Space and Identity in Modern Belarus: Assessing the “Minsk Phenomenon”

“Minsk Phenomenon” was the title of a 2013 Russian-language translation of University of Giessen historian Thomas Boehn’s book, which addressed the dominance of the city of Minsk in the development of contemporary Belarus.

In many ways the Belarusian capital is a symbol of modern identity in a country that is often labelled “Soviet,” but is perhaps more accurately described as “postwar Soviet” because it bears little resemblance to Minsk of the interwar years.

Arguably, the physical appearance of Minsk and its culture not only have maintained some Soviet traditions, but also they manifest and symbolise the post-Soviet identity of the state, which has been structured with minimal changes at a time when the capital has asserted its massive influence over the rest of Belarus. This development has been heightened under Aliaksandr Lukashenka who associates himself with past traditions that continue to glorify Soviet achievements.

Building a Socialist Utopia

The prominence of Minsk for Belarus is unique to post-Soviet states, particularly vis-à-vis its neighbours, where there are cities that often compete with the capital: St. Petersburg against Moscow, for example; or Lviv and Donetsk against Kyiv. Minsk’s domination is also consolidated by a stark fact: while the population of Belarus is declining, that of the city of Minsk is increasing. Soon it will comprise a quarter of the population.
Boehn focuses on the obliteration during the Second World War of both the buildings and the population of Minsk. Existing traditions, much of which centred on the former Jewish population, were simply liquidated.

Thus for the Soviet authorities there was an opportunity to construct a model Soviet city, with typical Stalinist era spacious streets, vast central squares, and formidable looking high storey structures combining neo-classicalism with gigantism.

Scholars Larissa Titarenko and Anna Shirokanova note that in 1991, when Belarus became independent, it was necessary to “build a nation out of the city’s socialist space.” As such the country emerged as a post-Soviet republic on the Soviet model, but with no space for the indigenous nation. This was a consequence of related factors.

First, there was the city’s appearance in its postwar version. Old buildings were discarded rather than being resurrected. The area of Castle Hill was removed, as well as the site of the historical river Niamiha, which is now underground. The Jewish quarter of the same name has disappeared and been replaced by the now familiar Sports Palace.

Monuments appeared all over the city, mostly dedicated to the war or else to Soviet-era figures, such as the former nominal head of the Soviet government Mikhail Kalinin (who was actually from Tver, Russia). And of course the dour Lenin
appeared in Independence Square, while its most impressive building is the ornate KGB headquarters on Independence Avenue and the most notable the modern National Library in the eastern reaches of the city, which looks like a giant space capsule but still contains a certain socialist realist ambience.

**Urbanisation means Sovietization**

Second, together with rebuilding came urbanisation, and today Belarus is the most urbanised of the former Soviet states, with over 75% of its 9.3 million people living in cities and towns, 1.9 million of them in Minsk. Migration from the villages and the transfer of the rural population to the city has helped attain this status.

Yet rather than bringing Belarusian traditions, culture, and language to the capital, the opposite occurred. The rural migrants became Sovietized and lived in an almost exclusively Russian-speaking environment. The policy ensured that Stalin’s attacks on Belarusian culture and the national elite during the purges continued in the later Soviet era.

Boehn notes, however, that the Soviet authorities were unable to control the flow of migrants into Minsk so that in the 1950s and 1960s it became fluid—he uses the term “quicksand” society, a term coined by the noted scholar Moshe Lewin. In a discussion on the topic, Siarhei Khareusky, comments that the inflow was limited for some time because until 1960, Belarusian peasants were not permitted to hold passports, so
were confined to their collective farms. Thus modern urbanisation started in the 1960s.

**Modern Belarus Builds on the Old**

The current post-1994 regime followed another Soviet tradition, namely maintaining state control over factories in what was termed the “Belarusian economic model,” which hoped to build on the success of republican industry in the later Soviet era without privatisation or shock therapy.

In fact most of the successful Belarusian companies in the modern era derive from the Soviet period: the Naftan oil refinery in Navapolatsk, which started in 1958; the Mazyr oil refinery (1975); Belaruskali (Belarus Potash), which is based on the Salihorsk potassium enterprise founded in 1963, and reorganised together with two other factories in 1970; and the Belshina tire plant, built between 1963 and 1972.

The combination of living space with industry, and the presence in Minsk of first the leadership of the republican Communist Party organisation and today Lukashenka’s presidential administration has transferred the postwar development neatly to the present. Its progress is linked tightly to a cordial relationship with Russia and with the prosperity of the larger neighbor. Today it has begun to unravel largely because of problems related to the Russian economy and Belarus’ failure to modify its industrial and economic paths.

**Minsk Phenomenon: Stability without Stagnation**
The “Minsk phenomenon” brought stability and allowed for a form of nation building around the rebuilt capital, which became noted for its spotless central streets as it expanded into neighbouring suburbs and settlements.

It is a magnet for Belarusian youth, which, escaping the ghost villages, has tried to create its separate creative space within a city that still exudes authoritarianism and seems to stifle individual space because of its deep and innate connections to the Communist past. None of this is to suggest any form of stagnancy. Minsk is vibrant and thriving, but largely in spite of its late Stalinist façade rather than because of it.

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