

Identity in an Autocratic State –

Or What Belarusians Talk About When They Talk About National Identity¹

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Abstract

How does the role of citizens change in the interpretation and production of national identity in an authoritarian political system? To explore the discursive role of the authoritarian political stability on public perceptions of their national identity, the study examines how categories of national are appropriated and internalized in identity talks among Belarusian citizens. The article presents a bottom-up perspective on national identification in Belarus based on the analysis of six focus group discussions with Belarusian citizens. The main objective is to observe which national practices hold symbolic significance to citizens and what meaning they invest when they replicate and re-enact different identity markers, bearing in mind the contingencies of the everyday life and the authoritarian political context. In my analysis I evaluate cross-group and intergroup discursive variations in responses and repertoires of the volunteered participants according to the principles of agreement and disagreement. The study suggests that public conformity with regime ideational practices does not equal political allegiance to the current political regime. Even when identity repertoires replicate the identity discourses from the official state ideology, citizens attach their own meaning and interpretations to these identity markers. However, I argue that the authoritarian context plays its role in the way identity repertoires are enacted and talked about. Integrating performative aspects of identity talks into my analysis, I observe how the participants consciously reflect on the sensitivity of political topics and how they prioritize politically neutral narratives.

Keywords: *Nationalism, collective belonging, identity practices, Belarus, authoritarianism, ethnography*

Introduction

Discussions on Belarusian national identity have been perplexed by the lack of national consciousness among Belarusian citizens in the aftermath of state independence in 1991. This puzzling lack of national orientation has guided a significant number of studies on the history, culture and politics of the country, aimed at understanding which national identity mechanisms

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are in place: indeed, the issue of national identity has never been absent from intellectual debates in Belarusian studies.² The literature has covered various issues ranging from the ethnic and civic dichotomy³ via competing identity discourses⁴, and the impact of state ideology⁵ to the language question⁶. While the effects of the political regime on the discussion of national identity have remained a prominent focus⁷, the stability of the authoritarian system as such has not been seen as essential in such studies. An analytical model receptive to the influences of the political context might provide fresh insights into how people's perspectives on identity develop within the stabilized political system.

The “everyday nationalism”⁸ approach draws attention to the implications of analyzing national identity through units of predetermined groups, urging scholars to examine practices of collective belonging. The everyday nationalism perspective on identity within the nationalism studies has questioned the stability of identity groups⁹. Capturing identity dynamics necessitates taking account of ever-changing identity repertoires and a range of political contexts.

² Important works on Belarusian national identity published in Belarusian, Russian, and Polish include R. Radzik, *Między zbiorowością etniczną a wspólnotą narodową. Białorusini na tle przemian narodowych w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej XIX stulecia* [Between Ethnic Population and National Union. Belarusians against the Background of National Change in 19th-century Central Eastern Europe] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2000); P. Tereshkovich, *Ėtnicheskaja istoria Belarusi XIX–nachala XX v. v kontekste Central'no-Vostochnoj Evropy* [Ethnic History of Belarus 19th–beginning of 20th c. in the Context of Central-Eastern Europe] (Minsk: Belarusian State University, 2004); V. Bulgakov, *Istoriia belorusskogo natsionalizma* [History of Belarusian Nationalism] (Vilnius: Institute of Belarusian Studies, 2006); and A. Kazakevich, “Kantsëptysi (idëi) belaruskaj natsyi u peryiad nezalezhnastsi, 1990–2009” [Concepts (ideas) of Belarusian nation during the independence period, 1990–2009], *Palitychnaia sfera* 14 (2010):1–20, surveys the development of the concept of “Belarusian nation” in Belarusian historiography from 1990 to 2009, noting the influence these ideas had on the elite discourses of the nation. The most recent English-language contribution on nation-building is P.A. Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

³ R. Buhr, V. Shadurski and S. Hoffman, “Belarus: an Emerging Civic Nation,” *Nationalities Papers* 39, no 3 (2011): 425–440.

⁴ N. Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: the Official and the Alternative “Belarusianness”* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010); A. Pershai, “Questioning the Hegemony of the Nation State in Belarus: Production of Intellectual Discourses as Production of Resources,” *Nationalities Papers* 34, no 5 (2006): 623–635; A. Sahm, “Political Culture and National Symbols: Their Impact on the Belarusian Nation-Building Process,” *Nationalities Papers* 27, no 4 (1999): 629–660.

⁵ N. Leshchenko, “The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no 8 (2008): 1419–1433.

⁶ A. Goujon, “Language, Nationalism, and Populism in Belarus,” *Nationalities Papers* 27, no 4 (1999): 661–677; C. Woolhiser, “The Russian Language in Belarus: Language, Speaker Identities and Metalinguistic Discourse,” in *The Russian Language Outside the Nation*, ed. L. Ryazanova-Clarke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 81–116; G. Hentschel, M. Brüggemann, H. Geiger, and P. J. Zeller, “The Linguistic and Political Orientation of Young Belarusian Adults between East and West or Russian and Belarusian,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 236(2015): 133–54.

⁷ D.R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalised Nation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1999); A. Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁸ M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995); T. Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); R. Brubaker, M. Feishmidt, J. Fox and L. Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); J. Fox and C. Miller-Idriss, “Everyday Nationhood,” *Ethnicities* 8, no 4 (2008): 536–563.

⁹ R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); K. Chandra, “Symposium: Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics,” *APSA-CP* 12, no 1 (2001): 7–25; P. J. Goode, and D. R. Stroup, “Everyday Nationalism: Constructivism for the Masses,” *Social Science Quarterly* 96, no 3 (2015): 717–39.

Investigating practices that include the process of establishing group boundaries and formulating shared meanings may enhance our understanding of societal discourses of identity within a given political environment.

This study examines the practice of quasi-public identity talk, which creates opportunities for informal exchange of opinions among people who have not met previously. This idea was developed on the basis of research into the role of political talk¹⁰. Unlike other social practices of communication, casual exchanges among strangers create an informal space for people to collectively define meanings that correspond to their group identity, while also interpreting political issues through the lenses of their own identity-perspective¹¹. This practice has gained momentum with the development of focus group techniques in political ethnography that allow the collection of rich data on how people talk and react to certain topics and how they respond and elaborate their opinions and views.¹² My analytical approach draws on these developments, tailored according to the theoretical and empirical contexts of this study.

The views of Belarusian citizens on national identity have been studied through small- and large-N public opinion surveys using predefined categories of identification in structuring interview questionnaires.¹³ While such an approach clarifies the degree of attachment that people feel towards specific identity elements, it cannot explain what they perceive as their national identity or what elements they prioritize in defining their feelings of national belonging. I focus on ordinary citizens' interpretations of identity through the practice of public talk. I organized and conducted six focus groups with a total of thirty-six Belarusian citizens in Minsk during July–September 2015 on the theme of national celebrations. That topic is sufficiently distanced from politics for participants to engage in informal talk, while also allowing discussions on identity without forcibly stretching the main theme.

How the stability of the political regime impacts the way people structure their behavior and opinions has been examined in a few exploratory studies.¹⁴ The practice of public talk

¹⁰ W.A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); P.J. Coover, D.D. Searing, and I.M. Crewe, "The Deliberative Potential of Political Discussion," *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no 1 (2002): 21–62; M.V. Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹¹ K.J. Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).

¹² S. Duchesne, E. Frazer, F. Haegel, and V. van Ingelgom, eds., *Citizens' Reactions to European Integration Compared: Overlooking Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹³ See for instance Buhr et al. "Belarus: an Emerging Civic Nation"; S. Hoffman and R. Buhr, eds., *Lithuanian and Belarusian National Identity in the Context of European Integration* (Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2013); N. Bekus, "Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus: Ethnolinguistic Survival as an Argument in the Political Struggle," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (2013): 1–16.

¹⁴ Among the examples initiating the discussion was the contribution by L. Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also R. Rose, W. Mishler and N. Munro, *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime: The Changing Views of Russians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and H. Huang, "Propaganda as Signaling," *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 419–444.

employed in my study formulates a more nuanced perspective on how an authoritarian political context conditions everyday language, and helps to unveil a power structure of regime ideational practices that stipulate criteria for acceptable public talk. Given the political circumstances and social dependencies in Belarus today, people can be expected to display awareness of how to perform public talk and which elements can be communicated only by “hidden transcripts.”¹⁵

I find that Belarusians have acquired an understanding of how to keep their public behavior separate from their personal political convictions and opinions: thus the system of “public” and “private” transcripts. While regime performative practices have an impact on a display of public support, personal convictions on identity and national belonging are not formed on the basis of political approval of the current Belarusian elites. People’s perceptions of what a national identity is and how they identify their personal belonging to Belarus have been formed through interactions within various nationalistic discourses, across a wide range of identity markers that are not linked in a coherent identity narrative. Lacking an assertive historical imagination, a myth of common origin or perspectives for the future, Belarusians formulate their identification through the connection to the land and the territory where they were born and live and to the current state, with its political regime and personalized in the figure of President Lukashenka. The shared meanings of Belarusian identity that emerge in focus group discussions have one distinctive similarity – they are determined by non-conflictual stances on the nation.

Conversations on identity in Belarus: from predefined groups to identity practices

Belarus, often associated with the longevity of the authoritarian rule of the president A. Lukashenka, entered the process of nation-building as a newly formed state with no prior institutional or social memory of independence. Those formative years of independence presented researchers with an empirical puzzle – the country that selected the path of reinventing the Soviet legacies as a building block of the state collective identity.¹⁶ While some grieved at the collapse of the USSR, stronger objections were raised at the prevalence of the post-Soviet political elites. This created political space for a populist candidate to win the popular vote, with enough political capital to shift the ideological dimension of national politics.¹⁷

¹⁵ Here I use the terms defined by J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) in distinguishing various forms of public resistance to dominant discourses.

¹⁶ T. Snyder, “Introduction,” *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 3 (2010): 3–5.

¹⁷ H.E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) elaborates on regime survival dynamics in Belarus during the independence period.

The divisive political rhetoric and the duality of political symbols that still coexist have also established the idea of two competing national narratives in Belarusian society.¹⁸ Those narratives are taken as the main terms for discussing national identity in Belarus; they also become initial references for researchers who approach the field expecting to find internal tensions in people's national identification along ethnic identity markers. As one focuses on finding manifestations of nationhood and ethnicity through predefined categories, empirical examples confirming the established notions will follow,¹⁹ especially in a symbolically contested field as Belarus.

Interpretations of vernacular identity practices through predefined ethnopolitical categories, including characteristics of “ethnic” and “civic”, fall short of understanding political contingencies of social practices in the Belarusian case. For example, the notion of the one-language-based criterion for defining “Belarusian” ethnic identity²⁰ fails to capture the impact of the politicization of the Belarusian language over the years and, most importantly, the conditions under which language can become an important identity signifier.²¹ In societies with a large-scale discrepancy between language practice and identity, people display cultural attachment to the language they do not use in everyday communication. Acknowledging cultural significance of the language as mother tongue has impact on cultural preferences not just in connection to language but also to national identity politics, including symbols, memory, citizenship, and foreign policy. In addition, radical positions on polarizing identity issues in politically challenging settings that might hinder inter-group cooperation are often replaced by non-conflictual stances.²²

Language is not the only fluctuating identity marker in the Belarusian case, which has to be addressed in a study on national identity. Comparing geopolitical preferences of Belarusian people over the years, the survey data combined with focus group discussions showed that people had grown in favor of foreign policies that “respected state sovereignty and yielded practical benefits.”²³ The multi-vectoral position in foreign policy, which promotes cooperation with different countries and is closely associated with the Belarusian government's stance, has

¹⁸ Two ideas of “Belarusianess” that feature in Nelly Bekus *Struggle over Identity* represent elite discourses on national identity. One idea of “Belarusianess”, which is also a foundation for the state ideology, is attributed to the discourse of the Belarusian government. The alternative idea, articulated by the Belarusian nationalist movement, is presented as a counter-narrative to the official discourse.

¹⁹ The critique on the use of the concepts constructed from above is presented by R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, “Beyond “Identity”,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1-47.

²⁰ My criticism is directed to the methodological approach of Buhr et al. “Belarus: an Emerging Civic Nation.”

²¹ Similarly to language questions in censuses as elaborated by D. Arel, “Language Categories in Censuses: Backward- or Forward-Looking?” in *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity and Language in National Censuses*, eds. D. Arel and D. Kertzer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 92-120, the language-based criterion for ethnicity, determined just by the knowledge and everyday use, does not capture the politics of language, which arises in concrete situations over the relevance of language for public identity.

²² V. Kulyk, “Language Identity, Linguistic Diversity and Political Cleavages: Evidence from Ukraine,” *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 3 (2011): 627-648.

²³ S. White, T. Biletskaya and T. McAllister, “Belarusians between East and West,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no.1: 1-27.

gained popular approval in the country against other choices for regional integration. It specifies that placing the discussion of Belarusian identity between the geopolitical vectors, Russia and Europe, or East and West, does not account for growing attachment to the state and people's identification as citizens of Belarus.²⁴ Thus, while elite discourses of national identity might persist along the ideological lines or cultural choices that are envisioned for Belarus,²⁵ popular discourses on national identity are not conditioned by the necessity to choose any specific cultural path.

A more recent study on national identity of youth in Belarus,²⁶ based on a survey of university students, has pointed out that young people displayed a mixed, or hybrid type of national identity rather than an ideal ethnic or civic type, which defined a set of variables for the survey questionnaire. The collected quantitative data from the open-ended questions can indicate general attitudes and levels of attachment to a nation and a state, especially if they are conducted among broader sections of the population and over time. This is often not the case in Belarus. Political restrictions on socio-political studies and public opinion surveys in the country²⁷ and institutional censorship, including self-censorship, increase costs and efforts for researchers working in the field. As a result, researchers concentrate on a more easily accessible group – university students, thus limiting the scope and the impact of a study. There is a need not only for an alternative way of looking at the subject of vernacular national identities but also for a change in the conversation on Belarusian identities – the one, which departs from discussing the level of national identification and explores how national discourses are used by people.

Without recognizing when and how “national” matters, researchers can reinforce the construction of “groupness” in a political and social context where public perceptions may be structured by different practical concerns, organizational routines and social expectations²⁸ – not least when the political context affects how people display and perform their loyalties in public settings, as it is often the case with authoritarian regimes. One way of approaching the problem is to focus on social interactions and how people construct shared meanings when talking about their stories, daily routines and activities and how they live in a particular state and nation. This

²⁴ White, Biletskaya, McAllister, “Belarusians between East and West”: 11-12.

²⁵ Ioffe offers to view nationalist discourse in Belarus through three “national projects”: Nativist/pro-European, Muscovite liberal, and Creole. See G. Ioffe, “Culture Wars, Soul-Searching, and Belarusian Identity,” *East European Politics and Societies* 21, no. 2: 348-381.

²⁶ S. Hoffman, M. Fabrykant and R. Buhr, “Youth and National Identity in Belarus and Lithuania: a Comparative Analysis” in *Lithuanian and Belarusian National Identity in the Context of European Integration*, eds. S. Hoffman and R. Buhr, (Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2013): 182-198.

²⁷ A recent example of political restrictions for independent socio-political research in Belarus was the destruction of ISEPS' interviewer network in August 2016.

²⁸ This statement draws on arguments put forward by Brubaker in *Ethnicity without Groups* regarding the use of undifferentiated categories and engrained groupism when we study national and ethnic identity without specifying the contextual meaning of this term for the analysed group. Also in Brubaker et al. *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*.

requires concentrating on how people interact with each other in a communicative setting and on what shared clues and knowledge they rely on to make sense of different issues in conversations with others.²⁹ These shared understandings generate mutual comprehension in social communication; they are “grounding mechanisms [that] coordinate understanding in everyday conversational contexts.”³⁰

Studies that link national identity with everyday social interactions adopted the methodological premises of everyday nationalism theory, which acknowledges how meanings attached to nationalism and nationhood vary among individuals and within different social and political contexts.³¹ Social interactions observed through embodiments, expressions and people’s practices help to examine how people engage with national identity discourses in the varied contexts of their everyday lives.³² The concept of “everyday” stands for a domain of research enquiry. It concentrates on the bottom-up perspective on the nation and analyses how people, and not elites, construct intersubjective meanings of nationalism and nationhood in routine practices and evocations. In the context of this study, I narrow the notion of everyday to shared meanings and practices that are considered self-evident in a social interaction of a given social group.³³ From four modalities of everyday nationalism specified by Fox and Miller-Idris, my enquiry about national identities in Belarus starts similarly to many other researchers: by asking people what the nation means to them and how they define themselves.³⁴

I focus on the aspects of the national framing and the language of Belarusians, examining the practice of “identity talk” developed from studies of political talk in the USA.³⁵ Public discussions and deliberations among people activate a range of discursive, cultural, symbolic and experiential references that provide perspectives for tackling complex and abstract problems.³⁶ My interest lies in comprehending the ways people communicate their own understandings and narratives of the nation to others and how they are able to reach common terms as well as to work out their disagreements. To recreate this in a quasi-public but controlled setting I developed

²⁹ M. Skey, *National Belonging and Everyday Life: The Significance of Nationhood in an Uncertain World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 37-39.

³⁰ H. Clark and S. Brennan, “Grounding in Communication” in *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition*, eds. L. Resnick, J. Levine and S. Teasley (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1991) as quoted by Skey in *National Belonging and Everyday Life*: 38.

³¹ B. Bonikowski, “Nationalism in Settled Times,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 42 (2016): 427–49.

³² I rely on the methodological agenda set out by Fox and Miller-Idriss in “Everyday Nationhood.”

³³ I derive the notion of everyday from Shevchenko’s critical assessment of “everyday life” in ethnographic studies in O. Shevchenko, “Resisting Resistance: Everyday Life, Practical Competence and Neoliberal Rhetoric in Postsocialist Russia” in *Everyday Life in Russia Past and Present*, eds. C. Chatterjee, D. Ransel, M. Cavender and K. Petrone (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Fox and Miller-Idriss in “Everyday Nationhood” frame the modality as “talking about the nation,” and it is also discussed by R. Wodak, R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl, and K. Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

³⁵ Gamson, *Talking Politics*; Cramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics*.

³⁶ J. E. Fox, “Missing the Mark: Nationalist Politics and Student Apathy,” *East European Politics and Societies* 18, no. 3 (2004): 363–93.

a methodology that allowed me to observe how focus group participants discussed and negotiated the meaning and content of Belarusian national identity.

The everyday nationalism theory also recognizes contingencies of political contexts in social communication and interaction, since everyday realities are conditioned by the language of state-sponsored or “official” national claims as well as regime ideational strategies for maintaining political power.³⁷ How official narratives and discourses co-exist with societal perspectives and how people engage with the official perspectives on the nation are what guide the final section of my analysis. The setting of a focus group presents an opportunity of examining how individuals move between different modes of communication, how they display their opinions and preferences and what communicative clues they use discussing politically sensitive issues.

Discussing identity: how do people talk about identity in Belarus?

I designed and conducted six focus groups³⁸ that provided communicative space and freedom for the participants. My role as moderator was strictly limited to that of an observer who introduces general questions and notes down the main points resulting from the discussions. This enabled participants to expand on topics in thematic directions of their own choice. The groups could remain informal in how they talked and interacted with each other, rather than depending on explanations and clues from the moderator. This choice was based on suggestions developed for the study of everyday talk on sensitive matters.³⁹

Wanting the groups to go beyond conventional general statements and clichés, I lengthened the discussion time from a standard sixty or ninety minutes to three and a half hours⁴⁰, limited the number of issues by focusing on rephrasing and reinterpreting the same topics, and restricted my interaction with participants, to allow for greater freedom. The atmosphere of a prolonged talk on one issue made it natural for participants to expand on aspects that are often avoided in public settings.

With the focus on public celebrations, questions about national identity and national symbols came later in the discussions. The theme of national identity was introduced when the topic could be comfortably discussed by the group without intimidating participants or changing

³⁷ See references on ideational strategies in authoritarian regimes in P.J. Goode, “Nationalism in Quiet Times: Ideational Power and Post-Soviet Electoral Authoritarianism,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, 59 (2012): 6–16.

³⁸ Six focus groups were organized and conducted during the fieldwork in Belarus in July–September 2015.

³⁹ J. Kitzinger and C. Farquhar, “The Analytical Potential of ‘Sensitive Moments’ in Focus Groups” in *Developing Focus Group Research*, eds. R. S. Barbour and J. Kitzinger (London: SAGE, 1999).

⁴⁰ All focus group discussions were tape-recorded, with the participants’ expressed permission. I also explained to all volunteer participants about their rights, especially regarding the informed consent.

their expectations. To sustain the flow of a conversation, questions were presented in various ways. Two sets of questions were used regarding national identity. The first concerned identity markers like any form of symbolic representation for identifying oneself as Belarusian and describing national belonging. This question aimed at establishing a broad spectrum of identification markers, which were chosen and discussed by participants in describing and defining their *Belarusian-ness*. The second block of questions concerned the process of “Othering” and marking the boundaries of national identity towards those who could be identified as outsiders, external “Others”. However, I avoided identifying the external “Other”, using broad generic terms like “someone else”, a “person who has no knowledge of Belarus”. This allowed the participants to define the “Other” on their own terms. The questions, phrased in Russian,⁴¹ were posed to discussants as follows in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Focus Group Questions

<p>Question Set 1: What defines us [the people in the group] as Belarusians? If you were to list any specific elements that help you to identify as Belarusian, what would they be? Can you think of any symbols, objects, historical events and characterizing elements? What would you see as the defining features of being Belarusian?</p>
<p>Question Set 2: If you were to explain that you come from Belarus, talking with someone who had not heard of the country before, how would you do that? How would you set about describing yourself as Belarusian? What would be distinctive?</p>

I wanted to reach ordinary Belarusian citizens, not any established social grouping.⁴² Participants were not acquainted with each other prior to taking part in this study. I developed a questionnaire for pre-selecting participants via telephone interviews and used moderate financial incentives for attracting the public who would often be unwilling taking part in opinion surveys or focus groups.

In order to integrate the political context, I relied on two factors in my theoretical sampling: (1) generational perspective as a way of including people who share similar socialization experience; and (2) the type of social dependency that an individual has vis-à-vis the state. For homogeneity in the focus groups, I was looking for similarities in participants’ socialization experiences, concentrating on the following criteria: age, education, employment and type of contract, parents’ employment and type of contract and participation in public celebrations.⁴³ Each group had six participants, with equal gender representation and was so designed that participants shared some socialization experiences.

⁴¹ While the majority of participants indicated Belarusian as their mother tongue (also as a bilingual option), Russian language was preferred for everyday communication; attention has been paid to wording, colloquialism, and linguistic switches.

⁴² I sought participants outside my wider social network, looking for people with different social experiences of living in Belarus.

⁴³ Only those who said that they had taken part in state celebrations in course of the last three years were selected.

A generational perspective on identity explores the role of education and socialization experiences as well as social positioning in talking about identity. There is a new generation of Belarusians who were born, schooled and socialized in independent Belarus with little prior knowledge of the Soviet period or the first years of independence. To enable analysis of changes in perspective among generations, I assigned each participant to a focus group with people of similar educational, parental professional background and social experiences; or, with the older groups, their children.

The second aspect is participants' location in the established system of the "social contract,"⁴⁴ used as an indicator of how an individual can be affected by the management and redistribution of resources by the Belarusian government.⁴⁵ The type of contract with the state is an important parameter that indicates the individual's social, financial and political dependencies on the current political elite, whether in a public service job, in a state-controlled enterprise, or through a state-sponsored university scholarship. These two parameters are closely interlinked, as they both contribute to structuring personal experiences of socialization in Belarusian society. Thus, while these parameters cannot establish clear-cut categories of social groupings, they may serve, though, as instrumental heuristic devices for interpreting the responses of focus group discussants.

To stimulate debate, I sought to ensure diversity of opinions by asking potential participants about their (5) choice of celebrations and (6) choice of national symbols. These recruitment approaches resulted in the following six groups, presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Focus Groups

	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6
Generation	G1 Youth, young professionals	G1 Youth, young professionals	G2 Mid-level professionals	G2 Professionals	G2 Professionals	G3 Retired professionals
Social dependency	Students, public sector	Students, private sector	Independent, Self-employed	Public / State controlled	Managers, private sector	Pensioners /State - controlled

The question for discussion was specifically formulated to allow a broad theme and meaning of Belarusian identity. Participants were often inclined to formulate an exhaustive list of identity markers and first associations concerning Belarus. Here it was important to let the enumerations continue until participants turned to discussing which aspects of identity held

⁴⁴ In this study I see the "social contract" as a political-economic trade-off agreed to by citizens in order to receive the benefits of a certain social position in exchange for obedient political behaviour (See S. White, "Economic Performance and Communist Legitimacy," *World Politics*, 38 no. 3 (1986): 462–482). I organized my focus groups according to their employment and study contract with the state.

⁴⁵ J. Allina-Pisano, "Social Contracts and Authoritarian Projects in post-Soviet Space: The Use of Administrative Resource," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no 1 (2010): 373–382.

special significance and priority. Once salient issues and conflicting topics had emerged, it was possible to establish which elements elicited general agreement or disagreement, the discussion could then move on to the second set of questions.

How to approach the analysis of identity talk?

When people engage in the process of negotiating specific meanings, they selectively use certain terms and references in their speech, while disregarding others. Analysis of references and terms may help in determining the framework of interpretation⁴⁶ used by discussion group participants in assigning and negotiating the meaning of their identity. As participants were located in the same context and were asked to respond to similarly phrased questions, it was instructive to observe how social practices of public talk varied across the groups and among the participants. I analyzed practices of talk through the concepts of agreement, focusing both on intra-group and then on cross-group identification, and of contestation, looking at formulations that possibly indicate polarizing issues among the participants.

As for a methodological tool suited for interpreting complex rich data that could move beyond the discussion topics and enable comparison of frameworks of interpretation between individual participants and groups, I turned to assumptions about human behavior informed by discourse theory in social psychology⁴⁷ and the sociolinguistic theory of semantic variations in everyday talk.⁴⁸ Discussing matters argumentatively influences how people express their opinions: by criticizing, arguing and justifying they appeal to accepted common-sense elements and commonplace references presumably endorsed by a larger social group.⁴⁹ People interacting with each other in communicative settings enact their habitual practices of talk and display behavioral patterns customary on such occasions. The next step in understanding the practice of everyday talk involves observing how these habitual practices and common-sense references vary among participants and groups.

⁴⁶ A framework of interpretation is a value system based on the assumptions of reality as shaped in pervasive process of socialization and then sustained and modified in daily interactions, as defined by P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1967). It is helpful in determining the meaning to be assigned to social facts: E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁴⁷ J. Potter, "Re-reading Discourse and Social Psychology: Transforming Social Psychology," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 51, no. 3 (2012): 436–455, J. Potter and M. Wetherell, *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior* (London: SAGE, 1987).

⁴⁸ R. Hasan and J. Webster, *The Collected Works of Ruqaiya Hasan. Vol.2: Semantic Variations: Meaning in Society and in Sociolinguistics* (London: Equinox, 2009).

⁴⁹ As it has been pointed out in M. Billig, *Talking of the Royal Family* (London: Routledge, 1992); and C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyreca, *The New Rhetoric: a Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969).

Differences in interpretive frameworks can be analyzed through discourse coalitions that bring out how practices are interpreted among the groups and which aspects contribute to some similarities and variations. The concept of discourse coalitions, propelled by the interpretive turn,⁵⁰ embraces the idea of co-existence and interaction of conflicting frameworks of interpretation. Here I focused on observing the ideational distance between the participants and the groups based on general criteria of agreement and disagreement as a measure of identification and contestation. Identification shows a degree of shared response and recognition of symbols and discourses; contestation was defined as a process of establishing a different meaning, characteristics and purposes through a meaningful interaction and confrontation with other participants.⁵¹ In interpreting the data, these aspects were considered: (1) intra-group identification: agreement among focus group participants; (2) intra-group contestation: the level and extent of disagreement in a group; and (3) ideational distance between groups, indicating identification and/or conflict across groups. Comparison of the ideational distances in participants' performances of identity talk can help indicate how generational communication affects identity perceptions, and whether there are shared patterns of identification or conflict across the groups.

Table 3: Salient topics for group identification

Social group	Salient topics	
	<i>Self-identification</i>	<i>vs. the Other</i>
FG1 Students /public	language self-consciousness	language and state symbols
FG2 Students /private	through the “state” duality of politics & state symbols	territorial borders, geo-political orientation / Russia
FG3 Independent / Self-employed	language, historical events	ethnic identifiers
FG4 Public / State-controlled sector	self-consciousness, the loss of tradition, history	Belarusian history (events and figures) awareness of tradition
FG5 Managers / Private sector	brands and products passport	President Lukashenka
FG6 Pensioners / State-controlled sector	specific character non-aggressive nationalism peaceful to other nations	differentiation through internationally recognized achievements

⁵⁰ D. Yanow, *Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2000) and P. Schwartz-Shea and D. Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁵¹ R. Abdelal, Y.M. Herrera, A.I. Johnston and R. McDermott, “Identity as a Variable,” *Perspectives on Politics* 4, no. 4 (2006): 695–711, and R. Abdelal, Y.M. Herrera, A.I. Johnston and R. McDermott, eds., *Measuring Identity: a Guide for Social Scientists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

I mapped the associations and the identity markers discussed, combining them into general consolidated categories. To structure the analytical approach, I referred to the points noted on the flip-charts; these were displayed so that participants could keep track of the discussion and return to more controversial points, which were specifically marked. These notes on identity markers presented the skeleton of the discussions, indicating the salience of the topics that were most controversial or important. I could then combine the most reoccurring parameters of identification: the “land,” “state,” “people,” ethnic identifiers and achievements.

I start by presenting the discussion according to general thematic blocks of how participants spoke of identity and approached it in negotiating identity markers. Structuring the analysis in this way enabled me to establish the presence of discourse agreements and disagreements across individual participants and groups, and to observe how the practice of identity talk was interpreted and framed.

While this study builds on observations of participants’ interpretive frames interacting in public talk, I in my roles as a researcher as well as a moderator, also contribute with my own interpretive framework. The experiential dimension of communicative practices embraces potential intersubjective disagreements about the meaning of an observed phenomenon.⁵² With the ethnographic sensibility⁵³ of both an insider and an outsider, I attempted to formulate a deeper contextualization of participants’ everyday language by locating the historical and cultural references that they used in formulating their symbolic constructs. In addition, I relied on personal judgement in making sense of omitted phrases, jokes and silences during sensitive moments of the discussions. Nevertheless, I recognize that the article is limited to analytical generalizations of how symbolic meanings of national and ethnic can be deliberated in everyday communication, given current social and political circumstances in Belarus.

Identity markers in focus group discussions

Geographical imagination: nature, landscape and the attachment to the “land”

In the focus groups, the element which featured most prominently and extensively concerned the geographical characteristics of Belarus. Discussants formulated a rather broad category of references and identity markers that were linked to the process of picturing and imagining “the

⁵² A thorough account of methodological misconceptions of ethnographic work in political science can be found in L. Wedeen, “Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 255–72.

⁵³ E. Pader, “Seeing with an Ethnographic Sensibility: Explorations beneath the Surface of Public Policies,” in *Interpretation and Methods: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, eds. D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 161–75.

land.” References of Belarusian geographical landscapes included lakes, forests, and national parks; Belavezhskaja Pushcha National Park was mentioned in every discussion. Such references were usually intended to present a certain mythical imagining of the land, like “Belarus as the land of lakes” (FG1, FG2, FG4), “Belarus as the lungs of Europe” (FG1, FG5, FG6) as a reference to Palesse or the Palesien Lowlands⁵⁴. These references stand as iconic images of the natural and geographical aspects of the land that have been reimagined in popular Belarusian culture⁵⁵ and then retranslated through various media forms as a way of branding the country. Under this category I also subsumed references to symbolic animals – Belarusian bison “zubr” and storks “busel” (both mentioned in Belarusian) – as well as to items like potatoes, and linen and straw – symbols that featured as decorative elements or tokens for certain events⁵⁶ or public posters and advertisements. The recurrence of these references indicated their culturally accepted status in society as established clichés.

Discussants showed close attachment to the land itself as a way of making meaning of their everyday lives in a big city. This symbolic connection to the land and nature can be explained by the fact that the urbanization in Belarus happened within one generation.⁵⁷ Belarusians mass-migrated to Sovietized and, already, Russian-speaking urban centers only in the post-war period during the Soviet industrialization in the 1960s. In the absence of established Belarusian urban culture, “mystifying” the land through its nature and landscape has formed a deeper connection to the place of personal belonging – the place of origin. Notably, such references were used to underscore the purity of the Belarusian natural landscape, with undisturbed forests and lakes. That same idea of purity was also applied in describing the cities, as an element of their distinctiveness: “Minsk as a very clean city,” “clean streets,” and “clean cities” (FG1, FG3, FG4, FG5). This metaphorical construction enhances the process of making sense of the surroundings and the qualities of living in a land that shapes people’s sense of belonging. Nevertheless, the references to nature and purity also brought up problematic points

⁵⁴ The Palesien Lowlands (*Palesse* in Belarusian), known for marshes, are located on the border of Belarus–Ukraine in the Prypiač river valley.

⁵⁵ There is no need to go far to find examples of the iconic metaphorical use of nature in the Belarusian culture. The reference to the Belarusian lowlands or marshes can be linked to the classic novel by Yakub Kolas *Drygna* (The Lowlands) or Ivan Mielež’s trilogy *Palesse Chronology*, which included the novel “Ljudzi na bałocie” (People of the Marsh) and is also included in the school curriculum on Belarusian literature. Ministry of Education (25/06/2015). Instructive-methodological letter “Ob organizacii obrazovatel’nogo processa pri izučenii učebnyh predmetov i provedenii fakul’tativnyh zanjatij v učreždenijah obšego srednego obrazovanija v 2015/2016 učebnom godu” [Organizing the educational process of teaching subjects and tutoring extracurricular activities in secondary education schools in 2015/2016 academic year].

⁵⁶ One example is the use of the Belarusian bison as a token for the 2014 World Hockey Championship organised in Belarus.

⁵⁷ D. Marples, “The ‘Minsk Phenomenon:’ Demographic Development in the Republic of Belarus.” *Nationalities Papers* 44, no.6: 923.

like the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences for Belarus (FG6) or the construction of a new nuclear power plant (FG1).

Another aspect of such imagining concerned the geographical positioning of the country on the Eurasian continent. This featured only partially as an independent identity marker in discussions, mentioned as a supporting argument in search for other identity distinctions (FG1, FG6) and also used in connection with the perceived lack of international awareness and recognition of the country. However, for the discussion in one group (FG2), placing Belarus among bigger geographical entities, Europe and Russia, and negotiating the geographical and political proximity to a certain region was used as a way of assigning other characteristics that could not be explicitly mentioned, as *Extract 1* illustrates.

Extract 1: FG2

FG2/3: It [Belarus] is the center of Europe.

FG2/4: That is claimed only in Belarus and nowhere else.

FG2/3: It is Eastern Europe.

FG2/6: I don't see it that way.

FG2/1: It depends on from which perspective we're looking at it – geographic, or geo-political?

FG2/3: From a geographical perspective it is Eastern Europe.

Group: [somewhat general agreement with the statement]

Moderator: How about a geo-political perspective then?

FG2/1: Then it is the East

FG2/8: Western Russia

FG2/6: Yes, Western Russia

FG2/4: Western Asia, I'd say.

FG2/6: Eurasia

FG2/3: It's better to phrase it as a neutral zone.

FG2/4: It's simply "remote" Asia.

FG2/6: [laughing] It's just a "black hole," you can note that.

Identification with state symbols and with the state

Focus group discussions on identity revealed the complexity of relations to state symbols, such as the coat of arms and the flag. While all groups acknowledged the undisputed role of state symbols in marking their identity, there was some uncertainty about how representative these symbols are of the Belarusian nation. State symbols, especially the flag and the coat of arms, emerged as established symbolic representations of the country that help to locate it within the international community. However, references to the state symbols did not result from close personal attachments to them, but merely as a response to their official status. The official

acceptance, use and recognition of these symbols, in Belarus and abroad, make them significant for participants as a way to signal national and state affiliation.

Participants in FG1 and FG2 also mentioned the role of the national anthem. Interestingly, members of both groups admitted that they did not know the words, showing that the state symbols and people's perceptions of them remain somewhat ambiguous.

Extract 2: FG1

FG1/4: We had this event *Let's sing the anthem together*. But does anyone actually know the words of the [state] anthem? Who wrote the music and the lyrics? Who can sing it?

FG1/5: I know some parts [...] During Olympic or European games when we win and the music starts playing, I feel happy. It does bring some feelings, since you recognize it. [...]

Yes, I think that the anthem is an attribute of statehood and independence. The anthem is an important element because it is different for every country. You don't need to know it [by heart]. There is no law that you need to know the lyrics. But it is a symbol. [...]

FG1/6: You need to understand what you imply with the meaning of the national anthem. Is it just about an anthem, or is it the one that we now have in Belarus? And then, someone has mentioned that some people choose not to sing the anthem. Maybe the reason for that is that it is not the right anthem. Our society is split, so we choose our own symbols.

FG1/2: We should to view the [state] anthem, the flag and the coat of arms as what differentiate us from other states. They're what differentiate us from others.

FG1/6: Our society is split. [...] Belarus is a unique country. We have a double of everything: two languages, two religions, and two flags.

Extract 3: FG2

FG2/6: [...] in many countries a crowd of people always gathers during a state celebration to sing the anthem.

FG2/7: But we also use it for celebrations.

FG2/6: Who sings it then?

FG2/1: I do!

FG2/6: I guess it is an orchestra and a choir that perform it.

FG2/7: Once I attended an event next to the church [in the Independence Square]. It was very thrilling, yes, cool. As far as I remember it was the celebration of [Minsk] City Day.

FG2/6: Maybe I am wrong, and maybe it is very cool. I've never attended such an event or heard the anthem to be performed that way. Does anyone know it by heart?

FG2/7: Not really... I only know the first lines [starts reciting the first line of the anthem].

Group: [agreed on the lack of knowledge of the lyrics]

FG2/6: So what kind of patriotism are we talking about, if we don't know the [state] anthem? That's the point.

The younger generation (G1) of the focus group participants proved eager to talk about how state symbols are accepted at the societal level. While the importance of the symbols was not questioned, a connection was clearly missing between identification and performative practice. It

is one thing to identify oneself with official symbols of the state, and quite another matter to be motivated to use them actively in marking one's identity, as shown in *Extract 4*. Moreover, participants were aware about the existence of two versions of the flag: in every group there would be a participant who acknowledged the importance of the white-red-white flag or the coat of arms *Pabonia*. However, it is not actually the symbol that becomes politicized, but the performative activity of waving the flag. The practice of actively using a flag has been connected to the oppositional set of symbols in Belarus, whereas the state symbols are perceived as passive, established elements representing today's Belarusian state. Any act of public use of a flag is weighted according to how politically neutral and acceptable it is. The only willing and active use of the state flag mentioned among discussants was the waving of the flag during sport and cultural events in support of Belarusian teams, performers or athletes. The greater the perceived distance to political issues, the easier it becomes not to see the practice of waving the flag as a political act, but as a unifying collective symbol. Discussants regarded the act as politicized not only at political rallies or public protests, but also at organized state celebrations, when waving the flag is delegated to a designated group of people.

Extract 4: FG2

FG2/7: Today Belarus has one, and only one, flag, so to speak.

FG2/4: kind of...

FG2/7: Don't say "kind of." If we're talking about what is accepted at the state level, then there is only one. So I can use it during the state celebrations.

[Talking about the use of the flag]

FG2/7: The problem is at the state level. If people were allowed and they saw some examples of how to do that [use the state flag]... People would have brought small flags and waved them [...]

FG2/6: I would bring the state flag [to a public event] and probably not think about whether it is allowed or not. And I want to wait and see if anything happens to me when I bring the [state] flag to a mass event with people celebrating, not rebelling or doing something inappropriate. What would they do to me? [...]

FG2/6: It is at the state level... I think that only people who are involved in the official celebrations are allowed to bring flags. I guess that if I bring the flag, people would look at me strangely.

FG2/3: Yes, there is this dubious feeling about it.

FG2/8: There are no events at the state level that would motivate anyone to bring the flag. There are only events that would do just the opposite, so a person would think "I would rather not... That would be much easier for me. Nobody would bother me then".

FG2/6: I've been listening to this, and I am so disappointed. [...] Ukrainians rose up and took the flags, wreaths and everything, using their own symbols. And everyone was proud, just the opposite [from the situation in Belarus].

FG2/8: Maybe we need to rise up too.

FG2/6: Do we need to get to such a situation before we will actually go out with flags? And, you all know perfectly well that there will be two flags. Again!

In discussing identities, participants mentioned other elements linked to the state, and it seemed appropriate to include them in this category. First and foremost, the figure of President Lukashenka featured in all discussions. The international recognition (and indeed notoriety) of the Belarusian head of state helps participants to explain their belonging to the state and to locate Belarus in geopolitical space. Whether using the name of the president or widely accepted descriptives, such as “the Sun-like” (FG6) or the “father-figure” (FG4), to avoid directly mentioning the name, participants assigned to this figure a symbolic identity value. A potential problem with this association lies in the fact that the president becomes somehow equated with the state, in turn backing up his leadership status. Once the president was mentioned, group discussions always came to a halt. Controversies surrounding the figure of the president would be reduced to insider jokes, silences and humorous remarks about avoiding politics when the discussion was being taped.

Other notable points from the discussions involved reconstructing how Belarus is perceived from the outside. Characteristics of Belarus as being a closed country (FG4) that limits the number of people visiting it, and the presence of international businesses and companies (FG1), indicated that the country itself was identified with the existing authoritarian political system. Other participants noted the high and increasing numbers of police forces in the country and the tight security control (FG1, FG2, FG5). This shows that discussants were aware of how the state maintains tight political control over the country, and that this differentiates Belarus from other countries. It became clear that participants felt dissuaded from participating in public events because of the security patrols and other measures of control employed in connection with such celebrations.

The “people” of Belarus and their qualities

The idea of national belonging is deeply rooted in the construction of a sense of community of the people. Participants were encouraged to describe what the Belarusian “people” are like and what qualities can be assigned to them. In trying to project certain qualities onto the whole population, participants were elaborating constructs and terms in which they were taught to perceive their fellow citizens. One term that emerged in all the focus group discussions was “tolerance” (FG1, FG2, FG4, FG5) as a way of portraying a peaceful and adaptive character. However, the idea that a certain type of Belarusian “mentality” exists made sense only for the older groups (FG4, FG5, FG6), where discussants underlined the non-aggressive aspect of Belarusians and Belarusian national identity.

Extract 5: FG6

FG6/7: What holds significance for Belarusians is kindness... and patience and tolerance.

FG6/4: Do you know the word *pamiarkoŭnasts'* [in Belarusian – “being complaisant and without conflicts”]? It captures us well. *Pamiarkoŭnasts'* is hard to translate into Russian with one word. It concerns deliberating one’s actions. Like when we think first, and then act. This is *pamiarkoŭnasts'*.

FG6/1: It is because the country is positioned that way

FG6/4: yes [in agreement].

FG6/1: Everyone has passed through us [our land]: Germans and others. It also changes who is in power: Russians, then Belarusians...

The continuation of the discussion from *Extract 5* led the group FG6 to conclude that the essential element was the fact that Belarusian identity is non-aggressive towards other nations. However, in FG4, a similar discussion about aspects of Belarusian “mentality” and character yield the opposite results: participants held disrespect and disregard for the people with limited abilities and elderly are highly evident, as discussed in *Extract 6*. People with differentiated abilities are excluded from the public space as well as not represented in elite discourses on national identity, which use images of fully able, even sportive, bodies with assigned biological roles.⁵⁸ Reflecting on the meaning of tolerance, discussants recognized that some people, particularly people with differentiated abilities, are not given recognition as full members of society in everyday interactions. Marginalization and exclusion of certain social groups affects the sense of community and belonging, something what the participants felt or experienced. The discussions also conveyed the idea that being a Belarusian is not necessarily linked to a sense of belonging to a community but rather a mode of self-awareness and self-identification with a certain set of values, characteristics and cultural elements (FG1, FG2, FG4).

Extract 6: FG4

FG4/7: Everyone says that Belarusian tolerance is so distinctive for us. But now I view this quality from a different perspective. [...] If we just compare how people with disabilities are treated in Europe and here, we see that we don’t have tolerance. I’m a teacher, so I’ve seen how children treat with disdain a child who looks just a little different from them. We have zero tolerance. Tolerance means accepting someone who is different from you. And Belarusians? They are just indifferent [using the Belarusian word *abyiakavasts'*]. [...]

FG4/1: We should mention that there is also disrespect to parents and disrespect to elderly. It was never like that before. [...]

FG4/7: Belarus has been losing its historic traditions, and there is nothing new to replace it.

FG4/6: These negative things that we have mentioned I’ve started to associate with the loss of traditions and culture, and how everything is turning into “mass culture.”

⁵⁸ The examples of discursive visualizations of Belarusians can be observed through the images used in official billboard advertising campaigns, such as *Slaŭsia, ŭiamli nashaŭ svetlae imia* [Glory to the blessed name of our land], *Sěrtsam addanyia rodnaj ŭiamli* [Wholeheartedly devoted to our land]. See the collection of posters at BELTA Collection of Posters, n.d., <http://www.belta.by/posters/page/1> (accessed 1 June 2016).

Here I employ a broad definition of ethnic culture, extending it to a spectrum of ethnic identifiers that can be acknowledged as symbolic representations of the ethno-cultural heritage of a nation. This category combines a range of references concerning visualized representations of the national cuisine, dress and embroideries to significant historical monuments and figures that are relevant for myth-making and for constructing a national belonging⁵⁹. As an integral element in the national discourse on ethnolinguistic unity⁶⁰, the discussions on the language issue were included in this category. References to the language and the linguistic differences led to further explorations of ethnic identifiers, like Belarusian folklore, fairytales, proverbs, and historical figures, as well as ethnic ornaments and embroidery (FG3, FG4). Language was recognized as a container of ethnic cultural markers, connecting discussants with ethno-symbolic aspects of identity through the influence of the Belarusian language on some words, phrases, jokes and songs.

Defining ethnic boundaries of Belarusians based on ethnic roots and descent did not dominate the discussions. This fact can be explained by the ethnically homogeneous composition of the focus groups; the race and the ethnic background were not factored in the analysis.⁶¹ During discussions some participants used references to “Slavic” ethnic identity in differentiating rituals and celebrations, for example “Slavic traditions of commemorating the departed - Dziady” (FG4), though these references did not hold identity-defining features. The idea of “ethnic origin” was brought up only in the older group (FG6), as presented in *Extract 7*. It is interesting to note that a person who initially proposes such a distinction switches to a more inclusive language when confronted by the other participant. It also shows that the older participants maintained their interest in the “people”: their stories and their socialization experiences.

Extract 7: FG6

FG6/4: I would say that a Belarusian is a person who has Slavic roots.

FG6/2: Not necessarily!

FG6/4: Maybe, it is not necessarily, but here in Belarus...

FG6/2: I have some Jewish roots in my family. Does it mean that I am not Belarusian? I was born and raised here.

FG6/7: As people say, giving birth doesn't make you a mother but raising you does.

FG6/2: Yes, and it is not necessarily to have Slavic roots. There are also Mongols, Tatars, Poles, Russians and Lithuanians.

⁵⁹ I use the ideas of Smith's definitions of ethno-cultural elements that stand for symbolic manifestations that provide the bond and inspiration for citizens. A.D. Smith, “The ‘Sacred’ Dimension of Nationalism,” *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000): 791-814.

⁶⁰ Bekus, “Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus”.

⁶¹ Only two participants clarified their ethnic cultural background (Russian and Ukrainian) being different from Belarusian during the interview stage. Other participants identified themselves as Belarusian.

FG6/2: So, a Belarusian is one who was born in Belarus, isn't it? [Asking rhetorically the group].

FG6/4: Again, not necessarily, it seems. Here, we have a person who was born in Kazakhstan and who was born in Azerbaijan. So, a Belarusian is a person who was born in Belarus or who has some connection to Belarus.

Aware of recent events in Ukraine, the focus groups recognized the Belarusian language as a significant marker of Belarusian identity. In the pre-interview stage, only four out of thirty-six participants stated that they used the language regularly; seven indicated Belarusian as their mother tongue, and fourteen chose the bilingual option of Belarusian and Russian. However, the discussions showed language to be the crucial element in marking identity boundaries and differentiating participants from any close "Others", as discussed in *Extract 8*. Even if Belarusian is not used in daily communication, command of the language is what substantiates belonging to this specific land, state and people. It conveys the cultural elements of Belarusian society through such a simple practice as mentioning a few Belarusian phrases.

Extract 8: FG1

FG1/6: Regarding independence, I would mention the language. Without the language there will be no independence. With no language, there will be no self-identification, and without self-identification, there is no difference. What would distinguish us from Russians? It is only the language. We can't invent anything else... absolutely nothing.

FG1/5: The single thing that can distinguish us is our language. Other symbols...? Maybe, it is the [Belarusian] marshes. Every country has its own features which are used to depict their beauty. We have the marshes. Our language we are losing. If no one in the [state] machinery doesn't start doing something, we will become more dependent, and not independent.

FG1/5: The language is our culture, history and our original way of living. If we lose the language once and for all, we will lose everything, our identity. What will be left? – Only the name of the country "Belarus"?

FG1/3: How about the borders?

FG1/5: I think that it is not too far [that Belarus will not have any border controls with Russia]. We don't have borders with Russia per se?

FG1/6: Don't you agree? [referring to FG1/3] Look around, what is close?

Group: [general agreement about the borders] Yes, there are no borders.

FG1/5: Well, little by little it is happening already. The borders are gone. And what is left is just some parts on the other sides [as stricter border controls].

For the younger cohort language becomes not just a marker of belonging, but also a symbolic element of independence and sovereignty marking imagined borders to the closest "Other." Since the language is not in active use, preserving it is seen as a political decision for sustaining the Belarusian community. For the older groups the language issue was not so salient, but discussants acknowledge that the language as such is what differentiates them. Participants noted that there are some differences in Russian pronunciation by Belarusians. The discussion in

FG6 also indicates that use of the language is associated with the experience of being local and living there for some prolonged time, as a way of being connected to Belarus and its life. This accumulated experience of living and adjusting to changes in the country is what the participants associated with language and belonging.

Extract 9: FG6

FG6/7: [starts in Russian] I don't know, but I always spent my summers in the village. When we arrived [switches to Belarusian] we talked in Belarusian, and no one needed to switch to Russian.

FG6/2: yes, I know.

FG6/7: [starts in Russian] there were Belarusian schools in Minsk, but in Russian-speaking schools you had to switch. [In Belarusian] But no one was avoiding this language.

[In conclusion of the discussion]

FG6/5: among other things, at least one should understand it [the Belarusian language].

Other elements in the category of ethno-symbolic representations of Belarusian identity included national ornaments in various forms, like ornaments featured on the state flag, clothing and different kinds of textiles, especially the Slutsk sashes,⁶² embroidered linen and the national cuisine. Further explorations of these categories were limited only to those groups where discussants had personal interest in or knowledge of the subject (FG3, FG4) or could speak from their experiences of participating in ethno-cultural festivals or events. In addition, since discussions focused on celebrations, some participants chose to distinguish ethnic Belarusian traditions and celebrations from the official state celebrations (*Extract 10*).

Extract 10: FG3

FG3/6: I would include celebrations like *Kupalle* [summer solstice celebration]

FG3/1: Yes, distinctive celebrations!

FG3/6: They are unique specifically to Belarus. These are historical celebrations, not the official state celebrations; they are specifically historical, for example, *Dziady* [commemorating the departed, All Souls Day] and *Kupalle*. And now people have started to revive these rituals.

When discussants refer to ethnocultural elements, they did not differentiate between symbolic references used by the state officials and alternative discourses. For example, the ornament on the state flag is equated in symbolic value with ethnic ornaments for embroidered clothes used by alternative cultural groups. The same is true about ethno-cultural festivals and cultural events, which could be organized either by city authorities, state museums or alternative cultural groups and commercial banks and companies. This supports the argument that some

⁶² *Slutsk* sashes (in Belarusian, *Sluckija pajasy*) were part of the garment of noblemen, worn as a sign of prosperity and nobility in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, now considered as a unique item of Belarusian culture. Examples of *Slutsk* sashes are displayed in the National Art Museum.

components of ethnocultural identity are mixed with elements of the state identity project in vernacular identity narratives.⁶³ Once politicized, some ethnocultural elements have lost its political relevance in a stable authoritarian state. It is also due to rebranding initiatives of the state authorities that integrated new designs and projects into the country national brand.⁶⁴

Achievements: consumer culture and the country branding

The category of achievements was often used to place the country in the global or regional contexts. The participants made reference to certain brands, products, factories as well as some industrial complexes and export goods. Discussants concentrated on elements that have been associated with branding Belarus internationally, with some recognition abroad. In fact, these markers are similar to those used in official discourses to display the success of Belarusian industry. In addition, discussants mentioned certain elements that are part of their daily life, but which they consider as important signifiers of living in Belarus. Things like local groceries, specific brands and manufactured goods that are part of everyday routine become important for marking people's belonging. Interestingly, the younger groups also wanted to identify with the success of the IT sector, new Belarusian businesses and enterprises (FG1, FG2), such as Wargaming, Viber, EPAM, whereas the older groups referred to more established industries and brands (FG5, FG6) – BelAZ, Kommunar, MAZ. Either way, being a national consumer, having access to and making use of goods available domestically, forms a connection with the country. However, some participants (FG2, FG5) underlined the contradictions and hypocrisy of the state-led campaign “Let's buy Belarusian,” given the low diversity in goods and the restrictions imposed on foreign companies.

The second aspect that can be placed in the category of achievement was the identification with success in sports, sport teams and, most importantly, several famous athletes – names of Darya Domracheva, Victoria Azarenka were mentioned in every group. Their success stories are elements that the participants feel very proud of with respect to their Belarusian identity. Hosting international sport events, such as the Ice Hockey World Championship in 2014, is also recognized as a proud moment for the country. For the participants, the practice of supporting and cheering for Belarusian athletes is political neutral, something that can unite people with differing views. Discussants agreed that sport events are the best venue for displaying their national identity.

⁶³ Bekus, “Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Belarus”, p.11.

⁶⁴ For example, Mir Castle and Nesvizh Palace are branded as main tourist attractions in Belarus. Belarusian cuisine, craft and artisanal products are included in supporting images. See the official tourism page for Belarus, n.d., <http://www.belarus.by/en> (accessed 1 June 2016).

Historical imagination

The element of historical imagination – the cornerstone of origin myths as to how a nation acquired independence – was not salient in discussions. The groups used generalized terms, like “our common history”, or mentioned historical monuments and figures, but there was no narrative of how the Belarusian nation achieved independence in a sovereign state.

Historical elements used as an identity indicator were references to Belarus as “the Partisan Republic” (FG3, FG5, FG6), acknowledging of the role of Belarusian partisan movements in World War II. Such an association links perceptions of identity with the state discourse of the war, which emphasizes the sacrifice of the Belarusian people and the heroism of the partisan movement during the war.⁶⁵ Popular discourses of identity convey and adopt the state narrative of the war. Discussions in the focus groups showed that memories of the war were a central, even sacred, element in thinking about the past. However, wartime memories were not prioritized or mentioned as significant identity markers.

Comparing identity perspectives: the strategic role of a new generation

Analysis of the various identity markers mentioned during discussions showed a rather homogeneous framework of interpretation in talking about identity (see *Table 4*). As participants were free to move the discussion in any way they wanted, the fact that they stayed within a limited range of identity markers indicates a shared value-system applied in defining what it means to be Belarusian. On the other hand, the way that participants prioritized some aspects over others and discussed the salience of specific identity markers presents intra-group and cross-group identification and contestation.

The major point of agreement across focus groups and participants concerned identification with the territory and natural landscapes of Belarus. This attachment was not limited to descriptive aspects of the land, but should be recognized as a culturally refined category featured in Belarusian popular culture. Moreover, participants potentially see this identification as politically neutral, without the difficulty of potential controversies.

A second point of general agreement is associated with sport achievements. Any significant wins by top Belarusian athletes or teams participants considered as proud moments for Belarusian identity. Such an event places Belarus on the international map and enhances recognition of the country – especially important for the younger generation. Moreover, it appeals to unity, as also this type of identification is deemed apolitical. Any contestation in negotiating identity markers starts when discussions shift to more sensitive subjects.

⁶⁵ See A. Goujon, “Memorial Narratives of WWII Partisans and Genocide in Belarus,” *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 6 (2010): 6–25.

Table 4: Comparison of identity markers in the focus group discussions

G	Social groups	Defining symbol	the “land”	the “state”	the “people”	ethnic culture	achievements
G1	Students, public sector	language	√	√		√	√
	Students, private sector	independent state	√	√	√		√
G2	Independent, self-employed	language, ethnic culture	√	√		√	
	Professionals, public /state controlled sector	ethnic culture	√	√	√	√	
	Managers, private sector	state, political system	√	√	√		√
G3	Pensioners, state controlled sector	people	√	√	√		√

Most participants embraced the identification with the “state.” However, some wanted to draw a distinction between being a Belarusian citizen (holding of a Belarusian passport), and personal feelings of belonging to Belarus. All the same, the core element of agreement across focus groups and participants was that their identity as Belarusians is defined by a sovereign independent state with internationally recognized symbols fixed in the Constitution. Whether state symbols should be perceived as national created some disagreement. All focus groups, except for FG4, had one or two participants who were keen on separating the state symbols as official representations of the country from the symbols which, to them, defined their national belonging. Those participants (FG1/4, FG1/6, FG2/4, FG3/1, FG4/6, FG6/1) who strongly contested such identification with state symbols were mostly members of the younger generation (under 35), except for one FG6 participant. With participants in FG2 and FG5 there were similarities in how their identity was defined by their connection to the independent state with its symbols and the political system, thus indicating that they shared a similar interpretive framework.

From the perspective of generational differences, we can note a shift in identity discussions – from negotiating the meaning and characteristics of the “people,” to talking about the importance of ethnic identifiers, like the Belarusian. For the older generation, the “parent generation,” recognition of having experienced the country’s transition formed an important part of their identity. Members of the younger generation tended to search for identifiers that would sharpen the distinction between Belarus and other countries, especially from the closest neighbours, and would improve its international. International recognition of Belarus as an

independent sovereign state with its unique characteristics is meaningful for the younger groups. Thus, the Belarusian language is slowly gaining a new role within the younger generation as an important signifier of their national identity. When discussions turned to the issue of the language, the very process of negotiating its importance convinced more sceptical participants about the role of the language in establishing the boundaries of national independence (FG1, FG3, FG4). This also means that members of the younger generation discover and formulate their personal attachment to the language on their own, as the previous generation was socialized in different linguistic environment. What we may observe today is the slow process of rediscovering language as an identity marker.⁶⁶

What characterized discussants with more nuanced opinions on identity markers was their exposure to a range of news sources and information. Those who had indicated during the interview stage that they used a diverse set of news outlets and sources were more inclined to engage in debate with other participants and to bring up controversial and contested issues like the ambiguity of national symbols, and the role of language and cultural values. Further, those who identified with a religious minority group - either Catholic or Protestant (and not Eastern Orthodox) – were particularly aware that different discourses exist within Belarusian society.

Performing identities in public talk: acceptable public speech

While identity markers offer a perspective on what Belarusians choose to talk about when discussing identity, it is essential to recognize the practice of talking and deliberating as an additional factor of the identity puzzle. The discussions reported here unfolded in a controlled and unnatural conversational environment with participants responding to the moderator's occasional questions.

My attempt to switch smoothly from the main topic of public celebrations to identity was never easy, since participants were puzzled and confused by the question of identity. When I redirected conversations to issues of identity, discussants fell silent for several minutes and prompted me to rephrase my questions several times. A discussion generally started with listing things that held some significance or association with Belarus, but these elements were not structured in a specific narrative or a storyline. Participants evidently found the question of identity puzzling and out of the ordinary. However, this also helped to make participants who showed less awareness and reflection on the subject more open and eager to negotiate the

⁶⁶ G. Hentschel, et al. "The Linguistic and Political Orientation of Young Belarusian Adults between East and West or Russian and Belarusian."

meaning of identity and to engage in evaluating significance and the salience of different identity markers with other participants.

In this practice of negotiating the components of identity, participants did not display doubts about their being “Belarusian”. No one questioned the essential element of the puzzle of whether they are Belarusians and whether they could or should negate the meaning of being Belarusian. Nevertheless, the multidirectional features of the discussions show the limitations of how the practice of public talk and discussion was experienced by participants.

This enabled me to observe what participants considered acceptable public talk or public transcript, and how “hidden transcripts”⁶⁷ can emerge through participants’ communication and interaction. A focus group represents a form of quasi-public or quasi-private space, depending on participant dynamics. Focus group settings give the opportunity to see in action any collision between private and public transcripts, since the continuity of the talk provides certain intimacy for participants to open up, while the whole idea of talking to strangers, with recording devices present, keeps people aware of what they can say.

The triggering element for the focus groups was when discussions shifted to political sphere, politicized issues expressed as general criticism of or disagreement with the discourse of the current Belarusian leadership. Some specific references, like mentioning the president or describing the political system, often led discussants to more controversial points that would require elaborating on political position, which is not a part of the public transcript. Whenever the discussions reached that point, in each focus group there was a person who would try to redirect the conversation back to an acceptable public transcript. Such attempts were phrased as signals to the other participants about going off public transcripts: “We don’t talk about politics” (FG1), “Let’s not discuss politics” (FG6). Others would point out that the discussion was being recorded: “There are cameras here, so let’s not discuss it” (FG2).

Another strategy to signal to other participants that they had crossed into a sensitive subject was to use silences, gesturing, remarks and euphemisms – the elements impossible to interpret without the contextual support of people’s interaction even noting those moments on the record. Having these elements in a focus group communication indicated that the participants shared a deeper understanding of what should not be mentioned in the transcripts. Topics here included mentioning of the president in any form, and political attitudes about the opposition and public protests. It also became clear that sensitivity arises not with the fact of talking about politics but with displaying a political opinion on the Belarusian leadership. However, the

⁶⁷ The term “hidden transcript” as conceptualized by J.C. Scott (in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*) characterises a discourse that is displayed when there is no fear of being controlled or observed by a power holder. Hidden transcripts consist of different gestures, comments and practices that stay out of public scrutiny.

participants felt free to address and criticize organizational and administrative problems in the country, as long as they did not assign any responsibility or blame.

From the performative perspective of how participants reacted to political topics, it was possible to make a distinction between the groups whose members are more dependent on state contracts, on the one hand, and individuals that were more independent concerning study and employment contracts, on the other. FG4, with mid-level professionals from the public sector and state-owned companies, took great care to follow the public transcript. The overall communicative dynamic of the majority in this group was to present publicly acceptable narratives: any potentially critical and controversial voices were simply kept silent.

The group with the oldest members, FG6, used the techniques of redirecting the conversation away from political subjects as a general compromise among participants. By contrast, the younger groups FG1 and FG2 preferred to use hidden references and euphemisms to avoid mentioning sensitive topics. However, the communicative interaction in FG2 slowly allowed the participants to feel more comfortable about going off the public transcript and voicing some controversial opinions regarding national symbols and political control. The group of managers working in the private sector, FG5, restricted their critical remarks to some jokes and anecdotes about the political situation in the country, but felt more comfortable distancing themselves from politics and the political sphere. Whereas the group of independent and self-employed professionals (FG3) was open to discussing some controversial points regarding identity and sensitive political topics, participants in this group felt a need to distance themselves both from the state ideology and from the current Belarusian leadership.

Overall, performing identity talk in quasi-public settings necessarily activates the public transcripts among all participants, with avoidance of any politically sensitive topics. Discussants in FG1 and FG4, who often were mobilized to take part in events organized by the Belarusian authorities, were more conscious about going off the public transcript. They preferred to replace certain remarks with silences or “hidden” references. Participants in FG2, FG3 and FG5 showed some similarities in how they performed public discussion. They chose not to display any controversies in discussing politically sensitive matters, but were more open in their criticism of the public policies of the Belarusian government.

Conclusions

When scholars talk about Belarusian national identity, Belarus is portrayed as a struggle of identity discourses, competing on the uneven field of the autocratic regime. The existing scholarship recognizes the hegemonic status of the Belarusian government’s discourse due to the

state capture of main communication channels and administrative resources. The academic debate also acknowledges symbolic and cultural roles of alternative discourses on national identity from influential cultural and political groups in the country. This academic construction of politically and culturally polarizing discourses has conditioned research inquiries into Belarusian national identity. However, what has been heuristically separated in academic discussions does not necessarily manifest itself in such polarizing form in people's communications.

When Belarusian people talk about identity, their discussions are circumscribed by social interactions, context, everyday concerns as well as exposure to various sources of information. The complexities of everyday communication shows that people can resist and respond to ideologically charged discourses in creative and meaningful ways in autocratic political conditions. The practice of identity talk in the quasi-public setting of a focus group discussion explores blurred boundaries between a range of identity markers and meanings of identity among people. The main contribution of the present study is to point out that people's perceptions of identity represent nuanced and context-dependent interpretations, which cannot be limited to theoretically determined identity groupings.

By examining the practice of identity discussions in Belarus, we see that people are receptive to a range of identity discourses and adopt those that make sense to them with regard to correspondence with other religious, social and political identities that they hold. People formulate their own interpretations and meanings "through the situations and routines in which they sometimes borrow from official political discourse but do not mechanically model their thoughts and actions on them."⁶⁸ Having access to alternative, as opposed to government-controlled, sources of information and perspectives allows some counter-frames as well as resistance mechanisms to emerge and to influence people's perceptions in private and semiprivate settings.

In quasi-public and public contexts, Belarusians attempt to distance themselves from the political sphere and politics in general, limiting their belongingness to a geographical identification with the land and everyday routines. A choice of non-conflictual stances in social communication encourages cross-group cooperation in the autocratic political system, when people perform according to the established public transcript avoiding problematic and polarizing political topics. However, as indicated by some participants, such identification does not provide a strong sense of a national community with a direction for the future or a shared

⁶⁸ R. Hervouet, "Authoritarianism from Below: Lessons from Ethnographic Studies in Belarus," *Anthropology of East European Review* 31, no. 2 (2013): 19–29, at 26.

value system that could offer a foundation for collective actions in democratic mobilization efforts.

What consequence does it have for the future of Belarus? The previous models of democratic mobilization that used national symbols and discourses protesting the Belarusian autocratic government have been losing public support and a political momentum. Some symbolic representations diffused into cultural mass production, creating recognized images, slogans and symbols. However, the Belarusian government has not stayed inactive. It has invested in country rebranding, integrated some new symbolic representations and supported sport activities and influential Belarusian sportspeople. In public discussions, younger people avoid associations with the political dimension but refer to some ethno-national elements, such as the Belarusian language, historical figures and events and ethnic ornaments, to make sense of their “Belarusianess.” Probably, future democratic protests in Belarus will become more issue-driven and less identity-based as it was during the previous years.