

Belarus in Contemporary History: Saving an Identity Symposium

Participant List & Abstracts

Andriej Moskwin, *Moderator*

Andriej Moskwin is Prof. UW (dr hab.) at the Department of Belarusian Studies, Head of the Laboratory of Theatre and Drama Studies in Central and Eastern Europe (UW, from 2016), and editor-in-chief of the magazine *Theatre Studies of Central and Eastern Europe*. He graduated from Moscow State University in 1986, obtained his Ph.D. in 1998 and habilitation in 2014 (University of Warsaw). He worked at the universities of Krasnoyarsk, Plzen, Bergamo, Petersburg and Belgrade. He was awarded the Bronze medal of the University of Warsaw for research and teaching in 2014 as well as the Zory Kipel prize for the best book of the year in 2016 for his book *Belarusian theatre 1920-30: deleted memory*, Minsk 2016. Nomination “Humanities”. (Congress of Belarus researchers) in 2017.

Among his publications are:

- ◆ *Stanisław Przybyszewski in Russian culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries*, Warsaw: UW, 2007;
- ◆ *Contemporary Russian Theatre*, Warsaw: UW, 2011;
- ◆ *Belarusian Theatre: 1920–1930. Rebirth and destruction*, Warsaw: UW, 2013;
- ◆ *Belarusian émigré periodicals*, Warsaw: UW, 2018;
- ◆ *The roots of disobedience in Belarusian literature*, Białystok 2019.

Henadz Korshunou, *Session 1, 10:30–11:15*

Henadz Korshunou is a Belarusian sociologist. He is the Program Director of the educational initiative *Belarusian Academy*, an expert of the Center for New Ideas and is a researcher at the European Humanities University, Lithuania. From 2018–2020 he was Director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus and from 2016–2018 Head of the Department and Scientific Secretary of the Center for Systems Analysis and Strategic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. Before, he worked at the Department of Sociology of Belarusian State University (2012–2015), the Institute of Economics (2009–2012) and the Institute of Sociology (2001–2009) of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. In 2009 he published his book *Место и роль социальной мифологии в структуре массового сознания* [*The place and role of social mythology in the structure of mass consciousness*], Minsk:Belaruskaya Nauka.

Prospects for a Horizontal Society

In 2020, as a result of the pandemic crisis and explosive (post) electoral solidarization-self-organization, a qualitative change began in Belarusian society. Based on the widespread use of digital technologies, decentralized initiative communities began to emerge and actively function, organized according to a variety of criteria and principles: territorial, corporate, professional, socio-demographic, etc. In the context of the existing “law default” and the approaching collapse of the public administration system, these communities have performed and are performing communicative, informational, organizational, (partly) economic and (partly) political functions.

Taken together, they are a proto-system of new – horizontal – civil society institutions with their own mechanics of local government, structure of trade unions, functioning of the media, tax collection, and so on. Their main problem today (after the violent opposition to them on the part of the Belarusian authorities) is the fragmentation, lack of formation or rupture of ties between communities of different types, between the institutions of the future civil society. Provided there is at least an information and communication unification (even – and precisely – without organizational unification, in order to avoid premature politicization and internal struggle for power) and the inclusion of people on the territory of Belarus in these networks, a decentralized and interconnected horizontal ecosystem of social institutions emerges.

Pavel Barkouski, *Session 2, 11:30–12:15*

Pavel Barkouski is a philosopher, social analyst, and translator. Former lecturer at the Belarusian State University (2006-2020), dismissed for his political views (2020). Organizer of the international intellectual book festival [Pradmova](#). Coordinator of the independent Belarusian philosophical community, [Prastora](#), spokesperson of the public company *Reforming the Education System Together*.

Awakening of Belarus. Seeking to Found Democracy and a New Civil Society: The Christian Pathos of the Belarusian Revolution

The whole world was surprised by the scale of social upheavals that swept Belarus in 2020. Having been in a state of preserved autocracy for many years, Belarus did not look like a region of spontaneous democratic impulse. However, while most of the world was battling the pandemic, Belarusians came out to fight for their freedom. What was behind their willingness to demand changes after years of dictatorship? Why was a mass social movement possible?

Belarusians are in favor of democratic choice, but at the same time they do not strive to join the European Union. What does the search for new foundations for a democratic agenda look like in the context of the crisis of the neoliberal democratic model prevalent in the West? Is a partial return to the

ancient ideals of people's democracy and direct participation of citizens in the life of the country possible? How should civil society change and what new (horizontal) connections and structures may be required for this change? This should take place not instead of, but together with the traditional model of NGOs: the experience of Belarusian courtyard communities and socio-political crowdfunding. This involves a peaceful revolution and an attempt to transform society in a non-violent way. What does the new embodiment of Christian values and the moral and ethical background of social tension have to do with it? Fighting a dictatorship is a moral choice for a citizen and a rejection of the postmodern grey zone of political understanding. It is also necessary to consider new (para)fascism with a Belarusian face and natural ways of confronting evil. Could changes happen peacefully?

Anton Saifullayeu, *Session 3, 12:15–13:00*

Anton Saifullayeu is Assistant Professor at the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw. In 2010, he graduated from the History Department of the Belarusian State University; completed his M.A. in culture studies at the Oriental Department of the University of Warsaw in 2012, and obtained his Ph.D. in the humanities in the field of history from the University of Warsaw in 2019. His areas of interest include postcolonial theory, cultural anthropology of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, theory of historiography, and Belarusian history of ideas. His academic works available at <https://uw.academia.edu/antosaif>. In 2020 he published his book *Postkolonialne historiografie. Casus jednego średniowiecza [Postcolonial Historiographies. The Case of the One Middle Ages]*, Warsaw: IHN PAN.

Trying to Deconstruct the Past. Using the Historical Narrative in the Context of the Belarusian Protest of 2020

The protests in Belarus in 2020 have to a large extent changed the perception of the problems of Belarusian identity in Belarus as well as abroad. In the expert and academic community, developments in the autumn-winter of 2020 actualized theoretical approaches which are very niche for the Belarusian academic context. This process on the one hand, showed the terminological closeness of the discourse about Belarusian identity, on the other hand, significantly widened its critical possibilities. Directly influenced by modern media technologies and how they help answer the question of what Belarusian society is now in this crisis. In turn, media language has become one of the means of attaining (ideological/ideological) consolidation of public awareness. One of the components, whether the language of protest or counter-protest, is the historical narrative, which has been used by both sides of the conflict as a tool to impact public opinion.

In the presentation an attempt will be made to analyze how the historical narrative is exploited in the protest movement and the manipulation of the past by the authorities in their counter-protest discourse.

The theoretical basis of the report will be postcolonial theory. It will allow us to analyze not only the language used, but also the political, cultural, and social context in which the narrative of the past resides. Consideration of Belarusian society within the framework of postcolonial criticism allows us to understand the manipulative properties of the language of elites and its instrumentalization within the boundaries of the counter-discourse to the language of elites. This allows us to analyze the contextual purpose and properties of the language used in civil protest. For example, some quotes presented in the paper, showing the associative functions of language with the help of historiographic narrative (Lukashenko=agrofürer, OMON=Gestapo, etc.) become explainable only when we understand the mechanisms of colonial engineering in the space of memory in combination with the behavioral model of post-Soviet elites and the inability to get rid of (post)imperial knowledge as such.

This kind of analysis will allow us to consider society's identity not only in the format of some ideological choice or national paradigm, but also to expand our understanding of how the narrative about the past affects Belarusian identity in the present, how it is used in the media and political context, and what strategies of civil protest can be most effective when using the “language of history”.

Olga Shparaga, Session 4, 14:00-14:45

Olga Shparaga is a Belarusian philosopher and a member of the coordination committee of the opposition where she is in charge of the educational agenda for a future democratic Belarus. After her imprisonment in October 2020, she was forced to leave the country and go into exile. From January 2022 she will be a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. Previously, she was a Research Fellow at the Ruhr-University Bochum and Technical University of Freiburg (Germany), Centre for Theoretical Study (CTS, Prague, Czech Republic), at the Warsaw University of Technology (Poland) and The New School, New York (USA). She is a member of the Editorial Board of [The Ideology and Politics Journal](#) and of the Belarusian journal for contemporary art, pARTisanKa, as well as of the Advisory Board of the [The Interlocutor. Journal of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas](#). Her book *Community-After-Holocaust. Toward an Inclusive Society* (Minsk, ECLAB-books, 2018, in Russian) was awarded best philosophical book 2019 by The International Congress of Belarusian Studies. Another of her monographs is entitled *Wake of Political Life: An Essay on the Philosophy of the Public Sphere* (Vilnius: EHU, 2010, in Russian). In 2020, the German publisher Suhrkamp published her much-discussed book [Die Revolution hat ein weibliches Gesicht](#) [The revolution has a female face].

The Belarusian Revolution is Female: Women as Actors and Symbols of the Revolution

Women have played a significant role in our revolution: in June 2020, women united around the portrait of “Eve,” a painting by Chaim Soutine (1928). Eve became the symbol of the political arrest of Viktor

Babariko, one of the presidential candidates in the 2020 election. A month later, it took three women – Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepalo – only fifteen minutes to form a joint headquarters to help Svetlana Tikhanovskaya win the election. On 12 August, in response to the unprecedented violence unleashed by Lukashenko and his armed henchmen during the first days after the elections, 250 women went to the first women’s chain of solidarity, which showed that women are ready not only to participate in politics on an equal basis with men, but also to expose their bodies to batons. This action launched a largely peaceful wave of public protest and resistance, including the Women’s Marches and different forms of sisterhood, which continues to this day.

Aleksander Raspopov, *Session 5, 14:45–15:30*

Aleksander Raspopov is a slavist, literary scholar, translator, and assistant professor (PhD) at the Institute of Russian and Ukrainian Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University. He is also a member of the Slavic Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The Aesthetic Dimension of the Belarusian Revolution. Areas of Freedom and Enslavement

We are witnessing the birth and perpetuation of a new aesthetic representation of the Belarusian resistance against the official authorities. The experience of 2020 has shown how fragile the ideological foundations of the current state system were. Belarusian society has undermined the basic belief that a European state, such as Belarus, can only rely on a system of violence and propaganda. Belarusians demonstrated the fact that the experiment of Lukashenka and a handful of his supporters in the revival of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, had fallen into ruins. Belarusian representatives of literature, art, theatre and music played an important role in breaking down imposed ideas and limitations, in proclaiming European values, and, as a result, in developing a vision of the new world and establishing its principles and aesthetics.

The book, published following the conference entitled “From the Slutsk uprising to the Belarusian revolution (1920-2020). Discourse of resistance”, which took place on March 9, 2021 at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, contains many references to the problem presented in the title of this paper. As co-editor and one of the authors of this issue publication, I would like to present the thoughts of selected authors and supplement them with my own reflections in this regard. In particular, literary practices will be considered (works of prose, poetry, dramaturgy, essays by such authors as Uladzimir Nyaklyayew, Alhierd Baharevich, Dmitry Strotsev, Andrei Khadanovich, Valzhyna Mort and others). I will also consider work by artists and painters like Olga Yakubouskaya, Rufina Bazlova, Vladimir Tsesler, by musicians like The Free Choir, by actors and directors (Kupalautsy, Belarus Free Theater, Andrei Kureichyk) and others who contributed significantly to the formation of a new aesthetic representation of the Belarusian resistance.