

# 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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## **CBS International Summer School for Belarusian Studies in Poland**

The Center for Belarusian Studies at Southwestern College (Winfield, KS) invites undergraduate and graduate students to participate in its first International Summer School for Belarusian Studies from **July 6 to August 7, 2009**. The program, to be co-sponsored by the Poland-based Belarusian Historical Society, will be held at the **Belarusian Lyceum in the town of Hajnówka in the Podlasie region of northeastern Poland**, an area of great natural beauty and home to Poland’s ethnic Belarusian minority – an ideal setting for the study of Belarusian language, history and culture, as well as for the

study of a broad range of issues relating to cultural diversity and minorities policies in the expanded EU.

Coursework will include intensive Belarusian language instruction (beginning and intermediate levels and individual advanced-level tutorials) and lectures in English and Belarusian on Belarusian history, literature, contemporary politics and society. The program will also include a regional studies component, with lectures and events focusing on the history, culture and current status of the Belarusian minority in Poland, as well as of the Podlasie region's other ethnic groups, including Poles, Jews, Tatars, Lithuanians, and Russian Old Believers. Faculty will include instructors from Białystok University and the Belarusian Lyceum in Hajnówka, as well as Hrodna University in Belarus. Additional guest lectures on Belarusian history, politics and culture will be given by visiting researchers from Europe and North America. Students will have a choice of dormitory accommodations at the Belarusian Lyceum, or homestays with Belarusian-speaking families in Hajnówka.

Coursework will be supplemented by a rich and diverse cultural program, including visits to Belarusian minority cultural organizations and media outlets, meetings with Belarusian writers and artists, films, concerts, theatrical performances, and excursions to important sites related to Belarusian and Orthodox culture and other attractions of the Podlasie region: the city of Białystok, the recently restored Orthodox monastery in Supraśl, the Białowieża (Belaveža) National Park (the largest and ecologically most diverse remnant of the primeval forests of the Northern European plain), the historic town of Bielsk Podlaski, the Holy Mountain of Grabarka (the most important Eastern Orthodox pilgrimage site in Poland), and the Borderland Foundation in Sejny, a unique institution dedicated to preserving the rich multicultural heritage of the borderland region and promoting dialogue and new forms of cooperation between its many ethnic groups and cultures. In

mid-July students will also have the opportunity to attend Basovišča, the annual festival of Belarusian rock music organized by the Belarusian Students' Association in the town of Gródek (Haradok) east of Bialystok.

At the end of the program, from August 8-19th, students will have the option of traveling to Belarus on a tour including Hrodna, Navahrudak, Slonim, Niasviž, Mir, Minsk, Połack, Viciebsk, Mahiloŭ, Pinsk and Brest. The program cost, including tuition, room, board, cultural program and excursions is \$2,900 (the cost of the optional Belarus tour at the end of the program will be announced as details become available). For further information and application materials, please contact the program director: Dr. Curt Woolhiser, Harvard University, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Barker Center 327, 12 Quincy St. , Cambridge MA 02138-3804; e-mail: [cwoolhis@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:cwoolhis@fas.harvard.edu); tel. (617) 495-3528. Please note that the due date for all applications is **May 15, 2009**.

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