

POLITICAL IDEAS

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RUSSO-CENTRISM AS AN IDEOLOGICAL PROJECT OF BELARUSIAN IDENTITY

General Characteristics

THIS WORK HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT UNDER RESEARCH “Projects of Nation and Identity. Belarus-Ukraine. 1990-2008” aiming at selection, description and analysis of the most representational projects of national identity existing in the public discourse of the Republic of Belarus.

In this case, we are talking about the projects of nation as some discursive integrities and consistencies of ideas about the essence of the Belarussian nation. Selection of the key nation projects rests upon two characteristics: a) availability of a systematic image of the past, present and future of Belarussians, where certain building blocks that possess semantic stability and reproducibility can be highlighted, and b) possibility of highlighting the discursive features that define the specificity and concreteness of the actual ideological project particularly as an intellectual construction.

Russo-centrism² stands out among the major versions of the Belarussian nation that have a direct impact on the political, cultural and intellectual life of the country. The ideological core of this project is considering Belarussians an integral part of the Russian people. The Russian people are understood as a super-ethnos uniting Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians), and Belarussians (White Russians). For this super-ethnos, the unity of language and culture as well as commonality of values and mentality is distinctive. Briefly, this main prescription of russo-centrism can be formulated as follows: “*A Belarussian, like a Great Russian and a Ukrainian, is a Russian man by his theoretical and practical life; and Belarus, like Russia and Ukraine are parts of a unified all-Russian civilization*” (Kryŭtapovič, 1999: 134 -135).

This results in prescriptions for alliance with Russia as a major geopolitical object for Belarus. Slightly peripheral for this political project are references to the Slavic brotherhood and “Slavic civilization”.

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² In this case, “russo-centrism” is introduced as a term not widely used in human sciences previously, but quite suitable for definition of this project due to the shortcomings of other common definitions for this circle of ideas (Russian nationalism, Slavophilism/Slavic nationalism, West-Rusism).

In this regard, the ideological form of russo-centrism possesses several specific features:

1. *Idealism*

This is a most important characteristic of russo-centrism, where idealism is manifested in two important aspects. Firstly, it is a constant emphasis on predominance of the spiritual over the material, the high over the low, the religious over the earthly. And secondly, it is the natural transition to an irrational world view, and accordingly, the same irrational type of substantiation;

2. *Dualism*

Within russo-centrism, the world in all its many facets is perceived and described through dichotomies, exclusively in black and white, where there is only Good and Evil (i.e. the highly spiritual Slavic World and the tainted materialistic West) between which there are no transition stages. The history of this world is regarded as the eternal struggle between the two principles; between them, there can't be any negotiations, agreements and compromises;

3. *Conspiracy*

Herewith, history and modernity are described not by rationalistic interpretations, but using a set of conspiracy theories. A hidden motive – most often an evil one – is sought behind any action; the underlying causes of the processes are linked to various conspiratory theories. This results in constant paranoid searches for enemies, even in the surrounding of “comrades”. And, while russo-centrists correlate their own movement with idealism, clarity and purity of intentions, there are only two possible options for their ideological opponents: to be willful conspirators directed by far-reaching plans for destruction of the light and pure Slavic civilization and establishment of their sinister domination, or to be naive fools pragmatically used by the first category for their purposes.

4. *Eschatology*

The result of these broad conspiracy networks covering the whole world is the fact that the human civilization is regarded as one at the edge of destruction, which adds a tragic dimension to perception of the world as well as requires incredible spiritual mobilization.

Thus, due to availability of the stable ideologemes (Belarusians as a part of the Russian super-ethnos, dominant of the common Russian culture and language, direction for an alliance with Russia) and general discursive characteristics, we undertake to state about possible occurrence of a unified and coherent project of russo-centrism.

On the other hand, the russo-centrism project is not completely self-contained. Along with the ideological center, which is an unconditional

axiological dominant, there are certain moments that cause conflicting interpretations. Existence of ideological unity against enemies and the fact of defending the values of the Russian people does not at all mean a complete unanimity. Certain disagreements and debates are also possible within the project of russo-centrism. The following two aspects are most disputable: attitude towards the Soviet past (idealization or criticism), and assessment of the role of Orthodox Christianity (along with the dominant orthodox position there is also atheistic criticism, as well as inclinations towards pagan mysticism).

Institutional Design

Any intellectual project exists in cultural space in two major aspects:

1. as a society of personalities, intellectuals;
2. as a network of various institutional structures (political and social organizations, newspapers and magazines, various informal institutions).

First, we will mention some of the most remarkable personalities who are – to our opinion – critical for this project:

- *Lieŭ Kryštapovič (Lev Krishtapovich)*, Deputy Director of the Information-Analytical Center under Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus, Dr hab. in Philosophy, professor, former Scientific Secretary of the Institute of Social and Political Studies under Administration of the President;
- *Eduard Skobieliëŭ (Skobelev)*, a writer, chief editor of the magazine “Information Bulletin of Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus”;
- *Jaŭhien Rosciakaŭ (Evgeny Rostikov)*, a journalist mostly cooperating with the Russian newspaper “Zavtra” (“Tomorrow”);
- *Valiancin Akulaŭ (Valentin Akulov)*, Dr. hab. in Philosophy, professor at the Department of Philosophy in Minsk State Linguistic University.

In our opinion, these are the most representational advocates of russo-centrism, who steadily – since the early 90s and up to the present day – work in this direction. In their works, the essence and peculiarities of this intellectual project are expressed in the most concentrated and distinct form.

Many professional historians also work in the stream of russo-centrism. For some of them, this circle of ideas has become a comfortable harbor which was easy to switch to from the Soviet historiography (Pietrykaŭ, Staškievič,

Zalieski, and others). But there is also a generation of young and “ideological” historians who try to re-execute this project using the modern language of humanitarian knowledge (Biendzin, Hihin, and others).

The one to be mentioned among the first here is Jakaŭ Traščanok, Candidate of historical sciences, associate professor of Mahilioŭ State University named after A. Kuliašoŭ. His views are particularly distant from the Soviet patterns of history writing, and in a bright and fairly radical form express the ideas of russo-centrism, not only in terms of historical substantiation, but also in terms of modern conceptualizations of the Belarusian nation.

For formation and development of any intellectual project, various periodicals are important. In this regard, the project of russo-centrism is clearly inferior to its ideological opponents and competitors. The “patriotic” press in Belarus, in contrast to Russia, is extremely poorly represented in terms of quantities.

Throughout the 1990s, there were several different newspapers which can be fully considered “russo-centrist” by their attitude:

1. “*Slavyanskije Vedomosti*” (“The Slavic Gazette”), published 1991-1992;
2. “*Rus’ Belaya*” (“The White Rus”), published 1993-1995;
3. “*Lichnost*” (“Personality”), published 1996-1999;
4. “*Slavyanskij Nabat*” (“The Slavic Tocsin”), published 1997-1999.

The newspaper “*Znamya Yunosti*” (“The Banner of Youth”) had also contained materials in a similar vein for long time, but this is a wider profile edition and can hardly be referred to purely “ideological publications”. Rather close in position was the newspaper “*My i vremya*” (“We and Time”), but the main emphasis there was placed on propagating the revived version of the communist ideals.

The peak of printing activity of the russo-centrist project comes to 1997-1999, when two weekly newspapers were published simultaneously, “*Slavyanskij Nabat*” and “*Lichnost*”. It is not hard to note that, at this moment, the project of russo-centrism has almost no media resources of its own (this is, in our opinion, very important), and therefore the mentioned “speakers” use their weight and influence for publications in either state-controlled media in Belarus, or in Russian patriotic periodicals.

The proximity of ideological attitudes and good relationships with the government allow the leading representatives of the russo-centrist project to be regularly published in major national newspapers, but such possibilities can hardly fully replace the lack of specialized publications where such ideas could be translated and disseminated.

As for the movements and public organizations, the peak here has also already passed in 1993-1999, when such organizations as the Council (Sabor)

“Bielaja Ruś” and the Belarusian branch of the Russian National Unity (RNE) were active. However, after assassination of Hlieb Samojlaŭ, the leader of this organization, in 2000 RNE in Belarus came to an obvious decline, and several later attempts to revive the organizational structure failed.

Now, there are few marginal small radical groups that are active (“Schoron Ež Slavien”, “The Slavic Union”), but they are small and focused mainly on agitation among the youth, and can hardly be considered serious actors in Belarusian politics.

Close in orientation to the ideals of russo-centrism is the Belarusian Patriotic Party, headed by Anatoľ Barankievič until 2001. After his death, Mikalaj Ulachovič has become the party leader, who at the same time is the Supreme Ataman of the Republican Public Association “Belarusian Cossacks” (and also the first editor of “Lichnost” newspaper). It’s worth mentioning that the party was officially registered and has been operating for a long time (since 1996), but it has failed to achieve anything significant - neither in political, nor in ideological terms - and has remained on the periphery of the cultural and political space of Belarus.

Another peculiar place where the ideas of russo-centrism are created and propagated is a series of international scientific and practical conferences held under the supervision of Uladzimir Sacevič. Sacevič himself leads social activities in several directions. He is the chairman of the “Human Ecology” Committee under the Belarusian Social and Ecological Union, a member of the Coordinating Council of the Union of Struggle for People’s Sobriety, and at the same time acts as the organizer of the Rodnovery (Slavic Neo-Pagan) movement in Belarus. Following the conferences’ results, digests under a characteristic name “The Slavic Veche” are published (in total, four such digests had been published by 2009). Selection of materials in these digests is very eclectic. There, one can find manifestos of Rodnovers/Neopagans, anti-Semitic slogans, as well as conventional scientific reports on various matters, which with the same success could be announced at any academic conference. At the same time, many of the key “speakers” of russo-centrism are actively involved in these conferences (Kryštapovič and Skobieliėŭ). A lot of Russian national patriots of various stripes are also invited, so with some reserve the conferences can be attributed to this political project.

Genesis and Ideological Sources

The range of ideas that underpin the project of russo-centrism has deep historical origins, but in their modern version they were first articulated in the movement of West-Rusism.

In fact, the modern russo-centrism in Belarus is the ideological successor of West-Rusism of the 19th century. This succession is recognized and emphasized.

One of the most important figures of West-Rusism is a 19th century historian Michail Kajalovič. Noteworthy is the fact that addressing to his heritage comes not only in the form of symbolic appeals and rhetorical praises, but also through the intensive practical application of his works in reconstruction of historical past of the Belarusian people. For example, historiosophic and historiographic essays of L. Kryštapovič “Belarus and the Russian Civilization” (Kryštapovič, 1999) are directly based on historical works of Michail Kajalovič, which is clearly evident from the references.

The Slavophil-nationalist trend in Russian philosophy of the 19th - beginning of the 20th century became another source for formation of the russo-centrist project. A fairly wide circle of thinkers (from Dostoevsky to Ilyin) are introduced into practice, but the use of their works is highly selective. Primarily, references to the idea of Slavic unity and high Russian spirituality are used.

While references to West-Rusism and Slavophilism are likely to be used for the purposes of legitimization, infusion of credibility and historical gloss, the most important real source of ideas, images and verbal formulas is the modern national-patriotic movement in Russia. This influence can be defined both in a latent form (common themes and description techniques) and by massive abundance of citations, reprints, etc. In addition, we have already mentioned that works of many representatives of russo-centrism are often published in Russian periodicals of nationalistic and patriotic sense (“Zavtra”, “Nash sovremennik” (“Our Contemporary”), “Russkij vestnik” (“The Russian Messenger”), etc.). So, in terms of declared unity of the Russian world, here one can really observe certain commonality among the Slavophil patriotic wing in Russia and Belarus.

Evolution of Development

During the period under review (1990-2008), there was a definite evolution in the content and formulations of the russo-centrist project, which took place due to both internal development and changes in the socio-political situation in Belarus.

The early 1990s were characterized by an acute painful reaction to the disintegration of the USSR, which was accompanied by rejection of the newly formed Belarusian state, acute antipathy to the authorities which were considered as realizing the interests of the BNF (Belarusian Popular Front). At that time, one of the most important problems was the Russian language issue: *“In Belarus, in the result of the activities of nationalists and led by the nose executive government structures, an unnatural situation was formed, when the Russian language – the language of the indigenous nation, spoken and thought in by most of the citizens of the Republic – is placed outside the law, strongly prejudiced and suppressed”* (Appeal ..., 1993). A public campaign for

return of the official status of the Russian language was unfolded; numerous articles stating that the Russian language is native to Belarusians were published; various manifestos and appeals demanding to provide the Russian language with official status were also often published.

A requirement for restoration of a unified state with Russia can be considered another main line in the journalism of that period. Despite the fact that the very idea of a “union state” is central for the project of russo-centrism, it was formulated in different ways. If in 1991-1992 the Soviet Union was declared an ideal form of government for coexistence of the Russian and Belarusian peoples, then in subsequent years we are talking about creation of a unified state of Russia and Belarus. And in the early years of existence of the independent Belarusian state, this project appealed rather to elimination of this “strange” state formation: *“In such a situation it is better to hand over our destiny to Great Russia”* (Tarasievič, 1993).

Since the beginning of Lukašenka’s presidency, a gradual conversion to the complete loyalty to the government from the representatives of the russo-centrist project takes place, although it is clear that up to 1995 they had been still looking narrowly at him. But Lukašenka’s practical implementation of the main demands vital for russo-centrism – making Russian a state language, creating a union state with Russia (albeit, not in as radical a form that russo-centrists were dreaming about), constant symbolic appeals to the Russian culture and Russian people – have naturally attracted the sympathies of russo-centrists to him.

Since that time, this political project of nation has been actively supported by the new President of the Republic of Belarus, which continues to the present day.

But such an “overloyalty” position towards Lukašenka’s policy has led to some changes of the ideological requirements. Exactly the idea of an alliance with Russia underwent the most significant transformations. The initial slogan of a simple return to Russia was clearly irrelevant in the light of the independent policy held by the Belarusian state. So, it was necessary to look for some other solutions for achieving the objective of restoring a unified state with the Russian people. From around 1997-1998, much more cautious plans on creating a union state began to be pronounced, lacking their initial enthusiasm: *“At any integration movements – economic, political, military, or cultural – we must save our state, and not to dissolve it in new formations. Going for a union with Russia, we must not turn ourselves into hostages of the criminal comprador factions fighting there against each other and selling their country to the foreign capital. Neither must we become a cesspool for accumulation of the criminal element coming from all over the CIS. We have to approach [Russia] as a centralized Slavic state, and with our organization and stability to contribute to stabilization of the Russian state, self-organization of the*

Slavic population there as well as its release from the influence of hostile to Russia political forces” (Malaška, 1998).

At the same time, it is worth noting that compared to all the other projects of nation existing in the Belarusian political space, russo-centrism is the most rigid and stable one. Alterations that took place in its ideological core within the last two decades are minor and relate mainly to reformulation of objectives for political practice. As opposed to the state project, russo-centrism does not need to immediately adjust to the actual tasks of socio-political development, which allows it to preserve the ideological purity. Unlike ethnic nationalism and the liberal-democratic project, it has not experienced severe crises due to displacement from the political sphere and public marginalization. This peculiar position allows russo-centrism to maintain the integrity of its central postulates.

Correlation with Other Projects of Belarusian Nation

The project of russo-centrism bases its own ideas about the cultural and political landscape in our country on the emphasized dualistic pattern, where only two poles of the Good and the Evil are possible.

Thus, there are only forces that defend the interests of the Belarusian people, and the forces that carry out an anti-people and anti-national policy. In Jakaŭ Traščanok’s statement, these are the two national ideas – the Orthodox national idea and the Catholic national separatism. One of them is certainly “right”:

“The historical traditions of the Belarusian people, their worldview, and their system of values correspond only to the first, the Orthodox direction. It is this route that the overwhelming majority of people consistently give their votes for in elections and referendums, and this path is represented by a charismatic national leader A. Lukašenka” (Traščanok, 2006: 64). The other national idea is unnatural and false; moreover, it is deadly dangerous for the Belarusian people: *“The Catholic separatism is an attempt to destroy the national mentality, to replace a living entity with an artificial construction. If such an attempt succeeded, it would mean a spiritual murder of the people, which would then be followed by a physical killing of the Orthodox East Slavic ethnos”* (Traščanok, The Two ...).

The opponents’ camp appears as something homogenous and static, completely devoid of differentiation and dynamics. There are only firm descriptive characteristics: nationalists, acolytes of the Western masters, etc. No significant difference between ethno-cultural nationalists and Liberal Democrats is drawn – anyway, they are “traitors of the Motherland” – so the nuances of their views are of no interest for russo-centrism.

Correspondingly, there can be no dialogue or discussion between the aforementioned national ideas. The modern cultural and political situation

of the national development in Belarus is described as antagonistic, in which only struggle is possible. Though, it is still not clear where the space for unfolding of this confrontation is. In fact, the relationships develop in terms of a unilateral debate, i.e. on basis of publications and presentations using some excerpts from the opponents' discourse and the episodes that could serve a foundation for accusations. In any case, the opposition camp (albeit in an undifferentiated form) performs a vital function of the "enemy" for russo-centrism, in many ways providing the meaning and purpose for its existence.

Much more difficult is to draw the line between russo-centrism and the government project of the Belarusian nation. We have already mentioned that russo-centrism consistently maintains a policy of loyalty and devotion to the state authority. Another additional problem is inclusion of many prominent representatives of russo-centrism in the state elite of the Republic of Belarus. Therefore, the dividing line between these two projects is blurred, but still exists (otherwise it would not be worthy even to talk about a separate ideological project).

Russo-centrism as a project of national identity is stable and centered around a clearly defined range of ideas; it is idealistic in its essence. The state project of the Belarusian nation is pragmatic; it varies depending on the socio-political agenda.

The project of russo-centrism creates an idealized image of the President Aliaksandr Lukašenka as a personification of people's interests, a charismatic leader who intuitively realizes and implements the national policy. But there still remains an opportunity for russo-centrists to take up an attitude of vigilant and conscientious guardians of people's interests, who can see the situation more clearly and fully, give advice and point out errors.

Meanwhile, there are certain similarities in the ideas, values and rhetoric of russo-centrism and the state project: we are talking about accentuation on closeness of the Belarusian and Russian peoples, prescription for priority of alliance with Russia, sympathies for Orthodoxy. But if for russo-centrism all coordinate systems are clearly arranged (salvation is in the union with Russia, while the West brings spiritual and physical death for Belarus), the government project contains possibilities for situational changes and political games (which was demonstrated during the "gas" and "milk" trade wars with Russia).

Nevertheless, most analysts tend to ignore these differences and, moreover, to easily identify the authorities with the ideas and values of russo-centrism in its rigid version. Such simplification and reduction of the state of affairs, in our opinion, leads to an erroneous understanding of the essence and nature of processes taking place in the cultural and political sphere of Belarus.

But let's proceed directly to how the Belarusian nation is presented and described within the project of russo-centrism.

Political Community

The fundamental principle for constitution of any identity is the division between “insiders” and “outsiders”. Conceptualization of the community of “insiders” in russo-centrism can be represented as consisting of several concentric circles centered on Belarusians, followed by a wider community of “insiders” - the Russian people, and, finally, followed by a still wider and at the same vague community of the Slavic world.

The central notion, of course, is the category of the “Belarusian people”. Within this project, it is not a subject for clear conceptualization, although the main feature is clearly distinguished as essential belonging of the Belarusian people to the Russian civilization. Often descriptions of the “Belarusian people” involve clichés from the Soviet times: ordinary toilers, working people, etc.

Theoretical conceptualization at a higher level can be found with Jakaŭ Traščanok who resorts not to rhetorical figures of the Soviet epoch, but to the modern terminology of the social knowledge, and uses the concept of “political nation”: *“All citizens of this country, regardless of their ethnic origin, constitute a unified political nation. Thus, our country is called Belarus, though apart from Belarusians who constitute the majority, it is inhabited by many other ethnic groups. And the polyethnic nation residing in Belarus is called the Belarusian nation. The Belarusian ethnos itself represents only the core of the Belarusian political nation and is not identical to it on the whole”* (Traščanok, 2006: 25).

But russo-centrism is far from the ideals of civic nationalism that involves inclusivism by political principle (all citizens of the country form a political nation).

Firstly, a very strong emphasis is placed on essential characteristics inherent to the Belarusian people – the culture, spirit and mentality, which means that in addition to citizenship, for being a Belarusian one must possess certain cultural qualities. Accordingly, in order to enter the number of Belarusians, just citizenship is apparently not enough, and here Traščanok contradicts himself. *“Today, a Belarusian may profess any religion or be an atheist, but what makes him a Belarusian is a real belonging to genetically Eastern Christian subsystem of European civilization and East Slavic (all-Russian) culture, of which the Belarusian culture is an integral part”* (Traščanok, 2006: 35). Thus, the main criterion of belonging to the Belarusian nation is not ethnic origin and citizenship, but identification with a specific set of values.

On the other hand, a part of ethnic Belarusians who have different political views are excluded from the Belarusian people.

Another, broader circle of “our” people is the Russian people, Russian world, Russian civilization, a part of which – according to the ideologists of russo-cen-

trism – Belarusians certainly are: “*We see the people of Belarus as an integral part of the Russian people. For us, the notion of ‘Russian’ is not the same as ‘Great Russian’. Great Russians are just a part of the Russian people, while the other parts are Belarusians, Little Russians (Ukrainians), and Ruthenians. In other words, Belarusians, Great Russians, Little Russians, and Ruthenians are subethne of the single Russian ethnos*” (Lies and the Truth ..., 1994).

And finally, a wider areal of “insiders” is the Slavic world. Although a marker of “Slavic” is often used for designation of the community of “insiders”, its interpretation significantly differs from ethnolinguistic criteria. Most often, the term “Slavic” is used only in relation to East Slavic peoples (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians), while the West and South Slavs have a very doubtful status with regard to belonging to the mythologized “Slavic world”. This especially concerns those nations where Catholicism is widely spread, but for the Orthodox South Slavic peoples there is also no place at the heart of Slavic civilization. They remain on the periphery of thinking and rhetoric of russo-centrism.

The Past of Belarusians

Russo-centrism has strong historiographical tradition which derives its origins from both the historical constructions of West-Rusism and reanimation of the Soviet historiography. We have already noted that the formulation of this project involves many professional historians (many with degrees of Candidates and Doctors of sciences).

In general, it can be stated that references to the past play an important role for the russo-centrist and ethno-national projects in legitimizing their claims for the present of Belarus (while the statist and liberal-democratic projects rather parasitize on works of their competitors). Moreover, the project of russo-centrism looks historicist, in which the notional center is exactly in the past.

Appeals to the past within the framework of this ideological project have two main goals (both directly arising from the dichotomous nature of this type of world view): legitimization of conceptualization of the Belarusian people as an integral part of the Russian super-ethnos using historical material, and, consequently, de-legitimization of the “enemies” and an “alien” interpretation of the Belarusian past, again with extensive use of historical facts.

First, we will examine how the first goal is implemented. It arises from the basic assertion, the cornerstone of this ideological project: Belarusians are a part of the Russian super-ethnos: “*A Belarusian, similar to a Great Russian and a Ukrainian, in his outlook, practical life and culture is a Russian man; and Belarus, like Russia and Ukraine, constitutes a part of a single Russian civilization. A Belarusian is ethnically, historically and spiritually a Russian man*” (Kryštapovič, 1998b).

The search for common roots goes back to the boundary of the 1st-2nd millennia AD, when the East Slavic tribes – according to the ideologists of this project – formed a feudal union - the Russian land, Rus'. From here, the roots of unity of the Russian people arise, which remains to this day. A direct continuity of historiographical constructions with the works of representatives of West-Rusism and the Soviet historical school is preserved, where relationship of the Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian people taking roots in Kyivan Rus' was substantiated: *“The ancient Russian state, or Kyivan Rus', a formed ancient Russian nationality, gave birth to Belarusian, Ukrainian and Great Russian (Russian) nationalities which are different, but united in their base by the common origin, language and Orthodox faith, culture and spirituality”* (Pietrykaŭ, 2007: 33).

The civilizational unity formed on basis of Orthodoxy was not broken even when on the ruins of the “Russian world” feuding states were formed – the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Grand Duchy of Moscow. Actually, starting from this point, a division into three new ethnic groups takes place in the “bosom of the Russian people”. They, however, are always considered as parts of a single super-ethnos within this project.

At this time appears an image of one of the worst enemies of the Russian people (and, accordingly, of the Belarusian people) – Poles, or, more precisely, the Polish political elite of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which allegedly sought to destroy the East Slavic Orthodox civilization through a forced Polonization and Catholicization. Particularly negative attitude gets the fact of adoption of the Polish culture and Catholicism by the local szlachta, which was regarded as an act of betrayal towards the “traditional” Orthodox culture, which in its turn had dire consequences for the development of the Belarusian people: *“As a result, by the end of the 18th century, Belarusian ethnos was virtually without its elite, intellectuals, schools, literary language, and typography. In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it was doomed to Polonization, ethnic extinction and disappearance from the map of Europe”* (Pietrykaŭ, 2004).

Active assistance in destruction of the Orthodox (Russian) civilization in Belarusian lands was also provided by one more identified enemy - the Jesuits: *“The main activity of the Jesuits in Belarus came down to de-nationalization of our people, even though it was covered by allegedly higher state and religious purposes”* (Kryštapovič, 1999: 78). The instrument for such destructive impact was the church union, the attitude to which from russo-centrism is sharply negative.

In general, the period of history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania has no particular semantic meaning in historiographical constructions of this project, it is considered merely a transitional period to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, to the time of oppression and decline. At that, the oppression of Polish szlachta had two basic dimensions: cultural-religious and socio-economic.

No wonder that partition of the Commonwealth and connection of Belarusian lands to the Russian Empire acquires the status of an act of salvation for the oppressed Belarusian people, almost a divine intervention that saved the ethnos from the threat of a final Polonization: *“Connection of Belarusian lands to the Russian Empire, inclusion of the Belarusian ethnos into a related Great-Russian historical and cultural body opened a new chapter in our history. Belarusians’ struggle for survival in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had ended. A difficult process of recovery of historical memory and consciousness of the Belarusian people, development of their spirituality, culture and national and state self-determination started”* (Pietrykaŭ, 2007: 35).

In the same light is the history of the 19th century described, as being almost a golden age for Belarusians. Suvorov and Muravyev are seen as defenders and guardians of the Belarusian people, while the Kosciuszko and Kalinowski are overthrown from the top of the national pantheon and fall under the category of “Catholic national separatists” whose roots go back to the eternal oppressors of the Belarusian peasantry, the Polish szlachta.

The term “separatism” is used in the project as a replacement for “nationalism” that was rehabilitated in the Russian patriotic discourse of the 90s. Due to the fact that in Belarusian public discourse the tag “nationalists” has been well established for ethno-national political forces, an operation for semantic substitution of “nationalists” with “separatists” was performed.

The attitude to the Soviet period in the framework of the project is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Soviet Union is always described as a powerful state, from which the people of Belarus tangibly benefited: *“Revolution woke the energy and enthusiasm of the workers. In a short period allocated by history, by extreme effort, the country of plow and flail was turned into a mighty industrial power which the leading Western states had to consider. After the revolution, the country established a system of guaranteed employment, provided free education, health service, and right to rest. Belarus, which gained statehood in post-October period, in alliance with other brotherly republics has made a breakthrough in creating a powerful economic potential, development of culture and education. For Belarusians, formerly a peasant nation, such access to knowledge was opened, which they did not know through the whole history of their existence”* (Kazliakoŭ, 1997).

Most stable are positive evaluations in political circles which are close to the Communists, as well as among the old generation of historians (Pietrykaŭ, Staškevič, etc.).

On the other hand, some representatives of russo-centrism (primarily Skobieliëŭ, Traščanok, Siarhiejeŭ) allow from time to time some critical attacks against the Soviet state, where the main blames are underlining the bureaucratization of power and accusations of forced Belarusization.

In any case, the disintegration of the USSR is seen as a tragic event, primarily because a natural unity of the Russian super-ethnos had been destroyed, resulting in disastrous economic and cultural processes.

Another strategy of appeals to the historical past is a struggle against “falsifications” of history by political opponents of russo-centrism, first and foremost including the historians of the national-democratic camp. Reviewing publications on historical themes in the corresponding periodicals, it is easy to notice that the number of materials on the “correct” exposition of history is equal to the criticism of alternative historical interpretations.

It is worth noting that the criticism of national historiography is generally one of the biggest challenges articulated in the project of russo-centrism. “Unscientific” and “unhistorical” nature of national historiography is emphasized: *“The culturological feature of the nationalist historical school, which quite unreasonably pretends to be representative of the Belarusian national historiography, is an immature study of the history of Belarus (Byelorussia). Such a study, without requiring a thoughtful research, is generally satisfied with superficial historical analogies and external set of facts”* (Kryštapovič, 1999: 11). Another methodological accusation is of “Jesuit” dealing with historical facts, where the opponents are accused of ignoring the context, juggling and distorted interpretations.

In the stream of the mentioned conspiracy, the historians who defend the national (nationalistic) version of the Belarusian past are seen as having a whole set of far-reaching intentions. Primarily, they are accused of creating artificial barriers between the Belarusian and Russian peoples, who – as we remember – appear an inseparable whole in the project of russo-centrism. The work with historical past is presented as a tool for achieving specific political goals: *“Playing on historical ignorance of everyman and trying to provoke anti-Russian sentiments in a simple man, nationalists are striving to drive a wedge between the brotherly peoples to continue implementation of their anti-people and anti-national reforms in Belarus, in order to please their Western masters”* (Kryštapovič, 1999: 24).

Several key episodes for the Belarusian historiography, which are being “purified” from falsifications and nationalist distortions by historians loyal to the paradigm of russo-centrism, can be highlighted here:

1. indication of the all-Russian character of Kyivan Rus’, resulting in disputed interpretation of the Principality of Polack being the origin of Belarusian statehood;
2. dethronement of the image of the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a “golden age” for Belarusian national history (it is stated that the power in that state belonged to ethnically and re-

- ligiously alien elite; moreover, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is considered only a transition period to the policy of Polonization and Catholicization in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth);
3. rehabilitation of the Stalinist regime, which unfolds in two main directions: accentuation of Stalin's leading role in victory of the Great Patriotic War and criticism of attributing the communist leader with organization of mass repressions (in this field, particularly fruitful is the chairman of "Historical Knowledge" society, Dr hab. in History Adam Zalieski).

The historical basis in the project of russo-centrism is very solid, as russo-centrists are using both the work results of historians of West-Rusism and the rich heritage of the Soviet school of historiography. But despite the broadest use of historical material, the vision of the past in the project of russo-centrism is very peculiar. In this case, we can consider existence of a special historiosophy, completely unscientific in its character and essence. On the one hand, all historical facts adapt to an already specified tough interpretive scheme, which eliminates the need for hypotheses and research as there is nothing more to discover in history; its meaning and purpose is clear and understandable.

On the other hand, the past in the project of russo-centrism is monolithic; it does not have a chronological axis, which allows to mix different historical epochs and different social strata in ideological collages. Polish noblemen, collaborators, Jesuits, Hitlerites, BNF members are one common enemy with the same attitudes and aspirations. Again, the triune Russian people appear as an eternal and invariable spiritual substance, the character and values of which exist in a crystallized form for millennia. Essentialism here takes an extreme form of expression, where historical facts are used to enrich the description of idealistic entities.

Modernity

It is impossible to imagine the modern picture of the world drawn in russo-centrism without considering the discursive characteristics of this ideological project, which were outlined earlier.

Thus, the world in the ideology of russo-centrism is perceived strictly dualistically, it is rigidly divided into two parts, between which there are no crossings and compromises: East - West, Good - Evil, God - Satan, etc.

Naturally, the Russian people – or its semantic substitute the Slavic world – constitute the positive pole. In fact, it can be claimed that "humanity" and "humaneness" come down to the Russian/Slavic world. Only the Russian people possess spirituality, culture and – consequently – civilization. Every-

thing else around is perceived as a space that is completely subordinate to the forces of evil striving to destroy the last bastion of civilization and high spirit.

The Russian people carry out a unique providential mission which reaches the scale of salvation of the whole world. According to the views of the ideologists of russo-centrism, the world is already at the edge of a catastrophe, full extinction, and only the Russian people can prevent its destruction.

The forthcoming (and, perhaps, inevitable?) disaster has two primary dimensions: spiritual and the one of natural resources. Oddly enough, but exactly the struggle for vanishing resources is becoming the main explanatory motive for many processes occurring in the modern world. The collapse of the Soviet Union is described exclusively as a carefully planned and technologically implemented action by the Western world caused by desire to possess the vast raw material reserves of this state.

Another important dimension of the crisis of the modern world lies in the spiritual realm. The Western civilization is described as degenerative, spiritless, and materialistic. Furthermore, the degraded and decaying West is trying to aggressively subdue the last bastion of civilization – the Russian culture – primarily through mass culture and mass media: *“Children’s souls are programmed to the standard of living not attainable by honest means, and at the same time a psychological filter is formed, through which only cultural sleaze seeps into the soul of the youth, while everything truly beautiful and human is filtered out. From the Western culture only its rubbish is adopted, not its masterpieces. Ignorance in national and world culture is formed, similar to that instilled by the Hitlerite kulturtragers around the occupied Slavic territories. As a result, two categories of people are being brought up – the working rednecks, unaware that they are rednecks, and the Janissaries, in case if the rednecks suddenly get wiser and rebel”* (Citoŭ, 1997).

Thus, the modern reality is described as a permanent spiritual and information war against the Slavic world. Here we approach the multifaceted and complex image of an existential “enemy” for Belarusians/Russian people/Slavs. Despite the constant shading of this image, referring to its mystique and power (otherwise it would be difficult to maintain the conspiracy strain), by a number of texts it is possible to reconstruct the essence and origin of this “enemy”, which is most often labelled as the “secret world government”.

Its genealogy has roots far back in history, and more specifically in such religious-political doctrine as Zionism, which is described as a “racist misanthropic ideology”. Completely ignored is the historical context in which the political movement of Zionism aimed primarily at unification and revival of the Jewish people in their historic homeland, Israel. Instead, a conspiracy myth is reproduced, which is very popular among Russian national patriots (from where it was most probably borrowed) about the sinister Zionist aim to

establish the world domination. *“The goal of the Zionists is to establish financial and political control in the world through their people in governments and in business; through banking and fund capital; through subordinate media. A sort of giant monopoly of a handful of super-rich Jews, obsessed with the idea of richness (they have only one god - dollar!)”* (Dyktaturaŭ, 1997). Moreover, even European fascism is described as a product of Zionism.³

Another sinister secret organization credited with ominous plans is Masons. Again, the theory and practice of Masonic Lodges is completely ignored; instead, the fantasy of apologists of russo-centrism creates fantastic images of power pyramids of joined together Zionist and Masonic clans, primarily in Israel and the U.S. The foreign policy of these countries is perceived as fully controlled by the all-powerful Zionist-Masonic secret government: *“In the U.S., Judeo-Zionism has taken rather strong roots; a powerful pro-Israeli lobby is in force. U.S. imperialism, merged with Zionism, has open claims to world dominance, threatening people with tomahawks and undertaking gendarme functions”* (Dyktaturaŭ, 1997).

Particular attention is paid to the ideological opponents of the project of russo-centrism who are declared conscious agents of the “secret world government”, or, at best, are pawns in the hands of foreigners. This is one of specific “axioms”, constant motifs which are repeated in almost every article or book created by the “speakers” of russo-centrism.

We have already noted a peculiar historicism, which is indicative for the project of russo-centrism. It is also reflected on the image of “enemies” in building of Belarusian national identity — National Democrats, which are identified with historical forces perceived by the ideologists of russo-centrism as hostile to the Belarusian/Russian people. Besides, the favorite rhetorical device is again mixing of different historical times, when the Polish noblemen, collaborators of the period of World War II, and modern Belarusian nationalists can be used in the same sentence as equivalents. For russo-centrism, it’s all the same, a deadly dangerous “Enemy” to be destroyed.

In a softer version, it is a question of similarity in aspirations, values and practices; in a harder option, it is a question of direct succession.

In fact, quite in the style of essentialist representations, Belarusian nationalists are attributed with a “native” craving for treason. Constant parallels are held with the local szlachta, which committed a “treason” by adopting Catholicism and the Polish language; and then with the Belarusian national figures who created the Belarusian People’s Republic, which again “betrayed” the interests of the country to Germans (favorite example in this case is the notorious telegram to Kaiser Wilhelm). Finally, a favourite comparison is

³ Though, it is possible to find another genealogy of fascism as a product of Western democracy: *“Fascism naturally developed from that level of Western democracy, was a logical continuation of the values of that capitalism. That’s why the upper middle class, the financial magnates placed their stake on the open terrorist dictatorship designed to stifle the labor movement and socialism, to defend the interests of capital. This is the main cause of the origin of fascism”* (Kazliyaŭ, 1998).

constant genealogical references to the activities of collaborators during the Second World War.

The Belarusian nationalists are accused of trying to rehabilitate the collaborators, which, according to representatives of russo-centrism is another direct evidence of identity of “traitors” of different times (Kazliakoŭ, 1998). Especially criticized is the BNF: “*No one other than the BNF have raised on the shield the bitter enemies of the Belarusian people, its bloody executioners – collaborators who served Hitler*” (Sciepanienka, 1999).

Thus, in russo-centrists’ representations Belarus (and wider – Russian-Slavic civilization) is opposed to the Zionist secret government, which controls almost the whole world and relies on the “fifth column” inside the country: “*It’s no secret that the republic is literally stuffed with various foundations, residents, magisters, emissaries of various Western organizations, with sects of Western origin and other ‘agents of influence’, covertly and overtly leading their subversive activities. This rat race has even been joined by representatives of foreign embassies*” (Barankievič, 1996). Representatives of various opposition political movements are also described as agents of Western influence: “*What is behind the passion of the West to ‘democratize Belarus’? It’s to form a so-called ‘political elite’, endowing it with full authority. Simply put, to prepare administration for the future colonial Belarus which would faithfully serve the new master*” (Akulaŭ, 1997). **Their aim is not only establishment of the Western control over the country, but also intervention in the process of unification of the Slavic peoples.**

Yet estimations of the current situation in the country within the framework of russo-centrism are of rather optimistic nature. It’s claimed that the plans for enslaving a small independent country have failed, which is explained by two main reasons.

Firstly, the values of the Western world, with a focus on acquisitiveness and selfishness, are organically alien to the unchangeable and sustainable character of the Belarusian/Russian people: “*The negative attitude of our people to the Western system of values is due to its civilizational nature*” (Chramaŭ, 1997). Therefore, any attempts of Belarusian nationalists to enforce a different system of ideological coordinates are pre-destined to fail: “*Their views are not able to contain the unshakable Slavic absolute values, to understand the people’s archetype preserving the global historical subjectivity throughout the Slavic-Orthodox civilization. Invented ‘overseas’ for Belarusians, the so-called ‘nationalism’ has neither in ethnic nor in state package no relation to the Slavic world, and can not seduce Belarusians, who think and feel by different standards*” (Huryn, 1997).

Secondly, highly emphasized is the role played by the President of the Republic of Belarus Aliaksandr Lukašenka, who is regarded as personification of people’s values: “*It is not accidentally that millions of people call Lukašenka*

'batska' ('the father'): he is called to fulfill the aspirations of the masses, and he, like nobody else in the CIS territory, seeks to fulfil them" (Skobielieŭ, 1997). But if "the people" is attributed with a passive rejection of the alien values, Lukašenka appears as a dynamic actor carrying out a life-saving mission of prevention of conspiracy against the Belarusian people.

Thus, the present situation in Belarus is described as a confrontation between two forces - the Belarusian people (the embodiment of spirit and values of which is Aliaksandr Lukašenka) and the secret world government, which with the help of its agents – the opposition forces – is trying to establish control over the country. In this case, this confrontation is becoming even more significant. Belarus (and its President) is regarded as the last bastion of the Russian world, defending the values of the Slavic civilization from the aggressive attack of the secret world government: *"Just because Belarus resists the Western plans and retains the Slavo-Soviet nature of civilization, it is subjected to fierce attacks from all the pro-Western forces. Figuratively speaking, all the powers of hell are thrown today at Belarus to knock it out from its Slavic orbit and bind it to the Western chariot, rushing to the underworld"* (Kryštapovič, 1997).

Accordingly, Belarus is endowed with soteriological status of the "savior of the world", since all human civilization is equated with Rus': *"So far, only Belarus retains the potential capability to arouse the rest of Rus' to great deeds... Even now Lukašenka unconsciously acts in the spirit of the Slavic teachings. As an example, we can take the union of Belarus and Russia. Meanwhile it is only a formal union, but if it is filled with content, Rus' will not only save itself, but will also save the other peoples from the approaching disaster"* (Niemčynaŭ, 2002: 175). It respectively endues the political confrontation with a visionary dimension, where the defenders of values of the Slavic civilization regard themselves as the last defenders of the Good: *"We declare holy war on Universal Evil. In spite of everything, we grain by grain will lay the foundation of the future Greatness and Rebirth"* (Hieraščanka, 1994).

Development Forecast

The forecast scenarios in the project of russo-centrism are saturated with eschatological overtones, which follows from description of the current situation: since virtually the entire world is under the control of a secret Zionist government and Belarus remains the only island of freedom, just two scenarios are offered - depending on whether Zionists will subdue our country or not.

Thus, in the publicist works of representatives of russo-centrism, much attention is paid to describing the tragic pictures of the future of the world, turning most people into obedient slaves as a result of the globalist dictatorship.

It is assumed that the first step towards the end of the world will be the puppet forces' coming to power, which would pass our country under Western control. Respectively, all chances for restoring the union of Slavic peoples – the only hope for salvation of the world by a modest estimation of russo-centrists – will be eliminated.

The picture of the “new world order” looks terrifying and palpitating. It involves establishment of a secret political and economic control of the secret Zionist government over all countries of the world through their placemen, as well as through international funds. In the territory of the former Soviet Union, the task of “Zionists” is maximal fragmentation of the states, preventing any integration processes, which will facilitate the establishment of full control over these territories. In parallel will come the process of imposing the Western values that are perceived as totally alien to the Slavic spirit and, accordingly, the result will be only destruction of the foundations of the Slavic civilization.

On the one hand, creation of national states after breakup of the Soviet Union is considered as a direct result of the underground activity of the secret world government and its agents, but on the other hand, nations themselves are becoming subject to further destruction as obstacles on the way of establishment of the total control over the world: *“But its (Western – A.L.) goal is abolition of national cultures and their viability, absorption of the Western civilization by the monster of mondialism which is a geopolitical instrument of the gang dreaming of the global hegemony and insistently making their way to it”* (Skobieliē, 1997).

The image of the coming liberal-democratic world has clearly pronounced apocalyptic properties, where the task of “the world’s backstage” is *“to turn the multicoloured modern world into some colourless ‘geopolitical space’, where Satan and his servants will dance their demonic dances”* (Akulaū, 1997).

Such motives contribute to increasing the motivation for social mobilization of supporters of the russo-centrist project, entrusting them with a special mission of saving the world.

We have already mentioned that virtually the only obstacle to the eschatological scenario is Belarus, with its Slavic values and messianic leader Aliaksandr Lukašenka. This implies the unconditional support of his policy, which is regarded as the practical realization of the values and ideals of russo-centrism. In fact, the program requirements are reduced to continuation and development of already followed economic, social and cultural policy.

Particularly important is the “restoration” of a union of Slavic peoples (although quite permissible seems a reduction to alliance with Russia). Since the Russian people are viewed solely as a trinity of three peoples, any disruption of this integrity is perceived as a painful injury that interferes with preservation of culture and advocacy of our statehood. Therefore, the union with Russia acquires the status of the most important task, even though its prospects are described in rather vague terms.

The most concrete is the guidance for certain economic benefits achieved with the help of this union: access to Russia's richest reserves of raw materials, the common market, etc. Another important motivation for unification is the possibility of a more successful opposition to the aggressive plans of the "Zionist government": *"Today, the historic watershed in Belarus is not between democracy and dictatorship, but between colonial dependence on the West and association of Belarus and Russia into the Union State, leading to the release from the Western dependence and anti-people reforms"* (Kryštapovič, 1998).

But more significant this union is still for idealistic reasons which are always at the head of the project of russo-centrism. It is assumed that with the creation of the Union State, a start will be given to the revival of humane system of values: social justice, national equality, labour, solidarity, unity, mutual assistance. No specific mechanisms and ways of establishing such an ideal state are prescribed: simple elimination of the traumatically perceived separation should already lead to a harmonious society.

Conclusion

For some time, the project of russo-centrism fit into the ideological agenda of the Belarusian government quite well, which was particularly noticeable in the second half of the 1990s, when the plan to create a union state with Russia was most actual. At that time, the ideas of russo-centrism were considered as substantiation for this geopolitical alliance. But the fixed stiffness and rigidity of this ideological project has led to a gradual marginalization of the representatives of russo-centrism from the influence on taking particular political decisions. While maintaining the leading "speakers" prestigious positions in the government, russo-centrism itself increasingly does not correspond to the situational and dynamic state interests. The chosen strategy of fighting with the economic crisis (liberalization, aid from international financial institutions) leads to erosion and dissolution of the established russo-centrist ideologemes (Lukašenka as a heroic fighter against the international financial system). Correspondingly, the present situation poses a serious challenge to the project of russo-centrism when the set of interpretational schemes fixed in this article should be changed as losing its applicability to the Belarusian realities. The long-term intellectual stagnation of russo-centrism, in which no intellectual development has been observed since the second half of the 90s, suggests that it will be quite difficult to find the way out of this critical for russo-centrism situation. The prospects for return of its privileged status also look illusory. Therefore, analysis of russo-centrism can soon completely pass to the sphere of history of ideas, unless there is a significant update of this project (both in ideological and institutional terms).

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