

# Collective Memory and Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Belarus: Soft-Belarusisation and the Kastus' Kalinoŭski Myth

Daria Cusitcaia, Ilaria Zaggia

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## INTRODUCTION

**B**ELARUS and Belarusian identity have been often described in terms of a “tabula rasa”<sup>1</sup>, a blank state, an empty, unmarked space between many areas of influence without clear distinctive features. However, recent events in Belarusian society, such as bottom-up initiatives in the framework of Soft-Belarusisation and the 2020 protests, challenge this conception: if the “tabula rasa” is a blank canvas, Belarusians have at least begun to fill it up, formulating and defining themselves in this moment of change and transition.

There have been a number of attempts to delineate the nuances of long-term post-Soviet developments in Belarus. In the last decades scholars have regarded postcolonial studies as a possible tool for understanding the former Soviet area. Interest in the matter was first sparked by the question “Is the post- in postcolonial the post- in post-Soviet?”<sup>2</sup>. D. Moore argued that post-Soviet countries can be included in the area of postcolonial studies, challenging the notion that only Western countries and their former colonies qualify as subjects of postcolonialism. Understanding how Belarus fits into the framework of postcolonial studies in the post-Soviet area, however, is an issue that has not yet been tackled extensively in the literature. Belarusian postcolonial

authors, namely Dubaviets, Akudovich and Babkoŭ, perceive Russian and then Soviet colonialism as the deprivation of the original Belarusian culture and independent history. ‘Decolonisation’ is therefore interpreted as a movement to regain the past and reimagine it back to before Belarus was ‘spoiled’ by colonisation, by setting Belarus free from its dependence on Russia, both culturally and historically, and condensing multiple cultural influences into one single form of national sovereignty<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the applicability of postcolonial studies in Belarus is problematic especially on the level of perception: while in other post-Soviet countries, such as the Baltics, there was a strong and clear awareness of having been ‘colonized’, in Belarus, the majority of the population (perhaps excluding only the cultural elite) did not feel that they had been colonized<sup>4</sup>. The Soviet period was instead remembered in generally positive terms. Actually, the very debate on the postcolonial condition of Belarus involved only authors from the elite circles and contemporary artists, while the general public was not interested in it.

These aspects can also partially explain why the Soviet legacy still has an impact on contemporary debates in Belarus also in terms of historical memory, myths and symbols linked to the period.

After gaining independence, post-Soviet countries often attempted to reject the Soviet era in order to forge a new national identity: the idea was to identify oneself in opposition to the Soviet past, in which the rejection of Soviet symbols was a key component of identity construction<sup>5</sup>. However, in

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, the term was used by the photographer and artist Sergei Zhdanovich in his photo series “Tabula Rasa”, as cited in Austrian Cultural Forum, *Belarus: The World is Moving*, Moskva 2012, p. 42, and S. Oushakine, *How to Grow out of Nothing: The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus*, “Qui Parle”, 2017 (26), 2, pp. 425-490.

<sup>2</sup> D.C. Moore, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*, in V. Kelertas (ed. by), *Baltic Postcolonialism*, Amsterdam-New York 2006, pp. 11-43.

<sup>3</sup> S. Oushakine, *How to Grow out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 431.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 463.

<sup>5</sup> N. Bekus, *Agency of Internal Transnationalism in Social Memory*, “The British Journal of Sociology”, 2019 (70), 4, p. 259.

2014 the threat of ‘colonization’ became not only cultural, but also physical. The annexation of Crimea has represented a tangible proof of the growing assertiveness of Russia and its interests in expanding to include those territories that it claims as its own from a historical and cultural point of view. The crisis in Ukraine was a powerful wake-up call for the already highly Russified Belarus, since Russia had established a precedent that could potentially be applied to Minsk. The situation had been exploited by Lukashenka, using the threat to his advantage, to strengthen his rule and to reinforce the idea of “a strong state, which will not allow chaos, even more so a civil war”<sup>6</sup>. The so-called Soft-Belarusisation, a process of revaluation and re-appropriation of Belarusian cultural and historical elements, was in fact started by the government, motivated by concerns that an increasingly aggressive Russia could be a potentially greater threat.

Soft-Belarusisation did not only affect the government’s narrative, but it also involved a bottom-up process concerning civil society. Calling Soft-Belarusisation an anti-colonial movement might sound provocative, but it cannot be denied that it has become a distinctive feature of the Belarusian post-Soviet transition and contributed to increasing national self-awareness. To defend itself from Russia’s cultural (and political) expansion even further, the civil society tried to show that Belarusians were indeed original and different, developing a new attitude towards culture, language, history, national symbols and heroes. This article aims to explore the Belarusian’s strategy to resist Russian influence by way of self-differentiating and self-defining, focusing also on memory politics, which will be analysed through the lenses of the Kastus’ Kalinoŭski myth as an exemplary case.

## THE DEBATE ON IDENTITY MODELS IN POST-SOVIET BELARUS

After achieving formal independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and forming a sovereign state, the issue of national identity returned to the center of attention in Belarus. Two main contrasting ideas emerged, based on different interpretations of a few pivotal issues: the role of the Belarusian language, the origin of the nation and the interpretation of history.

The ‘ethnolinguistic’ or ‘alternative’ identity-building is based on the concept of a ‘return to the past’ (and its reimagination), with narratives reviving the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth’s legacies; and on ethnocentricity, where Belarusian language and culture are seen as crucial components of Belarusian identity. The idea was to continue the 20<sup>th</sup> century Belarusian national awakening, which placed a strong emphasis on Belarusian language and culture in the construction of national identity<sup>7</sup>; the movement started at the end of the 1980s and was known as *Adradzhenne* [Rebirth]. The ‘Soviet’ identity model, instead, does not consider Belarusian language as an essential element of the national identity, and it uses Soviet narratives as point of reference, tracing the beginnings of Belarusian nationhood back to the start of Soviet history. Finally, the ‘creole’ identity model, a third hybrid narration borrowing elements from both previous models, was visible in Lukashenka’s policy after 2001 and was described by scholars like Ioffe, Bekus and Titarenko. The word ‘creole’ was originally used by Belarusian intellectuals, such as Bulhakaŭ and Abushenka, to describe how the official governmental rhetoric on the subject of Belarusian sovereignty changed and grew increasingly forceful. It came to rely solely on Soviet mythology to explain Belarusian independence, and Lukashenka lost influence<sup>8</sup>. Titarenko<sup>9</sup> described the ‘creole’ identity as being shaped around values associated with the Soviet period, such as patrio-

<sup>6</sup> A. Lukashenka, *Ukraine Could Be Established Within a Year if All Sides Wanted to*, <<https://www.euronews.com/2014/10/03/lukashenko-ukraine-could-be-stabilised-within-a-year-if-all-sides-wanted-to>> (latest access: 29.10.2021).

<sup>7</sup> S. Oushakine, *How to Grow out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 435.

<sup>8</sup> G. Ioffe, *Reassessing Lukashenka: Belarus in Cultural and Geopolitical Context*, London-New York 2014.

<sup>9</sup> L. Titarenko, *Post-Soviet Belarus*, op. cit., p. 9.

tism, pride in the Soviet past, and hard work, as well as more traditional Belarusian characteristics, like tolerance and hospitality, applicable to all citizens of Belarus.

After a brief period in the 1990s, newly elected Lukashenka set the conditions for full control over identity narratives by the authorities and was able to use his influence to dominate the identity debate. With time, the polarization became less evident than in the 1990s and Belarusian identity started moving towards the confluence of different ideas and a phase of synthesis. Titarenko observed that Belarus would eventually lean towards civic identity built “on the basis of civic consciousness without any direct connection to any language or ethnicity”<sup>10</sup>, which would be better adapted to modern challenges and the Belarusian situation as a whole.

A new trend in identity-building later emerged as a result of continuing processes in Belarusian society and a reaction to events in Ukraine in 2014, referred to as Soft-Belarusisation. This approach has involved both the government (until 2020) and the public, and can be analysed on these two levels. The next section will focus on how Soft-Belarusisation has had an impact on society and on the link with collective memory.

#### SOFT BELARUSISATION:

#### GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY, OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CIVIL SOCIETY

##### *Government level*

Originally an attempt to counter Russian influence and reinforce Belarusian sovereignty, ‘Soft-Belarusisation’ can be defined as a shift in official discourse which regarded with greater emphasis and tolerance elements of the national identity, such as Belarusian culture, language and symbols traditionally linked with the alternative identity model. The term ‘Soft-Belarusisation’ was used by Lukashenka himself in 2015, when it was revealed that he saw Belarusian language and culture as a tool to counter

Russian influence<sup>11</sup>. However, despite public affirmations and limited attempts to incorporate aspects from the ethnolinguistic identity project into the official identity narrative, the authorities’ new approach did not result in any significant change, and it was abandoned after the protest wave of 2020.

The most visible, and probably most significant, change in the official narrative involved public speeches and certain remarks Lukashenka made in 2014. For example, on the eve of Belarus’s Independence Day in 2014, he delivered part of his address in Belarusian for the first time in over two decades, restoring the Belarusian language to official status. The fact that Lukashenka, who had never spoken Belarusian publicly in previous years, selected Independence Day for this momentous address had a strong impact. On other occasions, Lukashenka emphasized the value of Belarusian language by affirming that “If we forget how to speak in Belarusian, we will stop being a nation”<sup>12</sup>. Lukashenka’s addresses in Belarusian, according to Posokhin<sup>13</sup>, marked a major shift. This was a pivotal moment for a language that had long been linked with the opposition, and which Lukashenka himself had previously viewed less than favorably.

Soft-Belarusisation also applied to politics of memory, as its narratives include symbols, heroes and festivities commonly linked with the national alternative identity model. In some situations, officials merely allowed manifestations that previously would have been suppressed, which is the case of the celebrations for the centenary of the Belarusian National Republic on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2018. Another example of an attempt to honour and appropriate competing national heroes in official discursive events<sup>14</sup> is the case

<sup>11</sup> V. Mojeiko, *Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka's Domestic Policy?*, “Belarus Digest”, 2015, 4, <<https://www.belarusdigest.com>> (latest access: 08.06.2021).

<sup>12</sup> A. Lukashenka, *Poslanie Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus' A.G. Lukashenko beloruskomu narodu i Natsional'nomu sobraniiu Respubliki Belarus'*, “*Si'lnaia ekonomika i chestnaia vlast' – fundament nezavisimosti strany i protsvetaniia natsii*”, Pravo.by, 22.04.2014, <<http://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P014p0001>> (latest access: 27/09/2021).

<sup>13</sup> I. Posokhin, *Soft Belarusization: (Re)Building of Identity or “Border Reinforcement”?*, “*Colloquia Humanistica*”, 2019, 8, pp. 57-78.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> L. Titarenko, *Post-Soviet Belarus*, op. cit., p. 9.

of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Algirdas (Alherd in Belarusian) and of military leader Tadevush Kastsiushka, both involved in the historical confrontation between Belarusian and Russian lands. The installation of two monuments dedicated to them was authorized in 2018, thus confirming their acceptance at the official level.

The official Soft-Belarusisation can be interpreted as a strategy by the government not only to reinforce the sovereignty of Belarus, but also to adopt certain features of the alternative narrative in order to weaken the opposition. Soft-Belarusisation at the government level only occurred without conflicting with the Russian state’s historical narrative<sup>15</sup> and without undermining Lukashenka’s status as the country’s liberator. The government was careful not to legitimate the political opposition. In sum, Belarusian language and identity remained a handy card for the government to play whenever it needed to strengthen its position.

### *Civil society level*

Soft-Belarusisation can also be considered as a bottom-up process involving civil society, with increased interest in national identity and efforts supporting national language and culture. These demonstrations were most likely prompted by a combination of factors. The war in Ukraine may have had repercussions in Belarusian society, fueling more frequent demonstrations of national identification and patriotism<sup>16</sup>. The authorities’ temporary tolerance then created fertile grounds for these initiatives to expand and intensify. This trend, however, might be the consequence of a long-term process that was manifested in a succession of spontaneous events, cultural and business initiatives, and language classes. Many of the actions began even before the events in Ukraine, proving that interest in Belarusian iden-

tity was naturally growing and did not require an external stimulus to begin.

Clear examples of these citizen-driven initiatives deal with Belarusian language. *Mova tsi kava?* [Language or coffee?] established in 2012 by journalists Kibalchych and Labadsenka, was the first independent campaign to address Belarusian language issues<sup>17</sup>. The course consisted of a series of casual lectures followed by topic-based discussion groups. The informality and spontaneity of the project are likely to have contributed to its appeal. The project later transformed into *Mova Nanova* [Language Anew], an initiative that includes free language classes and other cultural events to increase awareness of the Belarusian language and cultivate its understanding. It was a particularly organized and effective initiative. Classes began in January 2014, initially in Minsk, and quickly extended to other Belarusian cities, both in provincial capitals and small villages, with a total of 18 sites throughout Belarus. Apart from raising awareness on Belarusian language and offering instructional materials, the course has the potential to build a community by serving as a free, accessible platform that connects individuals with similar interests.

Already in early 2014, some months before the start of the official Soft-Belarusization, a survey, carried out by *Budzma Belarusami!* [Let’s be Belarusian] jointly with the research Centre Novak, pointed out that the association between Belarusian language and the opposition was dissolving: when asked, “What do you think about people that speak only in Belarusian?”, only 2.3% of respondents answered “nationalist” and 3.7% “dissidents”<sup>18</sup>. These figures were much lower than they were in the 2009 and 2011 editions of the same survey. Additionally, 2014 showed an increase in the number of people who claimed not to pay attention to language spoken (thus we can assume greater tolerance or at least neutrality towards speakers of Belarusian). Finally,

<sup>15</sup> A. Kazakevich – A. Lastoŭski, *Aliaksei Lastoŭski: Radykal’ny natsyianal’ny praekt belarusam azhytstsiavits’ nemagchyma, ale tendentsyia natsyianalizatsyi niaŭkhl’naia*, “Nasha Niva”, 12.05.2016, <<https://zautra.by/news/news-21340>> (latest access: 11.07.2021).

<sup>16</sup> V. Mojeiko, *Soft-Belarusization. A New Shift in Lukashenka’s Domestic Policy?*, “Belarus Digest”, 2015, 4, <<https://www.belarusdigest.com>> (latest access: 22.06.2021).

<sup>17</sup> I. Petz, *Belarus: Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, “Eurozine”, 2017, 3, <<https://www.eurozine.com/between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place/>> (latest access: 05.03.2021).

<sup>18</sup> *Iak bielarusy staviatstva da bielaruskamoŭnykh*, <<https://budzma.by/news/yak-byelarusy-stavyacca-da-byelaruskamownyk.html>> (latest access: 25.06.2021).

the percentage of respondents associating Belarusian language with 'elites' decreased as well (from 10.4% in 2011 to 5.6% in 2014). The survey also highlighted that 76% of respondents generally approve Belarusian-speaking people. This trend was later confirmed by further research. Rudkoŭski<sup>19</sup> reported data from a study from 2018 by the MIA research centre, which explored the attitude of survey respondents towards identity, narratives, history and language. While answering the question on Belarusian language, 86% of respondents agreed that Belarusian language is "the most important part of our culture, and it should be preserved".

Apart from new perspectives on Belarusian language, recent years also witnessed the revival of Belarusian history, the desire to rediscover Belarusian historical roots and heroes and the popularisation of traditional national symbols. For example, the shop Symbal.by produces and sells a wide series of merchandising which represents, as its founder claims, the "true Belarusians": the white-red-white flags and other gadgets depicting the flag or the *Pahonia* coat of arms, *vyshyvankas* [embroidered shirts] and objects decorated with the traditional embroidery patterns, books and other typical Belarusian souvenirs<sup>20</sup>. The success of a private business like Symbal.by means that there is demand for these types of products; there is a niche of people interested in symbols and objects related to the Belarusian national identity that, probably, has expanded in recent years to include more than just the traditional nationally conscious elites. The combination of greater awareness and interest in Belarusian identity has led to the popularisation of its symbols, cultural elements, heroes and language.

#### COLLECTIVE MEMORY, CONTESTED HEROES: THE CASE OF KASTUS' KALINOŪSKI

Of all the historical heroes whose official recognition sets clear political and cultural boundaries between Belarus and the "Russian world," Kastus' Kalinoŭski is among the most noteworthy. He

was one of the leaders of the 1863-1864 uprising against the Russian Empire that took place in the North-Western Province of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The insurrection ultimately failed, and Kalinoŭski was captured in Vilnius and condemned to death by order of General Mikhail Murav'ev. Kalinoŭski's burial place remained uncertain for 150 years until his remains were accidentally discovered on Gediminas Hill in Vilnius in 2017. A solemn reburial ceremony, organized by a special commission of the Lithuanian Seim, took place in November 2019. Thousands of people lined the streets of Vilnius to watch the passing of the funerary cortege, while thousands more witnessed the event as it was broadcasted live on online media outlets. The public farewell and the concelebrated requiem mass were attended by ordinary people, state officials and the foreign delegations from neighbouring countries. Farewell speeches were given by Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, Polish President Andrzej Duda, Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Ihar Pietryshenka and other illustrious guests. The event received the attention of international media and was deemed a dignified and noble occasion of remembrance. And of the thousands of people who gathered in Vilnius, Belarusians represented the absolute majority.

This brief account of events reveals that the case of Kalinoŭski is particularly unique, and it calls attention to the complex network of research, narratives, and remembrance in which it is entrenched. In the last hundred years, Kalinoŭski underwent a process of historical nostrification and is considered a natural hero of the Commonwealth's successor countries<sup>21</sup>. However, it is in Belarus that his name evokes emotional reactions.

The Kalinoŭski myth dates back to 1916, when Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, the leader of the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) made the first attempt to underline Kalinoŭski's "Belarusianness"<sup>22</sup>. Since then, he has been instrumentally used in Be-

<sup>21</sup> In Poland and Lithuania, he is known respectively as Konstanty Kalinowski and Konstantinas Kalinauskas.

<sup>22</sup> V. Lastoŭski, *Pamiaci Spraviadlivaha*, <<http://kalinouski.arkus.by/library/vlast/ps.htm>> (latest access: 12.12.2021).

<sup>19</sup> P. Rudkoŭski, *National Identity: State Policy and Public Opinion*, "Belarusian Yearbook", 2019, pp. 99-107.

<sup>20</sup> The shop was forced to close down in 2020.

larusian historiography to fit the changing political reality of the state, often described in a chameleon-like way – as the leader of the Belarusian national movement, a Polish dictator or terrorist, a mythical hero, a communist, or a ‘fake beacon’ of Belarusian history. The discussion about the myth of Kalinoŭski and the role he played continues today, and historians do not have a single, unified vision of him. The issue has recently moved from the academic world to the landscape of social media, reaching a wider audience and adding to the complexity of narratives and interpretations. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: almost 160 years after Kalinoŭski’s death, his presence, or rather his memory, is still deeply felt. Before exploring how Belarusians remember this personage, it is useful to put him into the context described in the first part of the article.

At the beginning of the 1990s, research on Kalinoŭski was rife with national motifs linked to the birth of an independent Belarusian republic<sup>23</sup>. In this context, historians started to treat him as the bearer of the Belarusian national idea, “usually taken to mean the idea of the sovereignty of the Belarusian people and the uniqueness of their culture and mentality”<sup>24</sup>. A figurative battle for Kalinoŭski took place between the nationally-oriented circles and the supporters of the official ideology, and it is still being fought today.

The nationally-oriented circles consider Kalinoŭski as the ultimate national hero. There may be three elements of his biography, involving the question of language, geopolitical orientation and postcolonial thinking in Belarus, that explain this perspective. First, through the uprising Kalinoŭski wanted to achieve the independence of historical Litva<sup>25</sup>, namely the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The GDL stands out as the Golden Age in the narrative supported by nationally-oriented groups and is consequently considered as a point of reference in the con-

struction of present-day Belarus. Through this ‘return to the past’, members of *Adradzhenne* identify with the Polish-Belarusian gentry<sup>26</sup>, to which Kalinoŭski belonged, thus distancing themselves from the majority of post-Soviet Belarusians who are influenced by the Soviet Union’s legacy. As a consequence, heroes like Kalinoŭski are perceived with neutrality or indifference by the ‘average’ Belarusian, but viewed positively by the younger generations and nationally-conscious citizens. Second, the anti-Russian character of the uprising is in line with the geopolitical aspirations of the Belarusian postcolonialists, who rely on commonalities with Europe and separateness from Russia<sup>27</sup>. The third element is linked to language. Kalinoŭski is one of the authors of the propagandistic leaflet *Muzhytskaia Praŭda* [Peasant’s Truth]. Written in Latin script Belarusian<sup>28</sup>, it aimed at convincing the *muzhyki* – the majority of whom spoke this language – to support the uprising. At the time, the choice of the language was a pragmatic one, but after Belarusians achieved independence it may have been proudly reinterpreted as a manifestation of the Belarusian national idea. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to think that Kalinoŭski was a conscious Belarusian who had national independence in mind. Like most of the 1863 patriots, he was no longer an early modern patriot and not yet a modern nationalist, but somewhere in between.

The official narrative, however, rejects Kalinoŭski from the pantheon of Belarusian national heroes. As a consequence of the identity processes leaning towards the ‘creole’ model, history textbooks present a quite neutral description of the 1863-1864 events and of Kalinoŭski. For example, the 2018 textbook for 8<sup>th</sup> graders dedicates many pages to descriptions of the complex preparatory phase of the uprising as well as the ideas of the individuals behind it. Additionally, it draws attention to the *Muzyckaja Praŭda* and does not deny the “Polish factor”

<sup>23</sup> E. Firynovich, *Mestsja krynitsy ŭ histaryjahrafichnym dyskursie ab paŭstanni 1863-1864 hh.*, in A. Sal’kov – O. Ianovskii (ed. by), *Rossiiskie i slavianskie issledovaniia*, Minsk 2013, pp. 203-214.

<sup>24</sup> A. Smalianchuk, *Kastus’ Kalinoŭski and the Belarusian National Idea: Research Problems*, “Journal of Belarusian Studies”, 2015 (7), 3, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> V. Ratch, *Svedeniia o pol’skom miatezhe 1863 g. v Severo-Zapadnoi Rossii*, Vilnius 1867, p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> S. Oushakine, *How to Grow out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 433.

<sup>27</sup> N. Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative “Belarusianness”*, Budapest 2010, p. 218.

<sup>28</sup> Also known as *Lacinka*, it was used especially as a literary language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

in Kalinoŭski's biography<sup>29</sup>. Yet the attitude of the Belarusian authorities towards this personage is inconsistent and conflicting. At times, Kalinoŭski is simply presented as a Pole. In a March 2019 interview, Ihar Marzaliuk, a Deputy of the House of Representatives, stated that Kalinoŭski – a Uniate Church believer – cannot be considered a national hero, because he had a bestial hatred towards Orthodoxy<sup>30</sup>. Other times, and especially in concomitance with Kalinoŭski's reburial ceremony, Belarusian authorities recognized him as “a son of our land”<sup>31</sup>, a figure inscribed in Belarusian history, immortalized in Belarus through monuments, street names and art. During his speech at the reburial ceremony, Deputy Prime Minister Ihar Pietryshenka even linked the insurgent's doctrine with the country's motto “For a powerful and flourishing Belarus”, chosen for the 2001 and 2006 Presidential campaigns of Lukashenka. Furthermore, he alluded to Kalinoŭski's famous quotation from *Muzhytskaia Praŭda*, “Not people for the government, but the government for people”<sup>32</sup>, to describe the efforts of the current regime<sup>33</sup>.

However, these words are not backed by concrete actions towards official recognition of Kalinoŭski, and they are always followed by a step back: Belarusian officials are very cautious and avoid mentioning the target of the 1863–1864 revolt – Russia – because they fear the negative reaction of their ‘big brother’. As long as the discourse on Kalinoŭski remains confined to culture, literature and art, the authorities let it slide; however, as soon as it is exploited for political purposes different from those at

the official level, it is condemned. Kalinoŭski has taken on a very strong political meaning. During the 2006 post-presidential election protests, October Square in Minsk was renamed in “K. Kalinoŭski's Square”<sup>34</sup> and this name is still used by representatives of the opposition. The act of renaming the square may have had the effect of legitimating the political opposition, undermining the status of the President as grantor of the country's sovereignty<sup>35</sup>.

#### MEMORY AFTER/AS EXHUMATION: SOFT-BELARUSISATION AS A BOTTOM-UP PROCESS

We believe that soft-Belarusisation also involves a bottom-up process, as it corresponds to certain attitudes and, in the case of Kalinoŭski, certain memory patterns developed by the citizens. In the next section we will thus focus on the period from 2017 to November 2020. 2017 was chosen as the starting point of the research, because it introduced a new element that renewed and reformed the discussion around Kalinoŭski, namely the discovery of his body. The discovery of his remains in 2017 was met with extreme excitement by members of the Belarusian civil society, historians and intellectuals. As a result, in September 2019, a group of Belarusian intellectuals, among which the Nobel laureate Svetlana Aleksievich, launched a petition and appealed to the Lithuanian Parliament requesting to transfer the remains of Kastus' Kalinoŭski to Belarus to bury him there. The Belarusian society was divided into supporters of the reburial in Vilnius (Belarusian authorities sided with them) and supporters of the remains' transfer to Minsk. At the same time, the high participation of Belarusians at the reburial ceremony in Vilnius indicates the event's significance and the citizens' desire, perhaps even sense of duty, to attend. Surprisingly, Kalinoŭski reappeared after the

<sup>29</sup> S. Panov *et al.*, *Istoriia Belarusi. Konets XVIII-nachalo XX v.*, Minsk 2018, pp. 59–63.

<sup>30</sup> *Interv'iu s istorikom i deputatom Ihorem Marzaliukom o kontseptsii infobezopasnosti*, BelteleRadio, 17.03.2019, <<https://bit.ly/3z0M0uY>> (latest access: 22.06.2021).

<sup>31</sup> *Lukashenko vyskazalsia o roli Kastusia Kalinovskogo v istorii*, Belta, 17.11.2019, <<https://bit.ly/3ifO4s0>> (latest access: 22.06.2021).

<sup>32</sup> K. Kalinoŭski, *Muzhytskaia Praŭda N° 4*, <[https://knihi.com/Kastus\\_Kalinouski/Muzyckaja\\_prauda\\_4.html](https://knihi.com/Kastus_Kalinouski/Muzyckaja_prauda_4.html)> (latest access: 11.07.2021).

<sup>33</sup> M. Karnevich, *Vystuplenne namesnika prem'er-ministra Respubliki Belarus' Ihara Petryshenki na tsyrymonii pakhavan'nia pareshtkaŭ kiraŭnikoŭ i ūdzel'nikaŭ paŭstannia 1863–1864 hadoŭ*, Narodnaia Volia, 2019 (93), 4448, p. 1, <<https://bit.ly/3raYFse>> (latest access: 22.06.2021).

<sup>34</sup> Radyio Svaboda, *Na Kastrychnitskim pliaty zhadvali Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha*, 22.03.2006, <<https://www.svaboda.org/a/768416.html>> (latest access: 14.07.2021).

<sup>35</sup> A similar political meaning is certainly present in the narrative surrounding Kastsiushka, who is also claimed a national hero by the opposition, but his inscription in official politics of memory is less dangerous than that of Kalinoŭski, because the language factor and self-identification ambiguity are absent.

beginning of the 2020 protests, in a moment when all the attention was focused on brutal repressions and violation of human rights by security forces.

In the following sections of the article we will try to understand which elements of Kalinoŭski’s original image characterize the memory of Belarusians after 2017, and how and why he again became relevant after August 2020 (until November 2020). The answer to these questions we will evaluate the reaction of the Belarusian society to the reburial ceremony of Kalinoŭski and to the 2020 protests. This category includes historians, intellectuals, journalists and ordinary citizens, most of which have attended the ceremony or witnessed it online. The sources correspond to the channels of communication used by each group, namely petitions, online interviews, online newspaper articles, and social media networks (Facebook and Instagram). The authors have also conducted 3 semi-structured interviews in Minsk in February 2020 with historians specialized on the topic of memory politics and Kalinoŭski. The main mode of analysis consisted in collecting comments, excerpts of interviews and of online articles, then coding them and finally making thematic groups which summarize the perceptions of the aforementioned category of people on Kalinoŭski<sup>36</sup>.

### *Clusters of imagery about Kalinoŭski*

Belarusians who gathered in Vilnius came from various cities, represented diverse age groups, had varied aspirations for the future and were informed to different degrees on the history of the 1863 uprisings. In the days following the event, they engaged in discussions on the feelings provoked by the ceremony both on social media networks and on independent media outlets. It is easy to imagine that in such a wide range of people there is no consensus on the meaning of Kalinoŭski’s reburial. In our research, six

clusters of imagery have been identified, as follows:

1. *Images related to the Romantic life of Kalinoŭski*. In this category of comments, Kalinoŭski becomes representative of the cultural and political Romanticism he longed for from the GDL past. Some tragic details from his biography even construct a mythical image of Kalinoŭski as a sort of rock star<sup>37</sup>: he had a love affair with Maryja Jamant, he was brazen, he did not flee his death sentence, and he died at the young age of 26 (practically reminiscent of the Club 27 of Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, and other ‘bad boy/girl’ celebrities). Speaking of music, the Belarusian folk punk band Dzieciuki has been profoundly inspired by the *Muzhytskaia Praŭda*, as seen not only in their lyrics<sup>38</sup>, but also in their name. “Dzieciuki” [fellow men] was the name that Kalinoŭski used to address the *muzhyki* in the propagandistic leaflet. At their concerts, they usually wear and show merchandise portraying Kalinoŭski as a military leader [Fig. 1]. This proves that Kalinoŭski is often represented with characteristics more typically attributed to the protagonist of a western movie, or as a Belarusian Zorro, resulting from a semiotic collision between the original historiographic sources and mass culture<sup>39</sup>. In historiography, there is no reference to Kalinoŭski as a military leader (here he is a revolutionary and a writer), while in mass culture he undergoes a process of “militarization”<sup>40</sup> and is represented with weapons in his hands on t-shirts, souvenirs, and even tattoos. All this may have contributed to the transformation of Kalinoŭski from a revolutionary activist into a ‘celebrity’ detached from the 1863-1864 context.

2. *Religious images*. This category of comments

<sup>37</sup> M. Zhabankov in E. Daneiko, “*Kalinovskii – eto cool*”. *Kak belorusy vosprinimajut lidera vosstaniia protiv Rossiiskoi Imperii*, Delfi.ru, 25.11.2019, <<https://bit.ly/3z5nJUB>> (latest access: 14.07.2021).

<sup>38</sup> One of the most famous songs dedicated to Kalinoŭski is *Chas kasineraŭ* [The time of schythemen]. Also known as ‘schyte bearers’, they were soldiers armed with schytes during the 1794, 1830-31 and 1863-64 uprisings.

<sup>39</sup> V. Bulhakaŭ, Private interview with the authors, February 2020; P. Tereshkovich, Private interview with the authors, February 2020.

<sup>40</sup> A. Vashkevich, *Heneral Kalinoŭski peramozha ŭsikh!*, “Arche”, 04.02.2020, <<https://gazeta.arche.by/article/321.html>> (latest access: 7.11.2021).

<sup>36</sup> It is important to underline that this research represents a first step to understand what the attendees (and not only) of the rebel’s funeral think of him, almost 160 years after his death. Consequently, the sample of the empirical analysis is modest. The sources used for this article include the opinion of approximately 20 people. Only the most relevant comments and ideas have been selected for the analysis. Hopefully, this research will pave the way for further explorations of the topic.



Fig. 1. The Belarusian band Dzieciuki during the concert after the reburial ceremony of Kalinoŭski in Vilnius on November 22, 2019. On their t-shirts and the banners hanging on the wall, the rebel holds a pistol or two swords. Source: svaboda.org.

emphasizes the role of Kalinoŭski as a martyr who gave his life for freedom and for a better life for future citizens. The surprising, accidental nature of his body's discovery on Gediminas Hill accounts for the emotional outburst of Belarusian and ultimately for the transformation of his public image into an almost saint-like figure: "there is something symbolic and miraculous in the fact that the remains of Kalinoŭski were discovered due to a natural phenomenon – a landslide on Gediminas Hill"<sup>41</sup>. The Facebook user Z.D.<sup>42</sup> has no doubt that this discovery was accomplished by God. In addition, Kalinoŭski's 'return' from under the lime after 154 years has been compared to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ returned in flesh and Kalinoŭski through his remains, but these resurrections produced the a similar effect<sup>43</sup>. These comments evoke the article written by Siarhiej Dubaviets in 2013. At the time, he had already built a parallel between the destiny of Jesus Christ and of Kastus' Kalinoŭski, underlining that both were treated as 'bandits' by governors Pontius Pilatus and General Murav'ev<sup>44</sup>.

### 3. Images related to ideas of moral integrity.

The mass participation at the reburial ceremony has been interpreted as a sign that even if the Uprising is over for the insurgents, their ideas and deeds continue to live today; in other words, "truth wins even when its bearers are stopped physically"<sup>45</sup>. Kalinoŭski is perceived as a model, because he calls on the Belarusian citizens to reawaken their respect and consciousness, and to live without fear<sup>46</sup>. Archbishop T. Kandrusевич, who gave a very emotional speech during the reburial ceremony, also added that in Kalinoŭski and his associates, "we see an example of altruism, self-sacrifice and self-awareness"<sup>47</sup>. In the first group of imageries, it is possible to ignore the ceremony's implications regarding citizens' moral duty, but in this case, remembering Kalinoŭski clearly led to a reassessment of perspectives, values and behaviour in their everyday life.

4. *Images of freedom from an oppressive regime.* This cluster of imagery particularly resonates in the current political situation in Belarus, where freedom of expression or association are denied. According to A. Dynko, "the presence of more than a thousand Belarusians and the abundance of white-red-white flags at the reburial ceremony of Kalinoŭski is [...] a reaction to the lack of the possibility of real action in Belarus, an explosive situational interest"<sup>48</sup>. In three cases, people underlined that during the event in Vilnius, they felt free<sup>49</sup>. They associated this feeling with the absence of paddy wagons, fences, and police in the streets of Vilnius<sup>50</sup>, which are usually seen during street protests in Be-

<sup>45</sup> Z. Dashkievich, "Hetyia dni vyjavili, dzelia chaho peradusim zhyŭ i za kaho zmahaŭsia Kalinoŭski". *Dashkevich pra ūrachystatsi ŭ Vil'ni*, Radyio Svaboda, 25.11.2019, <<https://www.svaboda.org/a/30290530.html>> (latest access: 07.11.2021).

<sup>46</sup> J.N., *Shanavanne pamiatsi Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha*, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> *Slova artsybiskupa Tadevusha Kandrusевичa padchas tsyrymonii perapakhavannia Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha ŭ Vil'ni*, Catholic.by, 22.11.2019, <<https://bit.ly/3klnBfi>> (latest access: 14.07.2021).

<sup>48</sup> A. Dynko in Daneiko, "Kalinovskii – eto cool", op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Z. Dashkievich, *Hetyia dni vyjavili*, op. cit.; Guide\_Minsk\_Belarus, *Perapakhavanne Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha*, Instagram, November 2019; Wildkot, *Ty, naverno, ved'ma, inache kak ty mogla prisutstvovat' na pokhoronakh Kastusia Kalinovskogo?!*, Instagram, November 2019.

<sup>50</sup> G.V., *Shpatsyravats' pa Vil'ni na perapakhavanni Kalinoŭskaha heta, kaneshne, klasna*, Instagram, December 2019; Wildkot, "Ty, naverno, ved'ma", op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> A. Dynko in E. Daneiko, "Kalinovskii – eto cool", op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> The authors of this article decided to preserve the anonymity of social media users, reporting only the initials of their names, without providing the URL to the post.

<sup>43</sup> J.N., *Shanavanne pamiatsi Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha*, Facebook, November 2019.

<sup>44</sup> S. Dubaviets, *Haloŭny heroi belaruskaha sertsya*, Radyio Svaboda, 24.01.2013, <<https://www.svaboda.org/a/24882349.html>> (latest access: 07.11.2021).



Fig. 2 - Vilnius, November 22, 2019. Painting by Alies Marachkin. Kalinoŭski's position in the painting reminds of the one Jesus Christ takes in the Catholic resurrection iconography. Source: [svaboda.org](http://svaboda.org).

larus. Even Lithuanians who witnessed the funerary procession shared a similar opinion: the mass presence of Belarusians in Vilnius reminded them of the spirit of freedom in the early 1990s, just after Lithuania had achieved independence from the Soviet Union<sup>51</sup>.

5. *Nationalist images*. In this category of comments, Kalinoŭski's body is perceived as a crucial element in encouraging national unity, to the point that a hypothetical memorial dedicated to him in Belarus would even serve for the consolidation of the Belarusians as a nation<sup>52</sup>. Svetlana Aleksievich has been the main supporter of this argument during the remains' transfer debate. She believes that there are very few occasions to feel like a nation, since the

main public celebrations in Belarus are related to the Soviet history<sup>53</sup>. A similar occasion took place in 2018, when the Minsk authorities allowed the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BNR, a crucial event in the alternative historical narrative.

Belarusian unity was felt even in the hours preceding the ceremony. Some of the participants expressed that coming to Vilnius required a certain economic commitment and other sacrifices: they had to pay for the Visa and for the round-trip train or bus tickets, as well as ask for a day off from work (the funeral took place on Friday). Many people travelled by night to be there early in the morning and others stayed in Vilnius for the whole weekend<sup>54</sup>. However, these sacrifices were compensated by the joy of travelling with other co-nationals and of taking part in what has been defined as a “historical event”<sup>55</sup>. Therefore, the atmosphere during the ceremony recalled a celebration rather than a mourning. Additionally, during the ceremony, there was a sense of collective suffering of participants and the insurgents, through the metaphor of cold. November 22, 2019 was a particularly frigid day. Despite the freezing temperatures, people still gathered in Vilnius and accompanied Kalinoŭski through the whole journey to Rasos cemetery. At least one hundred people remained even after the oration at the graveside, waiting outside the Chapel to drop their flowers before Kalinoŭski's burial niche. In one of the comments on Facebook, K.A. wrote: “What is it to freeze one day when our heroes have been freezing in raw land for 156 years?”.

Through these efforts, Belarusians proved that they are more than a people — they are a nation<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> I. Kulei, “On imeet delo s pridumannoi Belarus'iu”: Aleksievich kritikuet Pozniaka iz-za Kalinovskogo, Belsat, 25.09.2019, <<https://bit.ly/3z0cZGR>> (latest access: 12.07.2021).

<sup>54</sup> Several events targeting specifically the Belarusian public were organized by the Belarusian public committee for the remembrance of the 1863-1864 insurgents, thanks to the economic support received through a crowdfunding campaign. The events included encounters with historians, mourning processions, theatre representations, tours to the locations in Vilnius linked to the Belarusian history, and concerts.

<sup>55</sup> I. Karnei, *Hodny Źnal 150-hadovaŭ trahedyi. Iak u Vil'ni raz'vitalisia z Kalinoŭskim i iaho paplechnikami*, Radyo Svaboda, 22.11.2019, <<https://www.svaboda.org/a/30287197.html>> (last access: 07.11.2021).

<sup>56</sup> mmkut\_miensk, *Toi momant, kali nepatrëbnyia shtuchnaia*

<sup>51</sup> Z. Dashkievich, “*Hetyia dni vyjavili*”, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> A. Smalianchuk, Private interview with the authors, May 2020.

On the site of the opposition party Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), Aliaksiej Janukievich wrote that “a nation that respects its heroes even outside the territorial borders and without official state support — lives and will be alive”<sup>57</sup>. In the interview, A. Smalianchuk also stated that during the ceremony “it turned out that there is another Belarus. The return of Kalinoŭski stood for a very strong factor in the consolidation of the Belarusians. After all, we are not *tuteishia*<sup>58</sup> — but still we are a nation”. In this context, the decision of the Lithuanian government to include an inscription in Belarusian on the tomb of Kalinoŭski, beside Lithuanian and Polish, has been highly appreciated<sup>59</sup>. This may have been perceived as a sign of respect and esteem for the Belarusian national culture.

6. *Anti-Russia images*. Eventually, Kalinoŭski became a reminder of anti-Russian feelings, a symbol of self-affirmation vis-à-vis Moscow. This category is certainly linked with nationalist images, but here the focus is on power relations between Belarus and Russia rather than on the feeling of national unity.

In the petition for the transfer of Kalinoŭski's remains to Belarus, he is presented as a symbol of Belarusians' fight for independence<sup>60</sup>. The text reads: “The funeral of Kanstantsin Kalinoŭski in Belarus would become a symbol and a reminder to Belarusians how to love their homeland, their people, and how to fight for them”<sup>61</sup>. According to the authors of the petition, the ‘threats’ represent the main obstacle in the preservation of Belarusian independence.

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*idéalahichnaia ahitatsyia, pryusovyia zahony, plany, zahady dy pahrozy...*, Instagram, November 2019.

<sup>57</sup> A. Ianukievich, Sem vysnovaŭ pas'lia pakhvan'nia Kalinoŭskaha, narodny.org, 26.11.2019, <<http://narodny.org/?p=24524>> (last access: 11.07.2021).

<sup>58</sup> *Tuteishia* is the title of 1919 play written by Belarusian poet Yanka Kupala; the word means “nationally indifferent” local Slavs who lack a national identity, unlike the local Jews, Poles, and Russians” (from P. A. Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism. 1906-1931*, Pittsburgh 2014, p. 44).

<sup>59</sup> V. Bulhakaŭ, Private interview with the authors, February 2020; A. Smalianchuk, Private interview with the authors, May 2020.

<sup>60</sup> *Belarusy prosiats pakhavats pareshtki Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha ŭ Belarusi. Zhodnyia?*, Hrodna.Life, 24.09.2019, <<https://hrodna.life/2019/09/24/belarusyi-prosyac-pahavac-pareshtki-kastusya-kalinouskaga-u-belarusi-zgodnyiya/>> (latest access: 07.11.2021).

<sup>61</sup> Ivi.

It is possible that one of the threats is the integration of Belarus into Russia. In this respect, the authors of the petition claim that the physical presence of Kalinoŭski in Belarus would inspire its citizens to ‘fight’ anew to preserve their independence<sup>62</sup>.

After the funeral, Z.D. suggested that not by chance the reburial ceremony is taking place “in the 30<sup>th</sup> year of independence” and after 20 years “of building the *Union State* [...] the administration again rushed to the empire for a new treaty of slavery”. In this context, Kalinoŭski's struggle against Russian imperialism in the XIX century turned out to be more relevant than ever before. Historian P. Tereshkovich even presented Kalinoŭski as a defender of the motherland for the second time. The first time was in 1863, when he led the anti-Russian uprising; the second time was in 2019 when, through his ‘shadow’, he defended Belarus from the occupation plans of Russia<sup>63</sup>. In this sense, Kalinoŭski can be viewed as an anti-colonial symbol.

This last group of imagery had a practical result during the rallies against increased involvement between Belarus and the Russian Federation in December 2019, just a month after the funeral. The quotation “You will live happily only when there will be no Muscovite above you”<sup>64</sup> was shown on banners, along with the hero's portrait. It thus seems that Kalinoŭski's anti-Russian stance is the strongest aspect that characterizes Belarusian identity, but it is only one of many factors that constitute the wider concept of identity.

### *Redefinition of Kalinoŭski as a symbol*

After the beginning of the protest, two elements related to Kalinoŭski underwent a recontextualization. First, at a time when it seemed that everybody had forgotten about him, some people directly linked his reburial ceremony to the 2020 protests, as if the awakening of Belarusians began with Kalinoŭski in Vilnius: “We woke Kalinoŭski up in Vilnius and after

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<sup>62</sup> Ivi.

<sup>63</sup> P. Tereshkovich, Private interview with the authors, February 2020.

<sup>64</sup> K. Kalinoŭski, *Listy z-pad shybenitsy*, <[https://knihi.com/Kastus\\_Kalinouski/Pismy\\_z-pad\\_sybenicy.html](https://knihi.com/Kastus_Kalinouski/Pismy_z-pad_sybenicy.html)> (latest access: 11.07.2021).

that, everything began”<sup>65</sup>. In a post celebrating the one-year anniversary of the reburial ceremony, the shop *symbal.by* highlighted the continuity between the funeral and the protests: “At the time it was hard to imagine that within a year we would be walking in columns of thousands of people with native flags on the streets of Belarusian cities every week. This shows once again our achievements of the last year”.

It seems that a particular aspect of the protests reminded demonstrators of the reburial ceremony. This was confirmed by a Facebook user: “[...] the atmosphere of honour, dignity and freedom that reverberated in Vilnius a year ago, is now felt throughout Belarus. At least, I felt it very clearly when I was in Minsk on the Freedom March on August 16<sup>th</sup>”<sup>66</sup>. The collective experience of remembering Kalinoŭski in Lithuania served as a model of action that generated motivation to take to the streets in Belarus. Thus, we can see the people’s attempt to explain the present by reinterpreting past experiences. In addition, they drew a connection between two rather different events – a commemoration and a protest – meaning that Kalinoŭski associated with a strong symbolic value that inevitably links memory to politics.

Second, the significance of Kalinoŭski as a symbol was redefined. He went from being a symbol of independence from Russia to a symbol of revolution against the authoritarian regime of Lukashenka. This shift of meaning occurred specifically after the one-year anniversary of Kalinoŭski’s reburial. In fact, in November 2020, his image appeared on banners and white-red-white flags raised during street rallies in Minsk [Fig. 3]. In the memories of Belarusians, Kalinoŭski is still alive in his fight against inequality and for better living conditions of the peasants, which are examples of the pursuit for democratic reforms in the contemporary society. This symbolic redefinition suggests that Kalinoŭski has once again been instrumentally used to fit the changing realities,



Fig. 3. One of the neighbourhood marches in Minsk on December 13, 2020. In the hands of demonstrators a white-red-white flag and a flag with the image of Kastus’ Kalinoŭski in the background. Source: Radyio Svaboda.

this time not by the state, but by the street protesters. What happened in this case may be a decentralized process based on the initiative of people to incorporate a figure from the ethnolinguistic identity project into their identity narrative.

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The large presence of Belarusians in Vilnius and the recognition of Kalinoŭski as a hero at an international level could have played a significant role in making the claims and beliefs of the opposition more relevant and interesting in the eyes of the Belarusian society, especially for people who did not embrace these values before. It is not possible to confirm whether the Lithuanian government organized the ceremony with the intentional aim of helping the Belarusian opposition; however, it is well-known that Lithuania stands in solidarity of and supports the Belarusian civil society. From the perspective of the Belarusian side, support for the opposition appears more as an unintended consequence. However, it is worth noting that Lukashenka, too, could have played his part in legitimizing the opposition when he and his closest collaborators recognized Kalinoŭski as the son of Belarus in November 2019.

In a context of social mobilization, Kalinoŭski is portrayed as the hero of the 1863 uprising, which was anti-Russian. However, in the case of 2020 protests, it was Kalinoŭski’s personality,

<sup>65</sup> I. Azar, *Na sud’bonosnom perekrestke*, “Novaia Gazeta”, 14.08.2020, <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/08/14/86670-na-sudbonosnom-perekrestke>> (latest access: 24.06.2021).

<sup>66</sup> D. K., *Kazhuts’, shto z pakhavan’nia Kalinoŭskaha akurat i pachalosia tsiaperashnee abudzhen’ne belarusai*, Facebook, November 2020.

namely his relentless determination (and not his anti-Russian stance) that was most emphasized. Hence, Kalinoŭski may serve as both an anti-Russian and an anti-dictatorship symbol only for a certain group of people, probably within more opposition-minded circles, while for others, Kalinoŭski resonates solely as an anti-dictatorship symbol. To put it simply, while everybody was protesting against Lukashenka as an authoritarian leader and calling for a democratic development of politics and society, there was (and is) a group of people who do not perceive Russia as the enemy of Belarus. These people may even imagine closer integration with this country in the future.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we attempted to highlight some processes that have been taking place in Belarus since 2014 (and in some cases even before then), when Soft-Belarusisation was implemented by the authorities and adopted by the general public. Its implementation was mainly a result of the invasion of Crimea, which then led to a desire to move away from Russia, as it was perceived as a threat. Changes in the attitude of both authorities and the citizens have been visible in the spheres of Belarusian language, culture and collective memory. The revival of language and culture was favoured by civic initiatives, proving that Belarusian language is important in identity-building, contributing to the constitution of a common heritage with which Belarusian citizens might self-identify. Concerning memory, the case study of contested national hero, Kastus' Kalinoŭski, showed that he has been subject to a redefinition in the memory of Belarusians dictated by the circumstances of the present. It can be interpreted as evidence of a revival of national heroes that were not usually included in the official narrative.

Belarusian intellectuals and historians stress the fact that in Belarus, there are no tombs or monuments dedicated to historical or cultural figures who are relevant for the Belarusian historical memory<sup>67</sup>. For instance, Maksim Bahdanovich, one of

the founders of modern Belarusian literature, is buried in Crimea. It is therefore necessary to develop a memory politics to commemorate national heroes like Kalinoŭski, who are highly influential in determining the future of Belarus as a nation.

Kalinoŭski has potential as a national hero in Belarus only when the conditions are favorable for the work of amnesia and reconciliation, in order to find a compromise between the opposition-minded and the Soviet-minded communities in Belarus. The latter might consider with particular criticism Kalinoŭski's anti-Russian attitude, as well as the fact that he belonged to the Uniate Church (while the majority of Belarusians today are Orthodox). Another aspect that could play a crucial role is the liberalization of politics of memory, a process that allows the development of a healthy debate around the narratives concerning the national past while keeping it separate from politics<sup>68</sup>. It seemed that this process was already underway before the beginning of the protests, though its fruits may appear only when the current political crisis is over.

The national revival cannot be denied, but it does not mean that the Belarusian society is reverting back to the deeply nationalist ideas developed in the first half of the 1990s, which would not work in the present day. In fact, after the protests, the Belarusian civil society has reached 'a point of no return', in the sense that Belarusians have really started to learn how to function as a democratic civil society<sup>69</sup>. This trend has likely determined the path of Belarusian identity towards a civic type. However, the revival of language and national heroes means that this new identity is more fluid and will also include elements

*sprachaiutstva pra Kalinoŭskaha: iak heta bylo*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czr1MU7HWVo>> (latest access: 14.11.2021); I. Kulei, "On imeet delo s pridumannoi Belarus'iu", op. cit.; Matskevich o perezahoroneniі Kalinovskogo v Minske: "Mne ne stydno za sdelannoe", "Belaruskii zhurnal", 28.09.2019, <<http://journalby.com/news/mackevich-o-perezahoroneniі-kalinovskogo-v-minske-mne-ne-stydno-za-sdelannoe-1325>> (latest access: 14.11.2021).

<sup>68</sup> • E. Narvselius, *Collective Memories and "Blank Spots" of the Ukrainian Past as Addressed by the Lviv Intellectuals*, in B. Törnquist et al. (ed. by), *Painful Pasts and Useful Memories: Remembering and Forgetting in Europe*, Lund 2012, pp.51-72.

<sup>69</sup> • A. Rudnik, *The Changing Role of Civil Society in Belarus*, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4-hBJMY5tg&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4-hBJMY5tg&feature=emb_logo)> (latest access: 30.10.2021).

<sup>67</sup> A. Dynko – A. Smalianchuk, *Dyn'ko i Smalianchuk u Vil'ni*

from the ethnonationalist narrative.

From this perspective, in our view, soft-Belarusisation as a bottom-up process then might be seen as a phase of synthesis, a starting point for a new type of identity which could be described as ‘polyphonic’.

[www.esamizdat.it](http://www.esamizdat.it) ◇ D. Cusitcaia, I. Zaggia, *Collective Memory and Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Belarus: Soft-Belarusisation and the Kastus' Kalinoŭski Myth* ◇ eSamizdat 2021 (XIV), pp. 153-167.

◇ *Collective Memory and Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Belarus: Soft-Belarusisation and the Kastus' Kalinoŭski Myth* ◇

Daria Cusitcaia, Ilaria Zaggia

**Abstract**

The article aims to explore post-Soviet transition in Belarus with a focus on issues of identity, language, and collective memory, providing original insights to interpret the events of 2020. The reconstruction of the debate on identity models in Belarus constitutes the basis of the article, briefly covering the period from the early 1990s up to recent times. It is argued that, after 2014, the so-called Soft-Belarusisation highlighted some changes taking place in Belarusian society, manifested through civic initiatives and the shift in the government's narrative. These will also be visible in the case study of the contested hero Kastus' Kalinoŭski whose symbolic meaning has been reshaped in the memories of Belarusians after the 2020 protests. It is concluded that Soft-Belarusisation can be considered as a process of transition from an identity that still features many Soviet elements towards an identity under redefinition, which also incorporates elements from alternative models of national identity.

**Keywords**

Belarus, Identity Building, Collective Memory, Kastus' Kalinoŭski, Soft-Belarusisation, 2020 Protests.

**Author**

*Daria Cusitcaia* is Project Coordinator at the Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere". She holds a MA in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe at the University of Bologna. Recently, she conducted research on the K. Kalinowski Scholarship Program at the Centre for East European Studies (SEW) of the University of Warsaw and worked in the Organising Committee of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Belarusian Studies in Kaunas. In addition to memory studies, she has a passion for anthropology of post-Socialism.

*Ilaria Zaggia* recently completed a MA in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe at the University of Bologna, graduating with a thesis on Belarusian identity and language. Previously, she obtained a BA cum laude in Languages and Translation at the University of Trieste. In 2020 she worked as an intern for the Italian Embassy in Minsk. Her main research interests span from Sociolinguistics to Identity and Post-Soviet Studies.

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