National Identity Building and Historical Consciousness in a Specific Political Context: the Role of Belarusian Political Parties.

The use of historical interpretation as a reference for shaping identity and legitimizing political systems arises in different contexts. Identity building is a specific process which requires specific actors. Political parties play a major role in conceptualizing messages on the identity and history of a community, a group, or a nation.

Soviet ideology and the Single Soviet political party re-wrote (as incarnation of the Soviet political system) the history of Russia and of the 15 Soviet Republics (including Belarus) in order to legitimize the Soviet system. The "politics of memory" deployed by the Soviet government placed the Second World War (known in the former USSR as the Great Patriotic War) at the center of Soviet and Belarusian national consciousness as the key event in the development of the Belarusian nation.

In the USSR, victory in the Second World War became a unifying myth for the Soviet people. The Second World War was presented as a glorious event where all the peoples of the USSR joined forces in the fight against Nazism. Heroism, patriotism, and devotion to Soviet ideals joined forces with the leadership of the Communist Party, which led the Soviet people to victory. This victory was presented as an affirmation of the superiority of the Soviet political system in comparison to the Western model, and was widely used by Soviet propaganda. Neither the Soviet government's responsibility for the war, nor the numerous crimes perpetuated against the army and the civilian population on the eve, during and after the war by the Soviets were revealed.

In the post-Soviet block, the Perestroika period was a crucial moment for the building of states and their national identities. New political parties appeared to challenge the political monopoly of the Communist party of the USSR, claiming the right of the Soviet republics to an independent history and an independent future. Political parties, often called National Fronts, were the promoters of change and appealed to history in order to legitimize the new social and political system. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union the majority of post-Soviet countries have tended to articulate historical consciousness in

opposition to Soviet and Russian interpretations of the past\textsuperscript{3}, seeking for European roots in their histories\textsuperscript{4}. **Bearing in mind the fact that political parties in the post-Soviet world were a new phenomenon, the internal structure and identity of the parties was shaped by new historical discourse and new visions of national identity\textsuperscript{5}.**

Belarusian political parties websites frequently present parties with significant reference to history. It is a double-sided process: parties seek to elaborate a history and a national identity for the country and are themselves shaped by these projects\textsuperscript{6}. The leaders and members of new political parties were often professional historians aware of the importance of the past in shaping the political future, for example the leader of the Belarusian National Front Zianon Pazniak.

In 1988, a group of researchers from the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences headed by the archaeologist Zianon Paz'niak (who later became the leader of the National Front) found bones from the time of the Stalinist terror in Kourapaty, a suburb of Minsk\textsuperscript{7}. Soviet authorities have always attributed these massive reprisals (the number of victims is estimated at 250,000) to actions of Nazi troops during the Second World War. Z. Paz'niak's findings in 1988 contradicted the Soviet version of these massacres. The responsibility for these massacres was attributed to the Soviet government. The historical revelation of the crimes of the Soviet regime contributed to its political collapse\textsuperscript{8}.

Thus the Belarusian National Front defended a new conception of Belarusian history and identity and contributed to significant political changes: the independence of Belarus, the introduction of the Belarusian language as the official state language and new state symbols, and of the history of Belarus as a new subject taught in schools. The first school programs on


\textsuperscript{6}The National Front website http://narodny.org/?page_id=146; The Belarusian social-democratic party website http://bsdpng.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=57&Itemid=108


the history of Belarus were inspired by the National Front program, as was the New Constitution of the independent Belarus, claiming that “the Belarusian people has a long history of many centuries”. The coat of arms and "nationalist" flag dating back to the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, regarded by Belarusian nationalists as the "Golden age" of the Belarusian nation, were introduced after the proclamation of independence in 1991 under the pressure of the National Front.

As far as the Great Patriotic War in concerned, for the nationalist interpretation of history, the Second World War is a minor event, and its analysis is couched in much less glorious, victorious and sacred terms then in the Soviet tradition. The perestroika period saw a revolution in historiography. In the mid-1980s history was at the center of social change. The deconstruction of Soviet dogma led to the search for "new truths." The revision of history resulted in a change in social paradigms: what was sacred became profane and vice-versa. Sacred topics in Soviet historiography were re-interpreted and rewritten. The Second World War was one topic that was subjected to such reinterpretation. The myth of the leading role played by the Communist Party in the victory was debunked, as was the myth of the struggle of the entire people against the Nazis: the entire people did not fight on the side of the Red Army and the partisans. Historians revealed instances of collaborationism and crimes committed by partisans. The traditional Soviet heroic glorification of the Second World War was significantly toned down. The stories of the victims, of whole communities forgotten by Soviet historiography and by Belarusian historiography, such as the Jewish community for example, found their place for the first time in the historiography of the 1990s.

The historiography of the 1990s also highlighted other features of the Second World War in the USSR ignored by Soviet historiography: the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the purges in the ranks of the officers of the Red Army on the eve of the war as well as collaborationism and crimes committed by partisans. Some researchers, such as the Polish historian Yury Touronak and the German historian Bernard K'jary (condemned by the current Belarusian authorities) study collaborationism and present it as a mass movement (the only Belarusian Youth Union created by collaborators and modeled on the Hitler Youth numbered more than 10,000 members), which goes against official historical discourse which completely omits this historical fact. Researchers who are able to publish their alternative views on the Second World War are either based outside Belarus or are protected by diplomatic fora, such as the Minsk History Workshop, sponsored by the German Embassy. It’s important to notice what it is impossible to buy legally the books of these “prohibited” authors in Belarus, they are sold secretly only at the national Front headquarter.
Twenty years after perestroika historical consciousness is still a source of controversy in all fifteen Post-Soviet states, each of which is engaged in its own way in a process of individual and collective interpretation of the past. Under Soviet rule and since the collapse of the Soviet Union interpretations of national history in these countries have consistently been used to legitimize and define new structures forming social, political and identity. According to numerous research projects into historical discourse in all the post-Soviet countries, only Belarus (which is economically strongly dependent on Russia) officially promotes an interpretation of history and national-identity which is Russian-oriented.

The year 1994 witnessed a major shift in the liberalization of Belarusian society. The political forces which came to power in 1994 forged their victory by promising a people in disarray that they would restore the Soviet legacy, fraternal ties with Russia and the welfare state. The new government began to use methods inherited from Soviet leaders. A referendum in May 1995 focused on changing state symbols, union with Russia, and the status of the Russian language as the state language. After the 1995 referendum, these nationalist symbols were again replaced by those of the Soviet era. The majority of the electorate voted for union with Russia and two state languages in Belarus: Russian and Belarusian. The referendum institutionalized a return to the Soviet era. The legalized Sovietization also affected the writing and teaching of history and the official vision of Belarusian national identity. An edict of the President of Belarus Alexander Loukachenko of 16 August 1995 stated: "given the results of the referendum, it is necessary to replace books published between 1992 and 1995 with new textbooks". Concerned to defend the Soviet legacy, history textbooks seen by the president as having a nationalistic content were sentenced to be replaced by books that better met the aspirations of the new political power which took the Soviet heritage as its basis.

Nowadays, new pro-government “marionette” political parties exist in Belarus and actively promote the Soviet legacy, Soviet-Russian historical consciousness and a Soviet identity for Belarus. One such is “The Slavic Union of White Russia” chaired by the former minister of education Alexandre Radkov, known for his loyalty to the Belarusian President.

Present Belarusian politics and historiography and remembrance of the past are divided into two competing interpretations of history, two approaches to producing historical narrative: the

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10 SAHANOVITCH, Henadz, «The war against Belarusian history», Russia, the Independent States and Eastern Europe, Vol. 20, № 1, 2002.
nationalist and the Soviet versions. Each of these projects mobilizes and articulates facts and historical events in order to legitimize a political discourse and a narrative of historical identity.

In current Belarusian political life and historiography a clear imbalance exists between the historical narratives in favor of Soviet doctrinal and dogmatic narrative supporter by the political authorities. A single perfect historical narrative, a unique historical consciousness, a single way of interpreting the past as well as a single political party cannot exist, but this narrative and the political sphere must be plural, open, without dogma and without monopoly, which is not the case in Belarus today.

The red-white-red flag, used by the Nazis during the occupation and reintroduced in 1990 when Belarus became independent by the National Front, was replaced by the Soviet flag in 1995. The main reason for the replacement was the historical fact: the use of the flag by Nazi collaborators during the Second World War. The propagandist film "Hate. Children of lies", representing a very partial and very biased use of Belarusian nationalists symbols, particularly the red-white-red flag, by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War was broadcasted repeatedly on Belarusian television. Nowadays, the red-white-red flag is the flag of the political opposition, of the National Front. The majority of Belarusians have not done any research into complex sociopolitical phenomena, but the image of the white-red-white flag was destroyed, because it remained forever linked to Nazism in the discourse assimilated by Belarusian citizens. The image of the National Front is constantly destroyed by the officials who try to link the party identity to an aggressive nationalism and to the collaborators with the Nazi occupants.11

Soviet historical dogma, and in particular the cornerstone of the Soviet legacy - the glorification of the Second World War - has marginalized other historical interpretations. Alternative political parties defending alternative history and identity discourse are marginalized as well. Thus ideas of Belarusian national identity are once again based exclusively on the negative and destructive reference of war. Remembrance of the past and historical discourse, where it relates to national identity, should have an open, peaceful, pluralistic and discursive basis and should transcend controversial issues like wars and conflicts. Current definitions of Belarusian identity cannot be sustainable and will always be

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weak and susceptible to political manipulation because they are based on destructive historical references.
The nationalist parties, the nationality discourse of historical consciousness and national identity is condemned to obscurity by its lack of opportunities for transmission and legitimization. The only model for political structure, historical consciousness and national identity for Byelorussians is the Soviet model defended and promoted by the authorities. This Soviet model includes not only the unique ideology, the unique historical consciousness, but also the lack of real political life – the absence of political parties’ plurality.