

The Belarusian authorities learn to appreciate their country's statehood

On 1 July, on the eve of Belarus's [official Independence day](#), Alexander Lukashenka highlighted the connection between Belarusians and the [Grand Duchy of Lithuania](#). This was the first official statement to allude to the historical roots of a sovereign and independent Belarusian state.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, the Belarusian authorities have started employing rhetoric which differs starkly from the usual official [nationhood discourse](#). The Belarusian authorities continue balancing between the West and Russia while simultaneously trying to mitigate confrontation with the opposition within the country.

The official version of Belarusian nationhood

The process of national revival began to speed up after the [Declaration of State Independence](#) of Belarus on 27 July 1991. This process was initiated by nationalising elites in the second half of the 1980s. During this period, [national symbols](#) (such as the white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* coat of arms) acquired official status. Information about the deep historical roots of Belarusian statehood also started to appear in history books.



However, everything changed when Lukashenka came to power in 1994. One year after his inauguration, he drafted a referendum which would lead to the formal recognition of Soviet-era state symbols and make Russian the second official language (de facto the only working language). Belarus was well on its way to political rapprochement with Russia.

History books were once again rewritten, but this time emphasis was placed on the roots of Belarusian independence in the early days of the USSR; the national ideology was to be based on Soviet values. What's more, the collapse of the USSR was treated by both history books and Lukashenka himself as 'the greatest catastrophe', and its restoration in one form or another was to be seen as a restoration of historical justice.

According to official rhetoric, proponents of a national revival in Belarus were now portrayed as 'nationalists', who aimed to undermine Belarusian statehood and the Union State of Belarus and Russia for the sake of better relations with the West.

According to some political scientists, the rhetoric of Lukashenka in the late 1990s can be linked to his political ambitions to replace the faltering Yeltsin in the Kremlin and become leader of a kind of updated version of the Soviet Union.

Things began to change when Putin came to power in Russia. Lukashenka quickly realised that his former Kremlin ambitions were now impossible: he thus focused on strengthening his power in Belarus. At the same time, Minsk's strong economic and political dependence on Moscow forced the Belarusian authorities to keep on with the pro-Russian rhetoric – including a Russia-friendly interpretation of Belarusian history.

Thus, dates such as 9 May – Soviet Victory Day in the Second World War, and 7 November, which commemorates [the October Revolution of 1917](#) (and still remains a national holiday in Belarus) were seen as the most important historical events.

What changed after the Ukraine conflict?

The status quo only began changing starting with the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin's rhetorical use of the 'Restoration of the Russian World' as an excuse to occupy Crimea and invade a large part of the Donbas frightened the Belarusian authorities. They suddenly realised that Moscow could very easily take political power in Belarus as well. Resistance from Belarusian society – Russified and disoriented in matters of national identity – would be minimal.

Following the invasion of Crimea, the authorities increasingly began to allude to Belarusian sovereignty, the importance of respecting the Belarusian language, and the nation's historical roots. Thus, on the eve of the official Independence Day in 2014, a few months after the occupation of Crimea, Lukashenka, who usually uses only Russian language, gave a speech in Belarusian, referring to Belarusian independence from both Russia and the West.

According to Belta, in February 2017 Lukashenka stated that history books should discuss the true roots of the Belarusian nation, and not just the Soviet version.

Moreover, since the start of the Ukraine conflict, the level of conflict between Lukashenka and the Belarusian opposition has decreased. This is partially due to a change in Lukashenka's rhetoric: he continually emphasises the sovereignty of the Belarusian state.

Russia's aggression in the region has resulted in a kind of compromise between the opposition and the authorities. First of all, the opposition have recognised Lukashenka's international influence and ceased to bring up issues which had once been fundamental. The authorities, in turn, are maintaining a policy of [soft Belarusisation](#) and revising their discourse on Belarusian sovereignty.

In September 2016, the Belarusian president noted that he always encouraged Belarusian officials to speak Belarusian, writes *Nasha Niva*. Later, during a May 2017 meeting with Minsk school children, Lukashenka emphasised that Belarusian schools would benefit from more use of the Belarusian language.



Thus, representatives of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) have started to appear in [‘vyshyvanka’](#) (shirts featuring the national ornament), which had previously been considered taboo in official circles. Besides the Vyshyvanka Festival, BRSM also organised a campaign to present small vyshyvankas to new-born children.

Certain clubs in Minsk have started hosting ‘traditional-style’ parties, at which ‘vyshyvanka’ plays an important role. At some informal meetings, even Lukashenka himself has donned the national pattern.

The apogee of this new policy of turning away from Russia was [the arrest of several journalists working for Regnum](#), a Russian website which promotes the revival of the Russian Empire. They were suspected of inciting ethnic hatred – a charge which carries long prison terms.

Another sign of the authorities' re-alignment was the presence of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uladzimir Makei, at the World Congress of Belarusians on July 15. The event is

organised by the World Association of Belarusians, traditional opponents of the current regime.

Russian propagandists were quick to interpret these signals from Minsk as 'the machinations of the West' and local nationalists, who are plotting to organise a Belarusian 'Maidan'. Incensed by the contacts between Lukashenka and Ukrainian President Poroshenko, Russian nationalists began [labelling Lukashenka](#) a 'traitor' to the 'Russian World'.

Rethinking statehood: imitation or real change in official rhetoric?

Belarusian authorities have apparently changed their position towards Belarusian nationhood. However, phenomena such as the Festival of Vyshyvanka, organised by the pro-governmental Youth Union BRSM, the shift of emphasis in history textbooks, and pro-Belarusian statements by officials could be just another attempt to hang on to power. The aim of these signals seems to be mitigating confrontation with the opposition in the context of [possible annexation by Russia](#).

Belarus continues to be at the mercy of the Russian information space, which has significantly more influence on the world-view of Belarusians than the state propaganda machine.

In order to reduce the influence of Russian propaganda and the concept of the 'Russian World' on Belarusian society, the Belarusian authorities could take several measures. One would be to stop suppressing independent civil society and media. However, the authorities continue to treat their own citizens as the enemy, perceiving activists as a threat to their power. Therefore, [Belarus continues to balance](#) between loyalty to the

Union with Russia and the idea of national independence.