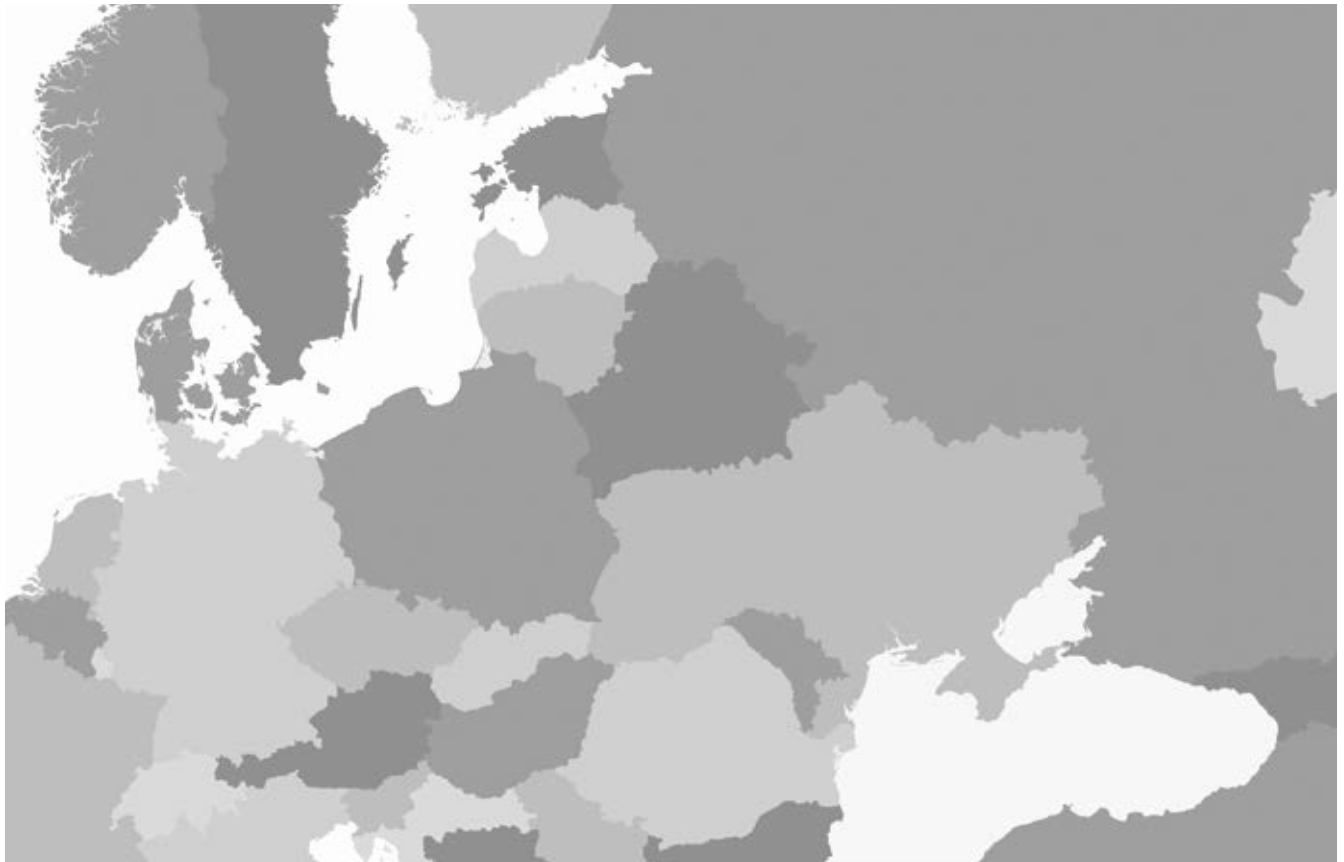


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# **Constructions and Instrumentalization of the Past**

A Comparative Study on Memory Management in the Region

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# The Politics of Memory in Belarus: Narratives and Institutions

by Aliaksei Lastouski

A distinctive feature of the Belarusian case is the exceptional stability of the political situation in post-communist transformations (events August 2020, however, casts doubt on this thesis). Since the relatively short transition period from 1991–1994, the country’s presidential office still belongs to Aliaksandr Lukashenka. This has resulted in an excessive and even exaggerated level of state control over the politics of memory. The main institutions for the production of historical knowledge are subordinate to the state, which appoints loyal rectors and directors who implement the occasional ideological cleansing of ordinary employees.

In 1991, the independent Republic of Belarus inherited the main institutions of science and education from the Soviet Union. The research work was organized through the centralized system of the *Academy of Sciences of the BSSR* (which later became the *National Academy of*

*Sciences of Belarus*) divided into specialized institutes with the Institute of History being responsible for historical knowledge. The Ministry of Education controls secondary and higher education. In the 1990s, private universities (though subject to state licensing) were created as an alternative, and many state universities also achieved a certain degree of autonomy. However, along with the centralization of power driven by Lukashenka, this sphere was also regulated, primarily through the establishment of a procedure for rectors’ appointments by the president, which significantly narrowed the possibilities for the universities’ autonomy.

The introduction of administrative control was largely attributable to a ‘struggle for historical truth.’ In the early 1990s Belarusian historical science was defined by a national narrative that was distinctive to Central and Eastern Europe and which glorified the heroic medieval past (firstly, the period of the Grand

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Museum of the Great Patriotic War, Minsk, Belarus.  
PHOTO: ADAM JONES

Duchy of Lithuania), followed by a long period of national oppression. The national concept of history was largely based on the Soviet Marxist historiographical tradition, only this time, the priority shifted towards the search for Belarusian statehood and ethnicity in history, the creation of a long genealogical line of the national state as a foundation for the formation of national identity. The emphasis on the European character of Belarusian history also meant the ultimate distancing from Russia (which was implicitly given the status of an Asian state). In fact, an anti-colonial revision of the past took place. However, after being elected in 1994, the country's President Aliaksandr Lukashenka (who remains president to this day) set the priorities of historical policy as follows: orientation towards integration with Russia and a positive image of the Soviet past as a tool for mobilizing political support among the masses.

The national narrative highlighted the constant wars with the Russian state, which were associated with barbarism and slavery, while the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was seen as a tolerant state governed by the rule of law, a part

of the European cultural and political space. At the same time, in the state's version of history, the cultural unity of the Russian Orthodox civilization that had been subjected to oppression and the forced Polonization in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, were more important. For the national narrative, the rebirth of national statehood resulted from the activities of national revival representatives who created the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, which ceased to exist after a short period while it was under pressure from the Soviet and Polish states.

The BNR was not recognized by other states but the attempt to create its own state was of great symbolic significance. The Soviet period is initially associated with mass repression against virtually the entire national democratic intelligentsia. The state narrative, however, exclusively views the Soviet period in a positive vein, with the greatest importance attributed to the Great Patriotic War as an exceptional event in which Belarusians suffered heavy losses but demonstrated supreme heroism. In this paradigm, the independent Belarusian state is to be

declared the legal successor of the Soviet period, the heritor of the traditions of social justice and military heroism. The Belarusian people's act of bravery in the Great Patriotic War is becoming the main source of legitimacy for the president as the main keeper of the memory, while his political opponents are consistently associated with collaborators and adherents of Nazism.

**A**s already noted, the most important feature of the entire period of Lukashenka's rule is the establishment of ideological control over the sphere of historical knowledge production. The rewriting of school history textbooks was initially carried out in 1996, followed by the revision of university textbooks. The next wave was 'cleansing' state institutions of politically unreliable teachers and researchers. Historians who dared to publicly criticize the ruling regime were dismissed with a 'ban from the profession,' meaning they would be unable to find employment in public research institutes and universities. Most of them were forced to emigrate or leave the scientific and research field.

'Inconvenient' research topics which – in the opinion of the officials dealing with history – should not be addressed, have also been outlined. These comprise the Stalinist repression and aspects of the Great Patriotic War that do not fit into the heroic and sacrificial pattern (any criticism of the partisan movement is taken extremely painfully). For example, the Higher Attestation Commission did not allow Iryna Kashtalian to defend her dissertation on everyday life in the era of late Stalinism. The regulation of these zones also affects access to the archives. Thus, even though archive files are to be declassified after 75 years according to the law, an important archive like the archive of the State Security Committee (KGB) remains closed to outside researchers. The only way to gain access to the cases of former political prisoners is by being one of their direct descendants. However, for historians, this virtually denies them the opportunity to fully investigate such topics as Stalinist repression. Some scholars have started turning to the archives of other

countries, primarily Ukraine, in which the Soviet service archives are available to researchers.

A set of restrictive and repressive measures have led to the establishment of an ideological division in the historical environment into 'national and court historians,' according to Rainer Lindner's apt definition. In fact, in many respects this division remains, although the situation was not and is not black and white. Despite all the cleansing and disciplinary measures, the creation of historical institutions that were ideologically loyal to Lukashenka was a failure. The authorities are forced to rely on loyal officials, while most of the time, ordinary historians openly support the national narrative.

However, leaving state institutions is a heavy blow for historians since resources in the independent field are extremely limited. External support (through Western funds and scholarship programs) has become one of the major sources of historical knowledge renewal after a long period of control by the Communist Party. In the 1990s, the Soros Foundation and its Polish branch, the Stefan Batory Foundation, ACLS and some other institutions were actively working in Belarus. While authoritarian trends strengthened in the late 1990s, many independent historical institutions (initially journals) began receiving external aid through civil society support in Belarus. The turn of the 2000s represented the peak of external infusions, which made it possible to support the publication of magazines and the arrangement of various conferences. A significant trend that greatly influenced the reformation of the entire field of independent history was the sharp reduction in funds allocated to support civil society in Belarus after 2010. In fact, this resulted in a sharp decline in research and publication activity, during which time independent historical journals either disappeared or drastically reduced their periodicity.

**N**evertheless, there has been an important exception in terms of external support. This refers to the long-term and purposeful humanitarian policy of Poland, which organizes various scholarship programs for young and



Unlike the scholarship programs in other countries, historians have always enjoyed unconditional priority here.

professional historians and other humanities scholars (the program of the Polish Government for young scientists, the Mianowski Fund, etc.). Unlike the scholarship programs in other countries, historians have always enjoyed unconditional priority here. This resulted in a situation in which most of the active Belarusian historians participated in one of the Polish scholarship programs (the virtual absence of a language barrier further facilitates this). This was one of the important factors that promoted a positive change in the Belarusian national narrative towards the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the early 1920s, Poles, along with Russians, were perceived as being the main enemies of Belarusian statehood, and the reaction to the Polonization of local elites from the sixteenth to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was particularly sharp. However, the established contacts with Polish historians and the acquaintance with Polish historiography significantly softened these hostile intonations.

**F**or a certain period, the European Humanities University became one of the main centers for independent historians. During the first period of the university's existence, history was not one of the priorities of this educational institution. However, after the university's closure in Belarus for political reasons and its forced migration to Lithuania in 2005, a department of history was opened. The EHU succeeded in bringing together prominent Belarusian historians who had been dismissed from state institutions, and two important journals were published (the *Belarusian Historical Review* and *Homo Historicus*). However, the university gradually started being torn apart by internal conflicts between staff and administration, as well as problems arising from the recruitment of students to the department of history. As a result, this center of independent historical life is gradually fading away.

The 'Historical Workshop,' a small institution created jointly by Germany and Belarus, remains the only island of relative prosperity in terms of external funding. Its range of topics is limited to the Second World War, with forced labor and the Holocaust being the priori-

ties. The 'Historical Workshop' was actively involved in the creation of the Trastianets Memorial (the location where many Belarusian Jews and Jews interned from Europe were executed) and is focused on various educational projects, again highlighting the prevalence of public history.

Another important attempt to create institutional support for Belarusian historians is the formation of the Center for Belarusian Studies at the University of Warsaw. Most of the Center's employees are also Belarusian historians who were dismissed from state institutions. The Center holds conferences, publishes its own magazine, but has unfortunately dropped out of Belarusian intellectual life.

In general, Belarusian historical science remains extremely isolated from the international academy. This has been influenced by a combination of factors: a deliberately isolationist policy by the institution's administration, a lack of international exchange, as well as poor knowledge of foreign languages (with the exception of Polish). In most cases, Belarusian historians only attend conferences in the neighboring countries and their publications are hardly known outside the region.

Thus, the resources for an independent historical field are extremely limited. When it comes to academic research, it virtually doesn't exist.

At the same time, a transition has taken place towards working with a mass audience. A change in the publishing policy of the *ARCHE* magazine which, at the beginning of the 2000s, was primarily of a political nature, became a certain kind of marker. The reduction in grant support for democratization programs resulted in the magazine being forced to increase its focus on public demands, which virtually transformed it into a history magazine in the second half of the 2000s. The themes of the books published by *ARCHE* also shifted to the field of history, which, according to the editor Valer Bulhakau, was due to the readers' demands. At the same time, the magazine retained a high-quality professional level in its publications.

The creation of the *Our History* magazine, the first issue of which was published in 2018,



evidenced the beginning of a new era. It was a completely new format for Belarus, a monthly magazine published on glossy paper, well-designed and aimed at a wide audience (with a circulation of around 5000). Professional historians like working with the publication and while articles are written in a popular style, the principles of scientificity have been preserved. The magazine remains committed to the national historical narrative with a notable shift to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is of greater interest to the audience. At the same time, the harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric distinctive of the early 1990s has been rejected. The unconditional success of this publication resulted in the *ARCHE* magazine beginning to focus on the same popular format, meaning that another resource for historical publications of an academic nature disappeared.

In the early 2000s, a thesis on two alternative cultural spaces existing in Belarus became popular. Indeed, the sphere of non-governmental organizations had lined up and the independent media had gained popularity. However, in the historical sphere, the initiative to build alternative institutions virtually failed as the few centers and institutions that existed were closed every now and again running a fever from the lack of funding. Informal courses with a historical component (the Belarusian Collegium, the Flying University) also failed to provide a high-quality alternative to traditional universities and faced the same problems of funding shortage and difficulty in transitioning to self-financing. With external grant support gradually diminishing, civil society in Belarus made the painful switch to internal support resources, of which crowdfunding became the basic mechanism. However, this significantly impacted historical knowledge production: an orientation towards mass readership began to dominate, long-term research projects virtually ceased, and public history replaced academic history.

Meanwhile, important changes were also taking place in the state's historical policy. In the early 2000s, Lukashenka switched from unconditional loyalty to Russia to an attempt to

create a Belarusian state ideology committed to sovereignty and internal legitimacy building. This culminated in an important change in the state's historical narrative which by inertia was not noticed by all experts. Prior to this change, the eras of *Kievan Rus* and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were considered through the paradigm of the unity of East Slavic peoples. However, this approach has been replaced by a 'long-term genealogy' that views the past through the consistent formation of Belarusian statehood. Within such a model, the Principality of Polatsk acquires the features of an independent state, emphasizing the predominance of the ethnic Belarusian element in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

It cannot be said that the Belarusian authorities have simply adapted the national narrative of the early 1990s, although the appeal to medieval statehood is its most important element. The fundamental difference is that the national narrative is built around the concept of nation, which drastically increases the significance of such components as a revival of the native language, the cult of national leaders (prominent enlightenment figures), a sharp contrast to and separation from hostile neighbors, in opposition to whom the national identity is built. The official Belarusian historical narrative is based on the statist version in which territory and the continuity of state institutions is of the greatest importance. The question of language then becomes secondary, enlighteners are replaced by public officials (from princes to the leadership of the Belarusian Communist Party), and the desire to erase and retouch the conflicting pages of historical relations with neighbors becomes greatly noticeable.

This narrative shift took place due to the combination of two groups of factors. Firstly, after the 'Crimean spring' of 2014, tensions in Belarus-Russian relations have been growing and the authorities have started paying significantly more attention to the symbolic space and the humanitarian sphere. Thus, the 'ribbon of Saint George' was virtually banned, the 'Immortal Regiment' initiative was marginalized – i.e. the symbolic measures to commemorate the Great

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In general, Belarusian historical science remains extremely isolated from the international academy.



Germany  
Lithuania  
Belarus  
Ukraine  
Czech Rep.  
Poland  
Hungary  
Romania  
Bulgaria  
Turkey

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centralized  
institutions  
for the imple-  
mentation  
of historical  
policy in  
Belarus.

Patriotic War initiated in Russia are negatively perceived by the Belarusian authorities as a means of soft power to create a common cultural and political space. What was once perceived as appropriate is now becoming suspicious. At the same time, there appears to be a need for a stronger version of national identity compared to the one constructed before, and this requires an integrative historical narrative. The previous version of historical memory based exclusively on the victory in the Great Patriotic War no longer meets the new requirements since it anchors Belarus in the post-Soviet space, in the zone of immediate Russian influence. References to the Early Middle Ages borrowed from the national narrative resemble a fair compromise that would not irritate Russia and at the same time have the potential for building a historical memory that would distinguish Belarusians from their eastern neighbors.

The government's request for an update of the national narrative revealed certain contradictions among existing historical institutions. This time, the conflict was not ideological like it was in the 1990s but lay in the struggle for symbolic capital and resources. A question was raised regarding who should build a new version of Belarusian history, i.e. publicly present it, and influence the main channels of historical knowledge translation, primarily through school and university education. In fact, a struggle regarding who would be responsible for determining the curricula of educational courses and the content of textbooks – the Academy of Sciences' Institute of History or university teachers (primarily from the Belarusian State University) – had been there before. Since universities are directly subordinate to the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for school curricula, it is quite predictable that academic scientists were virtually pushed out of the resource of school and university education.

**T**he interest group for the Institute of History is headed by Aliaksandr Kavalenya. Having served as the Director of the Institute from 2004–2010, he is currently the Academician-Secretary of the humanitarian section at the Academy of Sciences. Back in 2011, under

his auspices, the concept of Belarusian statehood was created. According to the concept, the centuries-old history of statehood leans on two inextricably linked forms: historical and national. Historical forms of statehood refer to the territory of Belarus, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were transformed into a national form of statehood incorporating the national content of the title ethnic group. It is difficult to find any theoretical and methodological meaningfulness in this concept. Of greater importance is the fact that a public appeal was made to create a unitary and integrative concept of the country's history with an emphasis on statehood. And, in line with Hegel's dialectic of spirit, the entire history acquires significance as an evolutionary development with the modern Republic of Belarus at its peak. The first revision of the *History of Belarusian Statehood* was published in 2011–2012 and covered the period from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. In 2018, this project gained a much wider scope and the first volumes of the planned five-volume edition began to appear. The history of Belarusian statehood became millennial, though judging by the content of the first volume, it actually starts in the Stone Age. Essentially, it was a claim to power and control over all the historical resources available to the state which, naturally, sparked a response from the university campus.

This campus also acquired its vibrant leader, Ihar Marzalyuk, a historian from the University of Mahiliou (it is important to highlight that this is Alexander Lukashenka's alma mater). Marzalyuk, who began his career as one of the leaders of the national democratic movement in Mahiliou in the early 1990s, gradually became the main apologist for Lukashenka in the historical environment, which earned him a senatorial seat. He managed to surround himself with associates who gradually took rector positions in the leading Belarusian universities (Belarusian State University, the universities of Hrodna and Mahiliou). It may seem paradoxical, but nothing better than the *History of Belarusian Statehood* (sic!) was proposed as an alternative to the project at the Institute of History. However, in this particular case, the stake was immediately placed on the control over

education. Thus, at the end of 2018, a task force for developing an appropriate university course was created under the Ministry of Education. It has been planned that the new course will be lectured at all universities in the country. At this point, a textbook on the history of Belarusian statehood has only been announced. At the same time, it is difficult to find any conceptual differences between the two projects. Instead, there is a clan struggle for the distribution of resources. After the degradation of state ideology, there was a new request from Lukashenka for a version of history that would revolve around the overarching values of the Belarusian state. And, as in the case of Belarusian ideology, the state demand has triggered a struggle for distribution and control, primarily in the field of education.

**W**hile Belarusian historical science is being isolated from the international academy (as previously mentioned), the trends in historical policy are different. Possibilities of transferring institutions for the regulation of historical knowledge that exist in neighboring countries are regularly discussed in the Belarusian context. The topic of the fight against the falsification of history, which is routinely mentioned in official sources and in the speeches of Lukashenka, was borrowed from the Russian environment. However, it never came to the initiative of creating a commission to combat falsification, as per the Russian example. Naturally, the Institute of Historical Memory, which is well known in Belarus for its Polish and Ukrainian examples, appears to be a convenient model for regulating history in the public space.

In 2018, the aforementioned Igor Marzalyuk also advanced the idea of creating a similar institution in Belarus in order to track the historical policy of neighbors and opponents, as well as to promptly respond to attempts to falsify and distort the history of Belarus. Predictably, the Academy of Sciences' Institute of History opposed this initiative, rightly believing that the creation of such an institution would further weaken its public position and lead to the strengthening of Marzalyuk's camp.

One way or another, there are no centralized

institutions for the implementation of historical policy in Belarus. The main reason for this is not about keeping a balance but is about the extraordinary degree of regulation of the academic (and public) space in Belarus. In such situations, special institutions seem excessive.

## Conclusion

Among the countries in the region, a distinctive feature of Belarus is the enormous degree of state control over the production of historical knowledge. This is achieved through the preservation of Soviet institutional forms (the Institute of History, state universities). This enables the easy production and dissemination of the type of historical knowledge that is tailored to Lukashenka's political interests. Critical voices are being pushed out of the state-controlled field into a space in which resources are extremely limited. An important trend in recent years is the growth of self-organization in Belarusian society, which makes it possible to create new forms of historical knowledge production in which the national narrative is reborn as new commercial and popular forms. ●

Note: This study has been conducted as part of the Research project "Religion in post-Soviet Nation-building: Official Mediations and Grass-roots' Accounts in Belarus" (61/2017), supported by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.