

Dilemmas of choice

By Vital Silitski

One of the respondents gave a genially concise and accurate explanation of the project. 'One should be someone', said Pavel Daneika, an economist and businessman. The questions definitely implied one more related requirement, 'One should be somewhere'.

So, why do we look for an answer to the question 'Where are we?' while trying to determine who we are? May be it is not a matter of excessive politicization of identity projects being discussed at present, because politicization is inevitable under the political, social, geographic and geopolitical conditions in which the nation is being shaped in Belarus. In any case, attempts to establish identity of the state and nation (or refusal to do so) are bound to change the balance of power, status, influence of political, social and intellectual actors. To a considerable degree, an answer to the question 'Where are we?' is intended to help define the substance of national identity – what moments in history we should be proud of or ashamed of; who should we call heroes as an example for our children to follow and who are traitors; what events should be remembered and what should we avoid to mention. One may question the need for including these elements of national mythology in the national project. But it is evident that the current political regime in Belarus also picks certain myths in an effort to prolong its existence. It is also evident that it has obvious political goals: to preserve itself as long as possible. Lukashenka has sent a challenge and we should respond to it or accept what he offers (or someone would say imposes on) us.

Therefore, it is natural that to define the Belarusians as a nation, we sought to associate them with ideas that determine civilization patterns such as 'Europe', 'Russia', 'the Slavic community' etc. I place a particular emphasis on ideals as distinguished from real geographical and political borders. (Although unlike the European Union, it is difficult to draw the border of Europe – either along the River Bug, or near Orsha, or along the Urals or one may even include Australia and New Zealand depending on his or her personal perception of Europe.) But to find out where we are, everyone refers to an imaginary, not real community or civilization. For example, a picture of Russia drawn by the Belarusian ruling elite and public often differs from Russia as it was or is in reality. The misconception is largely to blame for confusion that we often observe during the show called 'Belarusian-Russian integration'. This is also the reason why many pro-Russian democrats became disillusioned with the possibility of political changes in the country under influence from the East. The same concerns Europe, even to a greater degree. Discussion of Belarus' role in Europe and its prospects in terms of EU membership would make no sense if we viewed the subject differently from other Europeans (it would be the same if others viewed us differently from the way we see ourselves). It is not a question of whether we know or do not know each other. (Regretfully, the Belarusians have a very limited political, intellectual and human contact with the rest of the world and Europe particular). 'The other' is, like we, in the process of transformation and re-identification, not a fixed structure. The other can also be confused and disoriented. Whereas our own perception of ourselves could be a starting point or a stimulus for certain social modification, for adjusting the reality to a certain idea (this is what a national project is about in general), it is much more difficult, or even impossible to change others. But it may be possible to change the way we are seen in the bigger world that we seek to enter.

It is primarily the national and cultural elite that deals with the establishment of national identity and civilization choices. 'Creativity of the masses' cannot be ruled out, but it is obvious that few ordinary people can achieve

a moral and intellectual breakthrough. Or let us put it this way: those who prove to be able to deal with these issues become the national elite.

Therefore, the elite are not those who talk more than others. The elite are those who are heard better than others. According to the former criteria, the elite would be limited to Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarusian television show presenters and those who write and edit their texts. This book, however, presents views of representatives of the political, cultural and intellectual communities. These are people whose status and achievements make them entitled to be elite under normal conditions. The book mainly presents views of 'the counter-elite' – those who resist political dominance and ideology imposed by the current political regime. The pro-government camp is represented by figures prominent and particularly conspicuous by their attitude to the issues raised by authors.

The counter-elite includes representatives of diverse circles – politicians and cultural figures, journalists and economists, writers and human right defenders.

Judging by the composition of respondents, authors have managed to bring together people who can give detailed and clear answers to the above-mentioned questions. Do not only they offer an insight into the Belarusians' true nature, but they also visualize the future. This vision helps define in a way the public moral code and legitimize or cast aside certain political and cultural practices. The real elite cannot and should not impose its visions. It should rather think of ways to have its vision accepted by the public. This is the main difference of the elite from the regime, junta or executive vertical. On the other hand, if it recycled mass mentality stereotypes in order to get recognition, it could hardly be distinguished from the masses. One should keep a tricky balance between pragmatism and intellectual timidity.

One should not expect a national project to be formulated in one book. Even so, this book is of great value because it offers an opportunity to see whether the Belarusian elite (of course I mean the counter-elite in the first place) is prepared to give the answers. Analyses of the answers can give rise to polemics since the author of this article also has views that differ

from that of respondents. By no means, I want my thoughts to be taken as criticism. Instead, I would like to highlight, to my view, issues on which there is no consensus in society or among the elite. I will try to find where we are in our reflections and aspirations, and whether we have any aspirations at all, as Uladzimer Matskevich put it, 'think Belarus' and I would add 'the world around us'.

Who are we?

How do we imagine ourselves? Who are we or who should we be? There were different answers to this question. The opinions of respondents appear to prove that Belarusians' sense of identity is taking shape. Many say this in their answers (Kalinkina, Litsvina, Buhrova and Vardamatski). This is a process of understanding that the Belarusians are different from others, rather than identifying what unites them in their own world and in their society. Iryna Buhrova says that a distance from other states and peoples helps shape national identity. (Kasya Kamotskaya reflects on such a negative identity in a bit different context). However, the external distance does not reflect on the internal state, consolidation, a sense of unity and proximity. As Kasya Kamotskaya said hesitantly, 'Nationals of other countries would probably describe what is a Belarusian. But to me... it seems the process is still underway'.

What direction has it taken? Several respondents (Dynko, Vyachorka, Buraukin and Sannikau) noted the importance of the national language and culture. Interestingly, Yauhen Babosau, a representative of the official side (the scholar who failed in his effort to squeeze *Belaruskasts* into Lukashenka's ideology), offered the most succinct and challenging wording of the idea, 'Belarusian identity is the *Belarusian national language*'. Few respondents, except, strange as it may seem, for representatives of the ruling elite, make references to collective memory and the historical path of Belarusians (though Usevalad Yancheuski says that the Belarusians' main trait is their Soviet mentality, and many would subscribe to this point of view). Others avoid direct answers or say that classic language-based national identity is

impossible in Belarus, 'In my opinion, at the beginning of the 21st century, Belarusian identity, based on the principle of ethnicity, including its fundamental elements such as the common territory, blood, history and culture, is not that inadequate but it does not have clear prospects' (Manayeu). Abramava put it straightforwardly, 'With jingoistic slogans put aside, being a Belarusian means feeling that you belong to this land'.

Manayeu, above all, means to say that the so-called 'Belarusian-language national project' – building a state and a nation on the common language, ethnicity, culture and history foundation as proposed by Belarusian nationalists (although I doubt that such a common project exists) – is not feasible. However, with language and culture left off the agenda, we would have to answer the question 'what is instead?' or 'what else?'. Indeed, the lack of a unique national language does not necessarily mean that a nation cannot be founded without a common cultural code (the United States is often cited as an example). Common citizenship also is not an ultimate solution. Nearly everyone would subscribe to Vasil Lyavonau's statement, 'to be a Belarusian means above all to love the Belarusians and Belarus and contribute to prosperity of our country'. But one could love the Belarusians and Belarus when the country was part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union.

In their reflections on national traits of Belarusians, most respondents give priority to external, psychological (kindness, tolerance) or behavioral (adaptability) factors. To cite a few examples: 'This reveals one Belarusian feature – the intention to survive by all means, without caring about anything else. This may be a correct approach but if you are a human, a social being, you should be guided by the God-set principles and not only think about saving your own skin' (Fralou). 'I knew the rural type of Belarusians who are serious people who do care about their property and household' (Shushkevich). These examples, both positive and not, mirror the Belarusians' perception of themselves. However, such reflections can create illusions and myths. Are we as much tolerant as we describe ourselves? If we seriously care about our property and household, who else does not?

Therefore, the question remains open as to what makes Belarusians a cultural nation and what is the substance of their culture. Considerable part of the Belarusian elite, especially the counter-elite uses negation to describe identity – ‘we are not like others’ (see above quotes by Buhrova and Kamotskaya). This is a natural phase in the identity establishment process, a phase that Belarusian society is going through. But actions to set and achieve certain collective objectives are possible only on condition of positive self-identification (we are...). It is not enough to identify oneself with a territory (Abramava) because such identification would not help make that area legitimate. Only the community that inhabits it can make it legitimate.

The question of cultural identity rises again and we cannot dodge it. I do not mean to give priority to one project or another. For instance, if we choose bilingualism, it is necessary to detail what it means (the current authorities use bilingualism to disguise Russification) and how we interpret and establish bilingualism as a national cultural feature. Failure to identify the cultural code of the nation leaves a room for the identification of broad masses ‘with that unusual political regime’ as Dynko put it, and the regime gets an opportunity to create its own cultural code for the nation.

Where are we?

Only some of the respondents offered a meaningful idea of the Slavic community (which to a certain degree testifies to the ephemeral nature of the concept), the question about Russia dealt with politics, so let us discuss our outlook on Europe. For the time being, the Belarusians can only dream of Europe. A nation that is geographically located in Europe has the right to do so just as Europeans have the right to consider or not to consider Belarus part of their community or culture. There are no general rules for determining cultural or civilization borders of Europe. There are more or less generally accepted geographical borders of Europe (although the EU says in its official documents on the New Neighborhood Policy that the issue of further EU enlargement may be raised only after Europe’s borders are

finalized). Belarus is a member of some European institutions (the OSCE), but not all (the Council of Europe and the EU). Membership of most of these organizations may be only a formal sign that the country belongs to Europe, but formalities often play an unexpected role. The author of this article once told an audience in Brussels that the Belarusians could not be deprived of European identity (or dream) as long as the country is a member of UEFA. The statement triggered a heated debate.

Europe is not a nation (independently on Habermas and Derrida, who try to construct a 'European identity' as opposition to the Americanism) and it is impossible to determine what makes us Europeans unless we understand what makes us a nation (if we want to), is impossible without definition of a nation. Naturally, we can try to agree, for instance, to accept unilaterally all European rules on October 1 as national law. But when we come across the first manifestation of European bureaucracy's idiocy (let's say, strawberry should be precisely so long, and in order to exchange a lamp on a high ceiling, we should mount scaffolds for several thousands of dollars), we will ask ourselves why we need it and who we are to need it. The general can be understood in particulars and Vyachorka has a point when he says, 'European identity manifests itself only in national identities'. (American philosopher Francis Fukuyama contends in a recent article that the dilution of national identity in EU countries leads to certain erosion of European civilization values and causes social tensions and crises. The most pressing problem is integration of national and religious minorities – the aboriginals of old Europe are less and less in a position to define and formulate what distinguishes this community, what is its cultural code, 'civic religion' and how an emigrant from Morocco or Senegal can eventually integrate.)

Our potential elite (the counter-elite in the first place) has an idea of Europe based on the recognition of existence of 'European civilization' and the acceptance of the so-called European values such as Christianity, rationalism and dialogue (Daneika); 'the type of civilization that imposed this civilization on the whole world' (Shushkevich); 'the concept of democracy and the concept of civilization, which I consider suitable for Belarus'

(Buraukin); 'Europe is the world of wise mutual tolerance' (Vardamatski). Many respondents tend to idealize Europe ('Europe is a place where a new system of human values has been formulated and implemented. This is the place where people live like I would like to live' (Protska); 'it is the top standard in many areas of society, politics and economy' (Kalyakin); 'Europe means cultural values, general human values, something what is important to a majority of the population' (Abramava). However, some representatives of the ruling elite do not share this opinion: 'Europe has more often than not drawn various nations in troubles, wars and bloodshed. Recall who attempted to invade our land in the past!' (Kastsyan). Valery Fralou defines Europe as 'not America': 'if we compare the United States with Europe, the latter is more democratic, closer to us and has milder manifestations of democracy than the United States which is making much effort to help even those countries that do not want to become a democracy', and Zhanna Litvina as 'not Belarus': 'to me Europe is a society without the mad, insane, immoral propaganda and brainwashing'.

The potential elite, except for a few supporters of a geographic concept of Europe (Ulakhovich and Kebich), who believe that Belarus has been and will always be part of Europe, think in terms of values and civilization harmony. Few members of this group can admit that Belarus shares some European civilization values: 'Europe means Christianity, rationalism and a dialog' (Daneika); while others say that the country is not yet up to standard: 'a small group of intellectuals have formulated ideas on what this place should be like, pro-European ideas, but they have not yet been fully embraced by the people' (Aleksiyevich); 'I believe that this is just a historic accident and everything will fall into its right place in due course, maybe in ten, five or fifty years' (Kalinkina). Milinkevich says that Belarus will return on the European path: 'we are an anomaly in the European family', but 'Belarus will never disappear from the map of Europe'. Some respondents conclude that Europe is not ours: 'there is a civilization rift on the borders of Belarus, Russia caused by different modes of thinking in the two countries and the other part of Europe' (Fralou).

The association of oneself with one community or another is a matter of choice ('Have you ever heard a Belarusian saying, 'I am a European'? It happens very rarely. And representatives of other nations do say this, they say, 'We are Europeans, and that is why...' – Buhrova). A collective choice is always a combination of individual choices. So far Belarusians may be fated to move closer to European civilization individually and this is not unusual. Timothy Garton Ash, a prominent social philosopher, noted that Soviet-era pro-democracy dissidents in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary who internalized the West-declared values are somewhat more entitled to be individual members of the European community than certain countries to be collective members. Therefore, Abramava's complaints that Belarus' contacts with the EU have been privatized by part of the political opposition are unfounded. It is natural that people close in spirit and values find a common language easier.

The same concerns the other side, which is supposed to recognize us as members of their community. Other Europeans should also decide if we are of their kind, as Vyachorka put it 'not exotic'. However, it is not just about persuading the French, Poles or Cyprians that we are 'not exotic'. The notions of European values, European identity and Europe are not static. An endless and often futile search for own identity, the demographic crisis and economic stagnation, old Europe's pathological fear of the Polish plumber, Paris' ruined suburbs, cartoon scandals, murders of politicians and journalists in the Netherlands, political correctness that forces journalists to stop short of identifying a woman who intended to use her child as a bomb – this is also Europe. On the other hand, Europe can take us or leave us as a whole with all our 'weaknesses', our 'tolerance', moderate temper and Chernobyl.

It should be noted that European integration is a very conservative ideology. The EU enlargement livened up a discourse based on notions 'freedom', 'democracy', 'human rights', 'a free market economy', 'tolerance' and 'equality', and refreshed an understanding of European civilization as free world. The enlargement helped the rest of Europe return to its original ideals from various 'post' and 'anti' notions (postmodernism, post-Christianity, post-

nationalism, anti-Americanism, antiglobalism etc.), which invade the minds of those who 'think Europe' in Europe. Therefore, the main asset that Belarus can give Europe is not its kind nature, hardworking people, stability or even human potential and culture (Russia can offer the same), but an impulse to rethink and revive the values, if we can give such an impulse.

However, with every new twist of integration the concept of Europe as civilization of freedom becomes less topical as the shadow of the existential enemy – the East or Soviet Communism – disappears, and those trying to catch the departing train find it more and more difficult to reanimate the romanticism of founding fathers and heroics of 1989. Actually, the fact that Belarus is the last fragment of the defunct East (Russia still is a special case) does not mean that the rest of Europe wants to add this fragment to its mosaic, no matter how Vyachaslau Kebich may wish it to be so.

Integrating and achieving certain cultural and civilization unity is not an act of selling or preparing for sale. Naturally, we offer ourselves, as we are, with all our real or imaginary strengths and weaknesses.

What do we choose?

One of the undeniable features of 'the Belarusian national character' is inclination to avoid tough choices and fear of historical and political Rubicons. Some of the respondents consider it a blessing: 'we have refused to make a choice between the civilizations. But it was a kind of a choice too. Anyway, we should not hurry but wait until international policies take a more definite form' (Abramava). But others disagree that Belarusians are reluctant to choose: 'Apart from a clear knowledge that we are aware of, we have hidden feelings about reality and they emerge only when we have to make a choice. As the Belarusians have not yet had a choice and faced this problem, their feelings remain unarticulated. But I still have the impression that an overwhelming majority of the Belarusians have made an inner decision. And totally' (Daneika).

The elite's attitude to the issue is similar to what is inside ordinary people's heads and souls. Not all admit that a choice is inevitable. ('It should

not be a choice between one and the other. It should be a choice of both. It would be adequate to the nation's character, mentality, economic situation and geopolitical position' Vardamatski). Others hope that there will be no need to choose a path as external conditions change. ('But the EU tends to develop. And if Russia joins the EU, Belarus also will do so sooner or later. How can it be other way? If, say, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland are there, where will Belarus be? It also will be part of the European Union' – Babosau; 'It is evident that theoretically, being within Europe and a member of the European Union is ideal for Belarus. But I think this is possible only if Russia joins the EU' Kalinkina). Few respondents are decided about the country's choice. 'We need to choose something! In general, I back a pretty close union with Russia. Of course, Russia also should be a bit different' (Fralou). 'I am confident that Belarus must join only united Europe, the European Union' (Sannikau).

Respondents' understanding of the question of choice differs. Some believe that the choice is about integration and closer economic and political ties, while others think of bringing Belarus closer inside to one community or the other. The two aspects are not fully connected. A civilization choice is not about neighbors (there has been no choice of neighbors since 1945) or economic partners – it is impossible to change geography, this is why pipelines that pump oil and gas from Russia to the EU run cross Belarus. Economic integration is possible and underway with both Russia and the EU (as Kasya Kamotskaya noted sadly, Russia supports the dictatorship with gas and oil and the EU does the same. 'They buy oil from us and squeal with delight'.) Therefore, Belarus can have close ties with both (regretfully for some Belarusian politicians and intellectuals, regret that such a coexistence does not help make a political and civilization choice, but strengthens authoritarian presidential absolutism). However, it is hardly possible to blend Europe and Russia in political institutions, civic culture, attitudes to human rights and liberties – all that determines a choice of civilization. This would be a short-lived hybrid vulnerable to internal crises and destined to mutate into something more definite (like our neighbors Russia and

Ukraine). Finlandization suggested by Andrey Dynko is not an option. When part of the Soviet Union, Finland had no say on its military, political and economic relations, but internally it belonged to Europe. I would also call into question the statement by Aleh Manayeu that it is necessary to change the government first and afterward make a choice. The choice is not a result but a cause of power struggle. It is crucial for rallying voters and winning political battles. A proposal that does not meet with support is doomed. However, the lack of any proposal even more definitely programs to failure those who avoid formulating and pressing it.

This position 'between the two worlds' may be a natural stage in political development and nation building. But I have serious grounds to doubt that this is really so. Balancing between the two civilizations would be possible if communities on both sides of the former Soviet border still had illusions about a bigger alliance, for instance a Europe-Russia bloc (and all between these two ones), if both sides were undecided about their future direction. There is a fast process of political, institutional and cultural identification. The world is changing and if we fail to change together, there is a big chance that we will be left behind with what we've got.

Evidently, the Belarusian elite and counter-elite in the first place has just started looking for answers as to who and where Belarus and the Belarusians should be. So far we mostly replicate elements of mass consciousness than give answers or a search for answers. This proves the irrelevance of speculations by politicians and analysts on the existence of 'national Belarusian- or Russian-language projects, or other ones'. We have yet to formulate them. There is little clarity on how to select one, and its implementation is a long way off.

In general, the book mirrors the condition of Belarusian society as a whole and its intellectual elite in particular. Society atomization fragments the elite, deprives it of forums and media for discussion and dialogues within

the intellectual and political community, and of an opportunity to receive feedback. Often it may seem that we have too many current political and other problems and it is not time to reflect on high matters. But failure to break this circle, and begin a dialogue and a search for answers means to reconcile oneself with the fact that the nation will be created in the image of its current leader. The Belarusian elite is left with very few options and little time to prevent this.

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