

REVIEWS

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CRISIS OF BELARUSIAN STUDIES

Bekus Nelly (2010). Struggle over Identity. The Official and the Alternative “Belarusianness”. Budapest. Central European University

IT HAS LONG BEEN NOTED THAT BELARUS is not a subject of special interest to either Europe or the rest of the world. The interest is of course declared, as ignoring a country located in direct proximity to the European Union does not seem very politically correct. But this interest is nominal, as it is displayed rather through admiring the wild exoticism of the “last dictatorship in Europe” than through trying to give the Belarusian issue an intellectual and strategic treatment. A good example of this is a virtually complete lack of academic and expert circles outside Belarus which would engage in Belarusian studies. It would take two minutes to enumerate all the specialists in the subject of Belarus, and most of them are dealing with our country as a supplement to the subject of Ukraine. Our country is, indeed, the “heart of darkness” amidst the European continent: it is better to forget its terrible irrationality, or just wait until Russia finally regains its abandoned province.

Typically, it is emigrants who are trying to set right such an asymmetry of interest, which is characteristic not only of Belarus but also of other “post-colonial” countries. We mean the people who left their homeland but remember it well – the ones who entered the Western academic environment where they need to find their own niche. No one would expect any theoretical and methodological innovations from such outcasts, but there really exists an interest in exclusive information about the godforsaken places. Sometimes the emigrees manage to institutionalize their specific knowledge, a good example of which can be our southern neighbours who managed to create two major academic centers even during Soviet times: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (founded in 1973) and Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta (founded in 1976). Belarusians cannot boast anything of the kind. Therefore, every new book about Belarus published in English even comes as some surprise.

One can only rejoice about publication of Nelly Bekus’s (Neli Biekus) “Struggle over Identity” in a fairly prestigious publishing house of the Central

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European University (Budapest, Hungary). Interestingly, the author's biography reflects the abovementioned career trajectory of an emigrant scholar. Sometimes Nelly Bekus calls herself a Belarusian author, but she has long been living and working in Warsaw (since 1999). Such position provides opportunities for enhanced competence: besides having first-hand knowledge of the Belarusian context, it is possible to have access to the current trends of Polish and Western science.

Surely, this fact sets higher standards for text, forcing a scholar to give it a more serious treatment. Moreover, the introduction to the book begins with a rigid statement on the issues of the Belarusian post-communism transformation studies, namely the predominance of several "basic truths" that are becoming more and more self-sufficient. One of these axiomatic truths, according to Nelly Bekus, is the assertion that the weakness of Belarusian national identity stimulates the Belarusian authoritarian regime. Indeed, one cannot but agree with admitting the crisis in the Belarusian identity studies which are becoming more and more banal and stereotyped, less and less capable of explaining anything. On the other hand, such a claim at the beginning of the book sets the standard on what is to be expected from its content. Unwittingly, one can anticipate a critical revision of the current Belarusian situation descriptions, and formulation of some new conceptual approaches.

But as early as in two paragraphs the alert reader will be disappointed. "*The aim of this work is to present post-communist Belarus as a public and cultural space where the 'struggle over identity' between the official and the oppositional discourses takes place and where both discourses claim their right to be the only voice of genuine Belarusianness*" (p. 4). That is, in fact, this book is a deployment of another "axiomatic truth" that prevails in many other publications of both Belarusian and Western authors. I will not stop at this point but will try to search through these pages for some golden bits of sense.

The proposed structure of the book does not seem too successful either. It begins by describing the features of the triple (political, economic and civic) transformation of post-communist Belarus. In the second chapter, the author turns to theory and examines the current approaches to the study of nation and nationalism. In the same chapter, she also examines the history of Belarusian nationalism, paying particular attention to the national revival at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries and the formation of the Belarusian identity during the Soviet times. In the third and final chapter, she comes back to modernity again and describes the struggle between the two discourses for the hegemony over the Belarusianness concept. Such leaps (modernity-theory-history-modernity) are rather confusing, and a deviation from the classical structure (theory-methodology-history-modernity) can hardly be considered reasonable.

So the book begins with description of the latest history of Belarus. Despite the critical message implied at the beginning of the preface, Nelly Bekus

creates her text utilizing a strategy of polyphonic narrative. The story of how Lukašenka came to power and established an authoritarian political regime is presented as one consistent story where voices of different authors are entwined. While writing the first chapter, Nelly Bekus herself assumes the position of a meta-observer who faces the reality only through mediated texts (at best through opinion polls results). Therefore Lukašenka's coming to power, the essence of the Belarusian political regime or particularities of the post-communist transformation are presented not as a personal experience and its comprehension, but as a result of compilation of various analytical literature and consolidation of segmental positions and statements by other authors into a single text. Again, such approach is virtually a denial of the aims of a critical review of the field of Belarusian studies. Instead of contextualizing the knowledge about our country, showing conditionality of interpretations and seeking abruptions in the integrity of representations, the author of "Struggle over Identity" is simply putting her text together from different pieces. The list of different "labels" of the Belarusian regime – be it "super-presidency" or "neo-communism", "sultanism", or "lukashenkism" – resembles cataloguing various views that have no essential contradictions between themselves but are describing one and the same thing just in different words, which eventually leads to simplification of reality that has been clear a priori.

In her analysis of the post-communist transformation, Nelly Bekus refers to an already classical scheme of transition, which includes the processes of democratization of the political system, market reforms in economy and establishment of civil society. Obviously, the Belarusian case by no means fits in the Procrustean bed of transitology. So the presented criticism of this paradigm by Christian W. Haerpfer sounds quite reasonable: as an alternative, he suggests the "transformation approach", which renounces any predefined aims for the process of changes. But the declarative agreement with such an approach is undermined by the description of the triple transformation per se - the description made in accordance with the standards of transitology where the aims are strictly defined.

Thus, the Belarusian political system formation is described by the author as destruction of democratic principles and concentration of power in the presidential hands, which, again, is understood as deviation from the "ideal" line of democratization. Economic development of Belarus, though, is presented more ambivalently, since the lack of necessary market reforms is accompanied by economic stability and even development, albeit this "economic miracle" is again explained by a banal version of dependence on Russia's support. And finally, the development of civil society is described as a repressive process of ousting non-governmental organizations from the public sphere into the parallel world "outside the power".

Although, as already mentioned, the body of literature on Belarus is not that big, but exactly these themes are analysed quite in detail. Fortunately,

the author of the book is not limited to an ordinary description of these well-known processes, but tries to go further and seeks prerequisites for establishing authoritarianism. Understanding our country as some sort of a special exception to general processes, which is most common for the western analytics, also requires searching for some specific complex of reasons for such a unique path. It is clear that some of the reasons listed by Bekus (failure of the democratic movement of the late-perestroika period to seize the power or lack of previous democratic statehood) are widespread in the region and can hardly explain exclusiveness and exclusion of Belarus. Describing the positive experience of the Soviet times became one of the strongest arguments for the casus of Belarus, and this subject is specifically developed in the second chapter of the book.

Interestingly, the author is looking for prerequisites for democratization as well, while, once again, clearly having in mind the necessary and definite aim of post-communist transformation in Belarus. The results of a study on the index of democracy, conducted in 15 countries between 1991 and 1998 under the leadership of Christian Haerpfer,² come as one of the key moments for Nelly Bekus. According to the results, Belarusians – in their political preferences – are among the most “democratic” nations in Central-Eastern Europe, second only to Estonians.

The results of this study are very often mentioned in the book “Struggle over Identity”, eventually making an impression that we are dealing not with a tendency fixed by sociologists at a certain period, but with a natural fact, with Belarusians’ inherent characteristic. Different sociological information is widely used in the text in general, which is not surprising, since the author holds a PhD in Sociology. On the other hand, the manner of presentation of this information has certain flaws – primacy of synchronicity and neglect of the context. Results of surveys conducted at different times (and by different research institutes) are presented in the text in a mixed up manner, without any chronological connections, which sometimes creates an impression of some frozen image of Belarus, where nothing happens and nothing changes.³

² Christian W. (2002). Haerpfer. Democracy and Enlargement in Post-Communist Europe: The Democratization of the General Public in 15 Central and Eastern European Countries, 1991-1998. New York.

³ A good example can be the section “National Pride and Paradoxes of Russification” (p. 65-71), which is highly charged with results of various sociological studies. The text consecutively provides data of different polls from 2005, 2001, 2005, 1995-1998, 2005, 1992-1993, 1996 - the materials of IISEPS, World Values Survey and Polish sociologists. Moreover, this section addresses only the issue of pride for the country among Belarusians, while paradoxes of Russification are covered in the next section “The Paradox of Political and Linguistic Russification”, so there is an obvious problem with correlation between the name of this paragraph and its contents. As a more positive example of using sociological information we can recall the previous section “The Russian Factor in Belarusian Self-Perception”, which really tracks the processes of changes, though in a typically “mixed” style.

That is, Nelly Bekus's style is to combine heterogeneous information into an externally homogeneous description, static and devoid of dynamics, which is a clear misrepresentation of methodological standards of social science. In addition, one can come across simply crude mistakes in the use of sociological data in the book. A figure of 58% of voters who voted for Lukašenka in 2006 (according to the results of IISEPS research) is presented on p. 4, while at the same time p. 21 provides the same information, but the figure is changed to 63%. Often results of sociological research are given in the text, but the year when it was conducted is omitted as unimportant information (i.e., one has to search for it in primary sources).

But let us return to the contents of the book. In my opinion, one of its most interesting parts is the section "Arguments and Paradoxes of Weak Belarusian Identity", where Nelly Bekus rightly and properly contests one of the "axiomatic truths" of Belarusian studies - that of success of the authoritarian regime as resulting from the weak national identity. Extensive use of sociological material allows to note three tendencies that undermine this trend:

1. gradual departure of the Belarusian population away from supporting the project of unification with Russia and comprehension of national independence as a value;
2. strengthening of civic identity and pride for the country among Belarusian nationals;
3. erroneousness of political and linguistic diversification of Belarusian space where Belarusian-speakers are associated with democratic opposition and Russian-speakers with supporters of Lukašenka.

Sociological data allow Bekus to rightly question conventional opinions about awkwardness and immaturity of Belarusian identity. But stating the most obvious facts undermining this theory does not affect the basis of such stereotypization of Belarus, enrooted in production of the dominant knowledge, where the aims and priorities are specified and anything that moves away from instructions is disgraced and stigmatized. But Nelly Bekus's attempt to challenge this not only outdated but also harmful scheme is in itself worth supporting.

In the second chapter, Nelly Bekus shifts from direct analysis of the situation in Belarus and tries, firstly, to determine theoretical approaches to nation and nationalism (although, again, it would have been better to do it at the beginning of the book). Since a large body of comprehensive works is dedicated to this topic, no special revelations should be expected from this part of the book. We will only note that the author narrows down the current understanding of nations and nationalism to two main approaches: modernist (E. Gellner, E. Hobsbawm) and ethno-symbolic (A. Smith, M. Hroch). While describing, in her opinion, the main two approaches, Nelly Bekus again shifts to her favourite position of a meta-observer who provides a set of

different estimates but is incapable of choosing any particular approach to work with, due to her observer position. Hence we may naturally infer that for analysis of the Belarusian situation both modernist and ethno-symbolic approaches should be applied, as each of them has its own relevance.

In the second half of this chapter, the author tries to summarize the achievements of latest studies dedicated to implementation of the Soviet national policy. The fundamental revolution in the Soviet studies which was implemented over the past two decades and which is associated primarily with the names of American researchers T. Martin, R. Suny, and R. Brubaker,⁴ becomes essential for the author's understanding of the development of Belarusian national identity. The Soviet Union is now predominantly depicted not as a repressive empire that brutally suppressed any national ambitions of the enslaved peoples, but as a state in which institutional preconditions for development of a spectrum of national identities were created, which finally provided adequate opportunities for foundation of national states.

In particular, this approach to the history of the BSSR has been utilized by Siarhiey Bohdan in his article, arguing that the Soviet national policy has greatly contributed to the development of Belarusianness, although, of course, reduced to the socialist ideology. Unfortunately, his article "BSSR and Belarusian nationalism" (*Perekriostki*, No. 1-2/2009) was published not so long ago, so Nelly Bekus could not use it, and her text looks more like a schematic retranslation of achievements of the pioneer authors onto the Belarusian material. On the other hand, conclusions like "*the whole period of the Soviet power can be considered a specific process of designing a Belarusian nation that was incorporated into the ideological framework of the Soviet regime*" (p. 133) still delivers a fresh breath in shedding the light on the period of the BSSR. Let us hope that the book "Struggle over Identity" will also contribute to the burning issue – revision of the history of the Soviet period, which for now is primarily defined in the rhetoric of struggle or apologetics, though time has come to look at this period more objectively.

And finally, the third chapter consists of the results of Nelly Bekus's own research, which gives a reader tired of retelling thoughts of other authors an opportunity to turn to original findings. Unfortunately, the author could not introduce anything qualitatively new to the state of Belarusian research. The main conceptual idea – that in today's Belarus two versions of the national idea (official and alternative) are fighting for cultural and political hegemony – is also obtaining the status of a dead "axiomatic truth". That significant change in conceptualization which Nelly Bekus lists as her own achievement, namely the fact that she replaces one national idea with two

⁴ Terry Martin (2001). *Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Cornell University Press; Ronald Suny (1998). *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*. Oxford University Press; Rogers Brubaker (1996). *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and nationalism in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

(i.e., attributing the official project also with a national status, which not all researchers do) has long been apparent.

Therefore, this book becomes a part of a series of numerous studies of Belarus where our country is described as a space divided between the opposite “discourses”, each of which has its own logic, aims and values, practices and possibilities of institutional embodiment. This leads to an inevitable reduction of the complex reality, with a disregard to all the phenomena that exist “in between”, with a tendency to ignore interactions and mutual influences, transfers and borrowings (but, as we remember, the author is prone to static images, so there is nothing to be surprised at).

Description of these two modes of national idea begins with a paraphrase of disputes between the official and alternative historiographies. Unfortunately, this is one more basic scheme which, in spite of being widely used by many respected authors (R. Lindner, H. Sahanovič, A. Smaliančuk, A. Katliarčuk), has clearly lost any heuristic relevance. In the description by Nelly Bekus, this obsolete scheme is even more primitivized and turned into a complete cliché, which furthermore provokes a number of reasonable doubts in terms of methodology. First of all, the criteria of distinguishing between the formal and alternative schools remain very blurred, and the reference to the fact that historians are divided by geopolitical orientations (some support the version of a positive Russian influence, while others controvert it) is absolutely insufficient to substantiate such division. In addition, the comparison is mainly based on texts written at different times and in different genres, which is incorrect. One gets the impression that the author tried to present two maximally different versions of Belarusian history, while historiography itself became the victim of purity of representation of this confrontation.

For example, Bekus stresses that the period of the Belarusian territory being part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is evaluated negatively in the official version of history, while “alternativists” view it in a positive way. Already judging by this thesis, any person who is more or less acquainted with the development and status of Belarusian historiography can understand the degree of simplification and distortion of the content of discussions and position formation. Naturally, it is impossible to describe historiography without the procedures of reduction, but in this case it leads to complete destruction of the essence.

Further, in the following section, the alternative project of the Belarusian nation splits into two movements. One of them is described as a “European” project which regards Belarus as a European country. Articulation of this project is based on several basic principles: the liberal-democratic interpretation of nation (a nation can only be built on democratic basis), vision of the Belarusian past as part of European history with common political and moral values, and geopolitical orientation towards the West. But Nelly Bekus does

not stop at this and defines yet another version of alternative “Belarusianness” which is based on perception of Belarus as a country that does not belong either to the East or to the West. According to this interpretation, Belarus is at the crossroads of two civilizations, but does not completely belong to any of them and is doomed to look for its own way.

Such a division, in my opinion, looks artificial and objectionable. Already at the beginning, the researcher states that *“the two alternative concepts of Belarusianness not only do not contradict each other, but often join forces in their strive against the pro-Russianness dominating official culture and politics”* (p. 156). In fact, the rhetorical appeal to the “European” or “at the meeting point of civilizations” status of Belarus is not the grounds determining the differences in viewing the past, present and future of our country (and thus defining the political and cultural preferences). These two representations have already become standard clichés and can easily be substituted or even used together. And in this way they can be used with different political objectives, including some formulations of the state ideology. One can easily compile a set of quotations of Aliaksandr Lukašenka where he speaks about “Europeanness” of Belarus, or about our country being destined to link the West and the East. Consequently, we are dealing not with “discursive strategies” as Nelly Bekus tries to present it, but just with rhetorical figures.

Similarly, in the section dedicated to the Belarusian state ideology, the author tends to solidify the representation of the object which is eclectic and contradictory. Unfortunately, the origins of these contradictions are not presented, and neither are the ways of combination and the conflict of interests inherent in the project of creation of the state ideology. But the primacy of the idea of national independence laid in the foundation of this construct is emphasized quite fairly. That is why Nelly Bekus attributes the official ideology to national ideas, and in this we must agree with her.

Then, the author moves on to describe cultural manifestations of the “alternative” Belarusianness. Unfortunately, the initial approach of rigid confrontation of opposition versions plays its negative role here, as again, the metaphor of polarization denies any dynamics that still takes place in our country. For example, a movie by Andrej Kudzinienka “Mysteries. Occupation” is, according to Nelly Bekus, one of the manifestations of such alternative Belarusianness. Bekus writes about the film being banned in the official cultural space for explicit conflict to the foundational ideas of the official Belarusianness. Allegedly, the public fate of this movie is typical for the entire alternative Belarusianness that is ousted from the public space. But the latest developments have completely disproved these conclusions: the book “Struggle over Identity” was published on May 1, 2010, but in the summer same year the ban on screening the movie in Belarus was lifted. It was shown in cinemas, and moreover, broadcasted by the state television in

prime time. Kudzinienka himself has been a friend to Zamiatalin (director of “Belarusfilm”) for several years now, and is clearly favoured by the state cinematography. Or, does this fact also reflect the condition of the Belarusian alternative culture?

In fact, the only example really fitting in the abovementioned interpretation of alternative culture is that of the “Free Theatre” as this project successfully speculates on its repressed status and promotion of the democratic and European ideals under the “conditions of dictatorship”. Another example of alternative Belarusianness – the medieval reconstruction movement – rather destroys the image of the two warring camps, as it is not based on the logic of politics (government vs. opposition), has different origins and includes a variety of forms. It is, to a great extent, one of those “in between” phenomena upon which the Belarusian culture is mostly rested but which are often ignored by analytics trying to find a conflict and confrontation by any means possible. Nelly Bekus herself understands that the example of the reconstruction movement does not fit her criteria very well, but it does not make her give up the general scheme of the two discourses. Regretfully enough.

The book ends with description of the official politics of identity, which is presented through the standard signs: the “Slavianski Bazar” festival, the “Anastasija Sluckaja” movie, and public celebrations. Control over institutional resources allows the state to successfully implement its “national idea” which is based on the sense of belonging to the Belarusian people as a source of state sovereignty.

To sum it up, one should acclaim the publication of this book since generally an English-speaking reader can get very limited information of Belarus, both volume- and quality-wise. But in its essence, “Struggle over Identity” is rather a successor of those flaws in the body of Belarusian studies which Nelly Bekus mentions in the preface to her work. She is trying to articulate the points that have not yet been adequately perceived by many researchers (particular significance of the Soviet experience for formation of the Belarusian identity, inclusion of national interests into the foundation of the state ideology), but most of the basic schemes used by the author are clearly outdated and require critical revision. Most disappointing is the fact that the actual research part of the book (chapter 3), which examines the struggle of official and alternative versions of Belarusianness, is conceptually flawed and poorly outlined. Hopeful for a research that would open up new horizons, we have got a work that rather summarizes the critical moments in the study and representation of the Belarusian situation and is a strong argument for an urgent revision of this field.