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The Communist Legacy as a Factor Shaping Belarusian Political Culture and National Identity

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, post-communist Belarus, like other newly independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, faced the question of building a national state – the Republic of Belarus. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was both a geopolitical and ideological collapse of global historical significance and marked the beginning of a new post-Soviet era for the vast region. Belarus is described as 'post--Soviet', which, however, does not necessarily mean 'non-Soviet'. Among the European countries of the post-Soviet region that appeared on the map, Belarus already in the 1990s exhibited reverse tendencies: when Lukashenko came to power, the suppression of national culture and the strengthening of authoritarian governance across all spheres of social life began. The new authoritarian regime became the heir to the Soviet system: totalitarian institutions, historical myths, cultural stereotypes, and the absence of transitional justice. Alongside these features, the situation is further complicated by challenges in defining a national identity distinct from the Soviet one.

This ambivalent situation revealed the limitations of the dominant model for interpreting post-Soviet transformations within the paradigm of transition and imitation of Western liberal democracies, indicating the need to replace the orientation toward the Western model by focusing on the complex interaction of local political and cultural-historical factors.

The definition of 'legacy' used in this research is the one proposed by Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin in *Historical legacies of communism in Russia and Eastern*

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Europe (2014). They argue that legacy is a relationship between earlier institutions and practices and those of the present rather than a mere correlation or similarity. This means that legacies are not identical to the past phenomena to which they are related but constitute specific patterns that always involve something new, combining past with present or applying the past differently, for example to new spheres of activity. This assumption is used throughout the analysis in the present thesis. Furthermore, five key forms of legacy proposed by the authors (Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014) are explored and analysed herein:

1. Fragmentation: mostly unchanged institutions or practices, characterised by preserved core personnel and organisational inertia.
2. Translation: old practices are utilised for new purposes but still resemble, in the modes of action involved or the meanings attached, the earlier practice.
3. Bricolage: old elements are intermixed with the present to form hybrid institutions or identities that still bear the imprint of the past.
4. Parameter setting: constraints in how individuals think and behave, inherited from the past, resulting in institutional inertia or prevailing norms.
5. Cultural schemata: deeply embedded ways of thinking and behaving, shaped by earlier experiences, that persist across generations.

My research questions are as follows:

1. How has the post-communist legacy influenced Belarus's governance and institutional development?
2. How does the post-communist legacy shape Belarusian national identity?

The research questions were developed to address the main facets of Belarus's post-communist legacy: government, national identity, and public sentiment. They were selected because they exemplify the most significant aspects of the Soviet legacy's effects. They aim to explore the extent to which historical legacies continue to shape contemporary policies and public attitudes.

Thus, my hypotheses are as follows:

1. The post-communist legacy has entrenched authoritarian governance in Belarus, limiting institutional democratisation and maintaining centralised power structures.
2. The post-communist legacy has fostered a dual national identity, with nostalgia for Soviet stability coexisting with growing nationalism based on the non-Soviet history of Belarus.

The initial observations and patterns found in the existing literature on the subject served as the foundation for the hypotheses. Belarus's authoritarianism draws directly from its post-communist legacy, since centralised power structures have remained intact,

with no significant institutional reforms after gaining independence. In many ways, it still resembles the Soviet era.

A contradiction in national identity can be seen in Belarusian society: nostalgia for Soviet stability coexists with a growing yearning for greater independence from Russian influence and a revival of national identity. The complex nature of Belarusian identity in negotiating its Soviet heritage and current political realities is reflected in this hypothesis.

Therefore, there is continued interest in discovering why models originating from the Soviet era remain prevalent in the state's internal policies and continue to influence national identity. In order to properly assess and provide a comprehensive analysis of the current situation, determine its causes, and draw conclusions, the research aims to integrate knowledge from political science, history, and international relations. The research questions and hypotheses were chosen to integrate all aspects of the examined subject and address gaps in the existing body of literature.

The historical and ideological context of communism in Belarus

This part examines seven decades of Soviet rule in Belarus, setting the stage for further discussion of the country's policies and sense of identity after 1991. The first section, 'Soviet state-building and political control in the Belarusian SSR', explores the duration and intent of Soviet rule in Belarus, focusing on Moscow's top-down control of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic and its aims for this western border region. The next section analyses Communist ideology and its effects on Belarusian culture and national consciousness, while the last section discusses the transition from Communism to independence, highlighting how Soviet-era leaders and institutions remained and shaped the new state.

Soviet state-building and political control in the Belarusian SSR

The creation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in January 1919 marked a new phase in the process of forming Belarusian statehood, which lasted until 1991. It was driven not by popular will but by the strategic calculations of the Bolsheviks and, later, Stalinist consolidation. According to Hélène Carrère d'Encausse (1992, p. 87), it was the Bolsheviks – not the Belarusians themselves – who advocated Belarusian independence in 1919. Their objective was not national liberation but rather the containment of separatist tendencies and the curbing of Polish influence. Terry Martin (2001) similarly noted that the majority of the Belarusian peasantry resisted the establishment

of the BSSR, believing that Belarusians could not be considered a self-sustaining nation. Hence, Soviet regimes lasted uninterrupted in Belarus for almost seventy years, with the exception of the Nazi regime during World War II. The BSSR was nominally an independent Soviet republic, but its political authority was subordinated to Moscow's central command, and it operated as a tool of Moscow's geopolitical and ideological ambitions: a reliable buffer zone between the USSR and Western Europe and a symbol of the global advance of socialism, respectively.

Moscow's intent in Soviet Belarus was to consolidate communist power and to manage the non-Russian nationality through a controlled form of nationhood. Firstly, the BSSR was pragmatically used as a geopolitical tool by the Soviet regime, undermining the coherence of the nation, as seen in its brief merger with Lithuania (LitBel) and in the post-World War II incorporation of Western Belarus. As Wilson (2012, p. 91) points out, '(…) no other Soviet republic changed its shape and size as frequently and fundamentally as did the Belarusian Republic between 1918 and 1945'.

Secondly, the Soviet regime used policies of collectivisation and industrialisation to reinforce political loyalty and deepen the republic's integration into the Soviet system. Collectivisation in the late 1920s and 1930s destroyed private farming and created state-controlled agricultural enterprises (*kolkhozy*). In Belarus, the majority of the population was rural and highly reliant on farming, so this transformation was especially disruptive. Peasants who resisted were labelled *kulaks* and deported in large numbers: David Marples (2012, p. 31) estimates that around 34,000 people were forcibly removed. Thus, collectivisation also served strategic ideological functions: to suppress rural conservatism and ensure ideological conformity (Marples, 2012, pp. 30–33). Industrialisation followed in the 1930s and intensified after World War II. Belarus lacked both resources and technical expertise, and Moscow invested heavily in urban infrastructure, energy, and production. Industrialisation underscored Belarus's structural dependency on Moscow, since decision-making remained firmly centralised and the republic was integrated into a Soviet-wide production chain. This reliance continued after independence. Valer Bulhakau (2002, p. 57) explains that major industrial branches of the Belarusian economy established under Soviet rule have never undergone serious reforms and remain concentrated mainly on the Russian market.

Moreover, the BSSR remained a top-down administrative project, since all key decisions came from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The local Communist Party of Belarus had little autonomy, and its role was reduced to implementation rather than policymaking. In 1921, it had only 1,500 members, rising modestly to 6,600 by 1926, and just 11% of party leadership were ethnic Belarusians (Shybeka, 2003, p. 242). Marples (2012, p. 50) stresses that 'In the Soviet period, the Communist Party apparatus in Minsk was among the most powerful and deeply entrenched in the

USSR.' The regime sought to ensure that Belarusian identity remained separate from any real political empowerment.

At the same time, political loyalty was ensured by Stalin's regime through brutal purges and reinforced by World War II. The Great Terror was especially transformative and traumatic. As Per Anders Rudling (2010, p. 3) notes, 'The purges of the BSSR elites were more thorough than in any other republic, leading to the demise of 90 per cent of the Belarusian intelligentsia.' David Marples (2012) similarly emphasises that almost every leader of the Communist Party of Belarus was eliminated, effectively silencing any dissent or independent political and cultural leadership. Moreover, according to Timothy Snyder (2010, p. 251), 'By the end of the war, half the population of Belarus had been either killed or moved. This cannot be said of any other European country.' The political loyalty of Belarus was affirmed through the glorification of the partisan movement, one of the largest during the war, which became central to Soviet Belarusian identity and will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Communist ideology and its cultural imprint

Soviet control in Belarus went beyond the administration of territory and fundamentally reshaped the country's culture and identity. The goal of Marxist-Leninist ideology was to replace local identity with a new Soviet consciousness. This had a lasting imprint on how Belarusians view themselves and their past. The region had a long history of rule by external powers, weak national elites and institutions, and a largely rural population. All this gave the Soviet regime a unique opportunity to build a new, Sovietised Belarusian identity from the top down (Hirsch, 2005; Rudling, 2010), an identity characterised by conformity and survival.

In the 1920s, the Belarusisation policy temporarily expanded Belarusian-language use in education and administration as part of the *korenizatsiya* programme, the policy of promoting national languages and elites, which was always subordinate to broader ideological goals. Terry Martin (2001, p. 12) argues that the policy was intended to address the negative psychological anxiety associated with the perception of foreign rule: 'The non-Russian masses would see that Soviet power and her organs are the affair of their own efforts, the embodiment of their desires.' As Stalin famously declared, Soviet culture was to be 'national in form, socialist in content' (Bassin and Kelly, 2012, p. 4). The Soviet regime aimed to integrate diverse nationalities into the Soviet system and reduce resistance by allowing limited expression of national languages and elites. Institutions such as the Institute of Belarusian Culture and the Belarusian State University were established to help frame Belarusian national culture within a socialist framework (Shybeka, 2003, pp. 240–250). Yet this was a tactical decision to make Soviet rule appear indigenous and responsive to local needs. Thus, the broader

Soviet nationalities policy aimed at controlling identity to legitimise Soviet rule, not at granting real autonomy (Martin, 2001; Bassin and Kelly, 2012). By the 1930s, as Stalin tightened central control, Belarus lost most of its cultural independence (Bekus, 2019). Russian culture and language were set as the model to follow under the doctrine of the 'Friendship of the Peoples'. Belarus retained its own state symbols, but Belarusian identity was allowed to exist only within tightly controlled ideological limits. In this model, the Soviet system did not see Belarus as a genuinely separate culture but as an integrated and loyal region within a Soviet, Russian-focused civilisation.

Marxism-Leninism pushed for total political loyalty and the subordination of the individual to the state. These values were embedded into society through every sphere of life: in schools, at work, and even in art and film. All cultural production had to conform to socialist realism, which depicted idealised Soviet life. The state ensured that public discourse remained tightly aligned with Soviet doctrine through media censorship. Moreover, internalised self-censorship developed as a result of repression. Trade unions, youth organisations, and Party structures were embedded to ensure that labour was not only economically productive but also aligned with Communist Party goals. As a result, this propaganda produced a political conformism that contributed to Belarus's postwar reputation as one of the most ideologically loyal republics.

Moreover, Soviet rule left a deep imprint on popular historical memory and identity narratives. Soviet-era mythology became Belarus's own. The most fundamental narrative is the enormous place of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) in Belarusian identity. Soviet Belarus was lauded as a 'partisan republic' for its fierce resistance to Nazi occupation, and this narrative of wartime heroism and sacrifice became central to the republic's culture (Sierakowski, 2020; Wilson, 2012). Andrey Dynko (2002, p. 7) underlines that 'The Soviet regime in Belarus set itself the task of completely annihilating the previous cultural tradition, with all its forms and content, in order to replace it entirely with a culture of new, socialist content.' History was rewritten to emphasise Soviet triumphs and to downplay or erase Belarus's pre-Soviet past, including the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR). As Kłysiński and Konończuk (2020) note, the Belarusian state under Lukashenko would later reassert the narrative that the BSSR, not the BNR, was the legitimate foundation of Belarusian statehood.

Crucially, the result of these dynamics is a split identity in post-Soviet Belarus, as described by Nelly Bekus (2010). The consequences of the imposed identity would be long-lasting, as the passivity and depoliticisation of the Soviet period laid the foundation for the remarkable stability and compliance that came to define Belarusian political culture. However, one paradox of Soviet policy was that it simultaneously promoted a form of Belarusian national consciousness and stifled genuine cultural development (Bekus, 2019). 'It was the communist regime which deliberately set out to create ethno-linguistic territorial "national administrative units", i.e. "nations" in the modern

sense, where none had previously existed or been thought of (among them were also Byelorussians)' (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 166). The very existence of a Belarusian republic with its own literature and state symbols helped create a national imaginary, even if the nation was shaped and constrained by the ideological imperatives of the regime. In other words, while early Soviet rule gave a short-lived boost to Belarusian nationhood, the subsequent decades of communist rule severely weakened Belarusian-language use and national consciousness. By the 1970s–1980s, most urban Belarusians were Russian-speaking and heavily integrated into Soviet culture, with only a muted sense of a separate Belarusian identity.

The transition from communism to independence

Belarus had long been among the most Sovietised republics in the USSR and, as Kłysiński and Konończuk (2020) note, by the 1970s the BSSR was viewed as one of the most ideologically reliable and politically stable republics in the union. A popular expression from the early 1990s, 'Independence fell on Belarusians' heads like a ripe fruit', captures the public's lack of enthusiasm. In March 1991, just months before the Soviet collapse, 83% of Belarusians voted against breaking away from the USSR, preferring to remain within the Soviet Union, if possible (Sierakowski, 2020). According to a 1993 opinion poll, 51% of Belarusians favoured reinstating the USSR, while only 22% opposed this idea (Śleszyński, 2018, p. 288). This absence of mass mobilisation for national independence, even during the reformist waves of the 1980s, as Wilson argues, was a direct outcome of decades of state-enforced depoliticisation (Wilson, 2012). Thus, unlike in Ukraine and the Baltic states, the establishment of a sovereign Republic of Belarus was not based on strong national sentiment or mass mobilisation. Instead, independence was 'imposed' on Belarus from above (Sierakowski, 2020). As a result, in contrast to many post-Soviet states, Belarus's transition from communism to independence was marked by political, economic, and cultural continuity.

Firstly, institutional and personnel continuity between the BSSR and the newly declared Republic of Belarus further blurred the meaning of independence. The Supreme Soviet of the BSSR declared independence on 25 August 1991 by upgrading the 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty to constitutional law (Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020), which meant that it was largely the same communist-era legislature operating in new circumstances. Vyacheslav Kebic, who had served as head of the BSSR Council of Ministers, became the first prime minister of independent Belarus, and many other officials also remained in place. Stanislau Shushkevich, another Soviet-era figure, served as the Parliament chairman in 1991–1994, though he had been a reform-minded communist academic. According to Lavinia Stan, Belarus lacked any substantial process of 'elite renewal' or lustration, defined as the vetting and removal of former regime

officials, making it one of the clearest examples of continuity with the Soviet system in the post-communist space (Stan, 2008). The influence of opposition groups, such as the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), also remained limited. Thus, Soviet-era officials who retained their posts continued to shape policy through centralised mechanisms.

The continuity was further strengthened by the lack of transitional justice to address communist-era abuses, since post-communist justice stood almost still in Belarus. For example, the late 1980s discovery of mass graves in Kurapaty brought attention to crimes committed by the Soviet Union but did not lead to any attempts at national reconciliation or accountability. The Belarusian security apparatus even retained the notorious Soviet-style 'KGB' name and its methods. The state did not acknowledge the abuses of the Soviet era; instead, it focused on the BSSR's stability and industrial achievements. Bekus (2010) points out that Sovietness' was not rejected; it was reshaped as something to be proud of, a foundation for stability.

Moreover, public attitudes reflected support for the continuation of Soviet models. Surveys showed that most Belarusians cared more about economic security than about democratic reforms or reviving national culture (Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020, p. 6). That is very different from what happened in post-Soviet Georgia and the Baltic states, where people pushed for a break with the past and a new national identity. Wilson (2012) argues that Aleksandr Lukashenko, elected as President in 1994, 'instinctively understood' that many Belarusians preferred the familiar guarantees of the Soviet system to the uncertainties of national reinvention. He promised to 'restore the Soviet Union in Belarus', a message that fell on fertile ground in a society that had been 'a grand redoubt of belief in the old order' (Sierakowski, 2020). His government adopted a neo--Soviet approach, keeping Soviet-era symbols, narratives, and ways of governing alive, even after independence.

Thus, Belarus's transition after communism kept the same institutions and leaders in place and avoided economic reforms. This stands out when compared to countries like Poland or even Russia, which made major changes. Stability mattered most to the public, and the leadership avoided severe reforms. Independence was declared, but real change was minimal. These patterns shaped the country's politics, institutions, and national identity for the future.

Soviet legacies in domestic politics and society in Belarus after 1991

As established in the previous part, despite gaining independence in 1991, Belarus experienced only a partial rupture from the communist past. This part builds on that foundation and examines the legacies of the Soviet period and the way they shape

post-1994 domestic political and social development. Section 'Political continuity and authoritarianism' investigates how institutional weaknesses facilitated the consolidation of presidential power. Section 'Institutional continuity and symbolic politics' explores institutional continuity and the revival of Soviet symbols, while the last section in this part, 'Nation-building and societal perspectives', analyses generational divides, national identity, and language policy. Together, these sections reveal how the past continues to impact the political present in Belarus, not merely through continuity, but through active recontextualisation and adaptation of Soviet frameworks.

Political continuity and authoritarianism

The communist legacy in Belarus can be most acutely seen in the country's political trajectory, which is marked by the consolidation of power by President Alexander Lukashenko after he won the first presidential elections in the newly independent Republic of Belarus in 1994. Even though Belarus was the last former Soviet republic to establish the institution of the presidency, which could have allowed for political and social pluralism and prevented the concentration of power, the 1994 elections marked not a democratic transition but the beginning of an increasingly centralised and authoritarian regime (Silitski, 2005, p. 86). This consolidation exemplifies what academics refer to as a fragmentation legacy, in which the functional core of former Soviet structures was preserved despite nominal changes.

First of all, the weakness of governance institutions is central to understanding the durability of authoritarianism in Belarus. From an institutionalist perspective, Belarus lacked a strong legacy of nationally autonomous institutions prior to the establishment of the BSSR. That helps to explain the weakness of a democratic political culture and limited civic participation. Moreover, after gaining independence, the 1994 constitution of Belarus was only a few months old, and the ability of institutions to act as checks and balances against one another was untested (Frear, 2019, p. 40).

Following the 1996 constitutional referendum, the democratic principle of separation of powers was effectively dismantled (Pieczewski and Sidarava, 2022, p. 178). The referendum introduced vital changes: decrees issued by the President were given the status of law, and the prerogative of appointing members of the Constitutional Court and the Central Election Commission (CEC) was transferred from parliament to the presidency (Silitski, 2005). As a result, Lukashenko transformed the political system of Belarus in a highly centralised manner, subordinating the legislature, executive, and judiciary to presidential authority (Danilovich, 2001, p. 13). From that moment onward, the president ruled largely by decree.

The judicial system, whose inherent role was to oversee the legislative and executive branches, became subservient to the executive, lacking independence. Alexei Trochev

(2014, p. 153) argues that courts in Belarus are an example of a fragmentation legacy: although institutional names and appearances have changed, their essential role – to support the position of the government in court cases and reinforce executive dominance – has remained largely unchanged since Soviet times. The government has continued to abuse the legal system to suppress all forms of dissent, including lawyers, human rights advocates, and political opponents (Amnesty International, 2024, p. 95). Trials are mostly held 'behind closed doors', and verdicts are preordained. This pattern resembles the Soviet regime's use of the judiciary as a mechanism of political control – a legacy that persists in a modified form under Lukashenko's regime.

Moreover, electoral processes similarly exist in form but lack their intended democratic function. The members of the CEC are appointed by and remain loyal to the president, ensuring that elections are entirely controlled by the regime. Elections in Belarus are systematically undermined by manipulation, unfair media access, and harassment of the opposition (Minchuk and Burger, 2006, pp. 35–36). McAllister and White (2014, p. 83) propose the term 'competitive authoritarianism' for a system where some electoral competition exists but authoritarianism still dominates. Electoral voting serves a symbolic rather than democratic function, maintaining a democratic *façade* (Morse, 2012). In reality, elections are utilised by the regime to legitimise its power. This resembles the Soviet electoral system, where elections were nominally held but functioned only to reaffirm the ruling party's dominance. Thus, the manipulation of elections in Belarus constitutes an example of translation legacy: Soviet-style electoral rituals are adapted to legitimise authoritarianism while emulating democracy in a new historical context.

Institutional continuity and symbolic politics

Political continuity in Belarus is underpinned by the preservation of both formal and informal institutions that have adapted Soviet-era principles. One of the core institutions, the security service – the KGB – retained its name and role, suggesting not reform but continuity (Taylor, 2014). 'Rather than being asked to observe the law and being placed under parliamentary oversight, secret services have been used by the government against the political opposition and the independent journalists. Instead of becoming democratic agencies, security services have retained most of the functions, operations and personnel of the KGB' (Stan, 2008, p. 266). Similarly, pro-regime youth organisations such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) resemble in their functions the Soviet-era Komsomol, spreading the government's discourse and enforcing loyalty (Chulickaja, 2008, p. 122). Young people are pressured to attend BRYU events that glorify the President, often under threat of penalties or with the promise of incentives. This illustrates institutional

bricolage – the recombination of old and new elements to sustain authoritarian rule in the post-Soviet environment.

In parallel, informal institutions based on political patronage and elite loyalty reinforce authoritarian governance. As Lavinia Stan (2008, p. 254) notes, the political elite under Lukashenko is largely composed of individuals whose careers originated in the Soviet *nomenklatura* or security services, and who have no incentive to support reforms that might undermine their authority. Lukashenko consistently rewards trusted officials with administrative positions and impunity, creating a self-reinforcing elite whose future is tied entirely to the regime's survival. Such a pattern represents a translation legacy: the *nomenklatura* logic was adapted to serve today's authoritarian Belarus.

Furthermore, a process of translating Soviet practices into a new political reality is particularly evident in the widespread use of Soviet-style propaganda methods and rhetoric aimed at legitimising Lukashenko's rule. State propaganda has evolved into 'political technology', borrowing tactics from Soviet *agitprop* while adapting them to the modern context. As Andrew Wilson (2005, pp. 1–32) notes, both communist and post-communist regimes rely on manipulative language, disinformation, and so-called 'active measures' to undermine opposition. However, in Belarus today these practices serve personalised rather than ideological goals, supporting Lukashenko's authority.

One particularly enduring rhetorical device used against opposition figures is depicting them as heirs of World War II Nazi collaborators. This narrative was first deployed during the May 1995 parliamentary elections (Silitski, 2005) and remains a vital element of regime discourse because of its emotional power. The regime's strategy is fundamentally rooted in the consistent deployment of Great Patriotic War narratives and the perception of the Soviet Union as a stable and prosperous era (Klumbytė and Sharafutdinova, 2013, pp. 3–5). As a result, Soviet rhetorical symbols have been efficiently recontextualised to legitimise Lukashenko's rule and depict it as a stabilising force.

The Lukashenko regime has seized on this nostalgia: official discourse often treats the Soviet period as part of Belarus's nation-building and reuses Soviet imagery and socialist ideals (collectivism, social equality) to craft a positive 'Belarusianness' inseparable from 'Sovietness' (Bekus, 2010, p. 280). The state actively promotes Soviet--era symbols and narratives while downplaying independent Belarusian traditions. Alternatives to Soviet-era symbols of national identity are either eliminated from public discourse or labelled extremist. For example, the historical white-red-white flag, used by the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918 and now considered a symbol of democratic resistance, was officially designated an extremist symbol, and any public display of it is punishable by a prison term. This underlines how the regime explicitly utilises the cultural schemata form of legacy, embedded in the older generation, and fosters Soviet-era pride to mobilise its support.

Finally, the process of symbolic translation was institutionalised in 1995, when the referendum granted Russian the status of an official language and replaced post-independence national symbols with Soviet-era ones – issues that mobilised voters who felt nostalgic about communist rule and saw it as a 'golden age' (Silitski, 2005, p. 85; Marples, 2012). 'In fact, today there is no clear dividing line between Soviet Belarus (BSSR) and the Republic of Belarus in the form it attained by 1995, following the referendum that changed the state's symbols and national flag' (Marples and Padhol, 2008, pp. 165–166). These changes were instrumental in consolidating Lukashenko's early political base. Thus, Soviet legacies were selectively reactivated and adapted to serve the regime's strategic aims to consolidate power and win electoral appeal under post-Soviet conditions.

Nation-building and societal perspectives

The post-communist legacy in Belarus extends deeply into the social sphere, particularly regarding how people think about democracy and national identity. Soviet-era values continue to influence political culture, especially among older generations. At the same time, a sense of civic awareness has begun to develop among younger Belarusians, especially those who are politically active. Nelly Bekus (2010, p. 163) points out that there are two distinct ideas of what it means to be Belarusian, and these shape both the political landscape and the endurance of authoritarianism. On one side, supporters of the current regime adhere to a version of Soviet-Belarusian 'nationalism', promoted by official discourse. On the other, the Belarusian nationalist movement draws from an alternative identity, which forms the backbone of its political ideology.

Firstly, in post-independence Belarus, many older citizens retain a strong sense of nostalgia for the Soviet era. Analysts note that Belarusians are 'more nostalgic for the Soviet Union than people in other European republics of the former Soviet Union', with many older citizens associating the opposition's calls for change with the upheaval and uncertainty of the early 1990s (Kaminski, 2008, p. 9). Moreover, recent surveys identify a large 'Soviet' identity segment (approx. 37% of respondents), heavily weighted toward older, retired Belarusians (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 11). This group values Soviet symbols and rituals; state parades on 3 July and 9 May, for example, hold significant meaning for them, and loyalty to the Soviet past remains significant (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 16).

Secondly, quantitative studies show that younger Belarusians are much more oriented toward global identities and multiculturalism (32%), and some view Belarusians as a unique nation in Europe with its own history and culture (13%) (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 11). According to scholars, many have benefitted from travel, digital access, and new educational opportunities, and they no longer embrace Soviet traditions or values (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2021). Instead, they connect with

the Belarusian language, pre-Soviet heritage, and national symbols (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 16). Younger generations are inclined to question the state--framed version of history, especially its focus on Soviet times, and they seek more critical, pluralistic perspectives on the Belarusian past.

Furthermore, the disaffection of the younger generation with the Lukashenko regime has been observed over time. This discontent was particularly visible in youth--led mobilisations, from the 15,000-person tent camp in Minsk in 2006 to the large--scale uprisings in 2020. Those 2020 demonstrations marked a genuine turning point, not only in how Belarusians expressed national identity but also in their demands for democratic change. Nelly Bekus (2021, p. 1) argues that 'The protests of 2020 in Belarus have often been described as a new 1989', suggesting that these events were interpreted as a moment of 'synchronization' of the nation's development with the post-1989 democratic revolutions that swept through Central and Eastern Europe.

One of the defining features of the 2020 movement was its inventive use of symbols. Pre-Soviet national symbols, such as the white-red-white flag, the hymn *Mahutny Boža*, and the coat of arms *Pahonia*, were utilised to assert a version of 'Belarusianness' that stood in contrast to the Soviet-infused official discourse. That became a way to 'bring into existence a new realm of national being' (Bekus, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, protestors recontextualised the state-sponsored memory of the Great Patriotic War to articulate their dissent. For instance, a mass rally on 16 August 2020 surrounded the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, filling its Soviet-era forecourt with white-red-white flags as an act to emancipate the Belarusian people from the spell of a positive perception of the Soviet past (Bekus, 2021, pp. 8–9).

The 2020 protests highlighted the need for a break from Soviet-era narratives and pan-Soviet identity, and a reconsideration of the Belarusian past among the younger generation. They have even been characterised as a social awakening that caused Belarusians to 'break with the very foundations of their cherished stability for the sake of dignity' (Petrova and Korosteleva, 2021, p. 128). The protests blurred the boundaries between official and alternative identities. Cultural symbols and historical references associated with the official ideology were used by protestors to challenge Lukashenko's rule alongside nationalist revivalist symbols (Kazharski, 2020).

Finally, the linguistic landscape in Belarus is marked by deep asymmetry and cultural schemata. While both Belarusian and Russian hold official status, Russian overwhelmingly dominates everyday communication, media, and administration. According to recent data, 92% of Belarusians report speaking Russian most often, while only 7% do so in Belarusian, even though 56% still consider Belarusian their native language (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 19). This pattern stems from a long history of Russification and the Soviet push for 'one nation – one language'. Unlike other post-Soviet states, Belarus granted Russian official status (Bekus, 2023, p. 101), whereas others classified

it as a foreign language. Since then, Belarusian has largely been preserved as a cultural symbol rather than a language of daily use. However, there is a trend among the younger generation to use Belarusian rather than Russian, as they make efforts to revive pre-Soviet national culture. For example, the 2020 protests became essentially bilingual, with multiple slogans in both Russian and Belarusian used during the marches (Bekus, 2023, p. 110).

CONCLUSIONS

This research attempted to investigate how the post-communist legacy has shaped Belarus's domestic policy trajectories and national identity formation by formulating two central research questions. Historical, political, and sociological materials were employed in the study in order to evaluate the extent to which institutional continuity and public attitudes in Belarus reflect continuing legacies of the Soviet past.

In order to achieve this aim, the historical background of Belarus's Soviet past was established in the first part of the article. The analytical framework provided by Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin was applied in the second part, investigating the patterns of fragmentation, translation, bricolage, parameter setting, and cultural schemata. This analysis revealed the persistence of Soviet legacies in Belarusian political culture and Soviet influence on national identity.

To conduct the research, two research questions were posed:

1. How has the post-communist legacy influenced Belarus' governance and institutional development?

The results of this research confirm the hypothesis that the communist legacy has entrenched authoritarian governance structures in Belarus. The political landscape after 1991 was marked by a significant degree of institutional continuity, as key political elites, administrative practices, and state ideologies were inherited from the Soviet era. Instead of undergoing profound democratisation or reform, Belarus preserved a centralised, top-down system of governance, resulting from the absence of a tradition of institutional independence and an underdeveloped political culture. This has limited the development of pluralist institutions, undermined the rule of law, and preserved executive dominance, particularly under the presidency of Alexander Lukashenko. However, as the study found, the public's strong feelings toward the USSR were apparent both immediately after its disintegration and even a decade later. Society began to change in the 2010s and experienced a degree of 'mental democratisation'. Therefore, one could say that Lukashenko's administration consolidated power by taking advantage of society's fascination with the Soviet Union, but at present it merely attempts to hold onto power using Soviet-style tactics that are no longer true Soviet legacies.

2. How does the post-communist legacy shape Belarusian national identity and public attitudes toward communism and external influences?

The findings confirm that the identity of post-communist Belarus is characterised by duality: on the one hand, there is a nostalgic attraction to the stability and social guarantees of the Soviet period, while on the other, there is an increasing aspiration for self-determination as Belarusians not reliant on the Soviet past. This tension has been particularly visible in the aftermath of the 2020 protests and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although official rhetoric continues to be devoted to Soviet symbolism and discourse, younger segments of civil society have increasingly adopted the sentiments of democratic ideals and revivalist perspectives. This illustrates both a generational and ideological shift that challenges the endurance of Soviet paradigms.

In summary, this research illustrates that the post-communist legacy in Belarus is complex and fluid rather than uniform or static. While it remains a significant force shaping governance and national identity, it is also increasingly challenged by bottom--up movements. This dynamic is important for understanding both the resilience of authoritarianism in Belarus and the potential for transformative change toward democratisation and the establishment of a more homogeneous national identity.

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The Communist Legacy as a Factor Shaping Belarusian Political Culture and National Identity

Abstract

This research investigates how the post-communist legacy has shaped political culture and national identity in Belarus. It examines the extent to which institutions, societal norms, and strategic paradigms of the Soviet era have influenced governance practices and attempts at nation-building in Belarusian policies. Drawing on scholarly literature, policy analyses, and contemporary political developments, two interconnected dimensions are analysed: the persistence of authoritarianism and centralised state authority, as well as societal nostalgia. Ultimately, this paper concludes that post-communist legacies serve as a powerful explanatory framework for Belarus's domestic stagnation and dual national identity.

Keywords: authoritarianism, Belarus, communist legacy, national identity, path-dependence, political culture

Dziedzictwo komunizmu jako czynnik kształtujący kulturę polityczną i tożsamość narodową Białorusi

W niniejszym artykule zbadano, w jaki sposób dziedzictwo postkomunistyczne ukształtowało kulturę polityczną oraz tożsamość narodową na Białorusi. Przedmiotem analizy jest zakres, w jakim instytucje, normy społeczne oraz paradygmaty strategiczne epoki radzieckiej wpłynęły na praktyki sprawowania władzy i próby budowania narodu w polityce białoruskiej. W oparciu o literaturę naukową, analizy strategii publicznych oraz współczesne wydarzenia polityczne oceniono dwa wzajemnie powiązane wymiary: trwałość autorytaryzmu i scentralizowanej władzy państwowej, a także społeczną nostalgię. W artykule wskazano, że dziedzictwo postkomunistyczne stanowi istotną podstawę wewnętrznej stagnacji Białorusi oraz jej podwójnej tożsamości narodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: autorytaryzm, Białoruś, dziedzictwo komunizmu, tożsamość narodowa, zależność od ścieżki, kultura polityczna