itself and the small mound above it that forms after it is filled in. It is in this latter meaning that we will consider the disappearance of graves. The grave has traditionally been important, representing the deceased in the Belarusian folk culture: "To step on the grave is to trample the dead man's sides", and other proverbs regulated the careful attitude to grave mounds. This attitude was mostly preserved throughout the twentieth century in urban culture, where the grave and the monument always formed an inseparable complex. In the traditional culture of Belarusians, grave care was an important part of memorial practices: prior to remembrance days, graves were swept with a broom, sprinkled with new sand or covered with turf (Ausejchyk 2015). In many regions, on memorial days, the grave served as an improvised table: it was covered with a tablecloth, and people ate and drank on it during the ritual commemoration of the dead (Boryak 2021, 75).

Anthropologist Sergei Mokhov, based on his study of Russian material, concluded that care of burial sites is in itself one of the most important forms of commemoration, which has only increased in importance in the post-secular society (Mokhov 2018, 233). These observations can be easily extrapolated to the Belarusian commemoration practices and cemeteries, where an overgrown or unkempt burial site is a socially recognisable sign of oblivion, as the poor condition of the family. Though these observations are still correct, the situation is now changing in front of our eyes. City cemeteries are the main site for these changes. Increasingly, relatives order a burial design option where the entire surface is covered with stone slabs or concrete tiles, so that in many cases the grave, in its understanding as a burial mound, completely disappears. It can no longer become overgrown with grass or look unkempt.

On the one hand, these changes can be interpreted as a manifestation of hyper-care: the desire to keep the burial site in a constantly well-groomed condition leads to a decision that reduces the need for care to a minimum. But such a decision obviously also leads to a reduction in the minimum practice of caring for burial as a form of commemoration. The reasons for such changes are not difficult to determine. The population of Belarus, which today is almost three-quarters urban, has increasingly turned away from engaging in typical peasant practices – weeding a grave and the area around it. In addition, the development of the funeral services market and the gradual increase in the population's income make more expensive solutions possible in the design of the grave and the space around it.

The popularity of this solution is also affected by distrust that future generations of the family will be keepers of memory. The large number of abandoned graves, many of which are less than half a century old, in Belarusian cemeteries indicates the limited temporality of graves and tombstones, which in the frequent rhetorical formulas of epitaphs promise "eternal memory". Given this, investing in solutions that promise longer-term preservation of the burial site, even with the almost complete impossibility of caring for it, becomes logical and justified for many. Moreover, even if the burial site is filled with concrete and covered with stone slabs, there are still weeds growing around it, which, if desired, need to be weeded regularly.

On the other hand, the changes described can be understood as an admission of the inability to ensure regular care of the burials in the long term. The brevity of what would be called communicative memory in the twentieth century was no secret to any generation (Assman 2012). Traditional memorial practices, with their conversion of the memory of an individual into the memory of ancestors (*dzyady*) generally helped to accept this brevity as natural (Sharaya 2002). This acceptance made it possible to calmly accept that wooden tombstones disappeared over time and were replaced by new burials and new tombstones. This model declined throughout the twentieth century, with wooden monuments replaced by concrete and stone tombstones. Nonetheless, their ability to preserve the deceased's memory without the practice of care turned out to be very conditional.

An important condition that makes these dilemmas possible is that Belarusian cemetery law allows for the use of burial ground free of charge and eternally; this is uncommon for many European countries. Added to this is the increasing prevalence of cremation, primarily in Minsk, where more than half of all dead bodies are cremated. Even in cases where the urn is not placed in a columbarium but buried in the ground, the grave mound above it is redundant and meaningless. Cremation eliminates the body, and with it, its symbolic representatives, such as a separate grave, also lose their significance. According to our observations, relatives gather around the burial urns of their loved ones, including near columbaria, on traditional

memorial days. However, implementing the usual memorial practices here is very difficult. It is easier to do these near burials hidden under a thick layer of stone. Still, in both cases, the disappearance of the grave leads to the impossibility of a key practice of commemoration that cannot be replaced by anything else.

TOWARDS HEAVEN

Modern tombstone iconography depicts not only the deceased's portrait, profession or hobby but also relatives' ideas about the afterlife. These often contradictory ideas, which in an interview may not be easy for a person to reduce to a consistent statement, here acquires unconditionality and certainty. We will look at this using one clear example.

A half-hour drive from Minsk is the town of Smolevichi, one of many sleepy and provincial so-called satellite towns around the capital. Founded in the Middle Ages, its cultural landscape is now dominated by Soviet architecture, making it hard to distinguish from others. The new town cemetery is located in its eastern part, with the modern burial sector bordering the field of a neighbouring farm. It is a typical monotonous area without trees, filled with uniform black stone tombstones with portraits of the deceased. This monotony is interrupted by the monument to a woman who died in 2017, located close to the corner of the cemetery and clearly visible from the road. It is three times taller than the neighbouring tombstones. In the centre is a full-length, life-size image of the deceased in a red dress. She stands on the first step of a stone staircase with golden railings leading up to the sky. Behind her, the stairs dissolve into a shining light in which one can discern the open gates of heaven. Around them, in the clouds on both sides, we see a group of angels playing musical instruments. What we have before us is nothing less than the clearly recognisable iconography of the ascension into heaven.

In many other cases, the reference to paradise, heaven and ascension to it may be less vivid but still easily recognisable; modern colour tombstone portraits often depict in the background an image of the sky and clouds or just the colour blue.

No less often and no less clearly, the belief in the presence of the dead in heaven, in the Christian paradise, is expressed in numerous verses commonly found on modern Belarusian tombstones. Most of these poems use standard patterns and metaphors of naive versification. Their poetic level is not high, but simple and sentimental. And they are important for understanding today's ideas about the afterlife. Let us give an example of a poem from the tombstone of a woman who died in 2021 and was buried in the Orthodox cemetery in Kreva (Smarhon district, Hrodna region), the village and former shtetl dominated by the ruins of the Medieval castle.

Mamochka, kak plokho bez tebya,
Kak tebya poroyu ne khvatayet,
Podnimayu vzglyad na nebesa,
No Gospod' tvoy vzor ne posylayet.
Ya proshu Yego, nu khot' razok,
Day mne mamy lik zhivoy uvidet',
No s nebes lish' kapel'ka dozhdya
Shepchet tikho "mama tebya vidit"…

(Mommy, how bad it is without you,
How I miss you sometimes.
I raise my gaze to the heavens,
But the Lord does not send your gaze.
I ask Him, at least once,
Let me see my mother's face alive,
But from the heavens only a drop of rain
Whispers quietly, "Mama sees you"…)

The main theme of this poem is the melancholy of not being able to see a deceased loved one. But the idea of the mother's posthumous fate is also clearly expressed here: she dwells in Heaven. This is an example of the persistence of the Christian concept of the afterlife in a post-secular society, which is not unusual. This model, however, can only be called "Christian" in part. In all cases known to us, the Christian ideas of the afterlife are limited exclusively to Heaven. Hell, or the recognition of the connection between earthly life and the posthumous destiny, is entirely absent both in modern funerary iconography and in the texts of epitaphs. Based on the experience of studying modern Belarusian cemeteries, we can assert that today's post-secular consciousness has left itself only paradise from the entire topography of the afterlife. The Christian heaven here is indistinguishable from the heaven of traditional Belarusian culture, where the soul flies after the obligatory memorial days (Lobač 2004).

Direct references to Hell are also notably absent when examining epitaphs from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time, paradise – or Heaven – was not portrayed as an assured destination for the deceased, except for young children. Entry into paradise was understood as contingent upon divine judgment, which could be influenced by the intercessory prayers of the living. Consequently, a significant number of epitaphs incorporated appeals for prayer, reflecting both theological beliefs and the enduring relational ties between the living and the dead. In contemporary epitaphs referencing Heaven, the notion of judgment is often omitted, presenting entrance into the celestial realm as a presumed or unconditional outcome for the deceased relative.

This refers specifically to the explicitly stated topography of the afterlife. Many other epitaphs use a different metaphorical system, placing the deceased in "eternity", in "our hearts" and so on. Some epitaphs suggest the idea of the afterlife as dissolution in nature. For example, in the cemetery of the town of Dubrouna (a small regional centre on the border with Russia) sits the tombstone of a man who died in 1990. The adorning text is written in the first person on behalf of the deceased.

Nu chto ty, mama,
Utri slezu
Pechal' pust' budet
Gost'yey redkoy
Ved' ne odin ya tam vnizu,
Pod nulevoy zemnoy otmetkoy
Prosti za bol', prosti za muku
Nas razluchili navsegda,
No ya s toboy na vse goda
V ryabine, ive, laske vetra
Yeshcho raz mamochka prosti.

(Oh, come on, Mom,
Dry your tears
Let sadness be
A rare guest.
After all, I'm not the only one down there,
Under the zero mark of the earth
Forgive me for the pain, forgive me for the torment
We were separated forever.
But I'm with you for all the years
In the rowan, willow, caress of the wind
Once again, Mom, forgive me.)

This set of ideas about the afterlife is also indirectly present in numerous images on tombstones, where the deceased is depicted in the bosom of nature, often by a river or hugging a tree. Although "dissolution" in nature cannot be depicted (at least by means of traditional iconography), the deceased are often shown in a "natural" context. These scenes always represent a recognisable local landscape with its birches, cherry trees, meadows and the like. These images obviously do not refer to the Garden of Eden, the topography of the Christian paradise. On the contrary, they clearly reveal the features of local nature, with which the dead are inseparable.

These examples show how contemporary Belarusians demonstrate the different and sometimes controversial views they carry while commissioning gravestones for their relatives. Though limited in number, these examples encapsulate some of the most recurrent themes observable across numerous Belarusian cemeteries. In this way, they have much in common with their ancestors from the nineteenth century, as they were described by ethnologists of that age. At the same time, the secularisations of the twentieth century have left evident traces on the concepts of the otherworld. It erased the idea of hell as a possible fate for the soul of a close relative, leaving only heaven. In many other cases, the idea of the otherworld is not even mentioned at all.

TOYS FOR DEAD CHILDREN

Even with all the significant changes that have taken place in Belarusian cemeteries in the last three or four decades, one thing seems relatively stable – gifts to the dead. Indeed, in many cemeteries we can still see saucers, vodka glasses, candy, eggs and bread brought on memorial days. Recent decades have added ubiquitous bright plastic flowers, but they have only replaced the live flowers that were previously brought to the graves of loved ones. Candle lamps are still popular among Catholics and are becoming somewhat widespread in Orthodox cemeteries as well.

The desire to bring gifts to the dead remains unwavering; people rarely go to cemeteries empty-handed. This tradition itself influenced the infrastructure of burials and some modern features of monuments. In many regions of Belarus (primarily Polesie and Podneprovye), one can find tables of various size near burials. They are traditionally used for commemorative meals and serve as a sign of the preservation of memorial practices, often criticised by the Orthodox church. The intolerant position of the church has recently been able to push back these traditional practices in a number of regions. Still, in general, we can talk about their relatively high level of preservation.

The need to bring and leave gifts is reflected in modern monuments, where stone vases for artificial flowers and special installations for placing lamps are often used. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to columbaria, an increasingly popular type of burial; this choice of burial makes the traditional offering of gifts virtually impossible.

In addition to all the listed features, which can be called traditional, some have recently become widespread. An example of such a new phenomenon in memorial practices is the tradition of bringing toys to children's graves. Not uncommon in previous decades, when I started my research at the beginning of the 2000s, I encountered fragments of ribbon dolls that people brought to their children. However, this was never more than just a single toy or its fragments. Today, you can find graves where the number of toys can approach twenty or more, including soft toys (teddy

bears, etc.), various types of cars and so on. Parental grief is combined with the tradition of bringing gifts to the dead, and, as a result, the brought toys accumulate on the grave, testifying to the tragedy that has befallen the family.

Already in the nineteenth century, there was a clear tendency to spend significant amounts of money on tombstones for deceased children. Of course, it was not the rule, but wealthy families often ordered expensive monuments from workshops in Warsaw, Kyiv or Riga for their deceased children. This tendency continues today. Large monuments, colour portraits or images of angels in the case of the death of newborns, detailed epitaphs, often in verse – all are common in modern children's burials in Belarus, and part of this trend is the children's toys brought to the cemetery.

The traditional model of bringing gifts to the dead means reciprocity: remembering the dead assumed their disposition to the living and even help. The gift, like all the gifts in a traditional culture, assumes its return in another form. When bringing toys to children's graves, we can speak of a dysfunction in the principle of a gift's reciprocity. As a rule, the epitaphs serve as confirmation of this, speaking of grief and the senselessness of loss.

However, this telling example of bringing toys to children's graves can be seen as part of a larger trend. The system of practices associated with bringing gifts to the dead dominates the belief systems that justify it. This is particularly evident in the post-secular landscape of Belarusian cemeteries, which was formed mainly in the twentieth century. Here, one can see how the graves of consistent atheists, whose graves were either decorated with red stars (common over the burials of local Soviet party leaders and military men) or simply devoid of religious symbols, were also places where relatives came, brought flowers and carried out other caring practices. Although reciprocity in a secular situation is formally impossible, it is realised through the consolidation of the family and the confirmation of social statuses associated with family visits to the cemetery.

All this allows us to say that most likely, even given the ongoing slow secularisation in Belarus, the practice of visiting cemeteries and bringing gifts to the dead will continue to be preserved. The presence or absence of faith in the existence of the soul, the certainty of ideas about the afterlife, turns out to be secondary; even the emergence of new practices, such as bringing toys to children's graves, turns out to be not only possible, but also natural.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern Belarusian tombstones may tell us a lot about humans beliefs in the afterlife, about their ways of coping with grief and about the very culture of memory itself. Many things may be observed here and many interpretations proposed. I hope that

the five themes I have touched upon in this article regarding the development of modern Belarusian cemeteries give a good example of the fruitfulness of this perspective.

The increasingly frequent smiling faces of the dead on tombstone portraits indicate changes in the social status of the deceased and the rapid loss of strict memorial conventions that were common in the twentieth century. Frequent images of the deceased in the context of their working profession testify to the continuing importance of work for the identity of Belarusians – after death, many want to be remembered precisely in the context of work. At the same time, the arrangement of burials is changing so that the need for care for them is optional and minimal. Thus, the practice of care, as one of the most important forms of commemoration, is gradually becoming a thing of the past. Most modern monuments are marked with a cross, identifying them as belonging to a particular Christian denomination. However, a detailed examination of their iconography and accompanying texts shows that this affiliation conceals a mixture of different beliefs. The model of the Christian afterlife has been reduced: Hell is usually excluded from it, and the dead inevitably end up in Heaven. The growing popularity of cremation and burial in columbaria leads to an inevitable reduction of traditional memorial practices. But, at the same time, new forms of commemoration are emerging. One is bringing numerous toys to children's graves, representing the development of post-secular culture in Belarus.

Though the ways of interpretation could be argued, what we see here is a complex system of practices, beliefs and representations undergoing rapid changes before our eyes. The scope of this article permits the examination of only a limited number of cases; however, these examples are among the most representative and recurrent patterns I have encountered during regular fieldwork in Belarusian cemeteries. Many things will be altered within a decade, so we must observe and understand this system as it progresses. Debates on memory culture, secularisation and family development may find much here for further discussion and understanding. Modern Belarusian cemeteries may lie at the outskirts of towns and cities, but they deserve a central position in our attention to the changes Belarusian society is undergoing today.

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"POWER" AS AN IDENTITY CATEGORY IN THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE POLITICAL DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF BELARUS

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This paper analyses ways of speaking about politics in Russian-language political discourse by focusing on key cultural terms that describe political relationships and positionality. Data were collected from articles on Russian-language news sites and Russian-language comments on "Facebook". The analysis shows how "power" is constructed as an identity category through oppositional codes and metonymic substitution in public political discourse. Agonistic relationships are political entities reflected in political discourse and a cornerstone for constructing and maintaining the status quo among participants in public political discussions. This analysis shows how discursive oppositions in the Belarusian context are central to the reproduction of populist rhetoric. In sum, this study advances a cultural mode of thinking about political events.

KEYWORDS: political discourse, cultural discourse analysis, identity, power, Belarus

INTRODUCTION: POWER AS IDENTITY

During the election for the office of Belarus's President in 2020, Lidiya Ermoshina, an ally of the incumbent and chair of Belarus's Central Election Commission, gave an interview to the state-owned newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* on 17 June 2020 (Euroradio 2020). The interview came shortly after the pro-democracy activist Sergei Tsikhanovsky was released from detention and announced his intention to run for president. His supporters were collecting signatures on a public square during the officially permitted period to put his name on the ballot. However,

Tsikhanovsky was arrested and later imprisoned; his spouse, Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya, then ran in the election campaign instead, receiving widespread public support.

One statement by Ermoshina caught widespread attention: "The Tsikhanovsky group was striving to shatter the situation, used the collection of signatures, directing it toward a change of power" (author's translation). Speaking formally and without apparent self-awareness, she said that collecting signatures for an election was a threat because this might result in a "change of power". The irony of this statement was not lost on Belarus's politically active populace. Soon afterwards, a meme went viral across the Russian-language Internet (i.e., Belarus, Ukraine, Russia): "The opposition wanted to seize power via elections" (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Pryanikov (2020). Author's translation: "The opposition wanted to seize power via elections".

Even in Belarus, where leaders often make official statements that do not consider citizens' concerns (Klymenko 2016), Ermoshina's tone-deaf statement was remarkable.

This study explores what it means for state officials to speak like Ermoshina, and why such statements lead to responses as illustrated by this meme. Focusing on the web of relationships discursively constructed between "power", political processes and identity, this study explores the following questions: (1) What forms of relating between themselves and others do Belarusians discursively construct when talking about politics? (2) How does this discursive construction relate to different identities? (3) How can an understanding of social and historical contexts of discursive constructions allow a cultural mode of thinking about politics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Rich points" and a cultural mode of thinking about politics

To understand a culture, we should look at "rich points" – encounters with words or expressions that are puzzling because they are tied to richly layered and interconnected concepts of meaning (Agar 1994, Sandel 2015). Russian-language political vocabulary has many such rich points, where terms such as *vlast'* ("power") or *gosudarstvo* ("state") have layers of meaning that are language – and culture-specific; this includes "major rich points" – instances even cultural participants who are "insiders" find incomprehensible (Agar 2006). Hence, by examining discourses and political speech in Belarus, we uncover here the rich, cultural meanings of key Russian-language political terms and show what can be gained from a cultural mode of thinking about politics (Boromisza-Habashi 2013).

Belarus: Context and Studies

Belarus is a post-Soviet republic that gained independence in 1991 and, since 1994, has been ruled by the authoritarian leader, President Alexander Lukashenko. After winning the popular vote in a freely contested election in Belarus's first presidential election, he won each succeeding election by using the tactics of authoritarian leaders: controlling the press, eliminating the opposition and changing vote tallies (Wilson 2011). Hence, Belarus has earned the moniker of the "last dictatorship in Europe", whereby civic and political engagement are barred and marginalised, creating conditions of civic conformity and political passivity under the state (Bedford 2017; Pham and Kaleja 2021).

This does not mean, however, that the state has total control over society. Opposition movements are found in former Soviet bloc countries that are non-political and cultural (Kubik 1994). In Soviet times, opposition happened in underground and dissident movements; in such activities as *stiob*, satirically mocking authorities and official state-related practices (Boyer and Yurchak 2010); or *kvartirniki,* private meetings attended by poets, artists, writers, musicians and other non-conforming individuals (Yurchak 2005). More recently, Belarus has witnessed the proliferation of public creative practices and related forms of grassroots public life, such as urban festivals, public lectures, workshops, poetry and music jams (Dinerstein and Sandel 2024; Street 2019). Belarusians have introduced a variety of social and cultural routines, alternatives to state-sponsored activities that can transform everyday social and cultural life and confront the status quo (Dinerstein 2021; Dinerstein and Sandel 2023). Yet the problem remains: political actors and other Belarusians, wittingly and unwittingly, repeatedly construct a discursive opposition between the "state" and the "people" through the category of "power" in political discussions and everyday talk.

Many studies of Belarus use a top-down approach, such as studies of nation-building and national identity (e.g., Bekus 2010; Fabrykant 2019; Ioffe 2008; Wilson 2011), politics, identity, democratic processes (e.g., Bedford 2017; Bekus 2014; Ioffe 2008; Wilson 2011) and collective and historical memory (e.g., Goujon 2010; Wilson 2011). Accounts of Belarusian identity and culture are also provided. For example, Cherniyavskaya (2006) describes the archetype of "a traditional Belarusian" as shown via folklore data; Engelking (2013) examines *kolkhozniks*, who define themselves as simple, hardworking men "from here" that are responsible for their own well-being; and Cherniyavskaya (2010) explains historical cultural divisions within Belarusian society.

A "bottom-up" understanding of Belarus can also be found. For instance, Rohava (2017, 2020) examines how Belarusians reflect on the meaning of national identity, the meaning of state celebrations and related forms of state-sponsored public life. Vasilyeva (2019) shows how a Belarusian identity is enacted in everyday interactions, and how speaking either Russian or Belarusian can be a marker of identity. Others have studied the period of "soft Belarusization" (Boulègue et al. 2018), when people were actively involved in independent grassroots activities that facilitated social and cultural spaces where alternative identities and ideologies were enacted, spread and reproduced (Dinerstein and Sandel 2023).

These studies show that current protest movements, while motivated by precipitating activities such as election fraud, violations of the law and repression, are also the outgrowth of cultural differences across society or the "two parallel Belaruses", representing "grassroots" and "state" cultures (Dinerstein 2021). They also point to political processes in Belarus as cultural spaces that require an understanding of how people perceive and discursively construct politics. Hence, this paper suggests a cultural mode of thinking about politics (Boromisza-Habashi 2013) that questions simplistic assumptions about political meaning and discourse.

CULTURAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

Discourses both shape and are shaped by ongoing social processes (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Fairclough 1995) and play significant roles in the continuous reproduction of ideologies – shared systems of beliefs and values which guide everyday practices and give particular meaning to the world (van Dijk 2007). Ideologies often emerge out of conflict and struggle, thus creating "Us" and "Them" dichotomies and may be used to legitimate opposition and resistance to the status quo (van Dijk 2007). Furthermore, discourse is not only reflected in talk or cultural texts but also seen in what is silenced, repressed and not openly stated – discourse assumes

a particular articulation in the society that both facilitates a discourse and is reproduced in it (Foucault 2004, 28).

We draw upon cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) and the ethnography of communication (EOC) to examine the discourses of power and identity. EOC focuses on how culture is constructed and negotiated through various communicative means and meanings (Fitch 2005). To make sense of a culture, one should not simply document behaviours but also understand the meanings attributed to them (Leeds-Hurwitz 2005). CuDA claims that culture is a dynamic, creative and transformative process. Whenever people engage in communication, they produce meta-cultural commentary about identities, relationships, feelings, acting, dwelling and timing (Carbaugh 2007; Carbaugh et al. 2024). These offer insights into cultural practices and meanings. Moreover, cultures are communal conversations – a historically situated and ongoing process whereby participants construct, express and negotiate the terms of their social life (Philipsen 2002).

Therefore, we analyse words as cultural concepts that are packed with local meaning, used routinely and prominently or are potent in their meaning (Carbaugh 2007, 177). For example, the Israeli term *dugri* refers to direct, dense speech among the Sabra Jews (Katriel 2004); the interplay between *puhuminen* (speaking) and *vaikeneminen* (silence) in Finnish discourse reflects an oppositional agonistic relationship between "traditional" and "globalised" culture; and the British idiom "stiff upper lip" reflects shared cultural stereotypes about politeness as opposed to "exhibitionism" (Wilkins 2006, 2017). Other cultural terms refer to various communication rituals and practices, such as Israeli *griping* (a form of plaintive talk) (Katriel 1985), Bulgarian *oplakvane* (complaining) (Sotirova 2018) or German *jammern* (whining) (Winchatz 2017). Thus, the key premise is that all cultural discourses contain terms that are deeply symbolic and studied as "a historically transmitted expressive system of communication practices, of acts, events, and styles, which are composed of specific symbols, symbolic forms, norms, and their meanings" (Carbaugh 2007, 169).

We analyse key cultural terms in political discourse and their associated local meanings in collective activities and for social and political events from the standpoint of cultural participants (Carbaugh 2017). Furthermore, since concepts and practices unfamiliar to an outsider may have unexpected or distinctive meanings, it is necessary to study these from an insider's perspective. Hence, we approach the Belarusian community through its communal conversation, whereby cultural terms are explicated through both current cultural discourse and historical perspectives.

Scholars describe ethnographic research as a cyclical investigative enterprise (Leeds-Hurwitz 2005). EOC focuses on discovering local cultural meanings, symbols and the symbolic forms that are found in ongoing communication within a given speech community (Carbaugh and Hastings 1992, 157) and on training one's

"eyes and ears to local means of communicating, and to local system of meanings associated with those means" (Philipsen 2009, 88). CuDA suggests that to understand a practice, the researcher should first analyse discursive *hubs* (what is being said – a discursive form) and, second, interpret the *radiants* of meaning (what is being claimed about the discursive form) to explicate meta-cultural commentary enacted in and about the practice (Carbaugh 2007).

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The goal of CuDA is to examine cultural practices based on hubs and radiants of meaning in symbolic terms that show identity, relations, feelings, acting, dwelling or timing (Carbaugh 2007; Carbaugh et al. 2024). This includes six hubs and radiants of meaning: being/identity, relationship, feeling, acting, dwelling and timing. Of these, we focus on two: the hub of *being/identity* and the radiants of *acting* and *relating* in order to understand routine communication practices according to indigenous terms and participants' meanings (Carbaugh 2017). We thus analyse "power" as a key cultural term that is potent in meaning and used routinely in public political discussions in Belarus. However, we do not analyse symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) or power dimensions (Foucault 2004), nor provide a critical analysis of power relations that tap into existing power structures behind the language, as this is beyond the aims of this study.

Key cultural terms about identity and forms of relating in political discourse were collected from participant observation, public discussions and media accounts about political topics. Field observations took place between May 2020 (when pre-election activities in Belarus began) and February 2022 (when a referendum was held to change the country's constitution), resulting in a collection of video and photo materials (approximately five hundred items) and in-situ reflection papers (approximately 20,000 words).

From informal conversations with Belarusians, the first author found that, regardless of political affiliation, participants used discursive oppositions that consisted of similar key terms when describing political events. Belarusians contrasted "state" and "people" or "people" and "authorities" while also speaking of *vlast'* ("political power") in personified form when referring to state institutions and officials. Similar discursive oppositions were found in previous research on public creativity, where cultural participants drew divisions between the "two parallel Belaruses", where "creative people" were excluded from the public events organised via *vlast'* and "gosudarstvo" ("the state") (Dinerstein 2021). The same dynamic was observed in public messages displayed by protesters in 2020 (the reference illustration was withheld for safety concern).

The first author followed both the activities that unfolded in Minsk in 2020 and local news about the ongoing political situation in both independent and state

media. Examples of key terms in political discourse were identified. In addition, public discussion was followed on Facebook and Telegram, recording comments by supporters and opponents of the political authorities. This analysis allowed us to identify the salient political terms most active in identity discourse as used in public discussion.

Next, a focused analysis of news and social media accounts was done to extract themes about politics in public commentary by state officials and citizens. This examined the degree to which political arguments used the same and/or a consistent political vocabulary across political topics, themes and actors. The purpose was twofold: (1) to extract key cultural terms from participants' accounts to assemble an analytic interpretive lens based on local codes and meanings, and (2) to discover the codes and meanings that allowed for the interpretation of political activities and events.

Two online media outlets were selected: Sputnik.by and Onliner.by. There were three reasons for selecting these two outlets. First, each used Russian as a primary language in publications and had a similar-sized online audience in Belarus. According to Similarweb, a web service that shows data on online audiences and their demographics based on location, these two media outlets had similar online audiences in terms of numbers and demographics. Likewise, since both outlets used Russian and the study focused on Russian-language political discourse, comparisons could be made based on the same language.

Since a 1995 referendum granting Russian and Belarusian official language status, the Russian language has received institutional support. In contrast, Belarusian has been marginalised (Bekus 2014), hence why we focus on Russian-language political discourse – Russian is the language used by most Belarusians in everyday communication. While we acknowledge that the use of the Belarusian language can be an important marker of one's identity (Fabrykant 2019; Vasilyeva 2019), and in some situations, the choice of Belarusian over Russian may reflect an oppositional political stance (Vasilyeva 2023), we analyse Russian-language political discourse because it is the language that permeates most spheres of Belarusian society; that is, it is used the most widely inside the state bureaucracy as well as for education, work, media and everyday life.

The second reason for choosing these outlets was their difference in coverage: Sputnik.by leaned more towards official-oriented coverage, while Onliner.by tended towards independent-oriented coverage. Since media consumption tracks with political stance – pro or anti-government (Greene 2022) – comparisons across political views could be made. Additionally, the Belarusian media system has been deeply divided, with state-affiliated media financially supported by the state to serve the "common majority" by spreading the official narrative. Independent media is left to survive on its own, allegedly offering coverage for the "advanced minority" that goes beyond the official narrative; it is especially critical when covering political

events and electoral campaigns (Manaev 2014). It was essential to compare whether the use of key political terms would differ between the two media outlets when they report on the same political events.

Third, both outlets operated between May 2020 and February 2022 and had reporters and journalists working in Belarus when other major independent media (e.g., TUT.by) had either been closed by the authorities or operated outside the country (e.g., Belsat). Other major official online media (e.g., BelTA) had a smaller online audience.

Eleven search terms, based upon prominent political persons and events, were selected for data collection: "Sergei Tsikhanovsky", "Roman Protasevich", "Roman Bondarenko", "Victor Babariko", "Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya", "Bruzgi" (a border crossing Between Belarus and Poland associated with refugee crisis), "referendum on the constitution", "Alexander Taraykovsky", "Maria Kolesnikova", "TUT.by closure" and "police raid at BELAPAN". Publicly available Facebook posts on these topics were also collected. All corresponding entries posted between May 2020 and February 2022 on each media outlet's website were analysed. As a result, 1,027 media articles were found on Sputnik.by, 314 on Onliner.by and 159 posts on Facebook. The first author and a research assistant, paid for a three-month data collection assignment using guidelines developed by the first author, then looked at the parts of each media article in the sample. Title, body and direct quotes were employed to identify whether they contained the previously identified key terms: "*vlast'*" (power), "*vlasti'*" (those in power), "*gosudarstvo*" (state), "*strana*" (country), "*narod*" (people), "*liudi*" (people), "*suverenitet*" (sovereignty) and "*zapad*" (west). To find the key terms used by journalists, we analysed titles and the body of each article by excluding quoted passages. For the analysis of the key terms used by actors, such as officials, oppositional figures, activists, "regular" citizens and experts, we studied the quoted passages. This method was used to compare the different ways in which such types of actors (e.g., journalists vs others) used key political terms.

It was also important to collect data to determine how the key terms were used by citizens who were not political experts, journalists, political figures or activists. Thus, the first 30 public posts on Facebook per search term (from 2020 to 2022) were additionally analysed to learn how key terms were used across the same 11 topics from the collected data in Onliner.by and Sputnik.by. Since many Facebook users deleted their posts or changed privacy settings after the 2020 political protests – to avoid potential prosecution – for some, it was not possible to find 30 public posts per topic. Therefore, 159 posts were selected for further analysis.

This study examines how identity emerges and is constructed – a dynamic and fragmented process, an accomplishment performed or enacted by an individual or a group in scenes and settings (Tracy 2002, 17). Identities can be *ratified*, *contested*

or *rejected* in interactions and communication practices (Carbaugh 1996, 146), which are created and maintained through local contexts of interaction; they are discursive constructs that emerge from these interactions (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 585–586). Identities can also appear across categories of nation, ethnicity, race, class and rank, and gender (Kroskrity 2000). Yet these categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact on multiple levels. Thus, people experience what Kroskrity (2000, 112) calls "repertoires of identity". Identities may also be situational: group members establish situationally relevant identities enacted within the interaction (ibid., 113). The choice of situational identities involves both individual autonomous agency and social structure, meaning that one is not entirely free in enacting or playing out a particular identity; however, one is also not fully restrained by the outside environment (ibid., 113).

In sum, identity is *positioned* in discourses (Hall 1990, Carbaugh 1996) that come from interactions and narratives which originate both from within a group and are offered by outsiders (Barth 1969, 14). Hence, identities are shaped by interactions with and, in distinction, from outsiders (ibid.). This leads our attention to the explicit and implicit messages about identity in communication: by looking at identity terms, pronouns, terms of address or membership categorisation devices (Carbaugh 2007, 175). Therefore, this analysis shows the relationship between key cultural terms in Russian-language public political discourse and the ways of speaking about politics that allow for the construction of "power" as an identity category.

Thus, attention was paid to the source of the discourse (what kind of actor used key terms) represented in both news media and Facebook. We identified actors whose quotes were found in media articles: public officials, unofficial political actors, official experts, independent experts, regular citizens, journalists, foreign officials (translated into Russian by media), foreign experts (translated into Russian by media), foreign officials (original quote in Russian) and foreign experts (original quote in Russian). These actor categories were identified from the articles; they were not pre-determined but developed in subsequent data analyses.

For Facebook, we selected only those posts authored by regular users not explicitly affiliated with mass media, political entities or expert communities: the aim was to find examples of political discourse and key terms as used by Belarusians not directly involved in professional politics, journalism or expert practice. For each post, we also looked at first-level comments and second-level replies when a first-level comment contained a key term. This meant that in addition to analysing each of the 159 posts, we did further analysis of how the content of each post was discussed by those who commented on each post. Thus, the analysis of posts also included the analysis of comments and replies to these comments, which increased the data. That is why we had to limit the number of Facebook posts analysed, since some posts generated multiple

discussions. This allowed us to see how key political terms were used by people in public online discussion. Thus, we collected news outlets and Facebook examples from a range of actors discussing the same political topics. This showed whether actors employed the same political vocabulary, and if so, what differences/similarities emerged.

ANALYSIS

Key political terms identified during initial field observations appear in all parts of the media articles and Facebook posts – titles, article body, quotes, Facebook posts, comments to the posts and replies. As Wierzbicka (1997) argues, one can demonstrate that a term is a cultural keyword by showing both the frequency of its use in a semantic domain and its centrality in discourse.

Out of 1,027 articles on Sputnik.by, 62 contained key terms in titles and 792 in the bodies. Additionally, 862 articles out of the total contained quotes. Out of these articles with quotes, 431 articles contained key political terms in quotes. Thirty-six out of 314 Onliner.by articles contained key terms in the titles and 213 in the body. Additionally, 263 articles out of the total contained quotes. Of these 263 articles with quotes, 187 contained key political terms in quotes. Based on these data, both Sputnik.by and Onliner.by are heavily populated with key political terms identified during the preliminary fieldwork stage, especially in the text's body and the quotes in the articles.

Similarly, out of 159 posts on Facebook, 107 contained key terms in the post itself, 81 contained them in the first-level comments and 34 in the second-level comment replies. This suggests that key political terms are also used in discussions of Belarusian political topics among individuals not affiliated with journalist, political or expert communities. The analysis illustrates how these terms are central to political discussion by first showing what meanings they create in political statements, and second, how these terms are used by different actors in public political discourse.

Construction of meaning via key terms in political statements

The problem of "state"

Here we consider an excerpt from Lukashenko's statement on opposition, grassroots and NGOs to see how these key terms play out in discourse.

Excerpt 1.

1 **Deal with them**, especially with the managers: **too many managers we have,=**
2 **=who take an anti-state position**. And what amuses me (this is mostly in=
3 =Minsk): the managers of the medical institutions. Well, **too many of the=**

4 =**"smart" ones have appeared there, who are ready to work in place of a=**
5 =**prime minister, in place of the Head of the Administration, the head of=**
6 =**the parliament – in place of everyone**.=
7 =One more time I repeat: **one cannot forgive it to traitors**, **to those who=**
8 =**were trying to turn over the country and give the country away to=**
9 =**"there",** no forgiveness will be given. **We see them and are identifying=**
10 =**them by dozens, and even by hundreds. Those organisations, that were=**
11 =**financed from abroad and were organising the coup and rebellion, we=**
12 =**have liquidated all of them.** No matter how hard, we knew what=
13 =consequences there will be. And today they howled: "Reinstate back!"=
14 =**They will never be reinstated**.
(First author's translation; contact the authors for the original in Russian.)

In the first two lines (1–2), Lukashenko asks to "deal with them", the "managers" who "take an anti-state position", as there are "too many" such "managers" that "we have". The "managers" here refers to the managers and administrative staff of the state-affiliated institutions, such as "the managers of the medical institutions", whereas "we" refers to the "state" and affiliated entities, such as state-owned "medical institutions", as most of the medical workers in Belarus work in public clinics and hospitals. Based on this discourse, "state"-affiliated individuals, especially the managers, cannot "take an anti-state position", and that is why Lukashenko asks to "deal with them", those who dare to take such positions toward the "state". In lines 3–6, Lukashenko says that there are "too many of the 'smart' ones" who "have appeared there", in the "state"-affiliated institutions, "who are ready to work in place of […] everyone", "in place of a prime minister, in place of the head of the administration, the head of the parliament". Following this logic, anyone willing to "work in place of" a high-ranked state official or aiming for such a high-ranked post is taking "an anti-state position".

This is elaborated further in lines 7–9, where those who aspire for official posts are called "traitors" and that "one cannot forgive it to them", because those who "take an anti-state position" "were trying to turn over the country and give the country away to 'there'" . "There" refers to the "West", the countries of Western Europe (the EU and UK) and North America (especially, the USA) that are frequently accused of financing colour revolutions and wishing to take over Belarus. This means that those who take an oppositional stance towards the "state" and current high-ranked officials are considered "traitors" because by taking this oppositional stance, they are willing to "turn the country" over to the "West". Thus, "no forgiveness will be given" to these individuals. Therefore, in lines 9–10, the "state" and those who do not take an "anti-state" position "see" the "traitors" and "are identifying" them "by dozens, and even by hundreds" – "identifying" those who are "willing to work in place of […] everyone" and "trying to turn over the country and give it away to 'there'".

In lines 10–14, Lukashenko goes further, saying that this refers not simply to "managers" but also to the NGOs and other organisations and entities not affiliated with the "state" "that were financed from abroad and were organising the coup and rebellion". As a result, these organisations and entities "were liquidated" by "we", the "state", because these entities "take an anti-state position" by being "willing to work in place of […] everyone" and because they "were trying to turn over the country and give the country away to 'there'". And that is why those "liquidated" "will never be reinstated", because they oppose, go against and are willing "to work in place of" "we", the "state".

Discursive oppositions

The above excerpt introduces two interconnected discursive concepts: the "state" and the "country". Now consider the following.

Excerpt 2. Vyacheslav Orlovskiy, head of the Anti-Criminal and Corruption Department of the State Interior Affairs Office:
15 Yes, really, it was found by us that **the opposition leaders, who ran**=
16 =**abroad**, have **assigned themselves a task to create the conditions for**=
17 =**non-recognising the referendum** results **by the Western countries**.
18 Various options were discussed by them with the goal of completing this
task.
19 From boycott to creating **provocations at the election sites**=
20 =**with the goal of the election breakdown**. As a result of all their=
21 =discussions and considering the risks for executors, they currently=
22 =have accepted **a single strategy – the election breakdown by massive**=
23 =**stuffing of invalid ballots**. In relation to this, **I warn: all instigators**=
24 =**to performing such anti-state activities and their active accomplices**=
25 =**found in the country, will be isolated by us, held accountable**.

This excerpt shows how the concepts of "state", "country," and the "West" come together in the political discourse of officials. In lines 15–17, the speaker claims that "the opposition leaders" are willing to "create the conditions for non-recognising the referendum results by the Western countries". Moreover, the speaker argues that these "opposition leaders […] ran abroad", meaning that they are not a part of the "country" and, thus, are trying to influence the situation in the "country", Belarus, while physically located in the "Western countries".

After the 2020 presidential elections, the opposition had to relocate to Lithuania and Poland from Belarus because of political persecution. Thus, these lines show how the term "country" is used to disassociate a certain group of people by discursively aligning them with "Western countries". According to this logic, those who

are "abroad" are with the "Western countries", not with Belarus, whereas those still in the "country" are with Belarus.

Moreover, this is not a simple division between "us", who are in the "country", and "them", "who ran abroad" and are with the "Western countries". In lines 18–23, the speaker claims that those "who ran abroad" are trying to create the conditions for an "election breakdown", either via "boycott" or "provocations at the election sites" during the "referendum". As a result, those "who ran abroad" "have accepted a single strategy – the election breakdown by massive stuffing of invalid ballots". This refers to the protest voting strategy suggested by Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya and other opposition leaders: the people of Belarus should express their political will during the "referendum" by checking all possible choices on the ballot with an "X". The ballot had two options, and since only one was possible to choose when casting a vote, marking all the possible answers with an "X" would make the ballot invalid, choosing none of the options proposed by Lukashenko and his administration.

However, according to line 24, such behaviour constitutes "anti-state activities", which is why "all instigators to performing" such behaviour during the election and "their active accomplices found in the country, will be isolated by us", the "state", and will be "held accountable". As a result, there are only two types of behaviour – pro-"state" and anti-"state", where pro-"state" behaviours mean choosing among the choices offered by Lukashenko in the "referendum" and anti-"state" behaviour means marking all choices with "X" to invalidate the ballot and vote against these choices.

This excerpt illustrates the complex relationship between "state" and "country" as key cultural terms: those who are in the "country" are supposed to be pro-"state" and supposed to support the "state". At the same time, those who do not support the "state" and are willing to express their own alternative political position are considered "instigators" and "active accomplices" of those "who ran abroad", working together with the "Western countries" against the "state". The populace is discursively deprived of agency in making their own choices because choices, especially political, made contrary to those offered by the "state" are considered "anti-state activities".

"State", "power" and "country"

This next excerpt shows a relationship between these cultural key terms.

Excerpt 3. Anatoliy Markevich, the minister of culture:
26 Dismissal and rotation of staff is happening today, same is in any other=
27 =sphere, **there is nothing going on here**. **People retire**, **young**=
28 =**specialists come** – this is **an absolutely regular process**. **But if the**=
29 =**people take a destructive position**, my deep conviction is – **they cannot**=

30 =**stay working in the state service ((*gossluzhba*))**. […]
31 =**If you are working at the state service – you must be an adherent of the**=
32 =**state power ((gosudarstvennaya vlast'))**. This is my conviction. It has=
33 =not changed in many decades.

When Anatoliy Markevich, the minister of culture, was asked about those who left positions at state-affiliated institutions managed by the Ministry of Culture, he said that "dismissal and rotation of staff is […] an absolutely regular process" – "there is nothing going on here" (lines 26–28). However, he added in lines 28–30 that "if people take a destructive position", then "they cannot stay working in the state service". Moreover, in lines 31–32, the speaker suggests that should a person work at the "state service" (*gossluzhba*), then this person "must be an adherent of state power" (*gosudarstvennaya vlast'*).

The key cultural terms that are linguistically and semantically related to such phrases as "state service" and "state power" require elaboration. They show cultural codes that are inscribed into political discourse and why the relationships between the terms "state", "power" and "country" appear.

The term "gosudarstvo" (state) has the following related terms:

1. *Gosudarstvo* (**state)**, *gosudar'* (**ruler)**, *sudar'* (**sir/master) (**Vasmer 1996b, 446)
2. *Gospod'* (**master / also the form of address to the Christian god)**, *gospod* (**master)**, *gospodstvo* (**domination)**, *gospodin* (**master/host)**, *gospodar'* (**master/owner)**, *gospodarstvo* (**household/dominion)** (Vasmer 1996b, 446-447)
3. *Gosstruktura* (**a state structure)**, *gospredpriyatie* (**a state enterprise)**, *gossluzhaschiy* (**a state official (literally, state servant))**, *gosapparat* (**a state apparatus)**, *gosplan* (**a state plan)**, *gosnadzor* (**state supervision)** and similar linguistic forms currently used as complex titles in Russian.

Uspenskij (2021, 2023) makes several claims about gosudar' (ruler) and gosudarstvo (state). One is that the first use of the term "gosudar'", in the meaning of ruler, dates to the end of the sixteenth century, whereas the other term, "gospodar", also in the meaning of ruler, was still in use but was later succeeded by the former (Uspenskij 2023, 10–12).

Uspenskij (2023) argues that gosudar' cannot be directly derived from the term "gospodar" and is more likely derived from *sud,* which refers to the process of judging or a court; nevertheless, both gosudar' and gospodar were used to refer to a ruler during that period until the form gosudar' became the main form of addressing the Russian monarch (Uspenskij 2023, 12–14). Gosudar' was based on the form sudar', which Uspenskij argues meant a "monarch" – the one who can judge and decide singlehandedly – hence, gosudar' is the head of the gosudarstvo – the state (Uspenskij 2023, 14-15).

Note that this transformation is rooted in the fifteenth century, when the confrontation between Novgorod and Muscovy took place – for the people of Novgorod, which was a republic, gospodarstvo was something that preceded gospodar (the ruler was a part of the city and the community). Muscovy was a principality, meaning that the ruler, gospodar, preceded the city and the community, gospodarstvo (Uspenskij 2021). Therefore, the idea that a state, or gospodarstvo, is a domain of gospodar comes from an understanding of the ruler as head and owner of the state as developed in the Principality of Moscow, which differed from how the role of the ruler was understood in the Novgorod Republic (Uspenskij 2021). However, since Muscovy prevailed and became the Tsardom of Russia, the terms "gosudar'" and "gosudarstvo" also prevailed – the closest equivalents to these terms would be "dominus" and "domain" – meaning full control by the ruler over the territory and people (Kharkhordin 2001).

Returning to the present, a *glava gosudarstva* (head of state) is simultaneously a ruler, a judge, an owner and a master. A court and judges are a part of the "state" in this semantic relationship. Even the Christian god is semantically related to the "state", as the word gospod' (master) refers to God in Russian Orthodox Christianity. Unsurprisingly, both Russian and Belarusian Orthodox churches are closely related to the "state", are part of the overall "state" structure and aligned with the "state".

Consequently, gosudarstvo refers to a person or a group who can make judgments with the power to judge and make orders, to state and to rule. This differs from the current use of the English word *state,* which differentiates the personal *status* of a ruler from the *state*, as in *state apparatus,* a mere structure without personal connotations (Kharkhordin 2001). Thus, Russian presumes "state" as something inherent to a ruler or a group of rulers, not an abstract structure as in English. The "state" in Russian is *personal*, whereas in English it is *impersonal*. A similar relationship was identified by an analysis of the key terms from 20 years of Vladimir Putin's speeches (The Russia Program 2024). "Gosudarstvo" was one of the top key terms, referring not to "state" as a system of management but to the domain of determining people's lives and interacting with other states.

The term "country" has the following related words:

1. *Strana* (**a country/territory)**, *storona* (**side)**, *prostor* (**space, plain)**. It can also refer to a part, as in *storona sveta* (**a part of the world)** (see Vasmer 1996b, 380–381; 768; 771 for more details).

Here, a country is a territory, space and side. By side, it means that one can be on this side, or on that side, on the right or the wrong side, on the same side or the opposite side. A "country" is associated both with the territory and a specific side of the territory. Furthermore, territory belongs to the "state", and the "people" who live in the "country" must belong to the side of the "state", according to this discourse. Otherwise, these

"people" belong to a different side, meaning that if they are against the "state", they are against their own "country" and are referred to by officials as "traitors", "extremists", "criminals", "terrorists", and so on. Similarly, when officials talk about the "West", Russia, NATO and so on, they conceive of "country" as a space and territory that belongs to a specific side, to the side of the "state". If someone from amongst the "people" disagrees, it means they belong to the opposite side and are enemies, as anyone not on the side of the "state" is against the state in this discourse.

The identity of "power"

By using these terms, speakers enact the category of "power", or "vlast'", which is both an ability (a quality of an entity) and an entity itself: it refers not simply to an ability to make orders and coerce but also to affiliation with a particular group – the "state". "Power" in this discourse is the entity of the "state". It is the materialisation of the "state" in a particular group of "people" – the "people" of the "state" who belong to the "country" in this case, or *vlasti* – the plural form of the word "vlast'", which is used to refer to those in "power" and can be translated into English as "authorities". This is concordant with a recent analysis of Putin's speeches over the last 20 years – it is argued that management functions of the "state" in this discourse are delegated to vlast', which presumes that vlast' is not merely a quality of an entity but also an entity that is responsible for administering the "state" (The Russia Program 2024). Kudaibergenova (2020) reports a similar issue in Kazakhstan, where the meanings of the words "vlast'" and "gosudarstvo" were transformed in the early 1990s during institutional building, making sense of the new independent reality to represent the ruling regime and its goals rather than commonly shared values (pp. 55–56).

In Russian, vlasti and vlast' are derived from the same root. This semantic relationship constructs a connection between the concepts of "power" (*vlast'*) and "authorities" (*vlasti*), making them both related to the same entity – the "state"; both "power" and "authorities" refer to each other and are frequently used interchangeably. While the term "vlasti" refers directly to the particular group of those in power, "vlast'" refers to both the power and the authorities simultaneously.

Several related words explain how "power" is both an ability and entity: *vlast'* (from *volost'*: **a region, territory, state, power**) is related to *vladet'* (from *volodet'*: **to rule, to own, to inherit**); *volok, voloki* (**refers to the territories between rivers where people had to drag a ship** (a *drakkar* or a rook) to continue sailing); and, similarly, *volochit', vlachit'* (**to drag something**) (Vasmer 1996a, 340–345).

"Ship dragging" was done in the times of the Rus (nineth to twelveth centuries), when merchants and soldiers moved ships across the territory of what is now modern-day Belarus to get from Scandinavia to the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), as this territory was a part of the trading route from the Vikings (Varangians) to

the Romans (trading route to Constantinople). Thus, a name for the territorial unit – *volost'* – the place where people drag a ship. Similarly, a person who controls this process and/or territory is a *vlastitel', vlastelin, volodar* or *vladyka*, a ruler, an owner, a master. Vladyka now refers to the priest in a Church and to higher clergy in the religious administration of the Russian and Belarusian Orthodox churches.

These show how the concept of "power" is historically related to a *certain territory* and *specific activities* as well as *the people* involved in these activities. "Power" here refers to the ability to rule the people on this territory and to the group of people with this ability – those affiliated with the "state" in the context of the modern-day Belarusian political discourse. That is why "power" is a form of identity: it is affiliated with a person or a group of people and an inalienable part of personality, selfhood and identity. One can say things like: "*Ya zdes' vlast'*" (I am the power here), or "*Ya predtsavitel' vlasti*" (I am a representative of power), which shows personal affiliation to "power" as one gains the power to be the power based on this discourse. Thus, "power" is a membership category. As De Fina (2011) argues, "Categorization processes are central to understanding how the local identities expressed in interaction are both reflective and constitutive of wide social processes, including representations, beliefs and ideologies and social relations between individuals and groups" (p. 274).

Variations in the use of key terms by different actors

The argument about "power" is further demonstrated by a corpus linguistic analysis of the data (Dinerstein 2024; please see the analytical note to the dataset for more details). An additional parameter was used to categorise key terms as "passive" and "active", which allowed us to see whether personality was ascribed to each key term. For example, "power" might be used in a passive form when *power* is deemed a quality or an attribute of an entity or in an "active" form when personality is ascribed to *power*, meaning that it possesses its own agency and acts on its own behalf, thus representing a particular group of actors instead of the mere quality of those in power. Consider the following:

"Power" as an actor

> Quote: "When they rushed at the guys, how should one have acted? And you look at other **countries** <…> And whether you like the **power** (*vlast*) or not, today it (she) is the **power** (*vlast*)."

"Power" as not an actor

> Comment reply: "[…] And after all, it does not bother anyone that the German leader has been holding on to **power** with blue fingers (("with a death grip")) for 16 years. Because there it is allowed, and here – not allowed…"

The data indicate that unofficial Belarusian political actors tended to use the active form of the term "power" over passive more than Belarusian officials and regular citizens, thus constructing antagonism between them and "power" as an entity. Nevertheless, the tendency to treat "power" as an entity persists in political discourse across a variety of actors in the sample (including journalists and those not affiliated with political or expert activities) – the term was used in the active form in more than 50 per cent of cases on Sputnik.by, Onliner.by and Facebook. Also, note that the journalists who wrote for independent media tended to use the term "power" in active form more frequently than those who wrote for state-affiliated media. Thus, we see how a variety of actors from different sides of the political spectrum reproduce this discourse.

Moreover, when looking at how the term "people" (both *narod* and *liudi*) was used by different actors in the corpus examined, it is clear that Belarusian officials more often use both terms in passive form, while unofficial political actors and citizens tend to use these terms in active form (Dinerstein 2024; see the analytical note pp. 7–9 in the dataset for more details). Thus, the data show that the Belarusian officials in the corpus examined, by using the terms (both *narod* and *liudi*) passively, tend to discursively deprive "people" of agency.

According to Brubaker (2019, 18), such use indicates a populist discourse, where one can appeal to people as plebs or "ordinary people" vs. those on top (or at the bottom), to people as demos vs. those who actually possess power and to people as a bounded community who differ from both outsiders and those with a different status within the polity (e.g., elites or marginal groups). As a result, opposition, ambivalence and ambiguity are key elements of populism, as reflected in discourse (Brubaker 2019). The data in this study show that in the Belarusian case, such populist discourse is employed by both official and unofficial political actors, as well as by regular citizens and other actors examined – opposition becomes a widespread discursive practice where agonistic relationships between different political entities reflected in political discourse become a cornerstone for constructing and maintaining the existing status quo by the participants of public political discussions.

CONCLUSION

Several concluding points can be made. First, Russian-language terms that describe key political concepts differ significantly in meaning from their English-language counterparts based on their linguistic origins. Second, Russian-language terms may contribute to an understanding of political power as something personalised rather than impersonal – political power in this discourse does not exist without an entity who uses this power, and thus, power and entity become discursively inseparable.

Third, it is important to understand the historical contexts of these political terms, as this helps explain the logic of political argumentation used by both officials and citizens.

On the one hand, the categories of "power" and "people" are constructed via public political discussions and therefore allow the reproduction of existing political discourse. On the other hand, these categories are central for describing the political process in Belarus: they index specific forms of relationships within and across society, thus allowing one to distinguish between different kinds of political identities. For one to ascribe agency to power and to use it in active form means to position some people in a category while positioning the rest as outside. Similarly, ascribing agency to people and using it in active form means dissociating some people from power and putting them in an antagonistic relationship with it, as well as depriving people of agency and discursively making them subjects, rather than actors.

Such positioning reflects two ways of speaking about politics that reflect opposition as a discursive practice: (1) politics as a domain of "those in power", those who are deemed "professional politicians" possessing "sacred" and "hermetic" knowledge that regular "people" do not have, and (2) politics as a nationwide enterprise, where each participant is seen as political actor, regardless of whether they belong to the category of "power" or not, because politics concerns everyone. Thus, two oppositional understandings of politics are discursively constructed via public political commentary, discussions and media reports (see Figure 2 below). This suggests several ideas about the political process in Belarus and indicates a lack of consensus as to which is "proper". Moreover, different notions become intertwined when various people discuss political topics, leading to antagonism and oppositional readings of political events, be it elections, the voting process, legislation and so on. Thus, we see such statements as "The opposition wanted to seize power via elections".

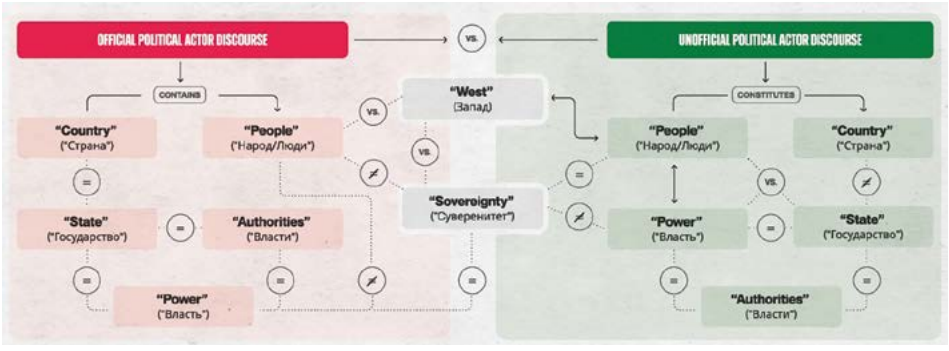

Figure 2. Oppositional codes in Russian-language political discourse in Belarus.

As a result, these relationships reflect populist elements – a specific type of discourse (Stavrakakis 2017) – but in a somewhat double-edged and reversed form. Here, the *elites* at the same time juxtapose themselves with everyone not considered part of the "state" and claim to protect "people" against "instigators", "traitors" and the like, whereas the political opposition juxtaposes themselves and the "people" with the current *elites* (or *establishment*). The latter is consistent with the common understanding of populism (Wodak 2020), while the former somewhat contrasts this by constructing a continual antagonism between the notions of "state" and "people".

This becomes possible due to the metonymic substitution occurring in Russian-language political discourse, with roots in socio-historical connotations. Metonymy (conceptualising one thing by means of its relation to something else; Lakoff and Jonson 1980) is conceptualising "state" in terms of "country", "country" in terms of those in "power", "people" in terms of a non-political entity that simply lives in the country, "sovereignty" in terms of "state" defined in terms of "country" that belongs to those in "power", and so on. The danger of metonymy in political discourse is that it is processed as literal language and can be used for manipulation (Cabrejas-Peñuelas 2020). However, in some cases, such manipulation may also happen, at least to some extent, as a by-product of the existing political vocabulary rather than a deliberate discursive strategy, as the Russian-language political discourse case presented in this paper shows.

As a result, the key problem created through such political discourse is that power becomes an identity instead of a mere quality. This means that the transfer of power aims to deprive an actor of their core identity: the loss of power means the loss of identity. Hence, metonymy may be an important element in constructing false identities and antagonism in political discourse, while to uncover such issues, one should employ the cultural mode of thinking about politics and consider local cultural and historical contexts beyond the political vocabulary at the core of the political discourse being used.

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VARIA

WE STILL HAVE NOT EMBRACED INDIGENOUS WORLDS, OR WHAT IS THE ENDGAME FOR THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN?

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This article examines some of the most important methodological and ethical challenges to be tackled by anthropologists advancing the ontological turn. I extricate such issues as causality, determinism, material relationality, Cartesian duality, Western modes of being, ethnocentric-ontological bias, the appropriation of indigenous ontologies and the decolonisation of indigenous thought. In the process, I explicitly connect with post-relational anthropology, actor network theory, thinking through things, cultural critique and controversy mapping. In conclusion, I propose a coherent set of methods with a strong potential to further improve ethnographic fieldwork, shed light on ongoing dilemmas and make the next step possible for *OTTers* (proponents of the ontological turn). Specifically, I point to performativity, active participation in creating "the common world" and connecting with indigenous scholars and thinkers (via ethical relationality), which encourages a way forward.

KEYWORDS: ontological turn, controversy mapping, ethical relationality, incompleteness, being-as-other, methodology, indigenous thought.

The ontological turn is an anthropological movement centred around a set of ontological and political issues such as "a condition of the possibility of being" (Sahlins 2008, 48), alterity, equivocation ("the process involved in the translation of the 'native's' practical and discursive concepts into the terms of anthropology's conceptual apparatus" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 4–5)), defining the common world, the ethno-political hegemony of the West, determinism and modern, that is, the Cartesian dichotomy of *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance)[1], that creates a set of its own entangled matters of concern.

1 I could not possibly discuss here whether this "orthodox" understanding of Descartes's mind-body dualism should be abolished for a more open interpretation that includes a tacit subversion of a seventeenth-century Catholic doctrine, as some philosophers have suggested.

Also known simply as *the Turn*, it is a well-known current at this point within the discipline, solidified recently by Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), whose book marks a point of arrival for its proponents, also known as *OTTers*.

The authors cannily define it as "a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems" (ibid., 5), while the main question is: "How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there?" (ibid.):

> What makes the ontological turn distinctive is the fact that it fundamentally recasts and radicalizes this problem by exploring the consequences of taking it to its logical conclusion. The epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is* to be seen in the first place. (ibid.)

Effectively, OTTers advance a monumental question: "How do we agree on what reality is?", thus rising above a tacit assumption that reality is the same for everybody while simultaneously subverting an apodictic conviction of the Moderns that it is exclusively up to them to decide upon.

Nonetheless, the Turn is still an ongoing "controversy", to use a concept developed by Venturini and Latour (Venturini 2012; Latour et al. 2012; Venturini et al. 2014). And that means we deal with a subject of a conspicuous social debate with many opposing and conflicting views, creating a "bubbly" network, which indeed represents "the magmatic flow of collective life" (Venturini 2010, 263).

And although I am largely aligned with the Turn myself, I must also point to the only objective thing about it – a vast disagreement (Bessire and Bond 2014, 2015; Bråten 2022; Fischer 2014; Graeber 2015; Halbmayer 2012; Heywood 2012, 2020; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Kelly 2014; Kohn 2007, 2015; Laidlaw and Heywood 2013; Pickering 2017; Rivera Andía 2018; Salmond 2014; Todd 2016; Wilson and Neco 2023).

It should not be taken as an oddity though. On the contrary, that is how every new scientific paradigm forges ahead: through a process of refusal, misunderstanding, critique, discussion and subsequent clarification and refinement.

However, we can at least agree that the biggest problem seems to be a continuous repackaging of indigenous ontologies through scientific modes of veridiction as explicated in *Report of the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre*:

> This system of selectivity and validation of specific knowledge may be an appropriate method of Western knowledge production, but it fails on one crucial basis

> from the perspective of Indigenous Peoples. The validity of this "scientific" knowledge only exists through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms and has not been triangulated to other systems of knowledge or to the natural and metaphysical realms of reality. Subjecting Western knowledge to the validating processes of other views of knowledge and to physical and metaphysical principles of validation should expose the ridiculous assumption that the knowledge is authorised under the imperatives of power, laws of nature or the will of God as a Judeo-Christian social arbiter. (Ermine et al. 2004, 25)

Consequently, decolonisation of indigenous thought should still be seen as largely an unfinished project, that can only be brought to its end by abandoning our unspoken games of self-deception, which should spare contingent – as it always has been – deception of others.

This postulate is contiguous in my opinion with a wish expressed by Barth as "this view of disorder multiplicity, and underdeterminedness" (Barth 1993, 5), and by Strathern as "the unpredictability of initial conditions" (Strathern 2013, 207). And while Strathern also says that "the justifications nowadays appear theoretically flimsy" (ibid., 207; see also Kelly 2014, 265), I see it as an open challenge for transforming this flimsiness into a more coherent and solid foundation for what was more or less systematically defined as "a symmetrical anthropology" (Latour 1993, 100–06), "a recursive anthropology" (Holbraad 2012), "the ontological turn" (Carrithers et al. 2010; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Heywood 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Todd 2016), "an anthropology of life" (Kohn 2007, 6), "the new animism" (Harvey 2017, 485), "post-Cartesian anthropology" (Morrison 2014) or simply as "a return" (Kelly 2014, 264).

THE TURN, WESTERN DETERMINISM AND NON-HUMAN AGENCY

A problem of divergent ontologies that OTTers are addressing can be well understood from many ends. A plausible one, though, seems to be a *δόξα* (commonly accepted view) of a deterministic universe, codified largely by Aristotle and solidified by mediaeval scholastics. It is precisely here that we can identify an obvious hindrance to the mainstream Western worldview, which is a perfect jumping-off point to a broader discussion on the "shrapnel" of ethno-ontological implicitness that OTTers have been trying to disarm. As tacit as it is high-handed, it poses one of the most serious limits for establishing the terms of the common world, or as Blaser calls it very aptly, "a pluriverse of divergent modes of existence" (Blaser 2024, 44), through the ethical relationality that OTTers have also embraced.

Rephrased, as long as a Western ethno-philosophical bubble and cultural narcissism support a negative frame of reference that may also be glossed as a colonial barrage or an ontological echo chamber, indigenous cosmologies will be subjected to symbolic violence, which walks hand in hand with the literal destruction of indigenous communities (yes, it is still going on strong). Historically, it starts with metaphysics, where Aristotle states:

> That a science of the accidental is not even possible will be evident if we try to see what the accidental really is. We say that everything either is always and of necessity (necessity not in the sense of violence, but that which we appeal to in demonstrations), or is for the most part, or is neither for the most part, nor always and of necessity, but merely as it chances; for example, there might be cold in the dog days, but this occurs neither always and of necessity, nor for the most part, though it might happen sometimes. The accidental, then, is what occurs, but not always nor of necessity, nor for the most part. Now we have said what the accidental is, and it is obvious why there is no science of such a thing; for all science is of that which is always or for the most part, but the accidental is in neither of these classes. (Aristotle 1984, 1682)[2]

To make myself clear, that the science of "the accidental" – which, for the sake of staying with Aristotle's hylomorphic model, will be understood here as a phenomenon lacking an efficient cause – must be brought into the fold, as it has become the core of Western science since quantum mechanics joined the corpus of physics via the Copenhagen interpretation. In hindsight, it opened our world to many scientific descriptions of reality that are based on chaos, randomness, degeneracy, unpredictability, probability, entropy, noise, accidental deviation or irrational rotation, such as the uncertainty principle, pilot wave theory, the Wheeler–Feynman absorber theory, the theory of chaos, Bell's theorem, the unified theory of randomness etc.

And what bucks them all up is that they cannot be handled through an efficient cause framework, as the axiomatic basis for its universality was rejected explicitly by Bohr (1958, 21–25). But they can be explained through "immanent cause" (de Ronde 2013), or "limited causality" instead. And that makes Aristotle's claim nothing but a "zombie concept" – an idea that will not die, even if its *modus operandi* has been plausibly refuted.

2 There is obviously much more to Aristotelian metaphysics of being, its accidentality (on *κατὰ συμβεβηκός*), the famous statement that "being is a homonym", reducing it to four categories, or the interplay between potentiality and actuality. However, the author cannot transform this paper into a treatise on Aristotle, because that is not its main purpose. Readers who would like to reflect on it further can simply grab *Metaphysics* or any of the commentaries written throughout the ages.

However, it is also necessary to point out that no concepts in the Western world have ever clung to reality by the power of "metaphysical gravity". They have only permeated our existence via certain vehicles (for example, books, packets of digital data, runestones) and their spreaders (for example, universities, NGOs, ancestors), who distribute them through the multiverse. Collected, these may be called actor-actant networks, chains of transformations and displacements or shifting supersets of in-betweens, keeping in mind that these terms are methodological tools and have no determinate ontological coordinates. Neither are they hegemonically asserted.

However, without these networks, for which the concept of "relational materiality" was coined (Law 1994, 2008; Law and Mol 1995), there would be no ideas to grasp at all. It is a straightforward implication of core actor network theory (ANT) propositions (Latour 1993, 2005, 2013; Law 1994), which are largely contiguous with those of the ontological turners (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Strathern 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2014, 2015). This perspective sees relationality as a matter of relations or the relations of matter that are tracked through what I personally like to call "multi-vectored conjunctions". Deleuze and Guattari epitomised it in a famous statement: "Unformed matter, the phylum, is not dead, brute, homogeneous matter, but a matter-movement bearing singularities or *haecceities*, qualities and even operations" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 512). However, it really goes back to Whitehead (1978) and Bohr (1958, 1961). It is deployed here largely as a methodology of a post-empirical, performative trajectory, serving multiple codes of utterance or heterogeneous modes of discernment.

It implicitly includes the agency of non-human entities, important for two reasons: they are crucial for indigenous ontologies, and their acting power permeates the Western world in exactly the same way, even if their agency is largely excluded from a commonly accepted framework of rationalist-dualist ontology. Moreover, this should be articulated as a positive fact, because it creates a common ground for the emergence of a "cosmopolitical proposal" (Stengers 2005, 994) that specifically "refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable" (ibid., 995).

We can easily step it up a notch by following a recent example of SARS-CoV-2, a material, non-human agent with no brain, which can act due to the carried code ("software"). As such, it is definitely capable of producing a network characterised by its own agency, and other associated agencies, which compose a set of multilayered relations: not that much different from an ancestor spirit or a plague-carrying daemon in the end, if we suspend our modern constitution for a brief moment as if watching a genre movie.

Obviously, it is still true that, within our limited, late modern framework, we cannot discern any ideas about it which are not our own, because Westerners

(academics, scholars, scientists) may simply lack the skills, precision, methodology, standards, imagination, technology or awareness for the task. But it does not in any way imply that the others: human-non-modern, human-indigenous or non-human entities cannot do so. In fact, indigenous thought is full of conversations with "epidemic spirits" (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), and they eventually enter our world via popular *actants* (mediators of action) such as books, documentaries and social media posts, thus instantly provoking discussions concerning radical alterity and other ontologies, partly ideological, partly philosophical and partly emotional.

These ideas can also be portrayed as "bubbles" in the pond emerging between discerned points of convergence to undergo inevitable, ontological and semiotic evisceration through the language of philosophy that anthropology uses in the process of giving form to indigenous thought. As Geertz memorably wrote, "All ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession" (Geertz 1973, 346), which is a double-edged sword in the end, because it has the power to suppress all the other worlds through our own ego exposition.

But the problem is much deeper than the language issue or inaccurate representation. It is about the self-sustained right to blow up and analyse mostly abstract representations of indigenous worlds and make them persuasive or intellectually tempting to be adopted as truth in the process. In fact, OTTers call for a focus on the complementarity of living, acting networks made of humans, non-humans and material things instead (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; cf. Salmond 2014; Graeber 2015). Unfortunately, social anthropology is a discipline strongly rooted in personal experience, from which any contingent data has been and will always be extracted, and that means recreating ethnographic practice is as crucial as reconceptualising it. If this difference is not clear enough, it is because we often treat our own thoughts as the only reality there is to be grasped, when it is only a sauce to the working framework.

Obviously, we are touching on an old and extremely complex issue here. For what it is worth, many – but not all – anthropologists and philosophers realise how difficult it is to overcome the tacit limitations of cognition (Kant knew it already), especially when these are still being pervaded by corollary axioms of Aristotle's memorable ode to rationality and the inherent logic of nature. However, it should be noted that we usually read his thoughts through the lens of mediaeval theologians-cum-mediators such as Thomas Aquinas, who reiterated God as an Unmoved Mover, mediated by the Logos, both the divine and rational language of the universe, effectively assimilating it into the foundation of Christian ethical conduct and theology. He also made "nature" into a radically different concept than it had been originally for Greek philosophers.

Fortunately, it is absolutely possible to deviate from this late augmentation by simply going back to Aristotle or recalling what Heidegger said about the Greek

understanding of *φύσις* (nature), which "means the Being of beings" (Heidegger 2000, 19) that ultimately "remains undiscoverable, almost like Nothing" (ibid.). And that led him eventually to assume that "its meaning is an unreal vapour" (ibid., 38), bringing him to a logical conclusion that "every essential form of spirit is open to ambiguity" (ibid., 10). It is a very useful tool in our fight against scholastic-cum-rationalist determinism, which fundamentally denies any ambiguity in the divine plan or model of the universe that had effectively become a corollary of the same intellectual motion via the Cartesian split.

Wagner, who pioneered the ontological turn, clearly sees it as what it is, an early obstruction for composing the common world:

> It [mediaeval civilisation] did not generate a Copernican plurality of worlds or a Newtonian mystique of "direct action at a distance", because its ground of being was centred on a palpable trope, the "now" of divine presence. It was too centred, as an era, upon the epoch of salvation to spare energy and credibility for a de-centred world of number and spatial plurality. (Wagner 1986, 111)

Fortunately, today we are mostly – or barely, or not at all, depending on the point of view – in a different place, which calls for an indeterminate, negotiable, open reality, with the potential of being much more satisfactory and just for everybody. But the tired, ethnocentric model with its modern submission to a metaphysical tension, which was added after partial purification of the world (Latour 1993), has to be discarded first. Unfortunately, as long as we are submitted to the inherent pain of the Cartesian duality hinging contingently on Western privilege, we cannot work smoothly through multi-vectored conjunctions – which bear some affinity to the "conjuncture of trajectories" (Strathern 2013, 234) – and thus we cannot disentangle and reassemble everything as a wide-reaching network of relationality, so we cannot fully include the indigenous worlds in it.

Moreover, Western scholars are also strapped by the ontological double whammy. On the one hand, they are unconsciously bound by the Immovable Mover, a towering figure providing a fundamental, theological premise for the axiomatic causality of Being and an orderly ascension of contingent chains of displacement. On the other hand, they are being inevitably driven towards The Ultimate Stopper, although "the real is not rational and history never expresses its own teleology" (Latour 2007, 25).

Due to this tension, many researchers struggle internally, but they continue to maniacally categorise and domesticate something that is not theirs in the first place. However, I propose that we go much further than most scholars would probably accept, sensing – and not without a reason – that a full "matrix flip" would render their

services obsolete, at least in their modern skin. And as no academic discipline wants to see itself redundant, its agents will fight politically even for the price of refuting their own noble claims. After all, there is no ontology without politics, and politics always comes down to "other methods" following its own performativity.

THE SELF, THE OTHER AND THE INDIGENOUS WORLDS

It may be safely assumed that anthropologists apprehend and transmit reality conceptually, if we agree that there is simply no way of getting beyond the description in the process of creating a description (something that Wittgenstein taught us, and Strathern reiterated). However, there is a possibility of cutting the bifurcation short prior to the moment of dispatch/collection (keeping in mind that the process of description is already in place before the materially active part of "languaging" commences).

Besides, it is also quite clear that Western scholars tend to navigate towards a point of ultimate satisfaction without factual travel. And that means free jumping through the cracks of reality, which has serious methodological consequences. The void is filled with "aether" as if something is there, although it cannot be accounted for, and thus prehension is reverted to a skeletal key term of choice: culture, society, ethos, collective perception, shared values, tradition, structure, etc., which are largely self-referential, and some purely tautological.

The burning question is then, if this is the space for incompleteness to be embraced (vividly pictured by Strathern 1999), which ontological or existential doubt is contiguous to, how do we adjust our praxis? So far, a lot of OTTers have argued that we should focus on improving the methods, tools, descriptions, manuals, maps and other quasi objects used to track situational trajectories or relations (Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Latour 2005, 2013; Strathern 1999). These are, after all, gauges of discontinuities that make flux towards continuities possible, and hence simply unavoidable for travelling. They constitute a sensible necessity in the process that either comes off or leads to direct experience, first-hand contact with objectivity, which involves advancing through multi-vectored conjunctions (that can also help to get to the personal truth). It resembles spinning the thread and then using it to weave a sail. Eventually, we will be able to move around the ocean and feel the elements deep in our throats. But this, I believe, has to be combined with proper ethical reformatting, which has much more in common with seeing through deep ontological issues and ethnocentric biases than with buzzing away into the world of pure spirit under the weight of *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time).

Undoubtedly, there is a reason why the practice is "much more important now than ever" (Strathern 2013, 207) as it is in practice that we drift through discontinuities, using jump-cuts to manufacture continuity, while we rarely "pay the price"

for this displacement (Latour 2005, 2013). But it is important to add that anthropologists are often not ready to open themselves to a total experience of the other as much as they are always ready to compensate for it with an experience of the other self. And that is also why the many names of indigenous scholars taking part in this discussion escape our comprehension (Todd 2016, 18). We simply cannot see the indigenous peoples as autonomous subjects, because we are too busy holding the mirror, and we cannot drop it until the fact of holding the mirror is clearly seen.

But how can things be different, if a reflection on becoming as exemplified by Whitehead's famous dictum "There's a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming" (Whitehead 1978, 35), also glossed as: "extensiveness becomes, but 'becoming' is not itself extensive" which leads to "the ultimate metaphysical truth" of atomism, where "each atom is a system of all things" (ibid. 35–36) also defined as a "society", is really a reflection on our own becoming?

It is true that Whitehead's "I-as-the-process" (or "I-in-the-nexus") becomes the other through discontinuous concrescence with God, guided by the appetition (a sort of metaphysical impulse). Still, the same "I-as-the-process" will never really become the other (at least not in our epoch, according to Whitehead), so the metaphysical tension remains firmly in place. And this looks even more puzzling when confronted with an indigenous perspective of a Yanomami shaman, who writes: "The white people, they do not dream as far as we do. They sleep a lot, but only dream of themselves" (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 313).

To wit, Whitehead's speculative truth, so profound in its vocality and striking at the heart of the too deeply rooted Aristotelian concept of the immutability of essence, bears little wide relationality in a sense that it does not put the variety of experience gained by different types of consciousness in the equation (Whitehead reduced the latter to a secondary factor, while he simultaneously expanded the concept of "feeling"). Thus, it is hardly applicable to multiple non-modern, indigenous worlds and identities as we can easily go beyond its metaphysical bubble or frame of reference and conceptualise different planets, planes, dimensions, worlds or natures and cultures of our multiverse, which enable and validate everything else but this.

And this conclusion is in fact supported by piles of ethnographic data, which point to another related but distinctive concept epitomised by Sahlins as: "If 'I am another,' then the other is also my own purpose" (2008, 49), or by Strathern as: "Each acts with the other in mind" (1999, 16) that is also one of the most important themes emanating from *The Falling Sky* (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), which is a great example of the ontological turn expressed by the missing part of the equation – an indigenous person. It also overlaps fairly well with Rimbaud's salient, as much philosophical as political, motto: "*Je est un autre*" (I is another), included in a letter written to Georges Izambard on 15th May 1871, where the poet wrote:

> Now I'm degrading myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a Seer: you will not understand this, and I don't know how to explain it to you. It is a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement "of all the senses". The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, one has to be born a poet, and I know I am a poet. This is not at all my fault. It is wrong to say: I think: One ought to say: people think me. – Pardon the pun!
>
> I is someone else. It is too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin and Scorn for the heedless who argue over what they are totally ignorant of! (Rimbaud 2005, 371, underlining added)

Let us make this argument slightly more transparent though so things do not get lost in translation. Rimbaud's strife is quite significant, because it is a perfect exemplification of a spiritual-existential-artistic trajectory taken up by the *poètes maudits* (cursed poets) and successive rebels against modernity, who tried to wage their "struggle against unity-through-domination" (Haraway 1991, 157), and effectively check out of contemporary society, which strove to fix all identities to a pole and thus rectify them. His letter is one of the first unconcealed gusts of defiance against the Western regime of biopolitics, binarity, ethno-political hegemony, rationalism and conformism that will be waged *mutatis mutandis* (with the necessary adjustments) by various countercultural movements (also indigenous ones such as the American Indian Movement [AIM]) just to get appropriated and exploited by the capitalist machine.

This fight has been studied extensively ("With Rimbaud, and then with dadaism and surrealism, literature rejects the very structure of discourse which, throughout the history of culture, has linked artistic and ordinary language" (Marcuse 1969, 66)), but the effects of its absorption have stayed largely elusive from the anthropological perspective, even if the transformation that counterculture has brought cannot be denied, because this is the flow that has forcefully split Western ontology over a modern constitution, and its ontological abyss, commonly denoted as The Great Divide (Descola 2013; Latour 1993) that in the simplest possible terms "separates us both from our past and from other nature-cultures" (Latour 1993, 56).

We might call it "a neo-native flux", an existential string clearly visible in the sleepy mesh of orderly, partly purified Western ontologies, a current of mystery, mysticism, magic, subversive art, diverse initiation and transgression techniques that has aimed for the destruction of the culturally mediated self and the construction of another plus-one in its place. Grown and nourished through Romanticism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, surrealism, dadaism, Lefebvrism, Lettrism and the situationist philosophy of Guy Debord (1995) and Raoul Vaneigem (2012), Beat-Generation soul-seeking, psychedelic mind expansion, the cultural critique of the Frankfurt School ("insight begins where there are no customs, where one finds oneself

in the unknown, unprotected, without the stronger battalion behind one" (Adorno 2019, 124)), and a lot of other fringe movements operating "in a world in which the page is supposed to have been definitively turned" (Stengers 2005, 1002), this rhizome, or loosely combined superset of trajectories, has slowly eroded all the foundations of Western determinism and dualism throughout the years by performing a centripetal movement, which has eventually broken through "to the other side".

And simultaneously, "on the other side", Amerindians have been carrying on their own fight along totally different lines from a position of political, social and ontological submission by "the settlers", trying not only to *preserve* their traditions, but *live* them, as Leonard Peltier, recently commuted to house arrest, aptly put it (1999, 74). And they "didn't even have to invent a cause", because they were born with one (ibid., 94). "The very survival of our people as a People" (ibid.) was at stake, wrote Peltier.

True to the spirit of their ancestors, Amerindians managed to evolve under the conditions of late colonialism and without absorbing "white ideologies" that deeply contradicted their own knowledge, which lured them with a false notion of universality, modernity's packaged deal:

> A new generation of spirit-warriors was being born and raised in the racial morass of America's cities, tough young men and women with brains and conscience and eloquence and guts they were willing to spill on behalf of this implacable upstart notion: the People. Yes, the People. This wasn't Communism. We didn't give a damn about the Communists. This wasn't anti-Americanism. We expected nothing from America except that it live up to its own laws, its own Constitution. This wasn't anti-*any*-thing. This was *pro*-Indianism. Something new, an intertwining of traditional Indian Way and spiritual values with urban political savvy and an absolute dedication to our cause. (ibid., 94)

Apparently, we have never really been modern (and we should never get tired of saying it), but we have been too blinded by our conceptual apparatus to access this simple truth. The Great Divide has never cracked more than three inches, and the "aether" in which modern objectifications were supposed to hang in a sort of *sui generis* (unique) manner, and trickle down to the world, has been nothing more than a work of persuasive fiction, partly literature, partly make-believe, partly public rhetoric and partly sitting in buildings made of bricks, mortar, steel and glass five days a week designing modern rules to live by. And thus at the end of the day we can be quite certain that a radically different ontology of the self has been pulsating for some time within a wider trans-ontological continuum, born in the process of fusion with "foreign" modes of being and modalities of thinking (aptly noticed by Laidlaw and Heywood 2013), that can be defined by falling back again to a Whiteheadian speculative,

but descriptively useful system, as "I-as-the-other-in-the-nexus-of-becoming", where any extension as a by-product of duality is unwarranted, replaced by "in-tension".

And if it resembles indigenous or even Buddhist mystique, it is due to a simple fact that we have been appropriating, translating and reassembling these worlds using our own frame of reference for a few centuries now, effectively crossing over "to the other side". So it is only fair to track this process with scrutiny and give credit where credit is due, but this time by giving indigenous thinkers the roles of referees. Who knows how much we have really robbed and appropriated? I would not dare to say for sure, but at least I would like to point out that it begs for a serious conversation with full inclusion of every voice out there.

MONADISM, REALISM AND THE COMMON GROUND

Western modes of living have a general tendency for displacement, convergence and hybridity via actor-actant chains (Latour 2013). We can keep them strategically separated on paper, but not in our daily lives. Sure, a virologist can enter a lab in a white coat, but the spatial-temporal convention of the lab does not simultaneously walk back to the precondition that one does not bring any assumptions inside. In other words, there is no objectivity where there is a singular, constantly moving subject which has to get through many multi-vectored conjunctions. But the only way toward objectivity is through relationality or the network of quasi-subjects and quasi-objects, which seems like a paradox, only there is no precedent logical error here ("just as there is nothing subjective that is not mediated, there is likewise nothing objective that is not mediated" (Adorno 2019, 124)).

However, let me explicate. As much as idealists would like to conceive the true world without the bodies and materialists would like to conceive the true world without the spirits, both ideological approaches eventually lead to the same kind of reductionism, astutely epitomised by Geertz (1973, 120). The importance of this fact for anthropological theory is rendered quite obvious if we refer to Wagner as well, who did not come to a full conclusion of descriptive realism in his early writings as he continued to use "symbolic dialectics" to account for the associations and displacements in the actor-actant network—which can be at least partly assembled due to "thinking through things (TTT)" (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) – but still concluded correctly that "just as materialism often forgets that we have minds, so structuralism and semiotics, with their absolute definitions of meaning functions, can be fairly accused of forgetting that we have bodies" (Wagner 1986, 129).

The indisputable fact is that anthropologists cannot deal with only one of both (material or ideal, concrete or abstract, general or particular), and neither can

quantum physicists or indigenous peoples, because sooner or later, inevitably, they have to deal with the act of their own existence as well as the existence of others. And due to the fact that humans or those living-as-humans are never in full control of their own lives, and thus in no real control of their own condition, any resolution mechanism or a cure must often come from outside.

This existential truth was expressed quite often by the recently deceased Marshall Sahlins during his seminars, and in his books and articles (Sahlins 1999, 2004, 2008; Graeber and Sahlins 2017). "If people did control their own existence, they would not die", he wrote (Sahlins 2008, 48), thus pointing to the limit of human control, which the West arguably tries to impose on everything to trick death, so to speak.

Undeniably, the West has always been drawn to the phenomenon of death and loss of consciousness, which remains the ultimate enigma to be solved. Is consciousness a function of matter, or is matter a function of consciousness? And is there a possibility of an ontology without consciousness? Or without the matter for that matter? Why don't we check what Amerindians have to say? They seem to know more about it than we do.

> You may deny the existence of ghosts or spirits, and I will not quarrel with you. But drop your gaze to this tall grass, raise it again to the vast skies, free all your senses to explore the moment, and it is hard to walk these hills without feeling a presence, something that cannot be explained by Eurocentric reasoning. (Means 1995, 23)

Obviously, indigenous peoples approach such issues in their own intrinsic way. And if Westerners will not find definite answers to the questions posed above in their own dual universe, they ought to stitch The Great Rupture first unless they want to collapse into a pure void. In the "monadic world" exemplified by controversy mapping – which can also be defined as "transforming negativity" – that gives a hand to the ontological turn, there are no substantial differences between subjects, objects, relations or perspectives, only differences of scale, aggregation, precision, flatness or expansivity – the objective situation is indeed smaller than its parts (Jakobson 1971, 118–19; Latour et al. 2012; Morin 1992, 108–12; somehow related to Strathern 2005, xvi–xxv).

The method – which should be strongly affirmed – is not an abstract construct, but a proven, computable practice relying on 2D "iteration" of digital traces via force vector algorithms, cluster algorithms, streamgraphs etc. (Latour et al. 2012; Venturini 2012; Venturini and Guido 2012; Venturini et al. 2014, 2017) with a potential to be extrapolated into 360° (AR/VR) structures. Within the bounds of this method – limited as it is, as it still produces only a map, a model, so it will never double for territory itself – ethical issues raised by Salmond, who, in the context

of digital rendering pointed to "translation's transformative effects, its capacity to 'deform and subvert' the nature and significance of its object" and "its potential misuses" (Salmond 2013, 11) are solved by the strategic collapse of multiple related points into a monad. In other words, if all relations are spread non-hegemonically, pluripotently through the mapped space, they will merge to show as a single collected entity.

What follows from this method, which validates its own premises through performativity, is that things which come from outside enter inside as much as those which fall outside from inside. In other words, one thing that is not restricted is the movement, the displacement, the transformation, the agency of change – embodied also in the indeterminate expansion of "entropy" ("as related to the asymptotics of probabilities or as a kind of asymptotic behaviour of probabilities", (Petz 2001)) – which dissolves the self-objectifying dialectic of *νόμος* (law, principle, or governing order) and *φύσις* (nature, the natural order) in the magma of self-absorbing relationality and its immediacy. After all, as Wagner claims:

> The invention of culture is motivated by the invention of nature. It is the familiar plight of urban civilization overextended, of the Roman rhetoric in theory and practice, the Aztec phenomenology of trope and metaphor of which Leon-Portilla writes, and, finally, of Spengler's "second religiosity"—Sufism, and the Buddhist "pure light" of the void. (Wagner 1986, 95)

From this point of view, there is no nature in the universe which could stop waves from becoming particles, dots from becoming lines, humans from becoming gods, space from becoming time, being from becoming non-being, and beginning and end from existing at the same time as much as from never coming to be. Relationality is apprehended through relationality itself, because in the end it is the relation that precedes the difference (thus forming it on one end and petrifying it on the other), and not the other way round (Strathern 1999).

This might indeed be apprehended as post-relationality, even if we're still limited by the conditions of provability for any given propositions uttered in a language (natural or formal) or a set of coherent (satisfying, compatible) relations which are always owed to meta-language, that embeds it. This is indeed one of the most important lessons preached by Tarski, who famously wrote:

> If, for instance, we become interested in the notion of truth applying to sentences, not of our original object-language, but of its meta-language, the latter becomes automatically the object-language of our discussion; and in order to define truth for this

> language, we have to go to a new meta-language – so to speak, to a meta-language of a higher level. In this way we arrive at a whole hierarchy of languages. (Tarski 1944, 350)

CONCLUSION

In order to stay firmly on the ground, we have to confront all discussed issues first-hand in the immediacy of "the ethnographic moment" as no formally coherent method, based on the strongest logical foundations, can replace direct experience of the anthropologist confronting himself or herself with the reality-of-the-other, that always grows beyond the linguistic apparatus, either on paper or in real life. In other words, contact with the other always extends beyond discursive methods of philosophy, and definitely beyond the language, which is "[not] the subject-matter of philosophy in general, but only of philosophy of language" (Hacker 2015, 55).

And due to the fact that no linguistic-analytical category can grasp, immobilise or encapsulate it satisfyingly, we must move between the categories from the get-go. In fact, we must approach reality-of-the-other as a world of infinite possibilities guided by our interlocutors, mediators and at the end of the day: the autonomous subjects. This way the ethnographic moment becomes a monad of shared experience, which consequently can be described only in mutually intelligible terms (in agreement with Tall-Bear 2014), which is a straightforward implication of a relationally ethical approach.

And if any transformation-to-understanding is qualitatively disjunctive with categorisation, conceptualisation or any act of prehension – this means it can precede it as well. All we have to do now is to check this assumption by driving "a wedge" between the reality and its description in order to make some space for human and non-human agents. And we start by recognising that the ground is not ours in the first place, it is always other-than-ours.

This also implies that any condition of sufficiency can indeed be established through anchoring quasi objects and quasi subjects (Geertz 1973; Latour 2013; Serres 1982). But the exploration ought to be always advanced by asking an indigenous subject in the field instead of following Heidegger's hermeneutic circle or pitching it back to Hegel.

It should be treated as a positive conclusion, though, because if you cannot transpose your own thoughts onto another world (flip the matrix, so to speak), there is a reason for that called the limit of pure reason, well-described by Kant, and widely understood by the philosophers. Nonetheless, there finally lies the chance of letting the others speak. It is enough to let them finish telling the truth. It will be more baffling and unfathomable as we go along, but it will eventually set anthropology free.

Obviously, these are serious methodological and ethical challenges, which most of the time are intertwined, so they must be disentangled one by one. Facts must be recognised for what they are: facts-in-the-making. Terms must be recognised for what they are too: ambiguous, contingent and inherently entangled. And, last but not least, indigenous peoples must be heard before the anthropologists start voicing their own viewpoint! It is simply not ethical to talk about non-Western ontologies without non-Westerners as a continuous reiteration of arguments pertaining to the validity and aspirations of the ontological turn. Without those central to this discussion, it not only embarrasses the concept of the ontological turn but also renders anthropologists themselves reactionary.

This stance will not make fieldwork any less messy and complicated, unfortunately, but it will give everybody an equal chance to be included and subsequently mapped. Any concepts to be used should emerge from non-hegemonic interaction with the indigenous or non-modern actors (in agreement with TallBear 2014). Human, non-human, they are all valid if they show up in the network. Moreover, the less anthropological presence, the better for our interlocutors, and the better for *our* final work.

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REVIEWS

MIGRACJE BIAŁORUSINÓW DO POLSKI: PERSPEKTYWA DYSKURSU PUBLICZNEGO (*MIGRATION OF BELARUSIANS TO POLAND: PUBLIC DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE*) BY TATIANA KANASZ, WARSAW, WYDAWNICTWO AKADEMII PEDAGOGIKI SPECJALNEJ IM. MARII GRZEGORZEWSKIEJ, 2023

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The 2020 protests in Belarus and the mass emigration that ensued, in addition to the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, have prompted researchers to pay attention to the rapidly expanding demographic of Belarusian migrants in Poland. Before this, the primary focus had been on the larger group of Ukrainian immigrants. Research on the most recent wave of Belarusian immigrants has highlighted a significant gap in media discourse analysis. Sociologist Tatiana Kanasz has attempted to address this in her book, *Migracje Białorusinów do Polski: Perspektywa dyskursu publicznego* (2023). The book aims to provide a sociological analysis of the "contemporary immigration of Belarusians to Poland, examining public discourse and its evolving nature" (Kanasz 2023, 7).

This 132-page Polish-language work primarily analyses how Belarusian immigrants are portrayed in Polish and Belarusian print and online publications. It compares these portrayals with those that dominated the press in previous years, identifies the main trends and explains these trends in the context of sociopolitics. The book comprises an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix containing the analysed titles.

Three theoretical sections precede the two main sections, which analyse publications from Polish and Belarusian mass media. The first section provides an overview of migration concepts and the latest trends in migration research. The author begins by defining migration and reviewing how it is understood in academic and public discourse. She further identifies significant sociological categories related to it.

Kanasz also discusses the critical role played by the state and the political situation in the migration process and how its outcomes are perceived. She elaborates on major trends such as the current increase in female migrants. The author additionally examines factors that may affect how migrants are perceived in the host society.

In her analysis, Tatiana Kanasz focuses on the concept of stereotypes, categorising them and dwelling on *explicit stereotypes*, which are particularly important for sociological research. She notes that, although stereotypes play a role in shaping the image of migrants, this image is also influenced by other factors inherent in social reality (Kanasz 2023, 16). Particular attention is given to analysing the numerous and diverse studies of migration in Poland since 1989. The author notes that analyses of public discourse barely cover Belarusian migrants. Nevertheless, there is a tradition of analysing discourse concerning this topic. This enables the author to build on this trend by demonstrating how the discourse has changed in recent years (Kanasz 2023, 22).

The second section focuses on the methodology and tools used in public discourse research. The author focuses on approaches that reveal the ideological and value-based nature of media texts and the way in which language shapes perceptions of migrants. In outlining the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study, she relies on the constructivist paradigm, which views reality as a social construct, and on the concept of *mediatisation*, which emphasises the media's growing influence on social processes. Kanasz provides a concise yet comprehensive summary of the principles and benefits of purposive and cyclical sampling, offering an in-depth analysis of the subject. The author expounds at length on the fundamental principles and advantages of critical discourse analysis, framework analysis and categorical analysis. The researcher emphasises the importance of analysing the content of Polish and Belarusian media within established, general categories. Kanasz categorises the Polish press as either liberal or conservative based on the values they promote.

In the third chapter, Kanasz provides an overview of the historical and contemporary international context of Belarusian migration to Poland, alongside statistical data on migrant profiles from 1990 to 2023. The Office for Foreigners and the General Statistical Office are the primary sources of these data. Research reports are also essential to this section as they show the problems Belarusian migrants face in Poland (Kanasz 2023, 49). This provides a framework for the author to demonstrate which issues are reflected in the media and which are ignored.

In the following two chapters, the author looks at how migrants are portrayed in the Polish and Belarusian media, using some of the most common stories as examples. This analysis demonstrates an incongruence between discursive representations and actuality. An emphasis on political migration characterises the observed deviation, while statistical data highlight a considerable number of economic migrants.

Furthermore, the cultural dimension of migration is overlooked. A favourable stereotype is formed about labour migrants, who are usually highly qualified and employed either in the high-tech sector or positions below their qualifications.

It is vital to emphasise certain methodological limitations of the study that seemed crucial. Firstly, the issue of the book's title must be addressed. The book's analysis focuses on the press discourse, sociological studies and official statistics, which are only part of the broader public discourse that "includes all messages available to the public" (Czyżewski et al. 2010, 21). At the very least, the book should either have included current social media discussions on the topic or indicated in the title that the study focuses primarily on press discourse. More precisely, the book is devoted mainly to studying media discourse during the 2020–2023 period (with the review of earlier research merely serving as background). Therefore, reflecting this time frame in the title would be reasonable.

It is also noteworthy that the analysis of statistical data is uncritical. The author's figures may not include undocumented migrants or individuals whose passports have expired. Another example that illustrates this is the discrepancy between the number of visas issued under the Poland Business Harbour programme and the number of professionals actually entering Poland. The Polish government recently highlighted this misalignment in an investigation.[1] It was discovered that some individuals had obtained this type of visa multiple times yet showed no intention of departing. Instead, they used the visas as a precautionary measure should Belarus become involved in the military conflict with Ukraine.

In the methodological section, the author compellingly illustrates the benefits of the chosen approaches – critical discourse analysis, framework analysis and categorical analysis. However, there is no justification for selecting these particular options when others are available. Interactive sociolinguistics and discursive psychology could at least be identified as alternatives (Stubbe et al. 2013). For example, including discursive psychology would help to answer the question of how the media reinforces schematic thinking and influences readers' perception of reality and identity by choosing the conventional path of stereotypical portrayals and sensationalised messages. This then translates into real social action. In the context of the deepening migration crisis, it is imperative to recognise the potential of seemingly trivial descriptions or everyday language to serve as a foundation for constructing reality and the subsequent transformation into political action (Weatherall 2007, 31–48).

1 Kacprzak, Izabela. 2023. "80 tysięcy specjalistów IT ze Wschodu dostało polskie wizy i zniknęło" [80,000 IT specialists from the East received Polish visas – and disappeared]. *Rzeczpospolita*, November 3. Accessed 7 August 2025. https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art39357501-80-tysiecy-specjalistow-it-ze-wschodu-dostalo-polskie-wizy-i-zniknelo/

Consequently, in the absence of a comparison with other discourse analysis approaches, the author's choice appears arbitrary and lacks persuasive justification.

The selection of source publications is also a subject that merits discussion. Recognising the importance of the internet environment and the individual commentaries of internet users (Kanasz 2023, 27), the author restricts her analysis to articles published in the online versions of mainstream newspapers. With regard to the Polish media, the ranking of the Institute of Media Monitoring (as of March 2023) is cited as a basis for selection. However, from my perspective, the impartiality of the ranking from this institution should be justified. The Institute of Media Monitoring, inter alia, commercialises analysis and, consequently, offers this service on a commission basis.

Furthermore, the author selects publications from the ranking, but not exclusively the most popular ones. Conversely, she omits radio and television products, except those posted by the Onet.pl media outlet.[2] The choice of publications is justified by the high number of citations and the thematic saturation of the sample.

Conversely, within the Belarusian diaspora media landscape, she selected a mere two outlets: Belsat.eu[3] and Zerkalo.io.[4] The selection also raises concerns due to its limited scope; in my view, at least three media outlets widely followed by migrants should have been also included – Nasha Niva,[5] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Belarus[6] and Euroradio[7] – alongside several others. It must be acknowledged that the popularity of these publications is not known to the author of this review, thus rendering any recommendation of them or other similar titles a highly subjective act. At the same time, my position as a member of the group discussed by the author enables me to assert that my choice is more aligned with reality.

It is also noteworthy that the author's decision to utilise the attribute "migrant" in reference to these media outlets has the potential to be misleading with respect to both the primary subject matter and the intended audience. Kanasz's observations are accurate in noting the restriction of access to the Belsat.eu and Zerkalo.io media outlets within Belarusian territory and the international location of the editorial offices. However, the content of the articles clearly indicates the domestic orientation of these media outlets. Compared to articles on Belarus per se, the number of articles on migration and migrants in these media is noticeably lower.

2 Onet. n.d. Accessed 7 August 2025. https://www.onet.pl/

3 Belsat TV. n.d. Accessed 7 August 2025. https://belsat.eu/

4 Zerkalo. n.d. Accessed 7 August 2025. https://www.zerkalo.io/

5 Nasha Niva. n.d. Accessed 17 July 2025. https://nashaniva.com/

6 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Belarus. n.d. Accessed 17 July 2025. https://www.svaboda.org/

7 Euroradio. n.d. Accessed 17 July 2025. https://euroradio.fm/ru/

In the study of the migrant representation in the media, Kanasz underlines the importance of the ideological and sociopolitical orientation of the publication authors. The researcher categorises the media according to their political orientations, inferred from the values they convey, dividing them into two main groups: conservative and liberal. However, she does not apply this classification to Belarusian media outlets. This division of the Polish media according to the political spectrum appears to be a priori, without providing arguments as to why she chose the terms "liberal" and "conservative" or according to what criteria they are singled out. It is also regrettable that the researcher does not provide a detailed explanation of the origins of her stereotypical generalisation that "Polish journalists' interest in Belarusian topics in 2020 can be linked to the pro-freedom mentality of Poles" (Kanasz 2023, 104). This assertion is notable given her observation of the divergent perspectives of conservative and liberal media on this subject.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that the author clearly defines all key terms, supports her findings with quotations from the analysed publications, provides a detailed account of the methodology and research process, and offers a comparative analysis of the discourses in Polish and Belarusian media. The study could have been strengthened by a more precise title, clearer articulation of the methodology, more critical examination of the statistical data and the categorisation of values. Nevertheless, it appears to be a socially relevant endeavour to demonstrate the potential consequences of how migrants are portrayed by media, especially when the researcher deems these consequences plausible.

These observations do not alter the fact that Tatiana Kanasz's book merits the attention of scholars studying Belarusian issues, as it seeks to capture how migrants are currently portrayed in selected Belarusian and Polish media and the transformations occurring in these representations. The author's argument regarding the advantages of the chosen methodological approach merits particular attention. This argument elucidates the value of the study for anthropologists. Discourse analysis facilitates a novel perspective on the text, clarifying the author's perception, elucidating their motives and unveiling latent meanings. This approach infuses the text with emotional engagement and underscores its significance in the broader context of social reality. For several decades, anthropologists have also embraced the advances of this methodology in their research, demonstrating that media articles, for example, are not merely a record of facts, but a reflection of the cultural context and the intentions of their creators. Comprehending the image of a Belarusian migrant as depicted in the mass media will facilitate anthropological research on the subject of Belarusian migration.

The book's primary value, it is argued, lies in its juxtaposition of the challenges encountered by Belarusians in Poland, particularly with regard to the regularisation of their stay and access to the labour market, and the manner in which these issues

are portrayed in various media. The author's argument for the necessity of creating a more diverse image of Belarusian migrants necessitates the continuation of research in this area, including from an anthropological perspective.

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REVIEW OF *MUSHROOM SPOTS* BY DARYA TRAYDEN, MIANE NIAMA 2025, ISBN: 978-83-971348-9-8

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Mushroom Spots is an autofiction novel set in post-2020 Belarus. The author, Darya Trayden, is a writer, artist and documentary filmmaker. Her first book, a collection of stories titled *Crystal Night*, received the Debut Award in 2019. *Mushroom Spots* is not positioned as an academic text, but several aspects would make it worthy of scholarly attention. It is a rich and engaging reading on life-making in the face of disruption. Those interested in studies of Belarus, particularly in issues of gender, sexuality, post-Soviet transformations and the autoethnographic method, may find this book particularly interesting.

Dealing with heartbreak, the narrator purchases and restores an old, empty house in a Belarusian village. Over thirty-one chapters, the book recounts the narrator's formative childhood memories, placemaking in a village, healing after a breakup and finding a new family. As the story is situated in Belarus after 2020, the narrator observes how more and more people she knew decided to leave the country. Simultaneously, the bars, clubs and restaurants that were connected to memories about her lost lover close down. As some relationships with humans dissipate, the narrator builds new ones with the landscapes, trees, bodies of water and flowers. The "big exodus" happening in the background, coupled with endless house repair works and financial precarity, creates a distinct sense of temporal liminality. The liminality does not end, yet eventually the house gets finished, a garden blooms and a new love is found.

Wacquant offered the term "eclipse of ethnography" to describe the limited access for studying life inside prison (2002). Vazyanau (e-mail exchange, May 2023) proposed that the issue of scholarly access to Belarus since 2020 can be understood as such an eclipse. The issue of safety, both for study participants and ethnographers themselves, most likely contributed to the growing number of studies focusing on the diaspora. This eclipse of ethnography increases the value of Trayden's work, conveying the perspective of a person who stayed. Observing the "big exodus",

the narrator realises that not only loved ones constitute our social fabric, losing people one dislikes can also magnify a sense of disruption. At the same time, she challenges the dramatised narratives populating the public discourse, especially in the diaspora. She resists the construction of Belarus as emptying place, as well as discursive divide between here and there. In the description of trips to EU countries, the humiliation during the border crossing is accompanied by the somewhat pleasant discovery that her friendships have now become transnational. Having friends scattered across Europe extends her possibilities to travel, even with rather limited finances.

As a social anthropologist, I am less interested in defining the exact genre the book belongs to. However, the connection to the feminist autotheory tradition is apparent. "I came to theory because I was hurting," bell hooks writes in her famous essay "Theory as Liberatory Practice" (hooks 1991, 1). Trayden's method seems to take inspiration from hook's idea that critical reflection can be used to imagine "a place where life could be lived differently" (hooks 1991, 2). Although the book is written in clear and accessible language, the bibliography at the end shows how the author traces rich intellectual and literary lineage. Anna Tsing's seminal work on the matsutake mushroom is listed as well, and since the book is titled *Mushroom Spots*, reading it with Tsing's theory in mind seems particularly interesting. Whether Trayden writes about the consequences of the 2020 protests crackdown[1] or the misleading promise of Western culture, spread after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the notion of ruin is consistent with Tsing's restrained optimism. For Tsing, neither disruption nor ruin is necessarily tragic. As something left behind when the promise of progress was not fulfilled, ruin becomes a home for emergent collaborations (Tsing 2015, 18ff). Moreover, there are so many ruins that there is no other way but learning to live within them. With the book built around the process of old house reconstruction, it goes full circle and ceases to be a metaphor. The house becomes both the space and the framework for imagination. Leaving the city is not an act of escapism, but a search for a healing and liberatory place, away from the state's gaze and custody. It is a journey to discover what kind of lives could be lived in a ruin.

The love story is important too. Writing about lesbian love is a deeply political act in today's Belarus, where the violation of LGBTQ+ rights is systemic and new discriminatory laws against the LGBTQ+ community are being introduced (Legal Initiative 2024). What does it mean to become partners when not only is your partnership not legally acknowledged by the state, but even announcing it entails risk? In *Mushroom spots*, not living together, but working together to make a place liveable, becomes a sign that relationships have grown into something beyond "seeing each other".

If autoethnography is about placing oneself in a particular social context, then for social scholars, it could be useful to think about the autoethnographic aspects

1 The protests are not mentioned in the book. This is my interpretation. Disclaimer is needed here, both for the sake of clarity and for safety reasons.

of *Mushroom Spots*. Trayden manages to weave together the sensory and affective with the societal and political. Shrubok writes in her study of older Belarusian women in rural areas and their relationships with plants that caring for gardens, or "cultivating love", helps them negotiate identity and social status (2023). Trayden's book provides a "native" account of the same process when she is evaluated by the older neighbour based on the amount of effort invested in her garden. Further, she writes about dealing with state bureaucracy in a rural setting: "My whole body is begging for the deal to be registered." This embodied desire to own a house, even a very old and uninhabitable one, is contextualised through her childhood memories and the internalised understanding of social stratification developing in post-Soviet Belarus. She shows how children of different social backgrounds would still go to the same school. The poor ones would figure out early on that "normality" is ascribed to a certain gendered and class position. Trayden examines this intuitive understanding of the need to camouflage family poverty and the way certain ideas about femininity could be mobilised to achieve that.

The lack of personal space experienced by a queer teenager is then connected to Belarusian policy on a minimum living space per individual, inevitably linked to social position. But even though a person in a rural area is entitled to more space, privacy continues to cost money. A temporary toilet in the house does not have walls, as building them is expensive. When guests are staying, going to the bathroom requires a collective agreement not to listen to the sounds accompanying the process. The author's attention to the temporality of precarious living, where a lack of money defines the decision-making horizon, is particularly valuable. The money is always lacking, but when the narrator finds some, she spends it on books or other "impractical" things. Later, she reflects on the role this class gap could play in her relationship with her former lover.

Inevitable self-censorship can be seen as an important element of this writing. Some references require certain positionality to be registered, and others may reveal how one's positionality may be shifting. I spent most of my life in Belarus, and one of the personal lessons I got from reading *Mushroom Spots* is that, after five years in exile, I lost an intuitive understanding of what is safe to say or write. At some point, "February" is written in the text. Whether one would understand that it refers to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine fully depends on the positionality of the reader. War appears in the book as an embodied reaction happening behind the silence: the delayed menstruation as a response to the shocking news.

Understanding the need for a certain level of self-censorship makes it harder to articulate criticism. One major aspect that seems lacking in the book is the issue of language. *Mushroom Spots* is written in Russian, while the first book by Trayden was in Belarusian. Belarusian writers who choose to write in Russian might have a privileged position in some respects but they also experience a lot of pressure and exclusion from the Belarusian writers' community. Therefore, I would never criticise the choice of language. Can a writer use two languages and switch between

them without the need to explain herself? Moreover, can it be that writing this particular book in Russian felt safer? Was it a question of money, too? I wish the nuanced reflection around these questions were present; however, it may be too much to ask from a book that already deals with so many issues.

In summary, *Mushroom Spots* presents a vulnerable and reflexive exploration of various topics, from love, home and identity to family violence and poverty. Darya Trayden's writing on finding safe(r) spaces in an authoritarian country is both deeply sensual and theoretically informed; it could teach a lot about what can and cannot be said about queer life in Belarus and beyond.

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In March 1925, a separate structural unit, the Ethnographic Commission, was established at the Institute of Belarusian Culture in Minsk. Therefore, the release of the "Belarusian" issue of the journal *Etnologia Polona* coincides with the de facto centenary of Belarusian academic ethnology. While this was not the original intention, the issue ultimately has a symbolic and commemorative dimension. Our question has been: How diverse are the approaches among ethnologists, anthropologists, ethnographers – whatever they call themselves – who are engaged with Belarus both as researchers as well as citizens? What issues do they address? What methods do they use? What theoretical fields do they refer to?

We have sought to preserve and convey what can be called the Belarusian intellectual context, in which researchers move and of which they are a part. We also wanted to show the spectrum of this intellectual context as it is reflected in the differences between the modes of writing in articles in this volume, their themes, logic, methodology and theoretical approaches. We do not want to speculate about the relations of those differences to factors such as generational differences or the greater or lesser involvement of particular authors in Western academia. We leave all this to attentive readers. Our goal is to show the spectrum in which the academics who base their work on research in Belarus move.

Why does the title of this issue, *The End of Post?*, end with a question mark? The prefix "post-" often denotes a theoretical or historical departure from the previous dominant paradigm. Our title signifies not only a recognition of the need for change in Belarusian ethnology and anthropology but also an actual shift in methodology, subject matter and critical reflection on the role of the past period. Still, we did not seek to conceptualise the development of Belarusian scholarship in a unilinear, directed manner. The question mark signifies the ambiguity or impossibility of determining a specific chronological framework for the post- related changes.

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