

BELARUSIAN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY IN TIMES
OF CATASTROPHES AND DRASTIC CHANGES:
A ROUNDTABLE

Andrei Vazyanau

Lecturer at the Department of Social Sciences,
European Humanities University
Savičiaus g. 17, 01126 Vilnius, Lithuania
Email: andrei.vozianov@ehu.lt
ORCID: 0000-0002-5103-7298

Roman Urbanowicz

PhD student, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Doctoral Programme in Social Sciences
Unioninkatu 35, 00014, Helsinki, Finland
ORCID: 0000-0002-0102-8051

Yana Sanko

Master's student in Social Anthropology, Lund University
Email: sankoyana@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-4540-6437

Aliaksandra Shrubok

PhD student, Uppsala University, Department of Cultural Anthropology
and Ethnology, Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies,
Engaging Vulnerability Program
Gamla Torget 3, 3 tr, 751 20, Uppsala, Sweden
Email: aliaksandra.shrubok@ires.uu.se
ORCID: 0000-0002-1287-8959

Stsiapan Zakharkevich

D. in History, Associate Professor at EHU,
Academic Department of Humanities and Arts
Email: stsiapan.zakharkevich@ehu.lt
ORCID: 0000-0002-8520-2730



Elena Gapova

Professor, Department of Sociology, Western Michigan University
1903 W Michigan Ave, Kalamazoo MI 49008-5257 USA
E-mail: elena.gapova@wmich.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-1009-8246

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Abstract. The last two years in Belarus were marked by a string of catastrophic events and profound changes: protests of 2020, unprecedented political repressions and involuntary emigration on a mass level, the refugee crisis of 2021 at the Belarus – EU border, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which Belarus partakes. Those events fundamentally reshape the lives and professional practices of social anthropologists and ethnologists. The aim of the rountable in Kaunas at the 10th Congress of Belarussian studies was to voice the experiences of anthropologists as practicing researches and private persons. The general directions of reflection included the problematic nature of ethnographic method in terms of access to the field in Belarus; validity of professional expertise and engagement; researcher's positionality within the unfolding calamity; the matters of disciplinary reproduction along the lines of geopolitical fissures.

Keywords: mass repressions; field access; disciplinary reproduction; the 2020s in Belarus; research ethics.

Preface

The past two years in Belarus and the larger region have been marked by a string of catastrophic events and profound changes: revolutionary protests of the summer of 2020, unprecedented spiraling exacerbation of political repressions in the country, the emergence of involuntary political emigration on a mass level, the refugee crisis of 2021 at the border between Belarus and the EU, and, finally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which Belarus is infamously partaking. Besides the social and political consequences of biblical proportions, these catastrophic events have been accompanied by a fundamental restructuring of the landscape of personal and collective emotions, affecting both social researchers and those who (or with whom) they study. A pallet of visceral sensations – hope, disappointment, anger, fear, effervescence, despair, camaraderie, desolation, hate, love, silence, torpidity, humiliation, pride, apathy, resolution, shame and guilt – overwhelms the social fabric in the country and beyond, inevitably shaping lives and professional practices of social anthropologists and ethnologists.

Thus, the aim of the roundtable that took place in Kaunas on the 1st of October at the 10th Congress of Belarussian Studies was twofold.

Firstly, it was to voice our diverse experiences of those catastrophic events as both practising researchers and private persons. Secondly, we aimed at reflecting upon the commonality of challenges and intuitively searching for ways of coping with them emotionally, intellectually, and professionally. All in all, it was about getting together in times of overwhelming catastrophes.

Given the diversity of experiences and certain generative pragmatics of the roundtable – to have the words “Belarusian anthropology” in the title is a rare currency – some more general directions of reflection were offered in advance, instead of precise questions. All the participants were encouraged to share their personal and professional experiences about the pressing issues of the moment. They included:

- ethnography as a method (a cornerstone of the discipline) and its problematic nature in terms of access to the field in Belarus, the safety of our research participants, and ethics, both professional and interpersonal;

- validity and (ir)relevance of professional expertise and engagement, its diverse forms of representations, and fraught and precarious practices of production;

- reflections on the researcher’s positionality within the unfolding calamity, its emotional contours and the tactics of ethical and intellectual coping with and countering the disasters;

- and finally, the matters of disciplinary reproduction, both formal and informal, alongside the lines of geopolitical fissures and in times that amplify the ethical and emotional gravity of choices.

Roman Urbanowicz

Andrei Vazyanau (European Humanities University)

What can Belarusian anthropology do in times of unprecedented mass repression and the Russian invasion of Ukraine using the territory of Belarus?

This comment is written from a not-quite-usual position for a Belarusian anthropologist. I grew up in Mariupol, Ukraine, and received my master’s degree in anthropology in St. Petersburg, Russia, and a PhD in Regensburg, Germany. In 2020, I collected signatures for an alternative candidate in the Belarusian election and hid protesters; in 2021, I came to Belarus for the last time and moved to Kyiv a few weeks after. A month ago, I delivered to Kyiv a parcel from the Belarusian community of Vilnius, for the second time in the last three months.

To sum up my experience of the recent two years in one sentence – like many of my colleagues, I have ceased to be able to do academic anthropology in the way that Western academia demands. Instead, since

the beginning of 2020 and until now, we have been writing reports for news sites, open letters, evacuation memos, and Facebook posts — except those days when we have to flee (often, for a second or third time since 2020) or look for a temporary job/visa/humanitarian protection to be able not to go back to Belarus (and yet some of our colleagues remain there). At the same time, I do not think that the activities undertaken by me and my colleagues to collect data and write texts fall outside the definition of anthropological work.

1. Not everyone has the privilege of doing ethnography following North American or Western European standards. Belarusians, amidst other researchers who do not have the minimum conditions for doing science (as seen by top international universities), should raise this concern loudly, including the very form of their (our) ethnographic efforts. In particular, it is necessary to problematize the application of standard compliances to researchers from countries affected by war and/or mass repressions.

2. Both (unexpected) consequences and (expected) effects of our research work should concern us no less than the achievement of the research goal. Attention is needed not only to the validity and reliability of the statement but also to the place and time of this statement. One recent example is the placement of Amnesty International's report on Ukraine in July 2022. While the content of the report is a subject worth of a separate discussion, we also need to reflect on which potential the text had at the moment of publication in the context given (to put it simpler: why, with which expectations would one publish the report exactly then, in that form, for that audience?).

3. The research agenda should seek maximum adequacy to the broader public discussion and the problem field. By reducing anthropology to theorizing, the academic community devalues it for the studied societies here and now. The perception of academic efforts by the general public may not seem important today, but it will likely manifest itself after the change, in the decisions made about transformations of the scientific infrastructure. Perhaps we should keep in mind the question addressed to us from the future: "What did you do during the war/repressions?". A case of similar questioning is the post-war discussion on the guilt of American anthropology — resulting from the fact that during WWII many anthropologists studied Japanese (or other) culture to consult the US military.

4. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a colonial war (as noted by Timothy Snyder (Snyder 2022)), and Belarusian anthropology today, if it aims to preserve its independence, cannot help but be decolonial. While decolonization is currently often assumed to be a necessary cause, component, and/or consequence of defeating an empire, nothing guarantees that the decolonization of self-knowledge will take place in every former colony. This imposes certain imperatives in terms of whom to give voice in the first turn, and which (institutional,

research, pedagogical) coalitions to join if we have the ambition to enter the decolonization process. At the same time, colonial optics are produced and used concerning Belarus not only from the Russian viewpoint. For instance, some German cultural institutions, closing their offices in Minsk, transfer work communication with Belarusians to their office in Moscow.

5. It is rarely discussed, but anthropology does not promise pleasant emotions and comfort to anyone involved. I can recall how, until 2020, my colleagues had been using ethnography to cope with the experience of something that they found emotionally disgusting or ideologically unacceptable. This included research on radical movements and subcultures, manifestations of discrimination and violence, etc. Today's context can work oppositely: we live in a situation where radicalization has become the mainstream, the value of nonviolent resistance is an object of ridicule or a reason for reproach, and the distinctive features that served as the foundation of Belarusian identity are rejected from various sides. This context requires a sustainable understanding of the principles and teleology of the anthropological profession – which will be a source of motivation for researchers, while also providing answers to the questions about us or addressed to us from outside.

Roman Urbanowicz (University of Helsinki)

Catastrophic research experiences and disciplinary self-alienation

The main message of my commentary is to highlight a contradiction between lived experiences of the ongoing catastrophic developments in the region and disciplinary conventions of how these experiences are supposed to be used by anthropologists and ethnologists. It just so happens, that living through catastrophes traumatises, and traumatic experiences are difficult and at times even painful to share. Yet the career conventions of our academic trade oblige anthropologists to represent their professional experiences, abundantly and vigorously. We seem to be bound to use it or lose it. What to do about it is not clear at all.

My commentary hence falls into three parts: a brief outline of my positionality and experience of ethnographic research and anthropological writing in the years of 2020–2022, followed by some scattered reflections on habits of othering that linger to the production of anthropological knowledge, as well as on looming sense of the vanity of our disciplinary practices, in light of the dramatic events that are unfolding.

1. While my professional socialisation in the discipline began years ago at the Belarusian State University, I have been a doctoral student

in social anthropology at the University of Helsinki since early 2019. I conducted my ethnographic research (a boringly old-fashioned year-long in-depth one) in Belarus in 2019–2020, finishing it in September 2020. The topic of my research focuses on the relations between the state and a group marginalised in terms of both class and ethnicity – a rural Polish community. Therefore, as my fieldwork was approaching its chronological end, the very experience of partaking in demonstrations together with my fieldwork companions (in our civil capacities), living together through the overwhelming moral catastrophe of totalising police violence, and a joint search for ethical responses to it happened to constitute a culminating part of my ethnographic research.

Now, there is a brief outline of some obvious things, important for my line of reasoning. The experiences of the 2020 revolt and unprecedented political repressions that followed were massively traumatising for many in Belarus, in various ways, and for locally embedded social researchers these are experiences of both living through and researching the very same injury. Amongst many possible consequences of dealing with traumatic and intense experiences, in turn, unwillingness to open up is a frequent one. It is not at all easy to share and dissect critically sensitive private matters and visceral experiences, those of courage, fear, hope, loss, and particularly, as of October 2022 – the one of defeat, that feels the most bitter given its consequences to the Ukrainian events.

2. Any act of anthropological knowledge production, on the other hand, inevitably entails defamiliarization, however elaborated the tradition of disciplinary reflection on the topic might be. To represent an experience unavoidably means to cater to the gaze of others, turning a vulnerable flow of lived experiences into a fixed, alienated form of representation. *Hell is other people*, after all, in a sense that any act of being conceived by (or represented to) another person implies a suspension of sorts, a stop of the flux of phenomenological experience of constant becoming. To be described is to acquire a fixed and complete form; for Sartre, an experience akin to that of death (Sartre 2021).

Among the anthropological reflections running parallel to this famous existentialist take on the idea of representation, debates on ‘narrative slots’ and temporal othering are most relevant to my commentary. Besides already classical pieces on the so-called “savage” (Trouillot 1991) and “tribal” (Murray Li 2000) slots, the thing that seems particularly fitting the topic is the notion of the “anthropology of suffering”.

The latter emerged as a critical description of a certain fashion in the discipline that took solid hold by the 2010s (Robbins 2013). In particular, as “a genre that specialises in the minute description of individual experiences of exclusion, violence, illness, and poverty” (Laidlaw 2013: 31), it was criticised for bearing habitual features of othering based on moral relativism. This time, by drawing on a rhetorical strategy of depicting individual suffering in ways that emphasize the

foreignness and unfathomability of their particular plights, compared to the presumed life worlds of the researcher and their academic audience (Mattingly 2014: 475). Contrastingly, it corresponds with a broader argument that emphasised thoroughly produced allochronism of a classical ethnographic subject (Fabian 1983). Recently, the issue has been noted to persist, particularly in relation to the anthropological subject in crisis. This particular kind of denial of coevalness is located not in failures to recognise the shared present but in the denial of a future shared with the researcher (Ramsay 2020: 403), as the distressed subjects of “anthropology of suffering” seem to appear as routinised instances of otherwise inherently brief disorders (cf. with Vigh 2008).

To sum it up: the ways anthropology knows to address its subjects in crises bear ample potential for exotisation and somewhat more fundamental futural othering. My take on those elaborated concepts is rather simple: a researcher of one’s own crisis might be supposed to reproduce a voiced denial of coevalness but concerning oneself. This friction unravels the crucial question: are we at all capable of describing those whom we study as *really* normal people, just the way we are in our normal lives?

My reflection is also prompted by the similarity of class trajectories between my fieldwork companions and myself. By the late stages of my fieldwork research, I happened to spend most of my time with rural men of my age and blue-collar occupations, and hence had a strong feeling of living an alternative version of my own life, the way it realistically might have gone. Thoughts, ideas, sensations, and expressions of my fieldwork companions felt to be of *genuinely normal* people, from my vantage; there was a distance of course, but it felt like a distance within rather than a distance between. Yet, I do not think that my fieldwork companions would necessarily be seen similarly from the vantage of the general international academic readership – those for whom I am supposed to present my ethnographic contribution, and of whom I can also say, under different circumstances, that they seem to be genuinely normal people, just like me¹. All in all, these contradictions only aggravate the pressing sensation of superficiality.

3. The amplified sense of vanity and alienation of anthropological expertise, when applied to overwhelming catastrophes that dramatically restructure your whole life and the lives of your dear ones, brings to the fore the matter of relevance. *They’ll never understand you anyway*, so why bother explaining yourself and arguing for validity, novelty, boldness etc. (familiar clichés abound) of your research/

1 Essentially, whose ways of accounting for the human condition are the only ways I have ever been taught. Yet, this passing comment touches on a much more profound matter of the class-based disparities in access to representation within and across “cultural units” on which we habitually divide the world; can peasants/workers/paupers/etc. authentically represent themselves academically or in terms of any other “high culture” of their society?

thesis/article/book? For me, as well as for many in Belarus, this has only become much more intense after the Russian aggressive invasion began, endangering the lives of friends, relatives, and colleagues, along with millions of other Ukrainian civilians and soldiers, and bringing the whole new level of anxiety and anger; and, to an extent, shame. *There is a goddamn war going on, things are gonna slide, and the future is murdered, how could they talk about anything else?* How could I talk about anything else, after all?

Conversely, the very logic of building an academic career in global English-speaking anthropology, especially at its early stages, is based on publicity, and broader, on the cultivation of cheerful and somewhat expansionist habitus of networking and self-promotion. To build an impressive CV and network of peer support, one is supposed to be active in social media and at academic events of all sorts, promoting one's research and its invaluable findings. Even more so, one is expected not to nauseate in response to "*oh my God, you have SUCH a fascinating topic!*" and reciprocate similarly. Effectively, a young and aspired anthropologist has no choice but to behave within their discipline as if their very formative professional experience did not instruct them to be particularly sensitive towards shallowness and vanity. As of today, it is not quite clear to me personally, how to reconcile this contradiction.

This raises a trivial question that lies at the core of my comment: how to do what we are supposed to do professionally these days, and for what? It is a rhetorical one, to an extent, as every injury heals with time (or so they say), but only to an extent. Undoubtedly, this question might also be dismissed as merely another instance of "how to bear with the vanity of the world" spleen. Yet the structural logic of the contradiction of various sensitivities and practices is not unique to either my situation or the Belarusian case. Our colleagues from some more actively threatened groups, those who sustain heavier losses and traumas, might quite reasonably (from their standpoint) wonder, how the hell can we be talking about our petty matters while their catastrophes take place. This is neither mature nor productive to compare or measure the gravity of crises but traumas seem to work this way, at times. A patient and nuanced approach to such cases, I hope, can provide an opportunity to scrutinise the mechanics of anthropological othering both intellectually and empathetically, using our own emotional experiences and responses as a useful epistemological tool to examine the emotional and moral landscape of the field (cf. Fassin 2008; Stoczkowski 2008).

Further, the workings and consequences of such complex entanglements of fraught personal paroxysms and extractivist disciplinary conventions that bound us to alienate ourselves actively and cheerfully might be scrutinised politically. This allows us to explore possibilities of transformative alliances and collaborations in academia and

beyond, outside the bubbles shaped by tragedies yet horizontally rather than vertically. The same applies to further exploration of the question of who are “they” that “will never understand”. It touches on the matter of hierarchies of knowledge and ontological standpoints within the global academia; much in line with A. Vazyanau’s contemplations regarding thorough attention towards the decolonial rethinking of our strategic and tactical coalitions within the academia.

Yana Sanko (Lund University)

For me, coming back to academia and anthropology in particular was one of the outcomes of my activist side projects, as well as of forced migration from Belarus in 2020. Before 2020 I had been working as a User Experience Researcher and doing qualitative studies for digital products mostly. Getting gradually involved in studies related to repressions and political activism made me face challenges, different from what I had been used to.

Firstly, an interview (often online) becomes the only option available after you leave the country. Not only I cannot go to Belarus anymore, but also people in Belarus feel much safer when they know that any evidence and content of the conversation is outside the country. Of course, during those interviews, you feel the place for the potential gap between self-description and how the events could unfold but you have to accept this limitation. And it’s not only an inconvenience in professional terms but also a very sensual aspect of the loss. It’s not just about the lost access to the field but a sensory deprivation of sorts, the impossibility to witness events and you saying to yourself “wow, this should be studied”. There is unarguably important work that can be done within the diaspora or even globally, yet this loss should be acknowledged and reflected upon.

Secondly, in crisis circumstances, you are more likely to get access to the groups that you are already part of. And that can pose all kinds of ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest. In my case, it has been in several different circles, but still, it’s clear that my political views limited my ability to reach out to the opponents. In one study I conducted 22 interviews, and I talked to only two people who do not actively support protests, despite my attempts to find more. This is a challenge but also it is a great help when you are a part of the emergent networks of trust. In some cases, my invitation to the interview was shared in secret closed telegram groups with a personal recommendation, and total strangers agreed to talk to me and to make the recordings. One person said to me: you are recommended by a person whom I trust, so I trust you.

Thirdly, there is an issue of consent. How can we rely on the consent given, for example, a year ago, if the scope and character of state

repressions have changed? Shouldn't the understanding of what data is safe to use change as well? But how to achieve that in practice? How often should we reconsider it? What if my understanding of what is safe is stricter than that of my research participants? In a way, it is a process of negotiations with the imagined future: can something published today become harmful tomorrow?

Often you can obfuscate the details enough to be safe, but sometimes the value of the story is in the fact of where and when it happened. As a result, you have to accept that some interesting data will have to stay unused for a while.

Those are some practical aspects of studying Belarus after 2020 when you are not being able to come back there. But when you get the data, there is also an unsettling feeling of the inappropriateness of doing theoretical analysis of the material when it feels to be at the expense of someone's stories of suffering. I doubt, I am the only one who has a job now to figure out how to embrace my positionality and emotional resonance with the subject. I find myself being engaged in a constant self-reflection: am I doing something or reacting to something as an activist or as an anthropologist or even as a living human being? In some cases, I consciously have chosen to be just a participant while thinking to myself "that could have been a great study".

Despite all the challenges, I have also found those studies to be of a great help to me personally in living through the traumatic experiences of the past two years. My study participants have been very open and expressed the desire to share. It was obvious, that security measures they had to live with since recently were not comfortable and not what they are used to. Some said they appreciated the possibility to talk about their experiences on their terms. I believe that engaged research practised as a form of solidarity (Rasch & van Drunen 2017; Speed 2006) may be one of the answers to the question of our roundtable on how to do anthropology in the midst of the catastrophe. Maybe some experiences want to be witnessed and seen, and that's acceptable if we propose their theoretical analysis much later, when we can.

To conclude, I would like to share several practices that I have found helpful and/or interesting to experiment with further. First of all, it was very important to me that people who agreed to participate in the study do not feel worse after the interview. I found learnings from Trauma-Informed research to be very helpful (Winfield 2022), however hard it is to monitor potential signs of distress within a zoom interview. I think that this topic deserves more awareness among anyone attempting qualitative studies in the region.

Above that, there were incredible opportunities for participative co-creation. Before leaving Belarus in 2020 I had had a chance to facilitate the process of decision-making about an issue that was very antagonizing in one of the local groups. Instead of the majority vote which was only reinforcing the disagreement within the group, we

experimented with a more consensus-seeking method and came up with an outcome that other members accepted and even liked. Looking back, I wish I had done more of such work when I had the possibility.

Finally, there is a space for experimentation with how we write about what we studied and experienced. In 2021, I conducted some interviews with Human Resources professionals in Tech companies in Belarus about their experiences during the protests in 2020. Eventually, I realised I could not have figured out a way to use my data safely. This summer I participated in the fem-writing lab Rasciajennie dedicated to migration and protest trauma in Belarus, where one of the tutors Hanna Otchik asked us to experiment with the so-called erasure technique. Initially, the technique encourages you to construct a poem by crossing the rest of the text with a black sharpie (Dorney, 2018). I took one of the interview transcripts and erased all the information that I thought was unsafe or recognizable. Peculiarly, this form of self-censorship became a liberating possibility to say something publicly at all. The person who gave the interview found the poem very resonating and “therapeutic” in their own words. They permitted to publish it. Yet I must say I was torn by the thought of whether it was even *allowed* within the discipline because it’s not theoretical analysis after all.

Can anthropologists in and from Belarus use their field notes to produce not only case studies and articles and lectures, but also ethnographically informed poetry or prose, or art? Can it be a more adequate format to communicate what we observe, think, and feel?

Aliaksandra Shrubok (Uppsala University)

In line with critical, postcolonial, and postmodern questioning of social science authority, an anthropologist is no longer considered a neutral observer but rather a “positioned subject” (Rosaldo 1989). It is on this common ground that I shall base my reflections.

Almost every of the roundtable’s participants, as well as many other social researchers, have been unable to conduct the “golden standard” ethnographic fieldwork in Belarus lately and have had to adopt various digital tools to access informants, who by and large share researchers’ life experiences, worldviews and political sensibilities. My case, however, is strikingly different.

I left Belarus in late August 2020, shocked and frustrated but still full of hope for a vague but better future for the country and its people, as many Belarusians were, and started a PhD research at Uppsala University, Sweden. My research interests have been mostly centred around human-plant relations, a seemingly politically neutral subject, which enabled my safe journey back to Belarus, where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork during the summer of 2021 – summer of 2022,

working with rural elderly women. However, an all-encompassing and totalizing political crisis has made it challenging, if not impossible, to foresee when a scenario for the “neutral research” may develop in a sensitive, politically and ethically charged topic. Any research topic can become highly sensitive these days, not only because of intimate subjects or vulnerable groups under study but also due to the researcher’s vulnerability. However welcoming, gentle, and kind my interlocutors might have been during our daily interactions, our discussions would get negatively charged if not aggressive as soon as the topics of the migrant crisis, political oppressions in Belarus, or, especially, the war in Ukraine, were brought to the table. Open, emphatic, and patient as I was towards my informants’ everyday-life experiences and existential struggles, I could not help but become defensive, over-sensitive and anxious in case some political issues were addressed.

A question of my political position and its role in the ways of my research is done at different levels of knowledge production (data collection, description writings, analysis and conceptualization of the research results) have become of utmost importance for my PhD project. Finding myself on the opposing side than those of my interlocutors, I could not help but engage in an argument, feeling irresistible anger, pain, and despair. Encounters like that have constantly made the boundaries between me, a researcher, and those whom I researched solid and impenetrable; they still hinder the construction of a more nuanced analysis of my informants’ experiences. The questions that I am still grappling with are the following: How to study those who cause you anger, pain, and shame? How morally (in)comprehensible are the “yabatskas”²? How to overcome an almost irresistible desire to put them into a “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991: 17–44)?

There is a challenge to egalitarian relationships between a researcher and research participants, as well as a threat to the researcher’s empathy if your interlocutor is a “yabatska”. The challenge to research empathy towards these specific groups of “conservative Others” (Gusterson 2017) – those we tend to dislike – is also a quest to cultural relativism as a basic presumption of anthropological knowledge and discipline.

Anthropology is a discipline that has long perceived and promoted cultural relativism as its essential value. The discipline has advocated stubbornly and vividly that we should understand everything, from magic and beliefs (Evans-Pritchard 1937) to head-hunting (Rosaldo 2004) and cannibalism (Conklin 1995) from a culturally relativist standpoint. And yet, due to my political positionality and my deep sympathy and respect for my informants in many other than their political

2 “Yabatskas” is a slang term used for the supporters of Lukashenka. Although the term was intended to mean I Am The Old Man, the pronunciation of this slogan resulted in a more vulgar «a fucker».

position regards, the “Yabatskas” seem to be an especially disturbing type of “cultural Others” to be engaged with.

Numerous theories have been put forth to explain anthropology’s “problem” with the study of the kind of conservatives that supported authoritarian/populist/nationalist regimes in the Global North. Thus, Harding said that in her study on American Fundamentalist Christians, fundamentalists were the wrong kind of cultural Other because they were, in contrast to the discipline’s “typical” subjects, powerful, outspoken, and “anti-modern” rather than “non-modern” (Harding 1991: 392). She stated that anthropologists wished to keep these Fundamentalist Others out of the conceptual and political space being occupied by the discipline’s conventional subjects: marginalized ethnic minorities or those who were under the pressure of powerful political and social forces (Harding 1991: 392). Other researchers believed that conservatives posed a political issue for the discipline because anthropology’s modern liberal humanist agenda tended to draw researchers with left-leaning political views (Heyman 2010: 287; Lewis 2014). As a result, anthropologists distanced themselves from the conservatives “at home”, frequently enforcing barriers between themselves and “them” (Coleman 2015: 275–278), and they found it difficult to understand their motivations or worldview. Although the issues discussed in the literature may be applicable to and valid in my research setting too, there is no ready-made recipe for how to deal with the practical difficulties: namely, anthropologists studying the conservatives may be failing to develop the psychological closeness and transcultural identification that served as the foundation of the discipline’s epistemology.

Anthropology ultimately rests on intimate research praxis, and ethnographic analysis is directed and informed by the emotional relationships between anthropologists and informants. “Direct” not-yet-rationalized and not-yet-conceptualized emotional and embodied experience is one of the most important epistemological sources. This is something that anthropology has presumably long since acknowledged. Now, turning to our mutttons, it seems that anthropological research in or about Belarus is prone to be extremely emotionally charged and affectively diverse, at least for the time being. Indeed, as Andrei Vazyanau noted, no one working in anthropology should expect to feel good or at ease. At the same time, while the role of “emotional overlaps” (Feldman & Mandache 2019) — the moments of intimate closure and empathy between a researcher and her or his informants — seems to be recognized and analyzed, there is a lack of discussion of “emotional collapses” that both interfere into and inform research process, and in a Belarusian case, this dearth is most acute.

There is no predetermined method for conducting a study on those who happened to be repulsive during external political developments, and I have no answers to the questions I posed above. Nonetheless, what seems clear is that if we are to contribute to the understanding

of present alarming tendencies in Belarusian society and to aid in their reversal, rich, nuanced and emotionally resonating ethnographies of “conservative Others” are needed. These encounters will call upon all the reflexivity, relativism, and humane critique that our discipline can muster.

Stsiapan Zakharkevich (European Humanitarian University)

Status quo of Belarusian ethnology and the catastrophic events of 2020 and 2022.

In my commentary, I would like to address specifically that part of the Belarusian ethnological and anthropological community that remains physically and institutionally located in Belarus. For a long time, I was affiliated with it. I occupied a clear and quite comfortable position as a university professor, having my life strategically planned for many years ahead. Yet, at some moment everything was lost due to the political events of August 2020 and their aftermath. After being fired from Belarusian State University for my politically motivated two weeks of detention, I found myself in a somewhat marginalised position: the previous professional status was lost, and the new one was not obtained or felt very vague and precarious. In retrospect, it can be seen as an interesting experience, and an opportunity to rethink things on the periphery of two academic worlds (Belarusian and the wider one).

In the context of the general topic of the roundtable, several issues of both personal and more abstract nature can be raised:

Belarusian ethnology is a small and quite conservative academic corporation. Yet, for a long time, it has not been conceived as a small one, as it has always been framed as a part of a larger discipline of history (numerically, a sizeable milieu of several thousand people); ethnology dwelt at departments of history and in similarly branded research institutions. Even the very name of the academic degree assigned for ethnologists (“*candidate of historical sciences*”) testifies that we were heavily burdened by our existence within historical disciplinary paradigms. My doctoral dissertation, for instance, had a very clear historical focus. These days, there are about 30 people in Belarus who can be formally considered ethnologists/anthropologists. The absolute majority of them research traditional and very conservative topics: ethnicity, history of ethnic processes, traditional culture, and various “vestiges” of these phenomena; cultural changes as seen through the prism of ethnicity and traditions, the history of ethnology through the prism of the “history of achievements”. Research on current events and processes practically does not exist in the country.

The numerical scarcity of researchers results in a total lack of both senses of community and discussions about the directions, problems,

and fate of science. It is simply not customary to talk about it, to reflect upon those issues, to “wash dirty linen in public”. We have no academic journal that would host such discussions and foster their development. There are no opinion leaders or “style icons”, and no seminal critical articles to spark this discussion. Peer review and scientific criticism are virtually non-existent. If we take, for example, Slovak ethnological tradition – demographically, a country half the size of Belarus – we will find two academic journals, and, by Belarusian standards, a fairly active anthropological corporation; not to mention Poland, the Czech Republic and other neighbouring countries. Besides, there are no working institutional ties with neighbouring academic centres, not even with Russian ones, despite linguistic commonality. Cooperation with Germany, France, the USA etc. is not even mentioned. Hence, there is practically no exchange of ideas and conceptual critique both within and beyond Belarusian ethnology.

Given the givens, Belarusian ethnology was simply not able to respond to the events of either August 2020 or February 2022. The ethnological and anthropological academic reflection of those events was simply inconceivable, as our corporation had not been prepared for it. There were simply no preconditions for it, either objective or subjective. Belarusian ethnology has not created an analysis of cultural conflict as the foundation for the disasters of 2020-2022. The tide brought up a sociological, political, and historical analyses – but as for ethnological or anthropological, there was none. Belarusian ethnology has always been focused on completely different topics. Many of us did participate in the events of August 2020 and 2022, but rather as citizens of Belarus, not as scholars or members of an academic corporation. At the same time, we were thoroughly aware that even in Russia, our colleagues discussed such issues, raised critical questions etc. There, anthropologists engaged with the fundamental societal changes and political catastrophes together with sociologists and political scientists. We, on the contrary, had discussions amongst our colleagues but were not quite able to develop even a framework that would help us bring the issues into an academic conversation. Personally, it was very difficult for me – to transform my experiences into scholarly representations. Any kind of a public or at least internal discussion might have minimized that psychological pressure, but it simply was not there. Fear and bad habits overpowered academia.

The second topic I'd like to discuss is my own experience of living through the August events and their consequences during my short imprisonment, as I was given 15 days of administrative detention, being unlawfully charged with participation in what the state calls an ‘unsanctioned political gathering’. This can be seen as an autoethnographic experience of sorts, the one of detention. Right after being arrested, I immediately felt a need to be a scientist: to observe and to keep a diary. I kept records every day for fifteen days. However, I met

an indescribable problem: I felt like I was tearing myself apart. Only later, being already at home, while delving into the topic of autoethnography, I realized: I had failed to create a clear distinction between myself as an inmate and as a researcher who had had to observe it from a distance. I kept a diary but felt that it was not good enough, as my notes were overwhelmed with emotions. And yet, I could not fully open up emotionally and describe my feelings as a layperson, because I felt a need to be a scientist. Interestingly enough, back then I did not think about the dangers of keeping a detailed and honest diary while in the penal institution. I felt caught between the imperatives of academic rigours and my own human emotions. In my opinion, I have failed to solve this dilemma. Hence the looming feeling of my diary is the one not having any proper academic validity. And this is precisely a personal problem, since being a Belarusian academic researcher, I failed (or was not able, or did not have the skills or habits of knowing how) to solve these complex reflexive methodological problems right there in the field where the life itself put me; inside the jail, that is.

I would also like to address the actual engagement with the war in Ukraine and the difficulty of understanding it when you are entangled in the conflict in any manner. Just recently I have attended the panel on modern media here at the 10th Congress of Belarusian researchers (Kaunas), where a Ukrainian colleague talked about the research of Viber groups that were active in Mariupol at the time of its capture. She warned the audience that she might get emotional, and indeed, she was crying during the speech. I had several questions prepared: how did she study the issue methodologically? When did she, as someone who used those chat rooms to find her relatives in Mariupol, get the idea to engage with the topic academically? In a sense, she was not able to answer it properly, being understandably emotional. At the same time, her presentation itself was very much academic and analytical. Having distanced herself, she followed due analytical procedures; yet, during the Q&A, her personal emotions prevailed. In a way, it resembled the ambiguities of my situation in the Belarusian detention centre. Both her case and my own experience illustrate the sensitivity of engagement with a traumatic experience, when a researcher is strongly involved emotionally in the event that he or she is studying. As a private person, I was profoundly touched by the presentation of my Ukrainian colleague (photos, screenshots, etc.), but as a researcher, I instantly felt that distance between the event in question and myself. I felt a need to reach out to my crying and visibly emotionally distressed colleague only to ask her about the methodology of her research. This interest of mine existed in parallel with a palpable sense of shame for the evident moral transgression: the topic of the research interested me scientifically, while first of all I should have shown compassion.

Summing up my comment, I would like to draw attention to several points. Firstly, it is the problem of one's mental health and emotional

conditions. While you are going through trauma as a citizen, it affects you as a researcher just as well, as you are no more able to do neutral, abstract science. A. Vazyanau spoke more deeply about the duties of an anthropologist during the war at this very forum. Secondly, there is the problem of witnesses and interlocutors with whom we cooperate, exposing them to the stress and dangers of various repercussions of our communication. These days, I consider the issues of trauma and anthropological ethics, relationships with the witnesses of certain events (for me, interlocutors) and methodological distance to be much more important than I thought some years ago when I was lecturing students on the history of the development of socio-cultural anthropology. Previously, my own ethnographic experience in Belarusian villages, one of the hundreds of conversations with simple old folks about classical ethnological matters (biographies, their past, all things traditional), made me rather skeptical of the problems, already described in English-speaking Western anthropology. I thought they were way too exaggerated and I treated them as a kind of postmodern game. Now, after I have encountered a set of similar dilemmas, I am predominantly worried whether we will ever be able to generate meaningful discussions about it, to reach a new level of reflection specifically within that part of the academic corporation that is located inside Belarus. Besides all other concerns, this matter is heavily burdened by the concerns for the personal safety of researchers that say in Belarus.

Elena Gapova (Western Michigan University)

I am a social scientist, broadly understood, rather than an anthropologist per se, but the issues that we face as scholars and academics are the same. Most of us in this panel are currently outside Belarus; some had to leave after the events of 2020, others have been based abroad for some time and cannot go back after “all that we did”, or, rather, said online and how we have lived our lives. Put differently, civic visibility can be a reason for arrest and persecution.

This has repercussions for our work as scholars of society: mostly, we do not have direct access to communities that we study, we cannot “go to the field”, as anthropologists call it; we might only, depending on the situation, have access to some groups whose members have life trajectories and views that are similar to ours. What’s more, in Belarus, polling and surveys can only be done by trusted government-funded institutions: polling by other bodies is not allowed. The following example illustrates the difficulties scholars might face trying to study Belarusian society. Recently, the French anthropologist Ronan Hervouet published his book on the Belarusian countryside titled “A Taste for Oppression: A Political Ethnography of Everyday Life in Belarus” (2021). As it follows from the book, he collected his data when

he was employed at the French embassy in Minsk (that was before 2020). To interview people, he would visit them in the countryside, go to the sauna, drink with them, and have “conversations”. As sometimes during those “interviews” he was pretty drunk and thus could not rely on his memory, he asked a friend whom he brought with him to those visits to stay sober and try to memorize what was said. This sounds like a joke and the method described is beyond questionable but the challenge that scholars face these days is no joke at all.

The current situation has its toll on those whom we consider informants. First, just asking questions can hurt people over there. Then, those who are critical of the regime are less inclined to talk to pollsters or interviewers, and this is understandable. Those who agree to speak tend to give socially acceptable answers. Thus, scholars frequently face what can be called “an imposed consensus”, as people tend to conform to what they believe to be the opinion of the majority, they do not want to be “marginal”. All this leads to biases and distortions; of course, the reliability of data is an issue in all social surveys and studies but to different extents.

All of that has a huge effect on knowledge production. It seems that we remain confined to digital material or secondary data, and even those are not secure. It is a mere fact that multiple Belarusian digital platforms are no more, they have been outlawed and shut down, like the main independent news source tut.by, whose servers inside the country have been physically destroyed by the regime. Thus, it seems that at the moment the preservation and archiving of digital data, as well as the documentation of life and the mood in immigrant and refugee communities is what we can do. We do not have access to real people and their stories, so the question is what kind of narrative can be built based on this information.

Of course, we are not the first or the only scholarly community that faces such issues. Foreign scholars had very limited access to the study of Soviet society in the 20th century; these days, there are Iran, Afghanistan, and other nations that are almost closed to researchers. Lately, Belarus and now Russia have joined those ranks. I know that many of my Russian colleagues left the country and now focus on the study of immigrant communities; those who stayed still might have some opportunity to go on with their work. Belarus is much more closed in this regard. All this makes us think about what it means to be a professional in social sciences and what the boundaries of the profession are.

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