

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'THE PEOPLE': MEDIA DISCOURSE AS THE REFERENCE POINT OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

### *Abstract*

The question of personal and collective identity is one of the densely discussed topics in Western social sciences. It is as old as the latter. Being one of the universal human needs (Bauman 1992), identity is a twofold phenomena: it is *lived* but it is also *symbolically mediated*. The former process is often seen as consequential: “what we call the *subject* is never given at the start” (Ricoeur 1991, 33), and it is precisely the order of the imaginary that constitutes and communicates personal and collective identities.

The essay aims at trying to describe national identity not in an essentialist way (what kind of identity it is), but from an anti-essentialist stand (what kind of identity it is said to be). To put it differently, it is crucial to consider the idea of national identity not as merely representational or descriptive, but rather as performative, thus opening a possibility to assess its ideological effects. Following Laclau’s elaborations on populism as a form of political logic that leads to emerging “people” as a political subject, the current essay explores the aspects of discursive identity-building processes in modern Belarus in order to access its ideological implications and offer a possible mode of narrating the Belarusian identity, in as much as, as I try to show, the only mode of present-time Belarusian identity is narrative identity - the way Belarusians are narrated and narrate themselves.

**Keywords:** personal, collective, national identity, the former process, “the people”.

***The question of identity [in postmodern times]***

What we call *subject* is  
never given at the start  
(P. Ricoeur)

There are a great number of writings devoted to the concept of *identity*<sup>1</sup>. Recent debates have shifted the accent from the clash between essentialist and anti-essentialist view of identity to the question of the very possibility of identity in post-modern times. It is often argued that the concepts of ethnic, national, and even personal identity have been erased and are no longer viable.

There is also a tendency to point at the fleeting and ephemeral character of post-modern identity. It has even been proposed to transform the concept on the lexical and morphological level and to use a more adequate form of the noun *identification* in order to emphasize the displacement in identity building that has occurred. Identity (if possible at all) is seen as postponed, never fully present, not preceded by any stable referent. Such a 'semantic turn' re-introduces the concept into the constructivist field and the discursive approach, according to which identification is seen as everlasting and always-in-process (Hall 2003). It also places the concept of identity into the semantic field of psychoanalysis where this category means a fundamental lack of what is a cornerstone of any identity: "one needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of identity" (Laclau 1994, 3).

At the same time all this doesn't mean that the notion of identity is unfeasible. As Derrida puts it, identity is still the concept, "without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all" (Derrida 1981, cited in Hall & Du Gay 2003).

Stuart Hall also points at the fact that the phenomenon of identity still remains central to the question of agency and politics (Hall & Du Gay 2003, 2). He also evokes the idea of 'identity politics' that actualizes the *question of identity* into the field of the political. Nowadays the majority of authors analyze identity in the context of symbolic practices, invoking identification as a process and result of hegemonic articulation (Hall & Du Gay 2003, Laclau 2005), thus radically opposing an essentialist view of identity. Identity is now seen as "the process of becoming rather than being" (Hall 2003, 4).

Constructing identity necessarily means it emerging in the symbolic order, telling a story about it. In this light let us use the definition of ideology that was proposed by Stuart Hall in the already cited work on cultural identity:

*I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point - the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpel-*

*late', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes, which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us* (Hall & Du Gay 2003, 5-6)

Thus seen identity / identification can still be considered as a primary form of ideology - the idea that has a rich history of scientific debates (see, for example, Adorno & Horkheimer 1979, Althusser 1971). In this tradition the subject is understood as a discursive effect, a *subject-in-process*, constructed and reshaped. The way a subject is *enunciated* "through and within" discourse becomes of crucial importance to the understanding of the formation of different *subject positions* - formally empty sites with a predetermined ideological content performing the role of a regulating and disciplinizing force. An individual as subject is welcomed to identify him/herself with one of the articulations that are fundamentally arbitrary and normative. Thus, a subject / a group of subjects is constituted around primary identifier that is claimed to be their essence. Consequently, a social agent occupies a predefined place in the social structure, and this positioning necessarily influences the area and mode of her agency. This process of interpellation is properly discussed in Althusser's works (see, for example, Althusser 1971). However, much less attention has been paid to the process of interior managing the process of subjectivization on the part of an individual: the question of what makes people prefer (agree with) certain subject positions, and what are the forces that influence their choices still remains to be answered. In postmodern times we can hardly rely on the conceptualization of the process of subjectivization as a one-sided process exercised by ideology and not obstructed by the individual.

Such characteristics of postmodern condition as drift, dissemination, playfulness, and schizophrenia bring about the necessary consequence of the "pre-occupation with the fragmentation and instability of language and discourse [that] carries over directly...into a certain conception of personality" (Harvey 1992, 53). A radical relationism of identities has inspired researchers to avoid the discredited term 'subject' in favor of a more cautious 'subject position' as constituting a single agent, which is deliberately ambiguous. It is also quite trendy to speak about the death of the subject, or "the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering and dispersion of this last" (Harvey 1992, 305). This brand new heterogeneous subject (if we are still allowed to use this term) is seen as part and parcel of a multiplicity of atomized narratives, language games, and plurality of context in a deliberately opened system (Laclau 1989) where she appears to be a subject of agency and not only an object of ideological manipula-

tions. Thus, the narrative unity of one's life appears to be an ambiguous process: an individual is narrated by power and at the same time narrates herself.

However, in some cases individuals appear to be more sensitive to the ideological tricks: as P. Ricoeur puts it, "we can become our own narrator, in imitation of these narrative voices, without being able to become the author" (Ricoeur 1991, 32). In such circumstances individuals are predisposed to external influences and emotionally prepared for them. The process of national identity formation is the case. Individuals are already interpellated to a certain national setting by the context of their birth and initially associate themselves with a certain national community. "Knowing where one stands" (Bauman 1992, 679) is of crucial importance for an individual. Nationalism has long been a cornerstone of collective identity, and at the same time it often plays a crucial role in the formation of personal identity. Accordingly, it is formulated "in terms of passion and identification": due to its emotional allure and appeal to the common past nationalistic discourses acquire an irresistible power (Calhoun 1997, 3). As such, nationality becomes "an object of, simultaneously, individual concern and specialized institutional service" (Bauman 1992, 680).

### ***National identity and the construction of "the people"***

In his influential above-cited essay "Soil, Blood and Identity", Zygmunt Bauman links nationalism and ideology arguing that nationalism is "an attempt made by the modern elites to recapture the allegiance (in the form of cultural hegemony) of the masses" (Bauman 1992, 675). Promoting the uniform national identity is the right way to standardize and normalize personal and communal identities reducing them to a common denominator of certain national traits and attributes, unifying and homogenizing individuals into easier-defined and thus easier-ruled masses.

Bauman (following Nietzsche) also points at the artificial and mythical character of a nation: although it is often represented (and decoded) as "a natural, God-given way of classifying men" (ibid., 676), "nation is incomplete without its 'conscience arousing spokesman'" (ibid., 686). Building a strong sense of common nationality inside a certain community may function as a strong ideological instrument of power as soon as

*Nationalism played the role of the hinge fastening together state and society (represented as, identified with, the nation). State and nation emerged as natural allies at the horizon of the nationalist vision (...). The state supplied the resources of nation building, while the postulated*

*unity of the nation and shared national destiny offered legitimacy to the ambition of the state authority to command obedience (ibid., 683)*

Thus, the state (or any other power structure) allows itself a managerial function of administering “truly significant cultural differences (those made visible, noticed, serving as orientation points or labels for group integration, and defended)” as *products* of identity-assembling processes (ibid., 692).

Accordingly, we can hardly define nationality as a bunch of certain objective characteristics that are common for most members of a certain group, but rather as a number of associated nationalistic claims about what this group is (or should be). In this case, national identity is profoundly instructed by the cultural symbols constituted for it by the instance of power and recognized by the members of the community as legitimate.

Consequently, we may speak of the discursive formation of nationalism. As Craig Calhoun notes, “this way of thinking about social solidarity, collective identity, and related questions (like political legitimacy) plays a crucial role both in the production of nationalist self-understanding and the recognition of nationalist claims by others” (Calhoun 1997, 4). The notion of nations as imagined communities (Anderson 1991) stresses the idea of communitary being as artificially and externally organized around common denominators (shared space and common history as most habitually employed<sup>2</sup>).

Whatever the common denominator could be, there is a profound similarity in constituting identity. It is organized around two enantiomorphic processes - that of inclusion and exclusion. As the idea of the Self is constructed through thinking the Self-as-not-the-Other, the idea of a certain community is organized around thinking: those Who-are-not-us. In this process the outside plays a crucial role in marking symbolic boundaries and consolidating the inside:

*...It is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive meaning of any term - and thus its ‘identity’ - can be constructed. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’ (Hall & Du Gay 2003, 4-5).*

This is precisely the logic of any semiotic system that can organize itself only through establishing its boundaries (that are porous and allow two-way contacts) and extra-semiotic space or a non-space. The Inside in this situation is a cultural space, and the outside is thought as a number of chaotic disorganized elements (Lotman 2005).

The process of integrating people into a certain unity also relies on the artificial process of boundary-drawing activity (see, for example, Bauman 1992, Hall & Du Gay 2003, Laclau 1990, 2005). As Bauman puts it, "it is in the end 'the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (op.cit., 678). It is obvious that such activity entails a binary logic, reducing all the social variety to the opposing worlds of *we* and *they*, and "the 'we-ness' of friends owes its materiality to the 'they-ness' of the enemies (ibid., 678).

Explaining the hegemonic logic of equivalences as the main instrument of constituting the people, Laclau (1990, 2005) notes that in order to grasp the limits of a certain totality it is crucial to "differentiate it from something other than itself" (69); and it is precisely this mechanism that simultaneously creates the totality as soon as

*vis-à-vis the excluded element, all other differences are equivalent to each other - equivalent in their common rejection of the excluded identity* (Laclau 2005, 70).

However, as we have already shown, even when the internal uniformity has been achieved with the help of rhetorics of exclusion and segregation, there is still a strong need to produce a *point de capiton*, a nodal point that functions as a referential block of meaning for the totality so that it could reassure and constantly maintain its own identity: "one difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality" (Laclau 2005, 70). Thus, the process of constituting collective identity employs both the differential and equivalential logics. This fusion can be illustrated by the example of societies that undergo the process of nation-building. Modern Belarus is such an example.

### ***Discursive production of Belarusian identity***

Nowadays the idea of the impossibility (or inconsistency) of national identity has become quite trendy. The nation-state that is prognosed to diminish gradually and the emergence of globalistic logic of intercultural relations posit a question: does national identity exist in a postnational epoch?

However, a postulated "bankruptcy of the nation-state in their past role of producers and suppliers of national identity" (Bauman 1992, 692) is true only to the established Western democracies while the nations that have recently undergone the process of restructurization (post-Soviet block and the Balkans, just as an example) and experienced a painful collapse of the nation-state still need to oppose radical disorganization with the order; the question of who will supply this order becomes of secondary importance. In the countries where the

process of nation-building is still under way nationalistic appeals become “a conjunction of the spiritual elite’s bid for political leadership and the political rulers’ bid for spiritual hegemony” (Bauman 1992, 683).

Belarus is one of the states that has found itself at the crossroads when the USSR broke down. The Belarusians entered the brand new era of independence experiencing a profound lack of the sense of collective national identity. Identity-building was destined to become a conscious political act, and a certain way of speaking about Belarusians as a distinctive independent nation should have been established. There was a genuine demand for some point of shared identification that could hold together a crowd and, therefore, for a narrative that could mobilize the Belarusians around a new way of being together by which they could constitute their collective and personal identity. The narrative unity of Belarusian life should have been created.

After President Lukashenko came to power in 1994, the process of discursive identity-building for Belarusians began. First, the logic of differentiation came into play. There was a strong need to unite people against a common enemy - a figure that would be non-comprehensible by most of the individuals in the state and would appear as potentially dangerous, an antagonist that necessarily introduced into play another important figure - the Hero. The position of the antagonist was filled with the vague notion of “the West”, and the Hero was embodied by the President himself. In numerous speeches, Lukashenko evoked “the West” as treacherous and vicious and articulated the need to unite against the common enemy.

This discursive appeal was not innovative, - it was just literally copied from the Soviet times and the Cold War rhetoric when “the West” was narrated as a foe, coercive and deeply sinful. What is particularly interesting about the whole situation is that national identity has been constructed around the appeals to unity (an image of a strong unified state and nation) with an emphasis on the figure of the Father-defender. The ideology of fraternity and patriarchy symbolized by President Lukashenko came into play. The national identity of the Belarusian people has been spoken in terms of *Vaterland* and *unity* [against a common enemy]. The dominant medium of such claims was then the President’s speeches delivered to the nation during state holidays and important political events<sup>3</sup>.

However, the practice of demonizing the Other (the West) exposed another problem: the semiosphere of Belarusians could have merged with a more general semiosphere of the post-Soviet people (Russians in particular). So there was a strong need to introduce a more internally significant nationalistic discourse in order to create / actualize the point of shared identification that would hold together the crowd. The fatal mistake was to infuse this discourse with an

obvious link with the present power, in an attempt to create a permanent association of the images of prosperous and happy Belarus with those in power.

Despite presidential speeches one of the most heavily used instruments employed in the process of identity-building was public service advertising. In 2003, a years'-long project of posters on Belarusian identity began. Through these posters the present power aimed at retranslating a certain narrative identity for the Belarusian nation: for years they have been making a story about Belarusian everyday life, its people and place, meaning to build a common we-identity for Belarusians and thus create the narrative unity of their life. National unity became the strongest point of identification on which the state relies, and nationality became normative and well-specified.

Then, in 2003, the point of identification was paradoxically Belarus itself and - what is more important - its well-being. The slogan was "For Belarus" and "Belarus for..." (certain epithets were added (For a prosperous Belarus, For peaceful Belarus, etc.). The aim was to re-establish the homogenous national community through accentuating collectivity and simple treasures of independent Belarus (labor, collectively spent holidays, welfare). Thus, the dominant images in these posters were "simple" people that do their work (often in the artificially created context, for example, a woman in a national costume who manually reaps corn), crowds of people celebrating a state holiday, bread, and so on.



The mythology of the new Belarusian populism employed the images of 'simple Belarusians' in their everyday life in order to re-activate the unity that was partially lost through the collapse of the USSR and years of witch-hunting inside the state that followed.

However, this attempt was hardly successful. Many recognized the posters as politicized and artificial, probably because the images were obviously staged and did not carry any message that could function as a nodal point of collective identification.



Later series of posters, such as “We are Belarusians”, “Together we are Belarus” simply paraphrased the previous ones - both on an iconic and linguistic level. Again the attempt of discursive identity-building employed semantically empty slogans and did not contain any patriotically driven message. This discourse did not offer any demand that could be collectively recognized as verified and crucial for most Belarusians, or, to say exactly, it offered too many of them. The images that were used presupposed that the claim transmitted through the verbal message had been already achieved and brought to life (thanks to the present power structures) and the only thing that was *really demanded* was to support the State. The re-articulation of national identities into political discourse was (and still is) so obvious that these messages had a negative effect both as a discourse on national identity and political advertising.

There was also a more open political campaign that was titled “The State for the People”. Reactivating communist rhetoric, this discourse interpellated people as the central force in whose name the governors exercise the power, thus legitimizing its politics as the one ‘done for the people’s sake’. Similar to Soviet propaganda, these posters widely employed the images of children and the already used appeal to the artificial, festive nationalist surface represented by national costumes worn with a modern make-up and *exhibited* in modern settings. Such an awkward attempt to build a reference to the common past through displacing its superficial and artificially imposed attributes (national costumes, scenes from the dramatized harvest crop) created a sense of narrative identity that was not represented but constructed and performed - the trick of ideology obviously did not work.



Soon it became obvious that structuring discourse around empty catch-phrases and visual simulacra of Belarusian identity could not build the sense of *la patrie*, and a different strategy of employing the image of Belarus as *terre* for a referential point. The campaign that was named simply "I love Belarus" (following the NY established fashion) and contained images of Belarusian landscapes, well-known places, and culturally significant symbols that were figured in the shape of a heart. The campaign was aimed at creating an affectionate attitude towards the common land and thus organizing community around this place. Containing no political references and employing culturally images salient for Belarusians the attempt was really much more appealing.



At the same time in postmodern condition such practice of building identity in a mode of desirable future appears to be problematic. In a global world where individuals become increasingly mobile and easily change places of living and affiliation, the concept of collective identities constructed through the appeals to *soil* and *blood* often appears to be inoperative. It also concerns the Belarusian situation where the concept of fatherland as a shared place has been historically discredited, as in Belarusian history people stayed on their own land but became citizens of different states with a newly defined national identity.

As Calhoun notes (1997, 23), "ethnicity is only one potential source of homogeneity and mutual obligation".

Thus, many researchers claim that it is civil - not ethnic - identity that gives a particular chance for the formation and maturation of Belarusian identity. As soon as we see identity as a discursive effect and the interplay of hegemonic practices, it is still quite possible to construct such an appeal, centering on one particular difference in order to appropriate the representation of the totality of Belarusians in the process of state-building within a post-national situation. However, civil appeals that are infused with a dense political context, linking some civil values with certain political structures, can hardly gain widespread currency. Loyalty to the category of *Belarus* rather than to some distinct political power can add much to the formation of Belarusians as a consistent group.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Being perfectly aware of the particular difficulty to conceptualize the notion of identity, I do not attempt to grasp the term in all its theoretical implications and elaborate here on what are its basic definitions (this is a vast field that should be deconstructed thoroughly, but rather concentrate on the problem of collective identities and suggest some possible ways of working with this concept.
- <sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman cites Maurice Barres who asks the question "What is la patrie?" and answers "...Terre et les Morts" (Bauman 1992, 684).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, the speech delivered during the meeting devoted to Independence Day in 2001 ([www.president.gov.by/press18816.html#doc](http://www.president.gov.by/press18816.html#doc)), where the USA and NATO are openly named as potential enemies and a threat to the peaceful life of Belarusians.