Is There Nationalism in Belarus?

Appointing three new university rectors on 28 February, Alexander Lukashenka once again stated that there exists no problem with the Belarusian language at universities.

Meanwhile, only 0.2 per cent of university students study in the Belarusian language, according to a recent survey. The lack of pride in national values is a well-known feature of Belarusians, and this situation has a historical explanation.

Perestroika and the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s gave rise to mass nationalist organisations in Belarus. Compromising with the Soviet bureaucracy looked likely to prevent the establishment of an authoritarian regime, but nationalists took an uncompromising position and lost the game.

Because of Lukashenka’s pro-Russian politics, they became the chief enemies of the first president and saw a decline throughout the 2000s. Today, nationalist organisations are few and they do not impact upon Belarusian politics.

The majority of Belarusians do not support nationalist ideas. On the one hand that seems quite a positive fact, which prevents conflicts between Belarusians and other nations and minorities. On the other hand, nationalism could have been an important factor in the national consolidation at many key historical moments, and indeed currently, but it has consistently failed to do so.

Revival of National Movement during Perestroika

In the 1980s, Belarus remained perhaps the most denationalised country of the former USSR. However, Perestroika, with its liberalisation and massive amounts of formerly secret
information being opened up, awaked national feelings among some Belarusians.

In 1988, a group of nationally oriented intellectuals established the civil movement known as the Belarusian Popular Front “Adradžennie” (“the BPF”), which had appeared in the Baltic states some time before and inspired Belarusians. At first, the BPF advocated national revival and democratisation, but soon radicalised and demanded the independence of Belarus from USSR.

The Belarusian nomenklatura (communist party and administrative bureaucracy), who occupied all major decision making positions, remained strongly sovietised and reluctant to pursue radical reforms. But they needed to make some compromises with democrats and the BPF party as its major force.

Independence came unexpectedly, although the majority of Belarusians supported the preservation of the Soviet Union at the Referendum of 1989. Until 1994, Belarus remained a parliamentary republic, but in 1994 the government took the fatal decision to introduce a presidential post. The 1994 presidential elections resulted in the election of an unexpected young Member of Parliament, A. Lukashenka, who changed the course of Belarusian history.

**Anti-Nationalist Strategy of the First President**

A strategic alliance with Russia, supported by cheap hydrocarbons and wider markets, made Lukashenka a prime anti-nationalist in Belarus. As the strongest among opposition forces and nationalist by ideology, the BPF party became enemy №1 for the newly elected president.

Lukashenka started his first term in office with notorious anti-national steps: he replaced national symbols with slightly modified Soviet ones, initiated the introduction of the Russian language as second official language, and stopped
and reversed support of the Belarusian language in education, media, government and virtually everywhere. This policy led to the continuation of the denationalisation policy started by communists.

During his speeches, Lukashenka liked to remind Belarusians about the 1990s, the time when “wild nationalists” raged. His favourite tale goes, “back in the 1990s Russians were sitting on their suitcases in Belarus” – meaning that nationalists were about to evict them from the country. In reality this is a complete myth, created to increase his importance in the eyes of the Russians.

Propaganda likes to show all opposition as nationalist, although most parties, particularly oppositional social-democrats and communists, are far from being so. Nationalism seems a better target for the authorities, as it is reminiscent of fascism and World War II, which provokes a kind of trauma in mass consciousness.

This rhetoric was strongest in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, when nationalist organisations and ideas remained more widespread and stronger. With consolidation of the regime and the decline of the organised opposition, this anti-nationalist pressure somewhat calmed down.

Today, the issue of nationalism has lost its former significance in Lukashenka’s speeches. Referring to the opposition, he speaks about western dirty money, external enemies, anti-state plots and so on, but usually does not touch on national matters any more.

Among the ruling elite, there remain no people with clear sympathies towards the Belarusian language, as the regime carefully purged the system. The former Minister of Culture Paval Latuška presented the only exception. He usually spoke Belarusian almost everywhere, visited many cultural events and was familiar with many figures of Belarusian art and culture.
But he seemed an odd ball among denationalised Belarusian elite and soon left the country to work at the Belarusian embassy in Paris.

Mistakes of Nationalists

Some experts believe that Lukashenka is not the only guilty person. Nationalists themselves also contributed to the emergence of authoritarianism through their uncompromising position. The politics of Zianon Paźniak, a once prominent politician who has been in exile since the 1990s, serves as the best example.

Many consider Paźniak to be an authoritarian, nationalist fanatic and russophobic person. His radicalism served as one of the main reasons for the defeat of opposition in politics in the 1990s, when people waited for social and economic improvement, but the opposition led by the BPF party highlighted national values as the foundation of further development. Paźniak never compromised with the nomenklatura, although such an alliance could have put Belarus on another path.

In 1999, the BPF split into two separate parties because of different views of Paźniak and other leaders of the party on further strategy. Since then, nationalist opposition, as virtually all other parties, has been in decline and has hardly been able to impact upon domestic politics.

Nationalists Today

Today two direct BPF descendants operate in Belarus: the Belarusian Popular Front party and the Conservative Christian Party BPF. Although both of them have hardly any popular support, the BPF party remains more dynamic – over the decade it has seen several leadership changes and often allies with other oppositional forces, even communists on some political projects.
The Conservative Christian Party received the nickname “sect”, because its unchallenged leader, Zianon Paźniak, has been directing the party from abroad since 1999. The party has a rather dogmatic ideology and does not ally with anybody at all.

The Belarusian Christian Democrats and the Right Alliance present two other major right and conservative organisations in Belarus. Both of them remain unregistered officially and therefore can not legally participate in politics.

All current nationalist organisations in Belarus employ peaceful methods of politics. Power confrontation became impossible in the mid-1990s, as the regime has consolidated significantly and nobody inside the country could resist it.

Importantly, Belarusians never supported Nazi ideas and no significant radical right organisations has appeared here. A few of them emerged back in the 1990s and tried to use violence against the regime, mostly in mass actions, but no major conflict that involved death has ever occurred in Belarus on that ground. Such ideas seem to be unpopular within the Belarusian mentality and way of life.

Even moderate nationalism remains uncommon for the majority of Belarusians today. Some manifestations of everyday nationalism occur in special cases, for instance when Russians come to Belarus and behave particularly uglyly. But usually, people express no hate towards the former “occupants”.

On the one hand that is quite positive, and prevents conflicts between nations—something which has never been a serious problem in Belarus. On the other hand, a degree of healthy positive nationalism could be an important factor in national consolidation and building of a civil society in Belarus.

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