

The Idea of Belarus at the Crossroads of Philosophy and History



In the world dominated by the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric and memories of bloody nationalist wars, nationalism is considered dangerous. However, the sentiment has become a highly positive phenomenon, and even, to an extent, a requirement at the international summer school “Belarus in the European Context: Current Discussions on Nation-Building,” organized by the Institute for Historical Research on Belarus and Philosophy Department of the European Humanities University ([EHU](#)) last week. Opening the school on August 2, Zahar Sybeka of Belarusian State Economic University said, tongue-in check, that all school participants were “nationalists.” The following six days proved him right as they showed their passion for the Belarusian culture and history and their concern about the country’s future.

Fittingly, the school was held in “[Kernavės](#) Bajorynė”, next to the highly symbolic UNESCO World Heritage Site that has become a treasure trove for archeologists. The event brought together intellectuals from Belarus, Poland, Latvia, Russia, and Lithuania to debate the development of Belarusian identity and the Belarusian national idea. The researchers also discussed the role of social groups in cities and villages, the role of history and memory in Belarus’ national identity, as well as the issues of nationalism, Europeization, and democratization.

Although the school guests were divided into experts/tutors and participants, their roles have merged in heated discussions. Everybody had an opportunity to present and defend his/her work and comment on the others' research.

While historians and philosophers were the majority, the gathering also included political scientists, a journalist, and a jurist. The schools represented at summer school included Belarusian State University (BSU), Harvard University, Metropolitan University Prague, Polish Academy of Sciences, European Humanities University, the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, University of Bremen, Samara State University, Hrodna State University, Polotsk State University, and University of Latvia.

Many interesting views were expressed during the school sessions. Olga Shparaga, EHU professor of philosophy, argued that for Belarusians "the question about the idea of Europe" is, first and foremost, a question about themselves. In contrast, University of Białystok professor Aleh Latyshonak said Belarusians lack "Europeanness." While Latyshonak said he views Belarusians as a Eurasian civilization, he believes Belarus could pass a Byzantine civilization in a best-case scenario.

In his turn, Belarusian philosopher and writer Ihar Babkou presented identity as a "battlefield" of power and knowledge. Interestingly, Valentin Akudovich, who teaches at the Belarusian Collegium, argued that Belarusian ethno nationalism has no future and will be very soon superceded by civic nationalism. In her presentation, Elena Temper of the University of Leipzig discussed the meaning of memory for the national self-identification and argued that the two most vivid examples of collective memory for Belarusians are the Great Patriotic War and Kurapaty.

Other prominent participants included editor-in-chief of Belarusian magazine ARCHE Valer Bulgakau; Poland-based

Belarusian historian Yauhen Miranovich; EHU lecturer Piotr Rudkouski; Hrodna State University professor Siarhei Tokts; Alvydas Nikzentaitis of Vilnius Pedagogical University; and EHU professor Ales Smalianchuk.

At the final banquet, the school guests were united by signing Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian songs. The school materials will be published by the EHU in the fall, and the organizers hope to make the summer school an annual tradition.

Listening to each other has allowed the researchers to share their views and learn from each other. As philosopher Alyaksei Dzermant [summed up](#), the event has left the participants with an impression “that a lot more unites rather than divides” them.

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Despite the controversial September 2008 parliamentary elections in Belarus, which were widely denounced by western observers as undemocratic, the European Union has followed through on pre-election pledges to loosen travel restrictions on Belarusian government officials, including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Over the past year, Belarus has taken steps to release political prisoners and says it wants improved relations with the West. Is Belarus, which continues to actively repress domestic criticism and has reportedly offered to host Russian missiles on its territory, sincere in its stated wish to improve relations with Europe and America?

Olga Kazulina is the daughter of political prisoner and former presidential candidate

Alyaksandr Kazulin, who was arrested in March 2006 and sentenced to 5 1/2 years of imprisonment for his political actions against the Lukashenko regime. She is a member of the

Social Democratic Party and the commission "Freedom for Kazulin and All Political Prisoners." Ms. Kazulina was the deputy director of the firm Alaktiv from 2005 until 2007, when she was fired after attending an opposition conference in Lithuania.

Alyaksandr Klaskouski is Director of Analytical Projects for the news agency BelaPAN and Editor-in-Chief of BelaPAN's Elections website. He also runs a popular political blog for the e-weekly *Nasha Niva* and writes a column for *Naviny.by*. Mr. Klaskouski is a regular contributor to RFE/RL's Belarus Service and BelSat, a Warsaw-based satellite television channel. Both speakers are in the U.S. at the invitation of the International Republican Institute to participate in events marking International Human Rights Day.

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