A Brief Genealogy of the Crivitian Idea¹

Abstract

The author reviews in the article the main stages of the Crivitian «idea» evolution in the context of Belarusian political thought. The process of Crivitian «idea» development was divided in the article into four periods: the fixation (XIX— early XX), the conceptualization (in 1920s—40s), an interruption in representation (1950s—80s) and present state (since the end of 1980-ies). The author gives the main characteristics, political and cultural features of each period, along with political analysis of the Crivitian «idea» and its position among the other cultural and political projects.

Key words: Crivitian «idea», History of ideas, identity, Belarusian identity, nation-building in Belarus

"Kryvija" (Crivitia), "Rus" (Ruthenia) and "Litva" (Lithuania) – this is the threefold knot, the three-storey labyrinth where our national self has been meandering. (V. Lastouski)

The nation's genesis is an event which can never be completely centralized in an intellectual sense, and the national projects are never homogeneous. History's certain configuration and cultural-national belonging's elements are not fixed – they are part of the historical and cultural evolution. History's and identity's elasticity is particularly evident from the point of view of the history of ideas² which usually reflects excessiveness of political and

cultural projects, including radicalized ones. Of course, not all projects can be even partly embodied - still they can influence obliquely the political and intellectual evolution. The ideas reflect the political context's fullness and political activity's structure and logic which can be hidden or even unseen behind the political practices that have the central status. Besides, the ideas create politics' actual archive which can be used (and is used) under politically favorable conditions.

This article aims to describe (maybe quite sketchy, which is inevitable within the format of one article) the basic stages of the genesis of the "Crivitian idea"

¹ The source for translation is: Андрэй Казакевіч Кароткая генеалогія крыўскае ідэі // "Палітычная сфера" №6, 2006 с.4—10.

We use purposefully the notion of "the history of ideas" instead of the traditional "history of a thought"

(Crivitians is the name of East Slavic tribe) as a phenomenon of the Belarusian cultural and intellectual evolution. We use voluntarily the term "idea". It is also possible to talk about the "Crivitian project", "identity model", "theme", "problematic", etc. It is difficult to call it "an integrated Crivitian political project" (at least, prior to the 1990's), if not presuming upon mechanical reconstruction practices. What circulated within Crivitian problematic was not restrained by the frames of the "identity", even though identity was the basic cause of fighting. We include a wide spectrum of phenomena into the "Crivitian idea". This is the idea of "a change of the name" in order to completely decolonize the Belarusian's image of being part of Russia³, as well as an alternative project of the Belarusian identity and proposals of a new national cultural ground. Thus, our conditional term "idea" consists of various practices including different forms of Crivitian problematic, terminology and symbolic combined with diverse cultural and political models, but its main aspects are various identifications.

"Kryvija" ("Kryuja") [Crivitia, Crivia] is one of the two alternative versions of Belarus' identification and outward representation which were formed in the difficult conditions of the nation-

building during the 20th century and which appealed to the correspondent historical traditions4. The versions were wide-spread in the sphere of cultural production, while their representation on the level of institutional politics had a fragmentary character. The idea of Crivitia would often have a character of a dispute concerning the country's name; gradually it acquired more autonomous forms, turning into an alternative and means of (self-)criticism of the term "Belarus" and everything connected with it. This idea was also a cultural and literary metaphor, a symbol of ancientry and tradition.

Thereupon, the existence of "Crivitian problematic" in an extended sense of the national political and cultural project seems to be rather important. It reflects a certain way of thinking within the framework of the national movement and the way the problems of political and cultural development were apprehended. The "Crivitian idea" gave birth to its own version of history and a lot of concepts, but only few of them were fixed on the level of the wholenational representation.

It is wide-known that the term "Belarusians" used to be translated into foreign languages as "White Russians" and "Belarus"— as "White Russia", Wiessrussland etc. Such "translations" used to result in a misunderstanding when Belarusians were thought to be Russia's White Guards (who fought against the Bolsheviks). Anyway, these terms have always been a sign of Russia's dependence (Belarusian mythology, 2004).

⁴ The other alternative version is Litva (Lithuania, in its historical meaning, not to be confused with the present Baltic state) and "Litvinism" (Lithuanism) based on the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Genealogy of the "Crivitian topic"

The national and historical "memory" is a flexible phenomenon which can be changed and politically altered. Crivitian problematic as a phenomenon of Belarusian culture is strongly linked to the development of the Belarusian national movement and is an important episode of the battle for memory. Considering the "Crivitian idea's" genesis, there are four separate stages: fixation of Crivitian problematic (late 18th early 20th), conceptualization (1920's -1940's), break in cultural and political representation (1950's - 1980's), its revival and current stage of development (since 1980's - 1990's). The stage titles are conditional, and they, as well as the time frames of this division into periods, are to be revised in the future.

A slightly different division into periods of the "Crivitian idea" was proposed by V. Korbut (Korbut, 2005). It consists of the following stages: Period N1 is "Crivitian romanticism" (19th early 20th) which is practically equal in its chronologic frames to the Crivitian terminology's fixation and analyzes the same cultural events. We think the use of the term "romanticism" in this context is not justified. Even if it was "romanticism", it was not "Crivitian"5. Period N2 is "the idea's birth" (1920's), i.e. V. Lastouski's and J. Stankievic's activities and a discussion among the Belarusian movement concerning the term "Belarus" and its possible changes. Gradually, within the Crivitian discussion, there were signs of a project of another Belarusian identity and another political project at all, not quite streamlined though. Period N3 is "the Soviet crackdown" (1920's – 1930's) when the idea's carriers were eliminated and the idea's positions were criticized. Period N4 is "a thaw during a storm" (1940's), when Crivitian problematic was used by some Belarusian organizations during the Nazi occupation. Then, the following periods: 1940's – 1950's – the Crivitian idea among Belarusian immigrants and since 1990's – the current state of affairs.

Such division seems to be not quite systematic as its basic events are just presented chronologically. Probably, it was not the author's aim, but this article, according to the frame connected with the study of the ideas' evolution, aims to analyze the qualitative changes in the contents of Crivitian idea as a cultural and political phenomenon, therefore we think the use of our own division into periods is justified.

Fixation of Crivitian problematic

The period of fixation of the words "Crivitia", "Crivitian", etc. in ethnographic, literary and historical texts is not part of the history of the "Crivitian idea", but it influences the understanding of its origin. Crivitian problematics' appearance took place in the late 18th – early 19th century. "Problematic", as we put it, is the use of the Crivitian terminology with reference to those who lived on

The term "Crivitians" was used to identify and describe, but it was never used by Crivitians themselves.

the territory of Belarus, correspondent versions of the ancient history and a corresponding solution of the problem of ethnic identification of the local population who had no acknowledged (legitimate) and independent title. Some researchers can see a political implication here, i.e. a desire of Polish (Polishspeaking) ethnographers and historians to ruin the memory of affinity between Belarusians and Russians (Greenblat, 1963: 33), but there are obviously no grounds for that. Moreover, the term "Crivitians" was later used actively by scientists of pro-Russian orientation (P. Shpilevsky), while the term "Belarus" was applied in the Polish-speaking authors' works (J. Borszczewski).

The Crivitian terminology pertaining to Belarusians had a historiographic origin. The Polish historical tradition of the late 18th century expanded the Crivitian tribe's settlement zone in the early Middle Ages practically to the whole territory of the present Belarus. Of course, it does not correspond to the present historical knowledge (it is thought that Crivitians lived in the Northern and partly central regions of Belarus only), but it was a basis to consider Crivitians to be the direct ancestors of the Slavic population who were later called the Belarusians. The Crivitian vision of Belarus' ancient past is usually considered to be invented by A. Naruszewicz (1733 – 1796) whose wellknown work, The History of the Polish Nation, would settle Crivitians not only between the West Dzvina (Dvina) and the Dniapro (Dnieper) Rivers, but also in Palessie (Polesia), while Dregovichs and Radimichs were correspondently placed in Podlachia and Volhinia (Latyshonak, 2004: 198). Crivitians were prioritized in the context of this territory's political development in the ancient times (which, by the way, is still done sometimes in modern Belarusian historiography where the basic plots of the early Middle Ages are linked to the Principality of Polatsk/Polotsk).

During the 18th - early 19th century, Polish historiography was a natural and sometimes the only source of knowledge about Belarus' past, and the "Crivitian" understanding of the historical past of the local population started to appear in researches and literature. In this context, the term "Crivitians" and its derivatives were used in ethnographic texts as one of the titles of the local population, as well as a description of the traditional cultural phenomena. There was not a legitimate and acknowledged title for the local population then and "Crivitians" was used together with "Belarusians". In this sense, the Crivitian terminology was synonymous with the Belarusian one, though the former was more like an obsoletism. It can be proved by J. Czeczot who used the word "Crivitian" and I. Borszczewski who used the word "Belarus" in the early 19th century in their texts which played their role in the country's outward representation. There are no examples of using the word "Crivitians" as a native name of the Belarusian population, except of some quite contentious cases. The main fact of fixation of such identification is the 1860's statistic data. so-called Parochial Lists which are now considered to be uncreditable.

Thus, the Crivitian terminology was used to describe the population of that time Belarus and to appeal to its past.

However, during the 19th century, the word "Crivitians" turned gradually into an obsoletism, giving central place in politics and researches to the word "Belarus". The main factor here was the political context, when the Russian authorities launched their colonial project to turn everybody on the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania into "Russians", with its corresponding political, cultural and researching practices.

Conceptualization

While during the previous period the Crivitian terminology was used to define and recall the past, then during the following stage the Crivitian idea turned into an intellectual trend, thus changing the situation. The concept of "Crivitia" (which later became a system which we call tentatively "the idea") was perceived as a means of a final decolonization of the national oneness. In its turn, "Belarus" (Byelorussia i.e. "White Rus\Ruthenia\Russia) was thought to be strongly connected with a colonial dependence on the Russian Empire. During this period, Crivitia was used in the majority of cases as a synonym of Belarus, but it reflected different cultural and historical connotations. Besides, some Belarusian intellectuals began to intuitively apply the Crivitia idea to defeat the Slavic (Russian) centrism, also with the help of the later actualized Baltic elements. Sometimes it was scientifically grounded, sometimes it looked hardly probable. Still, the obvious aim was to finally decolonize the native name and the nation's representation⁶. Alas, the new title of Belarus had its difficulties, which can be proved by the fact that it was not realized in the reality. As a vivid example the usage of various names of Belarus by J. Stankievic's: Kryvija (The History of Kryvija-Belarus', 1941); Kryuja (Kryuja-Belarus in the past', 1942); Kryvich-Belarus [A short history of Kryvich-Belarus, 1951] (Stankevicz, 2003: 48-188). However, the title Crivitia (Kryvija) was used most of all.

Besides, it is very important that "Crivitia" and its derivatives became a wide-spread metaphor and a symbol of Belarus' ancientry and historical past, which were supported on the whole-cultural level and used in literary and other texts by, for example, L. Hienijus, U. Zylka, J. Kupala and others.

As for the "Crivitian idea" itself, in the majority of cases it functioned as an idea of the native name (usually, it was a question of a parallel usage of both titles, at least in the beginning), which was supported by a number of influential activists of the national movement (especially by V. Lastouski and J. Stankievic). Step-by-step, the discussion concerning the name received an additional meaning and turned into attempts of a new interpretation of the "Belarusian character" and a search for authenticity with a special attention to the ancient history. V. Lastouski wrote, "Today, when the nation is trying to become alive again and seeking for every hue of its individuality in its language,

Compare it to the opposition of "Ukraine" and "Malorossia" (Small Russia) in the Ukrainian context of the 19th – early 20th century.

rites, arts and literature, it is crucial to recall its real name which reminds us of our nation's better days. It is important that the name is not just a colorful addition to somebody else's title (i.e. "White" Russia), but an independent individuality (Lastouski, 1997: 384). The search for individuality and freedom from dependence and "Whole-Russia-ness" was the basic argument of those who supported the Crivitian idea. Still, the idea rarely left the borders of the discussion concerning the country's name. The Belarusian intellectuals only had several unintelligible and antilogous texts which could not really describe what should happen to this idea when it would reach a higher (e.g. political) level.

Regardless of the idea's insufficient ideological and political completeness, the "Crivitian topic" was noticed in the Belarusian Soviet Socialistic Republic, where it was criticized and suppressed by the Soviet official structures who thought it to be a sign of extreme chauvinism and ardent nationalism, or even fascism. Since the 1930's, the "Crivitian theme" together with other signs of "nationalism" was called "the ideological enemy of the Soviet understanding of the Belarusian national identity" and eliminated from all spheres of life together with its carriers.

During the Nazi occupation (1941–1944), the Crivitian topic had a kind of a revival in Belarus, thanks to J. Stankievic who printed his text-books and articles in the media. After the war, the Crivitian discussion was completely annihilated in Belarus – it continued its existence in exile where it had some institutional forms (e.g. Crivitian

Gymnasium in Regensburg, Germany, 1940's) (Korbut, 2005: 65) and finally ebbed away. Even J. Stankievic changed his mind and became an adherent of "Grand Litva" (Grand Lithuania).

A break in the cultural and political representation

A cultural and political break of the Crivitian idea and problematic after the World War II was obviously mandatory under the conditions of the Soviet strict control. The Soviet version of the history of Belarus was created before the World War II; after the war it received its final form based on sequacious Russia-centrism with all the corresponding elements (theory of the one pre-Russian nation, Lithuania's and Poland's oppression of Belarusians in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, "an ultroneous reunion with the Great Russian nation", etc.) This vision was fixed in the academic sphere, thus being the only possible variant on the public level. Under such circumstances, the Crivitian idea which appeared in the 1920's as a form of a radical opposition to Russia-centrism and could not have any chances to be represented. There were no informal groups, including few nationally conscious ones, who formulated this idea, either. The alternative's possibility left the level of a public discussion and political project and went down to archeology and ethnic studies which seemed to be too far from politics.

During this break of its representation, the important thing for the future of the Crivitian idea became accumulation of empirical materials concerning the Baltic-Slavic connections and the

Baltic influence on the Belarusians' origin. During this period, certain events which influenced a lot the interpretation of the Crivitian idea into its modern understanding, i.e. a combination of the Crivitian topic and the Baltic theory of the Belarusians' ethnogeny. The authors of the 1920's - 1940's described differently the ethnic evolution's process, but almost all of them were united in describing Belarusians as a Slavic nation. The Baltic character had no attractive cultural and political image, at least this image could not compete with the image of Slavia. After the World War II, linguistic, archeological and ethnic studies opened new possibilities in this direction

Since the late 1960's, there was a keen interest in the hypothesis that the Baltic tribes took part in the Belarusians' ethnogeny (through a Slavic-Baltic symbiosis), which was proposed by the Russian archeologist V. Sedov whose researches became the basic grounds for legitimizing this vision. His concept openly contradicted the conventional scheme of the Slavic ethnogeny, but it was accepted by a lot of Belarusian archeologists and Belarusian culture researchers (Kryvaltcevicz, 1999). The problem of the Belarusians' origin started to gain a political coloration. In December 1973, a scientific conference, "The Belarusians' Ethnogeny", was banned as the Baltic problematic was planned to be discussed there. Thus, the accumulation of empirical materials allowed to guestion the theory of the exclusively Slavic origin of Belarusians and to discuss the degree of the Baltic influence. The foundation was laid, and then it was rather easy to declare that Belarusians are just

"Slavic-speaking" Baltic people, which was done in the early 1990's.

In the 1970's - 1980's, ethnologic and linguistic hypotheses gradually and logically evolved into a certain understanding of the ethnic and national history and under the favourable conditions of the 1980's transformed into political phenomenon. At that time, the "Baltic theory" became quite popular. The combination of the revived "Crivitian idea" and the "Baltic topic" was rather natural. The Baltic theory created a good ground for seeking for the authentic "path of birth" which coincided with the Crivitian idea's logic as a cultural symbol of the tradition and ancientry. Thus, some national movements perceived the nation's revival as a search for the Baltic roots, as well as an introduction of a new national name. The new name was considered to be more natural and justified than "Belarus". The Crivitian idea completely joined the Baltic theory, and it is what makes the modern stage of the Crivitian idea's evolution peculiar.

At the late 1980's - early 1990's, Belarus saw a boom of the Baltic theory which was spurred by the tendency of destroying the Soviet historiography's myths. It concerned both the Belarusian-speaking circles and the wider public. For instance, the initiators of the Palesian (Polesian) movement, which appeared at that time, announced the existence of a third Baltic nation and a fourth East-Slavic language (Dyn'ko, 2000). Their adherence to the concept of the Baltic ethnogeny was illustrated by the title of the new nation and the region - Yetvyz, a modification of the name of Yotvingians, a West-Baltic

tribe, who were thought to be direct ancestors of Palesians (i.e. those Slavic people who live in Palesie) (Tserashkevich, 1994: 69). M. Sheliahovich, the leader of the New-Yotvingian movement, included some Baltic words into his variant of the Palesian language.

Revival and the current stage of development

Some representatives of the Belarusian movement needed the idea of "Crivitia" due to the similar motives and logics as in the 1920's - 1940's. It did not reach the political sphere however it was introduced into cultural and intellectual discussions. Among the main motives, there was a search for an authentic individuality, some dissatisfaction with the "Belarusian idea" (as it is full of elements of dependence) and a desire to destroy the Russia-centrism model of the national history and culture. The Crivitian paradigm seemed to be a possible alternative and means of breaking the situation of dependence, and it still has this meaning now.

In brief, the Crivitian movement is now mostly represented in the cultural space by the Center of Ethnocosmology Kryuja (Crivitia) created in the early 1990's by the artist T. Kashkurevic and philosopher S. Sanka (San'ko, 1993). The Center's activity has had various levels; its work has not been stable. First, its main concern was archeology, ethnography, ethnology and traditional culture (oppressed for a long time in public conscience), combining scientific studies and different practices of sacralizing Belarusian ethnic culture, including attempts of creating a neo-

pagan movement. The Center organized some international conferences. as well as some musical and cultural festivals, and printed some books. In 1993, the first conference, Baltic Tribes And Belarusians' Ethnogeny, which was dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the banned in 1973 conference, announced the formula: "Belarusians are the Slavic-speaking Baltic nation" (Dzermant, San'ko, 2005: 235). The idea's initiators actively studied ethnography, linguistics and the allied subjects in order to prove their thesis. At the end of the 1990's, the Crivitian idea joined political theories, mostly of the European "new rights". First of all, the young generation seemed to be politically aware. It is fair to say that the signs of the Belarusian traditionalism are of the Crivitian character.

Besides, the Kryuja Center plays a considerable role in the modern conceptualization of the Belarusian ethnic culture when there is an evident stagnation of such work among the official institutions. They published the volume Belarusian Mythology (Belarusian mythology, 2004). In the 1990's, there was a specialized journal, Kryuja: Crivica. Baltica. Indogermanica; it was issued tree times: in 1994, 1996 and 1998. The journal was devoted to the studies of traditional culture of Belarusians and other Indo-European nations, as well as to searches for the Baltic elements in the Belarusian culture and Belarusian heathendom (Paznjakou, 2000).

Kryuja's immediate continuation is the Druvis almanac, only one issue was published in 2005. If Kryuja was a specialized edition in the field of the ethnic history, then Druvis was more diversi-

fied, representing the Crivitian paradigm from different points of view, including literature, folklore and politics. The edition secured a new stage in developing the "Crivitian community" as it was issued with the assistance of the young generation (Kazakevich, 2006).

The Crivitian idea's presentation and its influence on some public minds was implemented through various texts and literature where Crivitia was a metaphor, a symbol and a concept (R. Baradulin, P. Vasiucenka, S. Dubaviec, etc.) A wide use of the Crivitian terminology was helped by the Crivitian centers' influence. Crivitia was an important image of the past, mostly the history prior to the 13th century, the Principality of Polatsk, which unlike the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was not claimed by anyone and which unlike Belarus (Byelorussia) could not be considered as an invention of the colonial dependence.

The basic peculiarities of the current stage of the Crivitian idea: firstly, it has no direct succession of the previous periods; secondly, it is oriented on traditional culture and the Baltic theory of ethnogeny which is now not just a base, but the main direction of the cultural and researching activities; thirdly, its critical attitude towards the "Belarusian idea", sometimes with the elements of "Lithuania-philia" (Korbut, 2005:53).

The "Crivitian idea" was formed in the 1920's when the Belarusian national movement had already been legitimized on the cultural and political levels and could be considered to be one of the forms of dissatisfaction with the dependent and non-self-governing status of the Belarusian culture and self-awareness. Some intellectuals thought that the use of another native name, more authentic and more ancient, as well as a review of the history and the identity projects, would be an important way of seeking for the national individuality and completing the decolonization process. Their desires did not come true, but they influenced some sectors of the Belarusian culture.

After the violent break during the 1950's - 1980's, the idea was revived because the factors, which were put in its foundation, were still valid. However the majority of the society either knows nothing of this idea, or considers it as a poetical and historical symbol. For some people, it is a completed interpretation paradigm of history, tradition, language and culture. The idea's present representation unites organizations and projects which identify themselves as the "Crivitians" (e.g. Kryuja Center and Druvis journal), as well as a lot of texts and literature where the Crivitian idea can function as a metaphor or a symbol. a cultural or political project.

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