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ANASTASIYA ASTAPOVA

Negotiating Belarusianness: Political folklore betwixt and between

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
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UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
PRESS
1632

Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, Faculty of Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

When talking about Belarus, a European or American may often come up with a joke:

> Two rival businessmen meet in the Warsaw train station.
> "Where are you going?" says the first man.
> "To Minsk," says the second.
> "To Minsk, eh? What a nerve you have! I know you're telling me you're going to Minsk because you want me to think that you're really going to Pinsk. But it so happens that I know you really are going to Minsk. So why are you lying to me?"
>
> (Finder 2010)

Minsk-Pinsk Jewish jokes form a cycle famous outside of Belarus; it is, however, barely known within the country and does not strike a chord with an average Belarusian. While Belarus is often regarded from the outside as a place of origin of many Jews, this idea is not apprehended by Belarus itself, where the Jews and the memory about them were mostly exterminated.

Similar incoherencies take place with many other outsiders' and insiders' perspectives on Belarus. For instance, in spite of its independence, Belarus is often either mixed up with Russia or perceived as a current Russian territory. This is not just the result of people having known the Soviet Union only which suddenly collapsed into a number of unfamiliar states. Belarus, translated into many languages as "White Russia" (*Valgevene* in Estonian, *Weißrussland* in German, *Valko-Venäjä* in Finnish, etc.), is indeed the most Russified country of all the post-Soviet republics. This is reflected in the language use, but also in the political directions of the state and the blurred ethnic identity of its citizens. It is quite exemplary that counting the number of people in Belarusian diasporas abroad is often hardly contingent, as Belarusian immigrants whose ancestors were born and raised in the Belarusian territory claim that they are Russians.

Yet, Andrei Yekadimau specifies that it would be more accurate to speak not about Russification, but about Sovietization – the formation of a specific Soviet culture in Belarus (Yekadimau 2003: 186–187). Today's Belarus is indeed often characterized as neo-Soviet due to the socialist directions of its development. The Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), asked in the 2006 Belarusian national survey: "Do you consider yourself a European or a Soviet?" Two alternatives in the question implied two meanings of Belarusianness – a modern European nation or a White Russian variety, and the percentage proportions give a vernacular answer to it. 36% identified themselves as Europeans, and 52% – as Soviets (Ioffe 2007: 37). Belarus still uses the symbols (flag, coat-of-arms, and hymn) acquired in Soviet times, and the promises of Soviet-like stability become the basis on which the people trust the state. From the outside, this becomes a matter of both admiration – especially by

the nostalgic post-Soviet audiences – and skepticism – of the West-oriented liberal circles. Similarly, the political discourse inside the country seems to be split into pro- and counter- state stances, or, correspondingly, into pro-Soviet and pro-European attitudes based on different national mythologies and points of nostalgia. By nostalgia I mean what Svetlana Boym defines as "a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an 'enchanted world' with clear borders and values" (Boym 2007: 12)[1]. The nostalgic fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future (Boym 2007: 8).

The disputes over these fantasies and the narratives they produce become the focus of this dissertation. As all of the landscapes of identification are constituted by conflicting morals and loyalties (Anttonen 1996: 80), my research task is the in-progress observation of political folklore emerging betwixt and between different positions, as a response to the constant negotiation of Belarusian ethnic and political identities. In fact, these positions go far beyond the choice of points of reference for nostalgia: there are many more dichotomies the material I study can be placed in, while still not fully belonging to any of the extremes. I aim to explore vernacular images and narratives of Belarusianness, the folklore they are projected into, and various forms of conformism, resistance, and self-representation which can never be characterized as belonging to one imagined group only. Also, this research goes far beyond the tension between insiders' and outsiders' perspectives, although it is clear that Belarusian self-understanding and self-representation has little or nothing to do with the outsiders' Minsk-Pinsk jokes and corresponding Jewish associations. I argue that current Belarusian vernacular expressions are highly dependent on their political context and may be compatible with the expressions originating in similar situations. This folklore developing within today's political context must be subject to synchronic analysis otherwise it remains undocumented and gets lost. Which of the issues are the most important for the documentation and analysis is to be decided upon by the carriers of this tradition.

I should disclose that my interpretations in this dissertation may be subject to my own ideological constraints. No matter how formal, folklore study always contains scholars' personal histories, opinions, and messages. Having grown up in a more regular Russian-speaking half-Belarusian family with rather Soviet nostalgias, I learned about the existence of striking alternativeness very late, when starting this study which was planned as a research of Belarusian diaspora in Estonia. Looking for the diaspora representatives, I first found political refugees from Belarus who had been desperate for someone to listen their and their companions' stories of being persecuted in their home country. These stories were a darker side of Belarus I had not known about. With the research, new circles of communication, and personal friendships, I discovered more and more Belarusians whose Belarusianness was strikingly unfamiliar to me. The same

[1] See also different, rather dismissive definitions (Maier 1999: 273; Kammen 1991: 688).

year, I travelled to my first American Folklore Society Annual Meeting and stayed with the active members of the U.S. Belarusian diaspora afterwards. From them, for the first time in my life, I heard Belarusian as a native language of real communication rather than an artificial object of learning in the Belarusian schools (some American Belarusians even argued they did not understand Russian). Their narrative of Belarusianness represented astonishing difference from what I had known before. My narrative of having grown up in Belarus without speaking Belarusian was similarly surprising if not gross for them. Later I visited the Belarusian Uniate Church and Belarusian Library in London. When entering the latter, I well remember being told that only two things are prohibited in the library: smoking and speaking Russian. Further meetings with Belarusian political refugees in Poland and Lithuania were similarly unconventional. These and further encounters, perhaps, influenced my current personal ideology most, although I cannot fully ignore my neo-Soviet past either.

In addition, writing my dissertation in Estonia offered me a different scholarly and political context. These are not only various knowledge resources which were at my hand: doing my PhD in Estonia for four years, I learned that Belarus also could have followed its example of fast nationalization, democratization, and their benefits. That is why, if I have to place myself towards either side of the continuum, I must admit that my own views and opinions, also crystallizing in the process of writing of this dissertation, rather gravitate towards the wish of sovereignty, European integration, and liberalization to Belarus.

I. BELARUSIAN HISTORY AND A RATIONALE OF CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

Throughout its earlier history (IX–XVIII centuries), the territory of current Belarus was a part of Kyivan Rus', the Great Duchy of Lithuania, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Several separate principalities existed on its territory, e.g. Polotsk Kingdom (years 987–1397) and the Duchy of Turau and Pinsk (X–XIV centuries). Dominant languages and religions varied in its territory then, but at the end of the XVIII century, a prolonged era of Russification within the Russian Empire with its culmination in Soviet rule followed. The first questionable independence – the Belarusian People's Republic (1918) which emerged due to the efforts of intellectuals (often of Polish origin) was extremely brief and mostly unacknowledged, giving the place to the Soviet rule. The hopes for a united and sovereign country which emerged with the formation of the Belarusian People's Republic were ultimately lost with the Peace of Riga (1921) which divided the territory of Belarus between the Soviet Union and Poland. This partition set all the efforts the Belarusian intellectuals had undertaken for Belarusian sovereignty back; now divided into two groups, separated by the border, they lost the integrity of strains. As a result, the national idea remained very split and heterogeneous, and the consensus regarding collective memories upon which to base a national identity was no longer possible (Rudling 2015: 31).

While the Belarusian territory under Poland was subject to inconsistent, mostly Polonizing policies, in the 1920s, the Soviets came up with the policy of *korienizaciya* ("indigenization") – promoting nationalism, language, and cultures of the minorities in order to strengthen Soviet power (Hirsch 2005; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1994). However, the assimilation of Soviet citizens into the "national" and Soviet identity simultaneously sent mixed signals (Buhr et al. 2011: 431; 437). As Dmitry Gorenburg argues, for 70 Soviet years "the establishment of ethno-federalism, indigenization, and native language education were paired with efforts to ensure the gradual drawing together of nations for the purpose of their eventual merger". Despite minor shifts toward one or the other of these poles, at no time during the Soviet period was one of these poles completely removed from the ideology (Gorenburg 2006: 278; Laitin 1998: 67). The most abrupt shift happened in the 1930s though, when *korenizaciya* was suddenly replaced with the politics of suppression of Belarusian radical nationalism. Belarusian intellectuals became victims to the purges; some scholars state that the repressions were harsher in BSSR than in many other Soviet republics (Rudling 2015: 297).

Promoting one central Russian language inevitably brought about a decline in the use of competing national languages, which led to an increase in ethnic assimilation of members of non-Russian minorities (Gorenburg 2006: 273–274). Russification became a particular challenge to the survival of the Belarusian language due to its similarity to Russian (both are East Slavic languages

along with Ukrainian) and the consequent frequent representation of Belarusian as an inferior dialect. A frequent reaction a Russian still expresses to a Belarusian (and a Ukrainian) is not taking them seriously, but treating them as a broken Russian. The emergence of a dialect representing the mixture of Russian and Belarusian (*trasianka*) usually spoken by people from the countryside and of low education also did not help the prestige of Belarusian. David D. Laitin presents a startling fact about the nationalities of the Soviet Union: if for the majority "unassimilated bilingualism" remained the widespread and stable language repertoire, in Eastern Ukraine, Belarus, and some industrial Russian cities outside of Russia there was unambiguous trend towards full assimilation into Russian-speaking (Laitin 1998: 44). At the same time, Belarus was transformed from a nameless province of the Russian Empire with a 97% peasant population into an advanced industrial state with universal education (Leshchenko 2004: 337; Mihalishko 1997: 235; Titarenko 1999: 161). Belarus underwent intensive industrialization and urbanization, becoming the window display of the Soviet system, an exemplary republic within the USSR (Eke and Kuzio 2000: 523).

The exemplariness was largely empowered by the means of the Second World War narrative the Soviet ideology had constructed. Belarus was indeed one of the first Soviet republics to receive the blow of World War II: the country was violently destroyed and suffered, perhaps, the most substantial losses out of all the Soviet territories. This national trauma has deeply penetrated the public discourse and self-awareness of Belarusians, and, what is more, was wisely used to support and endorse the Soviet ideology (Kotljarchuk 2013). According to the Soviet historiography, USSR won the War due to the courageous Belarusian partisans, among others. The brand of a Partisans' Republic emphasized the shoulder-to-shoulder struggle of Belarusians with other brotherly Soviet peoples, served to eliminate nationalist feelings, and encouraged post-war renovation. At the same time, this narrative of the Soviet ideology also denied ethnic (Roma and Jewish) genocide and tensions caused by Belarusian collaboration with Nazis during the War. As recent research shows, the collaboration in Belarus was real and more extensive than supposed, with the collaborators having their own aims and agendas, distinct from the Nazi goals – including the sovereignty of Belarus; the collaborationists sought to achieve them with or without German support. The Soviet and later Belarusian ideology has condemned any motivations and reasoning that collaborationists might have had, stressing resistance as the primary indigenous response to German rule (Fritz 2012: 956; Rein 2011) and perpetuating the glorification of the Belarusian partisans (Marples 1999: 566). Per Anders Rudling asserts that the Second World War is the most influential historical event for today's Belarus; it is the foundation of the modern Belarusian identity (Rudling 2010: 91), the central narrative of the national mythology of modern Belarus (Savchenko 2009: 116).

The trauma of the Second World War became especially instrumental as soon as the country became independent from the Soviet Union (1991) and encountered the need to choose political directions of developments and its

leader. At this moment, Belarus found itself at the crossroads of two competing constructs of identity: pro-European and pro-Russian (Gapova 2008). Initially, at least on the official level, the pro-European inclination as an opposite of the Soviet doctrine dominated, ideologically grounded by the former belonging to Europe – the Great Duchy of Lithuania (rather than Russia) and expressing the need to return to the imagined European homeland[2]. The Great Duchy of Lithuania past supported the idea of Belarusian ethnic closeness to Balts (Europeans) rather than Slavs (Russians) and became the most important point of reference for this nationalist discourse. Likewise, the pro-European discourse saw prominent historical moments differently, emphasizing victories over Russia rather than the win in the Second World War.

The political party of the Belarusian Popular Front (further referred to as BPF) managed to implement a large part of the pro-European cultural agenda at the state policy level in the first half of 1990s (Leshchenko 2004: 335). They promoted the nationalist version of history and stimulated the replacement of Russian language with Belarusian. The latter did not go so well. In the post-Soviet 1990s, most of the Belarusians could not speak their own language, and the language itself was not ready to be fully implemented: for instance, it lacked scientific and political terminology (Rudling 2015: 211). The program "bore grave negative effects, such as discrediting the Belarusian language as insufficiently developed, creating social tensions on the grounds of language expertise, and a certain social reluctance to participate in what was seen as an expensive and pointless exercise" (Leshchenko 2004: 335).

Problems also arose when by the proposal of the BPF, the white-red-white colours of the national flag and the coat-of-arms *Pahonia*, emblems of nationalist changes and the imagined return to Europe referring to the era of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, became state symbols of Belarus upon regaining independence in 1991 (see Figure 1 below). Outlawed within the Soviet Union, in 1941, they were allowed by the Nazi occupation administration in Belarus. They even appeared on the arm patches of Belarusian collaborationists in the German Army. The symbols of collaborationists were questionable to use in the country where the trauma of the Second World War had been constantly reiterated and where almost every family had lost a member. The hasty implementation of symbols and language along with other radical nationalist measures ignored the recent Soviet Belarusian history and the ideology people had lived with all their lives. The nationalist claims were "hardly warranted by the level of national consciousness in the country" (Marples 2003: 28). By dismissing the Soviet period as a tragic mistake, the nationalists implicitly suggested that people should dismiss large parts of their own lives (Leshchenko 2004: 336). In March 1991, 83% of the Belarusian voters were in favor of

[2] This same discourse of returning to West as well as European self-image was prevalent in the Post-Soviet Baltics (and, unlike in Belarus, it turned out to be successful) (Kõresaar 2004; Lauristin et al. 1997; Tamm 2008).

retaining the USSR, a higher percentage than in any other Soviet republic outside Central Asia (Blacker and Rice 2001: 226; Rudling 2015: 2). Belarusians did not know other consciousness, and the surgical operation of immediate separation of the Belarusian and Soviet ideology could not be successful (Bekus 2010: 80). Belarus also lacked considerable, active, and rich diaspora to play the influential role in supporting nationalist moods.

Little wonder that when Alexander Lukashenko, opposing radical nationalism and promising to preserve many Soviet Empire values in his "retroproject" (Bugunova 1998: 32), showed up on the political arena, he immediately won the hearts and votes of the Belarusians. Challenging the nationalist inclination of the new Belarus proposed by BPF and its leader, Zianon Pazniak, Lukashenko promised familiar stability. This was a much more important matter to the people who had experienced the uncertainty and economic difficulties of transitional post-Soviet years than the imagined return to Europe.

Having beaten Zianon Pazniak at the 1994 presidential election, Lukashenko offered a terminal choice between the Soviet tenets and the pro-European concept at the Referendum held in 1995. The three main Referendum questions posited were about: (1) the possibility of giving Russian language equal state status with Belarusian, (2) the adoption of new national symbols, and (3) economic integration with Russia. The Referendum became a scene dramatizing the final debate about the attitudes towards the past before choosing the future. The majority voted for the retroproject, once and for all. After two consecutive presidential terms, Alexander Lukashenko changed the constitution through another Referendum. As a result, he has been the president of Belarus since 1994 with the majority of the Belarusian citizens voting for him at each election. Being in power invariably for more than 20 years, Lukashenko became the major symbol of the country and its ideological guarantor.

The telling angle of viewing his policies and the reactions to them is the differences of his name's spelling – Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Alexander Lukashenko (similar variations emerge in the majority of the Belarusian proper names). Both versions are used interchangeably in the foreign press and research papers. This results from bilinguism and consequent dualism of Romanization of the Belarusian proper names in Cyrillic, when either Russian or Belarusian variants are used as a source. Multiple options for transliteration of personal names comply with different documents, and there is no uniformity and ultimate standard. Sometimes, however, the choice in favor of either Russian or Belarusian language as a source can be a political message (Kascian 2015). It is similarly telling that Lukashenko is often accused of speaking the mentioned dialect – *trasianka* – the broken mixture of Russian nor Belarusian. This ambivalent position of Lukashenko has been one of the central messages of my interviewees.

2. REPRESENTING BELARUS: STEREOTYPES, QUESTIONS, AND CHALLENGES

Writing about Belarus, one faces different totalizing myths recurrent either in research or in everyday talks. In this section, I aim to give an account of these concepts, trying to justify the scholars' and vernacular views on them. I should also note that by using certain subtitles (e.g. "Denationalized nation" or "The last dictatorship of Europe") I do not mean to agree or disagree to what is conveyed by these definitions, but simply need to name the main folk and scholarly labels and characteristics given to Belarus. As a reader will notice, many of them are about being betwixt and between – whether a perpetual border or a denationalized nation – they are in the middle of an unresolved position.

2.1. Denationalized nation

Compared to other post-Soviet countries, Belarusian development is atypical since in the 1990s it experienced only a very short nationalist period. Moreover, the tension which arouse, e.g. in Caucasus, Baltic and Central Asian countries between the titular and the Russian-speaking population (which caused many of the latter to emigrate) was easily avoided: the Belarusians were too assimilated. In addition, the Soviet repressions were barely recognized by the state and its citizens. Only several short-living counter-Soviet claims were made. One of the most famous was the case of Kurapaty – a mass grave of victims executed between 1937 and 1941 during the Great Purge near Minsk. However, the case did not get full coverage and resolution – since its investigation was not supported by Alexander Lukashenko. Lukashenko's opponent who had discovered the Kurapaty case, Zianon Pazniak, immigrated to the United States, continuing making anti-Soviet and anti-Russian claims from there. Among other things, he argues that when the Chernobyl catastrophe happened, the radioactive cloud was approaching Russia and Moscow purposefully blew it onto Belarusian territory (Pazniak 2006). Pazniak has his followers, but his Soviet/Russia hatred ethnic project does not influence the majority of the Belarusian citizens. Instead of the nationalist separation accompanied by anti-Soviet narratives – as it happened in other post-Soviet countries – the opposite took place. Belarus turned back to the safe golden age of the Soviet Union, preferring its stability to changes.

Consequently, many scholars argue that Belarus is a "denationalized nation" (Marples 1999a), a "national failure" (Snyder 2007: 41–42), a country of "delayed urbanization" (Ioffe 2007: 49), of "unfinished nation-building" (Ioffe 2007: 37), and even "a state that has a dead wish" (Marples 1996: 125). Lukashenko is mostly criticized for depriving Belarusians of their national identity, failing to recognize any distinctive Belarusian traits (Marples 2003: 29). The thesis of the weak and undeveloped character of the Belarusian nation has occupied a definite place in the work of the Belarusian non-state analysts and

Western researches, deriving from the Belarusian failure of democratization and the emergence of an authoritarian regime (Bekus 2010: 277).

On the other hand, several authors argue that there is the official national project based on the people's awareness of statehood and the primacy of national interests in Belarus (Antanovich 2007; Bekus 2010: 214; Mitrofanova 2006: 226; Zaprudnik 2003: 122). In particular, Natalia Leshchenko insists on the expanded understanding of national identity and shows that Belarus became an arena of intensive nation-building, no matter, that it is Soviet-like. She contends that nation-building should not necessarily uphold the pure ethnic Belarusian version of identity (Leshchenko 2004). Indeed, to an extent, the Belarusian official national project may be defined as an example of civic nationalism. Unlike ethnic nationalism, in this case, the state derives its political legitimacy from the active participation of the citizenry, who recreates the system, representing the "general will". Responses to the question "What kind of individual would you perceive yourself to be if you were asked about it abroad?" posed in a national opinion poll in 2004 show that 44.3% perceive themselves as citizens of Belarus and 43.7% – as Belarusians[3] (IISEPS 2005). Feelings of belonging in Belarus are defined as much by the state, as by the ethnic legacy (Bekus 2010: 146, 272). Even though the Belarusian official national project does not strictly define the Belarusian nation in terms of ethnicity, it is built on the civil ideals appealing to the majority. Still, defining Belarusian nationalism as strictly civil is not possible, since "nationalism resists neat parsing into the types with clearly contrasting empirical and moral profiles" (Brubaker 1999: 69). The occasional appeals Lukashenko makes to Belarusian distinctiveness (e.g. following the Russian aggression in Ukraine and fear of the same aggression in Belarus) prove that the Belarusian case is not so pure.

Yet, the consent with the state which determines Belarusian official nationalism is crucial for understanding many topics tackled in this dissertation. For instance, Potemkinism or window-dressing (Article III) happens to show this consent with the state, at the same time, teaching people to get benefits from it. The consent and non-consent, or, conformism and resistance also become defining for the split of the Belarusian society into those of official and alternative views (see 2.3. Official and alternative Belarusianness).

2.2. Perpetual border

The ambiguities of Belarusian nationalism are further complicated by the position of the country with regards to other states. Multiple divisions of the current Belarusian territory throughout its history lead to a view of Belarus as perpetual border (Savchenko 2009), border of Europe (Zholtowski 1950), intermediate

[3] In addition, 4.1% – as Russians, 1,4% – as the citizens of the USSR, 1.3% – as a representative of the different nationality, 1.8% – something different, 3.4% – not sure.

state (Vakar 1956; Zaprudnik 1993), a country between Poland and Russia (Hamulka 2006), etc. This, of course, does not reveal the geographical position only, but the questions of outer perception and ethnic identity. In Belarus, the markers of ethnic identity which are supposed to unite the people – language, religion – on the opposite, split them and leave no place for the Belarusian own self. For instance, the domineering Eastern Orthodoxy is mostly identified as a Russian faith, while Catholicism is seen as a Polish creed (Bekus 2010: 157) with no space for the Belarusian at all. Similarly, those in the west, closer to Poland, are considered to be more urban and sophisticated then the eastern more Russified rural population. The in-between position in the borderlands results in a "culturally polyvalent" identity, when people relate to more than one nation (Törnquist-Plewa 2005). On the other hand, it adds to negotiations on self-representation – whether it is that of a perpetual province of the empires or the most pivotal area, the center of events happening.

Many write about the Belarusian complex of provinciality and the image of a peasant nation (Rakitsky 2010: 196–205; 216–223) in the shadow of a greater neighbor – mainly, Russia. This is complemented by the major stereotype of Belarusians – that of tolerance, or standing and getting used to anything, colonizers included. This joke about Belarusian tolerance was one of the most recurrent when I was collecting Belarusian political humor:

> The scientists decided to play a prank… Well, not the scientists, someone decided to play a prank on a Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian. In sum, it does not matter, the main thing is that the Belarusian was there; and they put a drawing-pin on the chair. The Russian sat down: oh, there is something pricking me, stood up, and saw a drawing-pin. Then the Ukrainian sat down: oh, there is something pricking me, a drawing pin! And then the Belarusian sat down. He sits one, two, three days, and then he is asked: "Is there anything disturbing you?" – "Well, there is something…" – "Why didn't you say anything then?" – "I thought it is supposed to be like that".
> (female, 27, translated from the interview recorded in Belarusian in 2011, Vitebsk, Belarus)

In contrast to the image of a perpetual colony or border, Belarus is sometimes depicted – especially by its officialdom – as a unique territory uniting Europe and Russia or as a center of Europe. Along with Kremnické Bane (Slovakia), Rakhiv (Ukraine), Tállya (Hungary) and other places in formerly borderland territories, several locations in Belarus are currently vying for the distinction of being the centre of Europe. The Belarusian officialdom also uses the position between Europe and Russia for political self-promotion. For instance, the 2015 negotiations between the representatives of the European Union and Russia about measures to alleviate the ongoing war in the Donbass region of Ukraine were held in Minsk as the capital of a neutral country.

The idea of neutrality and being in between was reiterated with the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Many interviewees of mine emphasized that in expressing his opinion, Lukashenko "tried to sit on both chairs" (*usidet' na dvuh stuljah* –

"sit on the fence") maintaining the relationship with both Russia and the West (and Ukraine too) – without openly criticizing any of the opponents. The Belarusian official reaction was ambiguous: Alexander Lukashenko consistently expressed contradictory opinions about the case. In one talk, he claims that he would defend his country's independence and territory till the end and starts to stress the uniqueness of Belarusians and the ethnic differences with Russians (Tut.by 2014). This may be caused by initial fears in the Belarusian state that some Belarusian territories may be annexed by Russia in the same way as Crimea. Conversely, in other talks, he underlines that Belarus should maintain friendship with brotherly Russia emphasizing the close cultural ties between the two countries (Belaruspartisan 2015).

Similarly, the attitude towards the conflict varies among the Belarusians. I did not make any special opinion polls regarding the situation, but the few interviews and talks of mine showed the following tendency. On the one hand, some Belarusians became more reluctant to face any changes, justifying it with the fact that changes in Ukraine caused many deaths and instabilities. On the other hand, the initial indignation with the West caused by the Russian television broadcast in Belarus soon changed to doubts and frequent condemnations of Russian media and the official Russian position toward Ukraine. Views sometimes changed fundamentally, as the interviewees expressed opinions in the recent interviews that were the opposite of the opinions they had expressed several years before.

2.3. Official and alternative Belarusianness

As pointed out in the historical background portion, the representations of Belarusianness shaped as pro- and anti- Soviet during the 1990s transition. This split still exists dividing the current Belarusian political discourse to what Nelly Bekus calls the official and alternative Belarusianness. These two discourses see the country's future in a completely different way, corresponding to how they see the country's past (Bekus 2010: 86). The two camps rely on their own historiographies and competing foundation myths. These views have strong corresponding bases of what Rainer Lindner calls Belarusian court and national history (Lindner 1999). The court historians continue the development of the accounts of Soviet historiography; they view the Belarusian origin and key events in close relation with Russia. Many of their ideas imprinted in the Soviet encyclopedias continue their existence in current Belarusian books written by them or their disciples. Meanwhile, the national historians come up with alternative Belarusian history underlining the uniqueness and value of the Belarusian nation and language, and, what is most important, its difference from Russia. The Belarusian image of history is divided in two, and historiography continues to exist within an area of conflict between interests of research and politics (Lindner 1999: 645). Table 1 reflects major historical disagreements in two political discourses.

Table 1. The views on the major events in the Belarusian history provided by the official and alternative historiographies

	Soviet and/or current Belarusian official version	**Alternative version**
Origin of Belarusians	Belarusians are East Slavs, along with Ukrainians and Russians	Belarusians are of Baltic origin, Slavicized later
Great Duchy of Lithuania	A state of Lithuanians which colonized Belarusians	An independent state of Belarusians, *the main point of historical reference*
Belarus under Russian Empire	Liberation and unity	Colonization, aggression, intervention
Soviet Union	Nostalgic attitudes	Colonization, aggression, intervention
Belarusian People's Republic	Unacknowledged political formation	The first explicitly Belarusian state
The Second World War	The Great Patriotic War, *the main point of historical reference*	The War in which Germans and Soviets used the Belarusian territory in their own interests
Belarus under Lukashenko	Stability, industrial and agricultural development	Anti-Belarusian formation
Future	Frequent negative vision of European values, integration with former Soviet countries and some Asian and South American countries (Pakistan, India, Venezuela, China, etc.)	Integration with Europe
Symbols	Red and green flag and coat-of-arms with a ribbon, a map of Belarus, wheat ears and a red star are only little different from the flag and national emblem Belarus had in the Soviet Union since 1951. The hammer and sickle were removed, the colours of the ornament pattern on the flag were reversed for the independent Belarus symbols.	White-red-white flag and the coat-of-arms *Pahonia* used in the Great Duchy of Lithuania and uprisings against and conflicts with Russian Empire. Outlawed within the Soviet Union, the symbols of nationalist anti-Soviet resistance. Allowed by the Nazi occupation for collaborationists. State symbols in 1991–1995.

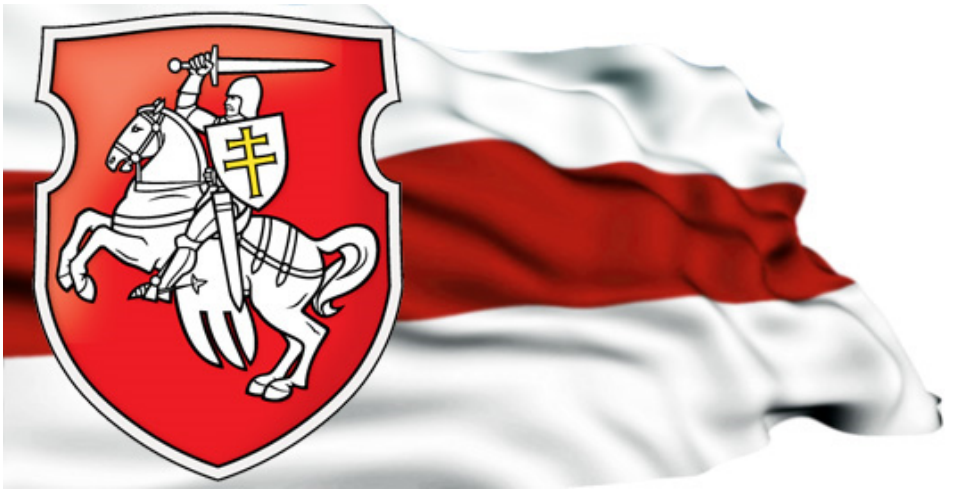

Figure 1. White-red-white tricolor and coat-of-arms *Pahonia*, emblems of nationalist changes and imagined return to Europe (Belaruspartisan 2013)

Figure 2. Current red and green flag and coat-of arms, closely resembling the Soviet emblems (N1.by 2012)

The views on the major events in Belarusian history from Table 1 as well as official and alternative Belarusian symbols also employ an abundant system of rituals – celebrating different holidays. For instance, Belarusian Independence Day falls on July 3, the day of the liberation of Belarus from the Nazis. Similarly, the Second World War victory is extensively celebrated – with both holidays officially reiterating the Second World War trauma in Belarus. These official holidays aim at reinforcing existing social rules and roles. Meanwhile, the Belarusian alternative discourse struggles for different values, and, correspondingly, different commemorations. For instance, they celebrate March, 25, the day of the establishing of the Belarusian People's Republic (1918), holding unsanctioned meetings and actions. The neo-Soviet and the opposition memorial cults are in bitter conflict (Lindner 1999: 643), since officials do not let alternative holidays be widely celebrated. They stigmatize any anauthorized gatherings by not reporting about them in the mass media or punishing those participating in them.

In response to this stigmatization, the alternative discourse, tries to emphasize that their holidays are more important in a number of ways. One of the most well-known examples is the actions held by nameless Miron, whose identity remains concealed and serves as a simulacrum for a national superhero in the non-conformist discourse. Since 1995, oppositional mass media has been reporting about the cases of Miron erecting white-red-white flag – the symbol of the alternative discourse – on the certain holidays, unacknowledged by the official discourse, on hard-to-reach and/or politically-sensitive places (e.g. the KGB building).

As a result of the described division, Nelly Bekus brings a metaphor of the Belarusian society as two movie theatres divided by a wall, broadcasting two different movies about the Belarusian life. Each projection is self-sufficient and complete enough to provide a full picture of the world (Bekus 2010: 176). Similarly, Maksim Zhbankov stresses the presence of this dual reality in Belarus, "cluttering the environment" with multiple competing myths longing for different epochs (Zhbankov 2008: 147).

The official discourse has the strong support of the official historiography, school and university textbooks, the press, television and radio programs. The employees of government organizations are often forced to subscribe to state newspapers. These sourses of official discourse imposed upon people persist in ruling out any counter-government version. They are as if ignored by the official Belarusianness underlining only those elements which are instrumental for creating the appearance of unanimity and consent (Scott 1990: 55) among the Belarusian population. In such a situation, Belarusian alternativeness becomes what Dorothy Noyes defines as zombie issues the official discourse tries to kill, while they keep coming back to life and attacking. Dealing with these issues is not a buying off, but a refusal to engage with the problematic part of the population (Noyes 2014: 74).

At the same time, as Grigory Ioffe has convincingly shown, access to information is not a supply-side problem in Belarus, but "rather a function of one's interests and willingness to obtain information" (Ioffe 2007: 46). Even though the official sources of information dominate, one can easily buy books with the alternative history, CDs of disfavoured counter-state musicians, or the alternative press. One of the major sources of the alternative discourse are the excile-run websites – the mass media channels supported by the journalists who were persecuted by the Belarusian authorities, forced to leave the country and now publish their websites while based mostly in Poland or Lithuania. Along with these openly oppositional sources, there is also a legal press, published in Belarus, and choosing a compromise between sharp direct criticism and the wish to get published. Both groups contrast the governmental press – the major arena of ideological propaganda.

The research on Belarus, my own interviews, independent opinion polls, and the results of presidential elections show that the official values (presented in the first column of Table 1) disseminated by the governmental press too are supported by the majority of the population. On a larger scale, pro-nationalist intellectuals produce, but fail to disseminate the nationalist discourse (Pershai 2006: 623) or to integrate it with the dominant one. This happens due to many reasons.

First, in spite of availability, the alternative discourse remains less accessible than the official since a Belarusian needs to make a purposeful effort to access it. My own case of not knowing much about the alternative discourse before starting this research may be the first example. Also, once I had an interview with a man in his 20s, who did not have a single idea about the elements of the alternative discourse. Seeing my surprise, he explained his ignorance with the well-known Maslow hierarchy of needs, arguing that unless his basic economic and safety needs are covered, he cannot start thinking about political choices and values. In the situation of Belarusian economic instabilities, one has to think more of the personal well-being than some political issues which, paradoxically, are not seen as defining the economic situation.

Second, the current alternative discourse failed when it had a chance to win in 1990s. Its radical representations were not accepted by the majority of people, and up to now they are often perceived as nationalist ones. For instance, the symbol of the alternative discourse, the white-red-white flag, was rejected by the majority of the population as it had been used by collaborationists cooperating with the Nazis. The white-red-white flag failed when the majority of Belarusians voted for the Soviet red-and-green version. As Alessandro Portelli observes, when the creation of meaning fails, "it is too easy and tempting to go back to the warmth and security of… authorized interpretations" (Portelli 1991: 233).

Third, the warmth of authorized interpretations is warranted by other failures of alternative discourse. The intellectuals, as its main proponents, are often criticized for being cut off from the majority and social realities (Shparaga

2008: 71). They frequently refuse to recognize the radicalism of their own claims and fail to be ideal too. The opposition is often criticized for receiving grants from foreign states and using them on their personal needs. Many complain about the lack of the opposition's consolidation. At every election, multiple opposition groups fail to present a single candidate who could compete with Lukashenko. Instead, multiple actors participate at the election, receiving a couple of per cent of votes each. At the time I was writing this dissertation, Belarus awaited for another election. An alternative candidate, Tatiana Karatkevich, was heavily criticized by the other opposition groups, much more than in the official mass media. Instead of uniting, the dissidents struggle against each other trying to disgrace and muckrake the opponent in various ways, including the spread of belittling rumors. All these factors contribute to the construction of a subculture of defamation, slander, and negativity which does not favor the formation of a united front to successfully oppose the power regime. The alternative discourse is torn up with contradictions and personal ambitions, disappointing those who may follow it. After all, it reaches a parochial audience, affecting mainly the insiders – active members of the opposition.

Finally, the split and the domination of the official discourse are ensured due to the rigidness of the Belarusian political regime.

2.4. The last dictatorship of Europe

"The last dictatorship of Europe", as Belarus had been named by George Bush Jr., became a brand put forward both by alternative and official discourses. The Belarusian dissidents fuel it with constant news in the alternative press about the new atrocities of the regime. They publish articles about how they were unlawfully surveilled and persecuted for the critics of the government or protests. Indeed, the 368th amendment of the criminal code passed in 1998 suggests up to two years of imprisonment or fines for insulting the president; the 367th amendment provides for punishments of up to four years for slander (Criminal Code of Belarus). As I will show in further articles, the rumors about how people were punished for telling a political joke or criticizing the president circulate around the country and I have no possibility to prove or refute them.

Still, in many respects, the idea of dictatorship is often overdramatized. Benjamin Cope and Siarhei Liubimau give an example of Belarusian alternative music winning attention mainly if performed in the rhetoric of repressions and the symbolism of drama (Cope, Liubimau 2008: 105; Liubimau 2007). Another exemplary case is a recent arrest of anarchists who tried to bomb the KGB building in Belarus. Arrested, they were immediately characterized as martyrs and political prisoners by the counter-state mass media.

Interestingly, the brand of the last dictatorship of Europe is supported by the official discourse too. Alexander Lukashenko once emphasized the Belarusian official state values in the polemics with a German politician, an openly homo-

sexual foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle. In response to criticism of the Belarusian human rights record, Alexander Lukashenko said that "it is better to be a dictator than gay" (Spiegel 2012). Moreover, the strict order established in the country, even if it is consequently labeled a dictatorship, becomes a means of positive representation of Belarus targeting mainly the values of the nostalgic Post-Soviet audience. As I will show in Article III, the main spectator of the order performance is certainly Russia, where phrases like "*Bat'ka* (father) keeps the country in order" or "We need *Bat'ka* (father) to establish order (*navesti poriadok*) in Russia" became almost idioms.

When discussing dictatorship, it is important to understand how its success derives from the peculiarities of the Belarusian civic nationalism described in one of the sections above. It cannot be generally argued that any inherent correlation exists between ethnic or civil nationalism and dictatorship or democracy (Myhill 2006: 22). Yet, for Belarus, these civil nationalism and dictatorship obviously correlate and secure each other. The civil consent to support the authoritative figure of Lukashenko becomes the source from which the dictatorship draws its power.

A question also arises about the attitudes toward the dictatorship from within the country. Some interviewees of mine, like the proponent of the Maslow hierarchy of needs idea, not following the alternative or foreign news, would not even guess they live in a dictatorship. But for the most part, positive evaluations of the dictatorship peacefully coexist with the negative ones in one interview. The attitudes are not so straightforward and unequivocal, they may be controversial and changing. Placing oneself in a particular position between positive and negative attitudes, one has to take multiple criteria into account: awareness, family history, safety, comfort, professional development, and political views. In this respect, the theoretical frameworks of vernacular religion and choices between the attitudes towards the monopoly state to be described in the further section become essential for my analysis.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND MAIN CONCEPTS

3.1. Socialist dichotomies

Perhaps, the major question regarding the study of rigid states is whether people resist or enjoy, follow or avoid the directives of the restrictive regimes. Multiple pieces of research are dedicated to the question of whether people were happy in the Soviet Union, with radically different conclusions. As Alexei Yurchak notices, such writings often carry binary metaphors, e.g. oppression – resistance, repression – freedom, the state – the people, official economy – second economy, official culture – counterculture, totalitarian language – counterlanguage, public self – private self, truth – life, reality – dissimilation, morality – corruption and so on (Yurchak 2006: 5). Even though I recognize the negative effects of such black-and-white descriptions, I consider that some of them may be useful to define the extremes of the continuum every individual chooses to position oneself between, rather than two only possible straightforward situations. Also, I prefer to view these dichotomies through the prism of vernacularity, the concept to be discussed in detail in the next part. But first I will concentrate on the theoretical binary metaphors I found useful for the description of the Belarusian continuums. Many of them are applicable to the wider range of subjects, not only socialist realities.

3.1.1. Public and hidden transcript

The dichotomy of public and hidden transcripts was suggested by James C. Scott (1990), a well-known researcher of resistance, anarchism, and farming societies. His monograph *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* on resistance and patron-client relations within agrarian communities in South East Asia (1976) expanded to the research of similar processes in the other parts of the world in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), and, later, to the study of different (not only peasant) subordinate groups in *Domination and the Art of Resistance* (1990). In the latter, James Scott invents the term public transcript "as a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" – a record of what is officially said and done (Scott 1990: 2). The greater the disparity between the dominant and the subordinate is and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more ritualistic and performative the public transcript becomes. The term, however, does not cover the "offstage" matters, which take place beyond direct observation of powerholders. To embrace these matters, James Scott suggests the second term – hidden transcript (Scott 1990: 3–4). Both transcripts are specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors; they do not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices (Scott 1990: 14). If domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a

hidden transcript of corresponding richness (Scott 1990: 27) with the multiplicity of rumors, gossips, folk narratives, gestures, euphemisms, etc. In this respect the concept of James Scott resembles famous Foucault's idea of power as traversing and producing things, inducing pleasure, forming knowledge and producing discourse (Foucault 1980: 119).

The definition of the hidden transcript is very suitable for the data presented in this dissertation; for instance, the window-dressing narratives are excellent examples of the subordinate groups clothing their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination. James Scott, however, dedicates a lot of discussion to the hidden transcript of the slavery as depicted in the works of literature and not always applicable to today's political reality. The new modes of communication and interaction enabled by the Internet and urban settings call us to revise some of his arguments.

First, in contemporary politics, hidden transcript is not always literally hidden. The idea of its hiddenness is, perhaps, not so important as James Scott shows on the slavery examples. While many of the slaves' genres remained clandestine and, as a result, undocumented, the Internet today becomes the large archive for contemporary political folklore. Multiple oppositional news websites and comments to them provide us with political rumors, jokes, folk biographies of the politicians, and other recurrent narratives of what James Scott calls backstage (Scott 1990: xii). However, one should not rely on this huge archive only – as there is still a lot not presented on the Internet. As my research on jokes has shown, it is extremely important to realize the difference between the Internet and real-life communication and understand how different the political jokes circulating in the oral discourse are from the Internet joke-lists: in particular, why certain elements appearing in one domain (whether Internet or real-life communication) do not appear in the other. Another tendency I have observed is the higher aggressiveness of the Internet expressions if compared with real-life hidden transcript. Even the same person I read the Internet comments of and had the interview with expressed oneself differently: aggressively and softer, correspondingly. These new dimensions of the hidden transcript brought by technology should be kept in mind.

Second, two transcripts – public and hidden – are not too easy to distinguish in between and the distinction is, perhaps, not always required. It is easy to follow how official and hidden transcripts merge together in the vernacular biography of Alexander Lukashenko, as it is difficult to tell one from another. Moreover, the official transcript of an opposing source – the articles in the dissident mass media are also neither explicitly public nor hidden, since their authors and editors are rarely mentioned.

Finally, I doubt about the characteristics Scott gives to the cases of explicit resistance when hidden transcript is openly declared and the public rituals are not followed. He states that irreversible process starts in this way, and "bridges are burnt" (Scott 1990: 202–215). Even though he brings real-life examples of such cases, it is not possible to apply their characteristics to every situation of

resistance. Looking at the Belarusian case, one would notice that the alternative Belarusianness has often broken through the public transcript – by the open declarations of insubordination, through the protests against the government. Still, Lukashenko's power apparatus and hegemony based on consent, people's habits and fears of changes, are so strong that it did not have such a categorical ending – no bridges were burnt or irreversible processes started. As Carol J. Greenhouse suggests, the position of Scott might be explained by the time he was writing (1990), shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet control in Eastern Europe – that is why all of the examples are success stories (Greenhouse 2005: 357).

Despite generally positive readings (Little 1993), Scott's work received other criticisms too. He is accused of dualistic fixities – an attempt to reform but at the same time to retain a widespread metaphor of power and resistance (Gal 1995). Still, Scott's book is outstanding in that he focuses on language and ideology. Scott is attempting to understand familiar subject matter: communication, everyday talk, and ritual in contexts of unequal power (Gal 1995: 408). Because, of this, the ideas of Scott's work has become especially applicable for folklore research, allowing for the precise definition of the subaltern transcript – the object of traditional interest for folklore studies.

Regarding folkloristics, Scott also calls attention to what remains offstage. While the public transcript is available even post-factum in archive documents and the press, the hidden transcript requires in-process observation, since otherwise it is often lost and obscured (Scott 1990: 88). Folklore studies offer great potential for this in-progress observation. With a few stipulations, this dissertation can be seen as a synchronic historical account presenting several aspects of the Belarusian hidden transcript. James Scott mentions that "each form of rule will have not only its characteristic stage setting, but also its characteristic dirty linen" (Scott 1990: 12). Belarusian hidden transcript indeed presents unique features corresponding to the rule it originates from.

3.1.2. Exit, voice, and loyalty

In the section about the dictatorship, I have already mentioned the multiplicity of possible attitudes citizens may have towards the rigid regime they live in. These attitudes, also projected into different genres of political folklore, require definitions. Obviously, the concepts of conformism and resistance are not enough to embrace the variety of reactions the society takes. An alternative might be a classification of reactions suggested by the economist Albert Hirschman and equally applied to the behaviors of those who are not compliant with the economic enterprise or state politics. According to Hirschman, they choose one of three options: *exit*, *voice* of dissatisfaction, or *loyalty* to the state (or economic enterprise). To put it simple, in case of repressions the citizens of a country may emigrate (exit), protest (voice), or remain silent (loyal). Exit and voice may also interact or influence each other in unexpected ways. For

instance, the role of voice would increase if the opportunities for exit decline (Hirschman 1970: 34). The exit alternative can therefore tend to atrophy the development of the art of voice (Hirschman 1970: 43). Loyalty then becomes a special attachment to the country's politics, holding exit at bay and activating voice.

One of the problems of this approach is that Hirschman often models voice and exit as mutually exclusive. For instance, when the emigration from German Democratic Republic proliferated in 1989, this led those who wanted to stay to start protesting and demanding change. Excessive exit caused voice with both coexisting and influencing further political development. In his 1993 article, Hirschman had to cast doubt on his earlier statements and acknowledge that exit does not always subvert voice (Hirschman 1993).

The theory of Hirschman became extremely popular, but was mostly applied to economics or urban studies (Dowding et. al 2000; Hirschman 1980). Rare political applications either concentrate on literal emigration (although the possibility of mental emigration is also acknowledged) or contain only hints, for instance, pointing at the possibility to study consequences and future identity for people choosing voice (protest) and exit (emigration) (Dowding et al. 2000: 492). One of the interesting applications of the theory to the former countries of the Soviet Union is that of David D. Laitin, who uses the concepts to classify the behavior of Russians who found themselves in the nation-countries (Estonia, Kazakhstan, etc.) after the collapse of the USSR. They sought to make the concessions with the local country consistent with the attainment of citizenship (loyalty), returned to their putative homelands (exit), or organized politically to seek recognition as an autonomous group within their state. Interestingly, the distribution of these options differs from one post-Soviet country to another (Laitin 1998: 158–198). This application of Hirschman's concept is almost irrelevant for Belarusians: Russians here did not have to choose the reaction to nationalism, since there was almost no nationalism.

To the best of my knowledge, folklorists rarely use the concepts of Hirschman, and if they do – only in passing. For instance, Dorothy Noyes refers to Hirschman in her analysis of today's Catalan festival *Patum*, suggesting that it emerges in the situation typical of small communities "in which it is generally accepted that difference and inequality must be lived with, because both radical social change and individual exit are impractical" (Noyes 2003: 6). Still, the traditions of folklore research propose that such strong classifications are not applicable to the diversity of folklore, even political.

The jokes – a genre of political folklore discussed in the first article of this dissertation – might be the case in point, since their functions are still argued and are seen as different modes of attitude towards the state. In his study of political jokes, Elliott Oring enumerates the following theories of why people tell dangerous political jokes and uncovers possible contradictions (Oring 2004):

1. The null hypothesis: jokes and other forms of humor are just types of aesthetic expression (in other circumstances it might have been achieved through the song, etc.). This hypothesis is contradicted by the fact that the informants themselves argue for distinctiveness of political jokes; also, why would one risk telling a political joke for aesthetic expression if it is possible to express oneself in the safer genres?
2. Political jokes are vehicles of speaking about what would otherwise be unspeakable. What cannot be expressed in the society can be expressed in the allusive techniques of the joke. However, the allusions often carry little protection and remain unsafe, thus undermining the need of a special vehicle (joke).
3. Cathartic, discharge, or safety-valve theory: political jokes give vent to frustration and aggression. This theory is not reliable, since its major element – catharsis – is difficult if not impossible to register.
4. Political jokes as revolutionary acts and political weapons, inflicting damage on a regime. Yet, jokes have never been implicated in revolutionary change.
5. Political jokes are the products of deeply cynical perspective which arise as a response to rigid political norms and limitations; they expose the coexistence of two incongruous spheres – official and parallel. This concept developed for the late socialist jokes, however, does not work for the earlier or later political jokes.
6. Political jokes offer their tellers and listeners a brief respite from the realities of everyday life, a moment when they feel that they, rather than the authorities, are in control. It is a means of which the regime, the leaders, the incompetence, the hardships, the duplicity, the surveillance, and even the terror are domesticated and discounted.

I bring up these multiple and conflicting views to show that the understanding of one political folklore form – joke – cannot be reduced to exit (pretence misrecognition), voice (tiny revolution) or loyalty (means of reconciling oneself with the regime). These disagreements show that such strict divisions are not possible. The lack of consensus on just one political genre shows how many difficulties may arise when trying to define other genres' functions exclusively as exit, voice, or loyalty. After enumerating the theories of political joking, Oring states, "we are left with the real possibility that political joke telling contributes nothing at all to survival, adaptation, endurance, or even equanimity in a repressive society. Political joking, in other words, may have no discernible functions at all" (Oring 2004: 229). With the general applicability of Hirschman's theory to my research, I should underline that I do not see the three options as strictly definable and mutually exclusive.

3.1.3. Hegemony, counter-hegemony, and myths

Antonio Gramsci developed the idea of political hegemony as predominance of the state obtained through intellectual and moral leadership – opposed to supremacy obtained by domination (Femia 1981: 24). For Gramsci, hegemony is not a matter of brainwashing or false consciousness; he understands hegemony as political control resulting from consent rather than force. Consent involves passive acceptance of the socio-political order and conscious attachment to certain core elements of the society (Femia 1981: 25–38). The theory of hegemony is applicable for the characteristics of civic nationalism when the state is not based on common ethnic ancestry, but is a political entity deriving legitimacy from the active participation of its citizenry.

No matter how much is criticized by the dissidents and international observers, the "bloody Lukashenko's regime" (a recurrent phrase in the oppositional press) is what Joseph Femia calls an integral and continuous hegemony successfully exercised through the ensemble of institutions, objectified by solid economic roots, and accepted by the majority (Femia 1981: 24). Belarus is a socialist state – and this is consistently implemented on many levels – from free healthcare and education to ideology based on the Soviet tenets. In the Belarusian hegemony, different groups and interests are brought together and forged into an economic bloc by the state providing the institutional framework for the implementation of its hegemonic projects (Joseph 2002: 32).

Belarusian officialdom based on hegemonic consensus, however, is contested by counter-hegemonic alternative practices attempting to disrupt current attachments in order to install another form of hegemony based on a new collective will. The disrupting practices may become weighted strategic acts undertaken by the certain lobby groups struggling for discursive dominance (Mouffe 2008). This dichotomy corresponds to the split between official and alternative Belarusianness, in which the latter strives to replace current hegemony with its own.

Gramsci's idea is complemented with the additional dichotomy of myth and imaginary. According to Ernesto Laclau, myth is an element of counter-hegemony. Only when the myths succeed in incorporating a number of social demands, they are transformed into hegemonic imaginary – the values internalized by the majority of people on a universal terrain (Laclau 1996). From this point of view, while Lukashenko's hegemony is successfully based on an imaginary, the alternative Belarusianness remains a collection of myths operating at the level of the interests of one, oppositionist, group. According to Gramsci, no nation-building idea will be successful if it does not integrate all the classes, remaining sensitive to different tastes and tendencies. For a cultural project to resonate with people, it has to be rooted in the "humus of popular culture" (Gramsci 1985: 102).

The research on myth and imaginaries also received attention in folklore scholarship, although usually they are not opposed in the same way as in Gramscinian scholarship and their understanding differs. For instance, to define

social imaginaries, Roger Abrahams quotes the philosopher Charles Taylor who states that "the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004: 23–24, in Abrahams 2005: 13) – a definition which does not differ from the Gramscian understanding of myth. Myth, meanwhile, is defined as "value-invested belief", imposing "value-orientation or ideologies upon a basic developmental pattern" (Abrahams 2005: 78). Abrahams also writes about festive activities constituting social imaginaries and providing a stage for the constant struggle for hegemony (Abrahams 2005: 129–130).

Folklorists tend to concentrate on the sacred myths, with little emphasis on their possible application to the study of nationhood. Even recognizing the attempts "to brand non-religious ideas, political ideas, economic teaching, etc. as myth", in his seminal work, Lauri Honko sees myth primarily as "a narrative which provides a verbal account of what is known of sacred origins" (Honko 1972: 16). Mainly following this definition, folklorists still acknowledge the political power of myths. For instance, studying cosmological mythology, Anna-Leena Siikala agrees that myths "have an uncanny power of self-definition and are therefore suitable for political uses" (Siikala 2004: 15). Similarly, Lotte Tarkka analyzing folk poetry, shows that "it is in the field of vernacular imagination that mythic elements are charged by means of emotions and current interests… and thus gain an expressive and world-altering power" (Tarkka 2015: 30). This is particularly the case of Finnish folklore studies, which have been also influential in Estonia.

Yet, the approaches to myths I used in this dissertation were mainly drawn from non-folklore sources, which mostly allows for a broader conceptualization of myth. For instance, in his political science research George Schöpflin sees a myth as a way in which collectives (and here he stresses the nations more specifically) establish and determine the foundation of their own being; a set of beliefs, usually put forth as a narrative held by a community about itself (Schöpflin 1997: 19). Like Gramsci and his followers, Schöpflin argues that to be effective in organizing and mobilizing opinion, the myth must resonate (Schöpflin 1997: 25).

This need to resonate as essential for the myth understanding brings me back to the role of different myths' contest, the reasons for them to win or fail, and the meanings produced as a result of this clash. Obviously, the authors of the Belarusian nationalist project remain concerned with their own vision of Belarus, distant from people who were supposed to be impacted by it. So far, Lukashenko has triumphed in turning myths into imaginaries and grasping the humus of the popular culture by proposing concrete stability rather than abstract national distinctiveness. The majority remains apathetic to non-official discourse – the alternative, distant doctrine still associated with unpopular political movements in the early 1990s – the time of change and political tension.

In spite of this, the conflict between hegemony and counter-hegemony may be also seen as productive. As Albert Hirschman points out, the very process of decline and isolation of the country activates certain counterforces (Hirschman 1970: 15) providing a mechanism for new production.

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Despite the predominance of the dichotomies, many other theories tend to combine the extremes into a single metaphor when describing political discourses. For instance, a Polish poet of Lithuanian origin Czesław Miłosz offers the term *Ketman* for the acts of paying lip service to authority and sacrificing the possibility of objecting and protesting for the sake of professional development or personal survival (Miłosz 1953: 54–81). Likewise, Erving Goffman demonstrates that "the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, … from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously" (Goffman 1956: 10). Goffman adds that the extremes between being taken in by one's own act or being cynical about it "are something a little more than just the ends of the continuum. Each provides the individual with a position which has its own particular securities and defenses" (Goffman 1956: 11). In a similar vein, questioning the dichotomist approaches, Alexei Yurchak suggests his view on late socialism in which ideological representations become increasingly normalized, ubiquitous, and predictable. To his view, in such a situation reproducing the system and participating in its continuous internal displacement become mutually constitutive processes (Yurchak 2006: 283). These processes can, to my mind, be best viewed through the prism of vernacular religion, outgrowing the dichotomies.

3.2. Vernacularity

In the 1970s, U.S. scholars rediscovered the term "vernacular" and started to replace the "folk" with it. The vernacular was "the everyday order of culture, developed in person-to-person interaction without the mediation of institutional codes or controls", a term contrastive to "standard" (Noyes 2012: 18). Recurrent in folklore research, "vernacular" received one of the most influential definition from Richard Bauman, encapsulating the "prevailing theory" of folklore as "the philology of the vernacular", using the term as the least ideologically encumbered[4] (Bauman 2008: 32). Bauman opposes "vernacular" to "cosmopolitan": while the former "pulls toward the informal, immediate, locally grounded", the latter "pulls toward the rationalized, standardized, mediated" (Bauman 2008:

[4] Roger Abrahams, however, argues that "vernacular" carries its own problems, for like "vulgar", "popular", and "common", the word carries class connotations (Abrahams 2005: 12).

33). This performance-oriented approach, however, had been established by Bauman and American folklorists long before this publication, giving special attention to the context of performance and individuality of the performer.

Still, the understanding of vernacular varies. While some use the term as an absolute synonym of the "folk", others argue for the substantial differences[5]. Among the recent influential definitions of "vernacular", however, I should single out that of Leonard Primiano, who used the term for the study of religion and came up with the concept of vernacular religion in response to dichotomies too. Before Primiano, religion had been mostly classified as (1) folk, unofficial, popular, juxtaposed to (2) official religion. This two-tiered model did not only impose derogatory definitions on the people's beliefs and residualized the religious life of the believers as in the (1) case; it also (2) mistakenly reified the authenticity of religious institutions as the exemplar of human religiosity (Primiano 1995: 38–39). Casting doubts on such a model, Primiano put forward the idea of vernacular religion or religion as it is lived: "as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it" (Primiano 1995: 44). Vernacular religion includes the verbal, material, behavioral expressions of belief at various occasions – not necessarily at the religious processions, but in everyday life.

In addition, Primiano argues against the common concept of official religion, as there is no objective existence of such practice. Neither of the seeming authorities of official religion like the Pope or Dalai Lama lives a religious life in a pure unadulterated form. One may follow conventional books, but there is always a question of what is conventional. Moreover, there is always some "passive accommodation, some intriguing survival, some active creation, some dissenting impulse" that make the experience of an individual unique (Primiano 1995: 46). Thus, the belief takes as many forms as there are individual believers. It is to be viewed within a context which influences the individuals and is influenced by them.

What makes the idea of vernacular religion conceptually valuable for my dissertation is that it is useful not only for the analysis of religion per se. Leonard Primiano, who, to my knowledge, did not apply the concept to political beliefs, yet, recognized the necessity to study its relationship to forms of power, in particular, the contestation to that power. He stated that "vernacular religiosity has a potential to manifest dimensions of both confirmation and contestation, of legitimization of the hegemonic[6] as well as resistance to such societal and

[5] For instance, as Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens argue, "vernacular" is a more general term than "folklore" in that it can refer to anything that is locally or regionally defined, produced or expressed (Sims and Stephens 2005: 6).

[6] One of the studies of religious responses to hegemony had been conducted before Primiano's publications: Erika Brady analyzed the expressive reactions to the biological hegemony of death within a multiplicity of private contexts and religious systems. She made a conclusion that individuals consider their own reactions to the death of the loved ones very special, and not corresponding to the conventional reactions in their communities (Brady 1987: 30).

cultural manifestations of power" (Primiano 2012: 384). According to Primiano, "religious life is sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic amalgamation of both confrontation and contestation" (Primiano 2012: 385).

In the same way, the political worldview of one person may amalgamate pro- and counter- hegemonic views. As the vernacular religion of an individual may embrace beliefs institutionalized as pagan and Orthodox, political acceptance and resistance may peacefully coexist mixed together in one person due to different reasons and motivations. As in vernacular religion, pro- and counter-positions do not represent separate and opposite realms, but rather become partners in a symbiotic relationship of vernacular discourse with a multitude of subjective and individual dimensions (Bowman and Valk 2012; Primiano 1995). Every Belarusian I interviewed radiated his or her personal set of beliefs nurtured by different doctrines, still with space for their own interpretations and non-doctrinal attitudes. For instance, when describing the Belarusian official and alternative discourse or hegemonic and counter-hegemonic features, I provided Table 1 with the main ideologies they follow. Obviously, the division may be also supported by the usage of Russian and Belarusian language corresponding to official and alternative discourse. In spite of such a tendency, the split is not so simple and unequivocal as it might seem. Russian in Belarus in many cases is as much a language of Belarusian cultural renewal as Belarusian (Zaprudnik 2003: 117).

Moreover, to borrow Primiano's turn of phrase regarding official religion, the political doctrines – institutionalized or high traditions – are themselves conflicting and not monolithic. As I will show in the majority of articles, neither of the sources of current Belarusian state doctrine may be considered absolutely authoritative and permanent. As a result, the vernacular knowledge has to fill in the lacunae or doubtful places to explain and form one's behavior and attitude. This dissertation is mainly about the materials filling in these lacunae – the political folklore.

3.3. Political folklore

In the *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*, William Westerman suggests the following concepts, among others, to refer to the relationship between political life and folk expression (Westerman 1996):

1. *the folklore of politics,* emerging from the political process and political conflict;
2. *the politics of folklore* as the impact of folklore on people's lives;
3. *the politics of applied folklore policy,* as the political implications of government, corporate, and nongovernmental policies regarding the implementation of folklore and cultural programming;
4. *political interpretations of folklore* by scholars;

5. *folk political organization* – how power relationships among individuals and classes are expressed, negotiated and relate to the larger society;
6. *political belief as folklore* – the study of ideology from a belief-centered perspective.

The terms provided by William Westerman, however, are rarely used in practice. Some may avoid the use of *political* with *folklore* to stay away from unnecessary attention and labeling. I could have chosen not to use such terms, for instance, if I had studied current materials in contemporary Belarus. Another reason might be the blurriness of the boundaries – in particular, what to consider *political*, since this term can be applied too widely. As Alexander Panchenko writes, the borders of *political* in folklore remain fuzzy: different social classes and groups may have specific ideas about what to define as political folklore (Panchenko 2010: 2–3). As a possible solution, in one of the following articles, I use the emic perspective – when the interviewees decide which joke to tell as a political, thus defining political folklore themselves. This also showed that the emic perspective on political jokes appear to be much broader than etic, embracing different kinds of texts and bringing to thicker conclusions. This emic approach poses new possibilities for researchers of political folklore.

Folklorists have studied the explicitly political genres rarely naming them as political folklore though. All sorts of questions about ideological and nationalist uses of the vernacular were raised in different pieces of folklore research, dedicated to the products of vigorous and playful resistance, opposition, and contestation (Carawan and Carawan 1997; Hurston 2008; Stokker 1997, etc.), stories of location and dislocation (Abrahams 2000; Fialkova and Yelenevskaya 2010; Siim 2013, etc.), divided societies (Cashman 2008; Mills 1991; Santino 2001; Seljamaa 2012, etc.), refugees and evacuees (Bohmer and Shuman 2007; Fingerroos 2006; Westerman 1994, etc.), labor movements (Huber 2006; Shuldiner 1999; Still 1975, etc.), rumors emerging in political instabilities (Fialkova 2011; Kalmre 2013; Smith 1995, etc.). The Politics, Folklore, and Social Justice Section of the American Folklore Society promotes the study of the relationship of folklore to politics and issues of social justice. Political folklore is also widely studied by other disciplines – anthropology, sociology, economics, philosophy, history, etc. They rarely use the concept of political folklore too, referring to the phenomenon as to popular culture or unverified information. While folklore studies concentrate on these texts and images as the voice mediators and the main objects of studies, other disciplines rather hold political folklore as a side aspect, complementing the research of the main object.

I will further keep referring to the term *political folklore* using it as a convenient concept embracing folklore which emerges from the political process (also nation-building) – including beliefs, vernacular narratives and images related to political events and processes. In this dissertation I mostly concentrate

on the genres of political rumors and jokes. Meanwhile, many other examples of political folklore could be given. For instance, my research also concern the problem of naming, e.g. the positive and negative nick-naming of Lukashenko and the arguments for and against different spelling of Belarus and the derivations from it. The latter arguments grow around the appeals to change the Belarusian toponyms and ethnonyms so that to make them sound less Russian. In connection to this, the searches for the proof that Belarusians are not Slavs, but Balts – including the linguistic one, may have been presented here. Once, in Minsk, I visited the lecture of Belarusian philosopher and alternative thinker, Todar Kashkurevich, who, on the basis of lexical similarities of Lithuanian and Belarusian languages, argued that Belarusian is a Baltic language. Kashkurevich also searches and finds similarities in Belarusian, Lithuanian and Latvian pagan religions and suggests that *kryvičy* (a proto-Belarusian tribe) was actually Baltic and was Slavicized as a result of Christianization. He and his followers also develop the concept of ethnocosmology – the ancient knowledge of astrology Belarusians had carried and based their ethnophilosophy on and founded the center for Belarusian ethnocosmology *KRYŬJA*. Moreover, Kashkurevich researches and plays Belarusian traditional music and publishes the almanac *Druvis* promoting the aforementioned ideas.

Many more rumors or conspiracy theories regarding the Soviets who were presumably destroying the Belarusian nation could be presented. In line with this, I could have discussed Lukashenko's fraud election narratives along with the rumors accusing him of organizing the 2011 Minsk metro bombing. Lukashenko is undoubtedly one of the major subjects of Belarusian folklore. His health – physical and psychological is a matter of multiple gossips; the protests against him in manifold forms and rumors about their consequences are canvassed; many folk narratives concern the new architectural forms ordered and erected by Lukashenko. These are only a few political topics heatedly discussed in contemporary Belarus – producing different forms of political folklore. Many of them remain truly hidden and offstage, which demands their concomitant study. So far, I am concentrating on those issues on which my interviewees chose to speak recurrently.

3.3.1. Genres of political folklore and intertextuality

Referring to folklore texts mentioned above and below, I choose certain genre tags – jokes, rumors, legends, nationalist narratives, etc. – as an orienting framework for the interpretation. Having collected certain materials, I need to analyze them, taking the previous research on similar items into account. Consequently, I need to label them so that to find other writings with the same labels and depart from them. I identified most of my materials as jokes and rumors, which indeed helped me in the initial approach. The choices of genre tags I made are certainly not occasional. In the case of (political) jokes, these were the informants who determined what suits in this category. Also, in certain

cases I had to avoid the usage of legend and conspiracy theory terms, and elect the term rumor as the term appeared to be less pejorative and more inclusive. Choosing to do so, I was correspondingly taking into account (1) the questions of ideology (possible connotations of the terms) and (2) genre borders.

First, the genre classification systems themselves are ideological (Shuman 1993: 73). Consequently, by stating that, for instance, surveillance stories are conspiracy theories I would undermine their authority and authenticity claims (Shuman 1993: 77). Similarly, when I call certain images of Belarusianness myths throughout this dissertation, one may assume that I doubt their validity. These brief tags thus convey too diverse semantic baggage, which may influence not only my interpretation, but also the perception of this interpretation.

Second, it is a common knowledge that generic classifications never quite work (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 132). The same stories I label as rumors can also easily fall into the categories of contemporary legends based on traditional themes and modern motifs that circulate orally in multiple versions and are told as if they are true or at least plausible (Turner 1993: 5); conspiracy theories alleging that "a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order" (Fenster 1999: 1); or even gossips (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). This case of ambiguity is obviously not unique, as "all genres leak" (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 149). In his seminal critique of the research on minorities, Americo Paredes shows how scholars frequently fail to make the distinction between factual report and joking (or some other type of performance), usually due to the lack of language command (Paredes 1993: 82). The problem, to my mind, goes further, since even interviewing an informant of the same mother tongue, it is often simply not possible to make genre distinctions. It is easy to notice how closely the genres of rumor and jokes are linked together. For example, my research shows how surveillance belief narratives include the warnings about the dangers of joke-telling and circulate side by side with the jokes about surveillance. The rumors, in particular, become instrumental in shaping and negotiating Belarusianness. As Timothy Tangherlini argues,

> it is the indeterminate and fluid nature of [group] ideology that requires group members to tell stories to each other to confirm, define, and shape it… this negotiation of the parameters of cultural ideology can bind members of a community together and affirm the group identity of the tradition participants. Such a negotiation of ideology can also serve to delimit clearly in-group and out-group membership. As such, the telling of legends should be considered a deeply political act… These stories are also deployed to sway others' actions, according to the narrator's own goal (Tangherlini 2007: 7–8).

Also, in talks on political folklore and beliefs I was often asked whether my informants really believe what they tell, and how much they believe if they do. These questions have to remain without answers as much as similar questions about belief in god would. Meanwhile, the truth claims remain one of the cri-

teria for the genre distinction. Generic boundaries are never fixed, the genres are not static, and "our investigations usually tell us more about the edges and crossovers than do about the centers" (Shuman 1993: 71).

These are primarily the crossovers – intertextual connections – I am mostly interested in exploring in this dissertation. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman claim that "genre is quintessentially intertextual" and there is a need of "an alternative view of genre, one that places generic distinctions not within texts, but in the practices used in creating intertextual relations with other bodies of discourse" (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 147, 163). By intertextuality, Briggs and Bauman mean a dialogue among several writings (Kristeva 1980: 65), a relationship between a particular text and a prior discourse (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 147). The links to generic precedents, the strategies used to construct intertextual relations, ideologically motivated choices between intertextual links provide powerful means for national identity constructions.

Table 1 in the current dissertation may serve as an illustration of how the creators of official and alternative discourse bound their texts together with similar appeals (e.g. to World War II trauma or the Great Duchy of Lithuania glorious past). For instance, alternative discourse texts of different forms (and, consequently, genres) are grouped together to become recognizable through the allusions to major texts of alternative ideology – the narrative of the Great Duchy of Lithuania is, thus, linked with the narrative of the lost Belarusian book (see Article V): the discovery of the latter will bring a new page of the Belarusian history, as glorious as the Great Duchy of Lithuania though. Ideologically mediated connections of different groups (Bakhtin 1986: 65) are, consequently, empowered by intertextuality. Enjoying less social power, such groups draw on particular genres in expressing the injustice of the situation or attempting to gain more active roles (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 158). That is how the surveillance rumors appear in alternative mass media, for instance. In between this search for more active roles and its collision with official discourse, the folklore emerges. Further examples show how these interlinked genres are brought to the target audience: a reader might notice recurrent motifs and allusions used to bound the ideas together and make the whole of coherent ideologies out of them.

Paradoxically, the multiplicity of intertextual links and generic precedents results in mixed, blurred, ambiguous, and contradictory generic framings (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 163). This, perhaps, is mostly visible in the biography of Alexander Lukashenko – in which the official and folk elements become mixed together and are impossible to separate from each other. The creation of intertextual relationships through genre simultaneously renders text ordered, unified and bounded, on the one hand, and fragmented, heterogeneous, and open-ended, on the other (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 147). The genres of Belarusian political folklore, again, appear to be in an indefinable position, betwixt and between. They become the flexible products of an ongoing struggle

for meaning-making. Their intertextuality allows the mythic meanings to affect the whole field of expressive genres (Tarkka 2015: 23). The process of intertextuality both reflects and produces power (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 165).

The ideas of Briggs and Bauman largely drawing from Bakhtin make me bring one more Bakhtinian concept essential for understanding the interconnection of genres, intertextuality, and genre-production. The idea of *carnivalesque* as a mode of subverting the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos (Bakhtin 1941) seems to be fully applicable to the Belarusian jokes and – at least partially – to rumors. Creating a "world upside-down", these genres constantly probe and defy ideas and truths, demanding equal dialogic status by resisting the hegemony.

3.3.2. Political folklore and truth

In her research on rumors, Eda Kalmre recounts the following case. Having collected the rumors about the human sausage factory of post-war Tartu, she gave an interview to the Tartu newspaper, referring to these texts as clear horror stories. As a response to this definition, an elderly man called the newspaper's editorial office, claiming that it was not folklore since his father had seen it all (Kalmre 2013: 3). The attitude towards folklore as something which is not true is not just an emic perspective though. In Article IV, I retell an account of a folklorist whose research on rumors was not accepted by a folklore journal, as these rumors were "true", as well as my own experience of being criticized for studying potentially truthful rumors of surveillance at a folklore conference.

There is no folkloristic consent about the study of non-verified rumors, although, there is no written condemnation either. Still, as shown in Article IV, scholars are inclined to research the narratives almost invariably believed to be false (Lindahl 2012: 141; Oring 2008: 159). If they tackle the problem of truth in belief narratives, this is rather narrative truth, believability, and rhetorics the performer employs to make his or her story trusted (Bennett 1988; Kalmre 2013: 22; Oring 2008, etc.). Another important direction of truth study is ostension – when real-life events repeat the events described by a legend and fact mirrors fiction (Degh and Vazsonyi 1995; Degh 2001).

Meanwhile, these are primarily unverifiable narratives which are the focus of this dissertation. With the lack of official commentary on many Belarusian events resulting from the rigorousness of the state, too many questions remain unresolved, causing the emergence of rumors. Due to the absence of official information, rules and accountability, they serve as behavioral guides. More than other folklore genres, they focus on the points of stress in the society, "unsatisfactory resolved by social structure and custom" (Jacobs 1959: 130). With the absence of official comments, justifications, and accounts, rumors serve to clarify the policies of the state and prevent people from potential mistakes. They become self-regulations emerging from the vernacular knowledge. This is best illustrated by the surveillance rumors, which spring from the need for information about

who can be surveilled, why they can be, and what are the possible consequences of it. Another example is the fraud election narratives reporting the voice rigging at the Belarusian presidential elections. It is almost impossible to find out whether this and many other forms of political folklore are true.

As Leonard Primiano has shown applied to vernacular religion, there is no single institutional authority which may provide absolute reliability and truth to follow (Primiano 1995). This is especially applicable to totalitarian and authoritarian societies, as many historical precedents like the opening of communist archives revealed. What were the folk rumors once appeared to be true years after. What was the state truth, appeared to be lie.

Trained as a folklorist, I do not aim to trace whether the political folklore I recorded is true or false. I would rather take an experience-based explanation of this phenomenon. In a way, the folklorists may treat unverified political folklore the way David Hufford suggested treating supernatural beliefs – as rooted in real, somatic experiences and representing logical attempts to understand these experiences (Hufford 1995). Similarly, rumors are based on real life and behavior, being typical reflections of the beliefs, prejudices, values, and stereotypes (Kalmre 2013: 131). For instance, Eda Kalmre convincingly shows how the need for truth and clarity in the dangerous, confusing and complicated post-war milieu of Tartu brought forth rumors about human sausage factory that corresponded to people's perceptions of the situation: they partially appeared because the Soviet authorities did not inform the general public about its decisions (Kalmre 2013: 19–20). Myths, a genre mentioned in this dissertation, are also acknowledged as products of "true experientially" (Doty 2000: 51) or are "considered and experienced as real" (Siikala 2002: 52). As Lauri Honko wrote, "myth can encompass everything from a simple-minded, fictitious, even mendacious impression to an absolutely true and sacred account, the very reality of which far outweighs anything that ordinary everyday life can offer" (Honko 1972: 7).

Instead of the search for the truth, I would rather concentrate on how non-verified narratives point at the urgent problems unresolved in the official discourse, to be settled only through vernacular knowledge. Through the stories filling the vernacular knowledge, individual tradition participants can explore how they would react to various hypothetic and extreme situations, which allows for the negotiations of strategies to deal with the potential threats that any group perceives in their surroundings (Tangherlini 2000). Their rhetorical weight as an expression of something that might well have happened, however, make these stories "a significant component of an individual's political behavior, informing his or her actions as they negotiate daily life in communities and organizations" (Tangherlini 2007: 8).

Finally, the presence of truth in jokes also appears to be an important issue of argument in scholarly discourse, although in a different vein (Dundes 1987; Ellis 2002; Foot and McCreaddie 2006; Popa and Tsakona 2011; Shiffman and Lemish 2011). Taking all the arguments into account, Liisi Laineste explores

the kernel of truth in jokes through the empirical research. She concludes that a successful joke must have an actual point of reference (a kernel of truth), even if a very vague one. However, the content of different jokes is not equally sensitive to the changes in the social reality; the extent of sensitivity is the largest in topical jokes (reacting to immediate events), decreasing in political and, decreasing even more, in ethnic jokes (Laineste 2012). The influence of social reality on jokes is visible in the way they adapt to different contexts (Laineste 2009: 47).

3.3.3. Research on Soviet, Russian and Belarusian political folklore

Many of the folklore items I will analyze here aimed against the current Belarusian state are, consequently, counter-Soviet too. Paradoxically, they often carry close intertextual connections with Soviet folklore – common motifs and even plots that largely rely on the Soviet experience. The Soviet and post-Soviet territories have always been of particular interest for the researchers of political folklore – presenting the unique material which formed within the rough political system or the time of transition. Here I aim to give a very brief overview about general tendencies and interests the scholars had, since every article of the dissertation presents a fuller historiography on its topic. The brevity inevitably forces me to concentrate on those publications which mostly influenced this dissertation.

The researchers of Soviet folklore have mostly focused on the socialist political jokes. However, as shown above, despite the significant tradition of their research, there is still no consent upon many aspects. As Alexander Panchenko noted, Western scholars often imposed their political values on the Soviet jokes' research, understanding them as a means of social protests (Panchenko 2010: 5). Meanwhile, back in the Soviet Union these jokes had to be ignored by the scholarship till the late 1980s. Since then, political jokes are mostly collected from the internet or archives (Arkhipova 2009, 2012; Arkhipova and Melnichenko 2010)[7], and no interviews are conducted to record the texts or the attitudes people might have to them.

Another widely-researched topic is "pseudofolklore" or *Foklore for Stalin* (Miller 1990) – the fairy-tales, epics, and other genres created by performers to glorify the Soviet leaders and system. These fakelore forms characteristic of several countries of the socialist block now continue being produced, for instance, about Vladimir Putin or Sergey Shoygu (the politician and Minister of Defense in Russia) (Lenta.ru 2012). Unlike the Soviet tradition, few of the modern forms are being studied (Kozlova 2015). These cases are, of course, less frequent than in the Soviet preudofolklore; also, the lack of their research is to

[7] The best example which also inspired aforementioned researchers is the collection of Internet-jokes by Estonian folklorist Arvo Krikmann (Krikmann 2004).

be explained with the scarcity of Russian scholarship on the political folklore in general. There are important exceptions though.

Within the last five years the students of political folklore mainly turned to the study of protest movements in post-Soviet territories, in particular, Russia and Ukraine (Arkhipova and Alekseevsky 2014; Britsyna and Golovakha 2005; Erpyleva and Magun 2014; Gromov 2012; Kachkaeva 2013; Lurie 2012; Protest meetings 2012). Among the research groups based in Russia and their studies, I should single out several ones. Even though many of them do not position themselves as folklorists, what they study may be undoubtedly characterized as political folklore.

The Public Sociology Laboratory based in the Center of Independent Sociology Studies concentrates on post-Soviet protest movements. Along with the individual publications, their main collective monograph *The politics of apolitical* (Erpyleva and Magun 2014) is published in the collaboration with the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences of Saint-Petersburg State University. Based on the interviews and other, mostly qualitative methods, the book focuses on the Russian movement "For the honest elections" and different kinds of political involvements the citizens of Russia have. The leading scholars are Maksim Aliukov, Svetlana Erpyleva, Ilja Matveev, Andrej Nevsky, Natalia Saveljeva, Diliara Valeeva, Oleg Zhuravlev.

In contrast to the aforementioned publication, the research of another group – based on the School of Relevant Humanitarian Research (The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration) and Centre for Typological and Semiotic Folklore Studies (Russian State University for the Humanities) – is often based on the quantitative methods. Their observation of 2011–2012 Russian White Revolution protests resulted in the special issue of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* journal (Protest meetings 2012), the collective monograph *We are not mutes* (Arkhipova and Alekseevsky 2014) and the album *The ABC of protests: the folk placard* (Lurie 2012). *The Mythological models and ritual behavior in Soviet and post-Soviet space* book (Arkhipova 2013) became the proceedings of the same name conference and included the studies of political holidays and rituals, the transformation of traditional and mythological beliefs, and the constructions of the images of the authorities in different political circumstances. Currently, the research group issues a monthly bulletin *Monitor of the relevant folklore* on the vernacular responses to current political events, such as jokes, demotivators, commemorations, protests, etc. This publication is predominately based on the Internet data and is mostly prepared by Alexandra Arkhipova, Marina Baiduzh, Anna Kirziuk, Darya Radchenko.

The Research Center for Literary Theory and Interdisciplinary Studies at the Institute of Russian Literature conducted the project "Russian political folklore" which prompted the publication of the collective monograph *Russian political folklore: research and publications* (Panchenko 2013). The book is dedicated to mass perception of the political events of the XIX – XXI century and includes

the articles about political legends, jokes, prison songs, satirical poetry, and political myths. At the moment, the Research Center works on the project "Conspiratorial narratives in Russian culture" (the research team headed by Alexander Panchenko includes Konstantin Bogdanov, Kseniya Egorova, Diana Iljina, Irina Kozlova, Sergei Shtyrkov, Valery Vjugin, etc.).

As the head of the aforementioned Center, Alexander Panchenko, states, many genres of political folklore in Russia still remain almost unnoticed by the scholarship. While the falsified folklore and jokes received more attention, political legends and rumors (with a few exceptions (Chistov 2003)), humorous songs (*chastushkas*), different forms of the Cold War folklore almost never received attention from the folklorists (Panchenko 2010: 4).

Given the particularities of the current Russian regime, the fact that Russian scholars are dealing with such topics so actively, employing a variety of methods, is worth stressing. Despite being so advanced, published, and connected to international scholarship, on the whole, these researchers are still not representative of mainstream. The majority of centers for folklore remain concerned with preserving the past and the tradition, ignoring any political connotations at all.

What is majority in Russia, becomes an absolute majority in Belarus. Despite the existence of several centers for folklore studies, they mostly concentrate on the research of what may be called traditional folklore – the genres they imagine as artifacts to be carefully collected in the Belarusian villages and preserved. Based on the research methods of the Soviet philological school, folklore studies include some modern innovations, for example, the interest in religious folklore, still in the frame of traditional calendar and holidays, the memory of which must be recorded. The approach may be best characterized by the photo of the Laboratory of Belarusian Folklore presented at the website of the main – Belarus State University (Figure 3).

Such laboratories of folklore or ethnography based at several philology and history departments of the Belarusian universities organize folklore fieldwork for the students (mainly, in the villages), publish and analyze songs, folk lyrics, supernatural narratives etc., and hardly any political folklore. I only heard several presentations on ethnic jokes from the students – either based on the publications of the beginning of the XX century or the least politicized. Such a situation results not only from the seeming or actual censorship and limitations in Belarus, but also from little interest toward folklore in general and the lack of scholarly connections and funding which could bring different knowledge.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian political situation is widely studied by non-folklore disciplines, outside of Belarus. One of the major centers for the Belarusian studies is the European Humanities University in Vilnius, with the Institute of Historical Research of Belarus, Center of Gender Studies, Center of Progressive Studies and Education (CASE) etc. – focusing on Belarus. Many other research groups and journals on Belarus are based in Lithuania and Poland

Figure 3. The Laboratory of Belarusian Folklore (the placard reads "The culture and everyday life of our ancestors") (Philology department n.d.)

(e.g. Vytautas Magnus University, Institute of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, Department of Belarusian Studies in the University of Warsaw). Among major centers for the Belarusian Studies I should also single out North American Association and Center for Belarusian Studies (U.S.) and the Belarusian House in London – both based on the large groups of Belarusian diasporas. A few centers for political studies are situated in Belarus too, e.g. *Palitychnaia Sfera* and Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies. The main periodicals on Belarus are *Acta Albaruthenica*, *Arche*, *Belarusian Political Science Review*, *Belarus Digest, Palitychnaia Sfera*, *The Journal of Belarusian Studies,* etc. All these centers and periodicals mainly concentrating on Belarusian politics, however, study almost no political folklore. One more problem which characterizes the current Belarusian studies is the foregoing split into nationalist and court scholarship resulting in completely different approaches to the same problems with almost no agreement and collaboration. Sending my article to one of the aforementioned periodicals once, I got two blind reviews which were ideally representative of the scholars of these two poles. While one was praising Soviet research on the topic and the actions of the Soviet state in the given period, the other simply condemned the same issues.

4. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY OF THIS RESEARCH

The conclusions made in this dissertation largely derive from constant observation of the Belarusian political situation and the comments made to publications to the official and alternative press available on the Internet – the newslore. Russel Frank defines newslore as "folklore that comments on, and is therefore indecipherable without knowledge of current events"; he includes jokes, urban legends, digitally altered photographs, mock news stories into the category of newslore (Frank 2011: 7). But mostly the dissertation relies on the real-life communication and interviews with the Belarusians; more seldom – with the representatives of other countries expressing their ideas about Belarus.

In 2011–2015, I carried out over fifty informal, open-ended interviews on the issues of political and ethnic identity with Belarusians living in Belarus and those who had emigrated from the country. The interviews were held in Vitebsk and Minsk; in smaller percentages as well among the Belarusian diaspora in foreign countries – Russia, the UK, USA, Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and China. I mostly interviewed those who volunteered to be interviewed. For instance, Belarusian friends posted information on social networking sites announcing that there would be a native scholar coming to Belarus, researching political and ethnic identity. Correspondingly, those people who were interested in voicing their opinion on these issues contacted me. As it is obvious, but still slighted, sometimes the informant selects the folklorist rather than the other way round (Paredes 1993: 96). Also, whenever I went to a foreign country, I looked for Belarusians there through acquaintances in Belarus (and Belarusian diasporas) or through simply searching for Belarusians on the Internet in the countries I was visiting (these were mainly very active people I could find through googling, for instance, "Belarusians in China").

Through these methods, I found and interviewed most of respondents; these were mainly males aged between twenty-five to forty-five years who volunteered to be interviewed on politics. It seems to me that they were representative of politically aware and interested part of the Belarusian society and diasporas. Compared to many others who were reluctant to speak about politics, they form rather distinctive sample characterized by the sensitivity, concern, and awareness of political issues as well as the openness to discuss them. At the same time, the interviewees were of different political mindsets, not necessarily oppositional to the current government. As I mentioned, the informants often chose me rather than vice versa, and the fact that the majority of those who were interested in talking about political situation were males shows that political folklore genres in Belarus are highly gendered and often remain out of interest of the female part of the population, or women remain the passive tradition bearers. Due to anonymity promised to the participants, these interviews have only very basic references: I mention where and when the interview was recorded as well as the age and gender of the interviewees.

Before the interviews, I prepared the basic plan of main topics and questions to ask:

1. *Belarusians.* The ethnicity of the interviewees, their view on the Belarusian origins, stereotypes about Belarusians and neighbors, the Belarusian mentality and how it was formed.
2. *The symbols of Belarus.* The Belarusian coat-of-arms, flag, and hymn. Belarusian state and alternative holidays. Miron Vitebsky and other heroes of the flag.
3. *Political belonging.* Attitude towards the current government.
4. *Language.* The interviewee's language of communication, attitude towards Russian and Belarusian. What is the right way of spelling and pronouncing "Belarus" and "Belarusian" in Russian, Belarusian, and English.
5. *Belarus and Russia.* Views on the political relationship between them. Whether any of these countries is more belated or progressive. Where Russian nationality originates from.
6. *History of Belarus.* When Belarusians formed as a nation. The role of the Great Duchy of Lithuania and other political formations. Attitude towards the Soviet Union, Second World War, collaborationists. What we still do not know about our history. Whether there is something in the Belarusian culture which has been irreplaceably lost. Whether there is something we need to know or still do not know. The religion of Belarusians. Chernobyl, Kurapaty, Uladzimir Karatkevich, Euphrosyne of Polotsk, The Belarusian People's Republic.
7. *Alexander Lukashenko.* His biography, origin, family, health, secrets.
8. *Potemkin villages.* Special preparations made before the visits of officials and foreigners.
9. *Protests in Belarus.* The quantity of protesters, kinds of protests, persecution of protesters.
10. *The general election.* Frauds and results.
11. *KGB and surveillance.* The number of people serving in the police, army, KGB. Attitude towards people serving there. The safety of talking on the phone and using the Internet. Whether people are afraid of being surveilled. Whether there were any real cases of being persecuted for political criticism as a result of being surveilled. Surveillance in the Soviet Union and now. The 2011 Minsk bombing.
12. *Jokes.* The safety of political joke-telling and the request to tell a joke.
13. *Future of Belarus.* Different possibilities of the political developments.
14. *America and Europe.* Attitude and thoughts about life in the West.

I did not always follow this plan relentlessly, but let the interviewee speak more on the issues he or she was interested at. That is how, for instance, the topic of window-dressing turned out to be of great importance for many respondents. I mostly recorded the interviews; there were only two cases when my interlocutors

did not agree to record the interview and allowed me only to make notes of what they tell. Sometimes, I also refer to the unrecorded talks I had or overheard, for instance, when it comes to outer image of Belarus. While travelling, I was always interested in learning what people think of Belarus, especially in the first comments and reactions people had when I told where I am from.

I analyzed a variety of materials – from multiple recorded interviews and notes to fewer saved Internet-pages in different ways too. Largely inspired by the aforementioned work of Alexandra Arkhipova, Arvo Krikmann, and Liisi Laineste, I used quantitative methods for the joke research, which was not quite applicable for other texts. I looked for the plot intersections of the Belarusian jokes with non-Belarusian texts, in numbers. For the rest, I used a variety of methods, including elements of the historic-geographic approach (looking for the similar motifs and plots) and performance-oriented approach (paying attention to the context of the talk and the individuality of the informant). Often, I was trying to compare the materials I collected in Belarus with those documented elsewhere, in an attempt to understand why certain elements (do not) emerge in this or that case. My main aim, however, was to give the possibility of voice to my informants, following Kenneth Burke's rhetoric of motives – the position from which every informant expresses his or her perspective and how these positions and perspectives intersect to shape a dialogue (Burke 1941; Abrahams 2005: 26). Similarly, I looked for the intertextual connections of different genres and tried to see folklore forms as partly universal and partly embedded into the particular cultural context (Magdalenic 1999: 31).

As I said before, the articles presented here are only few examples of Belarusian political folklore, the bright ones though. By the time this dissertation gets published, new forms and themes will undoubtedly have appeared in Belarus. This study does not aim to grasp all the plots, but to capture several most significant ones, taking into account that they and the attitude towards them can change considerably within time. I believe, however, that the analysis of the material published here as well as the material itself will remain mostly relevant for quite some time. To my mind, these are the main political concerns and folklore in circulation in Belarus these days. Some articles inevitably repeat certain information – especially that on Belarusian context and history; written for different journals and a book, all of them demanded the description of the country's background and my own methodology.

5. THE ARTICLES IN BRIEF AND THE MAIN IDEAS DESCRIBED THEREIN

5.1. Article I. Why all dictators have moustaches: political jokes in contemporary Belarus

HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research, 2015, 28(1), 71–91.

When it comes to the research of political jokes, the scholars mostly follow two paths. They either conduct the post-factum study of the socialist humor of the XX century or concentrate on contemporary Internet humor and political satire in mass media. Conversely, my article is based on contemporary Belarusian political jokes collected in the oral interviews and the comments the interviewees made to them. The latter revealed the fear of joke-telling in today's Belarus and rumors about persecutions for telling political jokes. These rumors are inherited from the Soviet Union and supported by the current Belarusian dictatorial politics. This situation led me to think that many folklore phenomena particular to the dictatorships might be inherited and widely used by contemporary Belarusian culture. Indeed, the first interview records showed that Belarusian jokes about Lukashenko had been once told about Stalin or other socialist leaders, made current simply by changing the protagonist.

Trying to measure the extent to which we may talk about the continuity of dictatorship jokes in the contemporary Belarusian political joke cycle, I conducted an experiment to compare contemporary Belarusian jokes with the earlier totalitarian ones. I chose three of the few professional collections of Soviet and Romanian socialist jokes for my experiment which constituted a corpus of traditional totalitarian joke. Among them, I selected those which may be productive for nowadays Belarusian situation (e.g. are not based on the pun which can be related to Lenin's and Stalin's names only) and (1) searched for their Belarusian variants on Google; (2) offered them for the recognition in the questionnaire to over 100 Belarusians; (3) compared them to the corpus of Belarusian political jokes I had collected. This comparison revealed that there are only eighteen plots of traditional totalitarian jokes (from the joke collections mentioned) productive in Belarus today – on the average, 4% from every book of socialist jokes.

The fact that there are so few jokes from previous dictatorships being used in contemporary Belarus made me pay attention to their plots in order to understand why these particular jokes became productive. Surprisingly, sixteen out of eighteen jokes are told not only about Stalin, Ceauşescu, and Lukashenko, but also about other heroes. Moreover, these jokes often had non-political version (e.g. were told about doctors or students). This points to a phenomenon much wider than the simple inheritance of jokes from one dictatorship to another:

certain joke plots become productive and easily adaptable for various situations and countries due to their flexibility.

In spite of the general complaints that the political joke is in decay, joke telling is still very popular in Belarus, and goes far beyond Internet-publications. Jokes often emerged on their own in the interviews as comments or amplifications to the interviewee's thoughts. Out of 93 joke texts that I collected, 77 texts represented full narratives, while in 16 cases the respondent mentioned or referred to a joke that I was supposed to recognize due to its popularity. 93 texts constituted 46 plots, the majority of which (35 plots) have versions about non-Belarusian leaders, nationalities, or non-political versions. In other words, the majority of the Belarusian joke repertoire is not purely Belarusian. Moreover, variants of Belarusian political jokes are not necessarily political. The high percentage of such jokes allows me to argue that there are a certain number of universal joke schemes easily mutable according to the situation or country. The easiest way to change the joke is to employ a new protagonist or circumstances in place of the original. However, more complicated cases of adaptation I encountered are also described in the article.

11 jokes which presumably do not have strictly non-Belarusian counterparts are built up on the basis of specific plots that are not easily adaptable. They are either cases of (1) non-translatable wordplay which would not be applicable to jokes about other leaders and nationalities, or (2) real quotations from Lukashenko which seemed amusing to people. Interestingly, the emic perspective includes the latter quotation type in political jokes, while scholarly discourse, to my knowledge, would rarely see the retelling of these quotations recitals as political joke telling.

In spite of the similarity of the Belarusian political jokes and the jokes from other dictatorship, the repertoires differ in general. Unlike the Soviet totalitarian jokes which concentrated on ideology, the Belarusian jokes are mostly authoritarian, as about 70% of them concentrate on Lukashenko's figure. Even ethnic jokes on Belarusians manage to embrace Lukashenko as a main protagonist, and, according to emic classification, become political. That is why naming Belarusian jokes as totalitarian may be not technically correct. It makes sense to distinguish between these targets in political jokes, as they shed light to the nature on the regime. Moreover, the emic perspectives on political jokes appear to be much broader than etic, embracing different kinds of texts. Analyzing the emic perspective and differences in targets of political joking in different regimes is possible through real-life fieldwork which poses new tasks for the researchers of political folklore.

5.2. Article II. Political biography: incoherence, contestation, and the hero pattern elements in the Belarusian case

Journal of Folklore Research, forthcoming.

This article concentrates on two major topics related to Alexander Lukashenko's biography:

1. official and alternative versions of his birth story which, due to intertwining, constitute a broader vernacular picture;
2. the selection of the elements of traditional biographical pattern in Lukashenko's birth story.

The distinction between official and alternative stories does not correspond to the distinction between official and alternative Belarusianness made in the introduction. By "official biography" I mean narratives concerning Lukashenko's life story published by official government-controlled media and authors, while alternative stories are represented by oppositional mass-media and materials collected from the interviews. Yet, when trying to differentiate official biography from alternative stories, I realized that neither of the sources represented by an incoherent mess of official representation, altered narratives, literary productions, and quotes ascribed to the president carries authoritative information and ultimate truth. The only distinction which can be made is that pro-Lukashenko biography writings are consistent at representing him as an industrious peasant's son out of common people.

Meanwhile, the vernacular biography concentrates on completely different elements. Most of the rumors on Lukashenko's life story are related to who his father was, probably because this fact is so blurred in the official biography. Most alternative stories discuss not the father's profession, social class or background, but his ethnicity. First, the most often recorded version considers him a Roma (*tsygan*) and claims that there was a Roma camp passing through the village where Lukashenko's mother lived. The second popular version states that Lukashenko's father was a Jew. The third version, recorded only once, claims that Lukashenko's father was a German occupant who remained in Belarus after World War II (and thus Lukashenko himself is a German). The appearance, further transmission, and transformation of the rumors are caused by habitual labels, in this case – ethnic stereotypes. Their multiplicity is prompted by the lack of official authoritative information and strong domination producing a hidden transcript of corresponding richness. Moreover, in Lukashenko's case the rumors are often aggressive and destructive, aiming at subverting his domination. The mechanisms of rumors are in fact similar to the

mechanisms of folk religion challenging the official truth and questioning the institutional authority of the church.

At the same time, Lukashenko's official and alternative biographies are rather clichéd and unique stories. They follow what has been recognized as a *biographical pattern in traditional narrative* with certain recurrent if not universal elements. Yet, the absence or presence of certain details and traits of biographical patterns provides a significant clue to the particular worldview. In the article, I analyze the elements of biographical pattern which become especially relevant for Lukashenko's biography, trying to show that the same biographical elements may acquire different meanings and functions in different contexts.

First, the hero of illegitimate birth and/or having a single parent – is one of the basic building blocks in the heroes' biographies, nevertheless, resolved in different ways. In Lukashenko's case, the alternative and official discourses provide accordingly negative and positive reflections on this fact – as sinful 'bastardness' or resulting in his attachment to mother. While the positive image projects onto the paternalist image of Lukashenko – the basis of his political success, the negative perspective compares him to the bastard Gypsy Other. Similarly, the exposure move biographical element is wisely used by the court biographers to construct the image of a diligent peasant son "of the common people" (another successful turn in a socialist country), while the alternative discourse picks up different elements of the hero's biography, using his rumored ethnicity to delegitimize him as a president.

The stricter the regime is, the broader the gap between the official biography and its contested versions becomes – the more manifold meanings of the elements of biography pattern appear. Lukashenko's vernacular image owes much to the metaphors attached to it and influencing his reputation.

5.3. Article III. When the president comes: Potemkin order as an alternative to democracy in Belarus

Ethnologia Europaea, forthcoming.

Potemkin villages are "an elaborate, false construct designed to conceal an unpleasant or unwanted situation" (Purs 2012: 49). The term owes its name to the historical myth, according to which General Grigorii Potemkin ordered the construction of mock-up villages along the route of Catherine the Great to impress her. *Potemkinskie derevni* ("Potemkin villages"), *pokazuha, kultpokaz* ("cultural show") later became a common concept to refer to ostentatious rituals concealing the real unflattering state of things. Significant portions of socialist and post-socialist countries can often still be understood in terms of a

Potemkinist or window-dressing mindset. Moreover, as Brian McVeigh argues, "all societies possess – indeed, rest upon (to some degree at least) – simulated institutions" (McVeigh 2002: 15). The difference is probably in the relevance and choice of certain institutions and objects put forward for display.

This article is about narratives describing major types of displays in Belarus, vernacular attitudes and anxieties rising around them. The rumors about Potemkin villages in Belarus, of course, reflect the practice, although it is not clear how often it happens as opposed to being narrated. Most of the stories concentrate on the efforts the common people undertake to present their localities to the president in the best possible ways. In addition, the façades are painted not only for the president, but for the smaller officials and foreigners. Many interviewees underlined that such practices reflected the *marazm* ("asininity") of higher ranks, coming from the top and diffusing around. According to many, potential troubles are the main reason of Potemkin villages being built without any objection.

These are certain events and places in Belarus that have a great potential for current ideology promotion and become especially apt for window-dressing (e.g. showcasing industrial enterprise becomes important during economic crisis). Perhaps the ultimate example of Potemkinism in Belarus is Alexandria village, the settlement where Alexander Lukashenko grew up. The duties of the dwellers of this and nearby villages include grooming perfect façades and undertaking elaborate preparations for each of Lukashenko's visits, "crawling and cleaning everything with their bellies". Rumors about these exemplary villages circulate around the country. The ideal-to-be artificially harmonized and ordered picture falls apart in the rumors about how it was painted.

To my mind, the main basis of Potemkinism in Belarus is the paternalist socialism inherited from the Soviet Union and enthusiastically promoted. Building Potemkin villages, consentient Belarusians maintain the leader's authority and become a part – albeit subordinate – of the power bloc. The fact that everyone participates in the creation of the façade unites people, moreover, everyone is to some extent employed. Satisfying the hegemony's aspirations to ideal by participating in window-dressing, they achieve social guarantees – employment, free healthcare, mother's salaries, etc. – in return. The Belarusian order is produced and preserved through display, reenacting rigorous power relations. Simultaneously, this order is often subject to parody and ridicule that are similar in their mechanisms to euphemisms, disguise, and other rituals of the transcript hidden from the superior.

Negative views, of course, form a large part in window-dressing discourse, and they are especially often employed by the oppositional press to launch its critique of the government. But usually the cases of window-dressing have more than one dimension, and positive evaluations of window-dressing peacefully coexist with the negative ones even in the same interview. People learn not only to survive, but to benefit from such a system. Moreover, Potemkinism is a good tool for foreign propaganda, targeting mostly the values of nostalgic Post-Soviet

audience – the main partners in economic and political cooperation. Many of them highly value Lukashenko as *Bat'ka* (father) who keeps the country in *poriadok* (order).

This state of things in Belarus seems to constitute a viable social model, contrasting Western-style democracies. It is not the freedom or liberal values which counts as order in the Belarusian case, but power: the ability of the leader to provide peace, prosperity, and stability. People learn to adapt and benefit from the situation they find themselves in, to compromise for the sake of socialist advantages they are given back and familiar with. Appearance of peace and stability becomes more important than actual peace and stability: the Belarusian brand of an ordered and reliable country works when it is needed to be sold to both inner and outer audience.

5.4. Article IV. In search for truth: surveillance rumors and vernacular panopticon in Belarus

Journal of American Folklore, forthcoming.

In this article, I analyze rumors about surveillance – the issue which engendered the creation of autonomous surveillance studies discipline. The discipline is mostly based on the Foucauldian theoretical notion of the *panopticon* – a metaphor of the prison where a single watchman can observe all inmates, used by Foucault to define modern hierarchical institutions. The democracies, mainly of Anglo-Saxon origin, became the focus of the surveillance studies research as much more accessible at the beginning of the discipline development. Meanwhile, the sources for the research in non-democratic societies are almost exclusively based on rumors folkloristics might have a well-developed apparatus to study. I suggest analyzing the narratives about surveillance as (unverified) rumors because this term appears to be the most inclusive and the least pejorative in comparison to legends and conspiracy theories, and it allows me to embrace not only the basic beliefs, but also concrete stories with it. Finally, looking at the surveillance discourse in the frame of rumors empowers the folklorists to compare their motifs, functions, and impact, depending on the circumstances and concerns surrounding them in a particular society.

It is not merely the level of democratization that seems to define rumors about surveillance; they differ depending on national traumas and state politics. Tracing the history of surveillance in Belarus, I discovered that panopticon structure which later inspired Foucault had actually been designed for an inspection house in the current Belarusian territory by the architect Samuel Bentham in the XVIII century. Many surveillance techniques were implemented then and later too by *politicheskii sysk* ("political detective work") through spying on citizens and foreigners and the encouragement of denunciations in the

Russian Empire. In spite of its criticism of Tsarism, the Soviet Empire not only adopted its methods, but also elevated the security services to being highly professional and hierarchical. The state was omnipresent in private life, not only through direct surveillance and the notorious 58.10 "anti-Soviet agitation" article though. The feeling of the panopticon was amplified by the limitless domination of the state in the bureaucracy, distribution of goods, and employment. These experiences undoubtedly became one of the determinants of attitudes and rumors of surveillance in contemporary Belarus, in addition to the current Belarusian rigorous politics.

The Belarusian surveillance rumors paradoxically originate from the state's attempt to preserve the country's safety and stability by having the information about its defensive mechanism – surveillance – obscured. As a result, a vernacular discourse of surveillance rumors becomes the only source of information about the issue. In Belarus, these are active or passive non-conformists who are especially sensitive to the possibilities of surveillance. The dissident movement has become one of the major sources of rumors about the panopticon, and many stories group around violently surveilled and suppressed protests and their aftermath. The ongoing debates about the country's development, including that of ethnic identity choice, force the dissident mass-media to depict any gesture of the state as oppressive. The same gesture, however, is justified by the state as being in the interest of public safety.

The recurrent motifs of not being able to avoid surveillance no matter how hard you try, the vulnerability of (even former) dissidents "on the list" is accompanied with the idea of danger coming from telecommunications. The fears of phone tapping coming from the Soviet times now emphasize that the more developed the technology is, the more likely it is to serve for surveillance. The mobile phones, Internet, and Skype are believed to be especially dangerous. Interestingly, the anxieties of Belarusians do not exclude expressions of irony over the fear of surveillance.

The unverifiable surveillance rumors shaping cautious and alert behavior emerge due to the lack of accountability in official Belarus. It is not masterfulness in surveillance in non-democracy that makes the difference, but the fact that the object under surveillance cannot see back. Unfamiliarity with the rules leads Belarusians to interpret many deeds as potentially risky. With the absence of official comments, justifications, and accounts, rumors serve to clarify the policies of the state and prevent others from potential mistakes.

The analysis of the surveillance discourse in the rumor frame proves to be productive, as these non-verified narratives uncover many more (different) problems than the official report about the human rights violations from abroad. Studying unverified rumors may be very fruitful in many other situations where the truth remains concealed and inaccessible both to the people who care about it and to the researcher.

5.5. Article V. In quest of the lost masterpieces, ethnic identity, and democracy: the Belarusian case

Marion Bowman, Ülo Valk (eds.). *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. London; © Equinox Publishing Ltd, forthcoming.

This article attends the belief narratives occurring in the context of Belarusian belated pursuit for ethnic identity and liberalization. These narratives are united by the modality pushing towards the search for lost masterpieces that once belonged to the Belarusians, but were allegedly stolen by the enemies who stood against the formation of the Belarusian nation.

One such masterpiece is the alleged continuation of the novel *Kalasy pad syarpom tvaim* ("The ears of rye under thy sickle") by Uladzimir Karatkevich. The first book (1965) of what was planned as a trilogy was dedicated to the preparation of January Uprising of 1863–1864 against the Russian oppression in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In contrast to conventional historiography which regards it as the Polish uprising, in his novel, Karakevich emphasizes the role of szlachta – the Belarusian privileged noble class conscious and proud of their Belarusian origin – who pushed the protest. The novel published became a revolution in the Belarusian literature as, perhaps, the first example of historical prose in the Belarusian language, enchanting the readers by the images of educated, noble, smart Belarusians with strong national identity. The success of this first book gave place to excitement about its possible continuation – two other volumes of the trilogy planned by Uladzimir Karatkevich – the sequel about the Uprising per se and its defeat.

However, these parts were never published. The rumors about why the long-awaited books did not reach the readers became public in 1990s when several Karatkevich's biographers and intellectuals claimed that the rough copy of the sequel had been stolen, and this "villainy of the century" must be revealed. The hot debate about the book continuation coincided with the Soviet Union collapse and the search for national identity for independent Belarus. After being mostly forgotten, the rumors reemerged again within the last several years. The interview I recorded with a Belarusian political refugee added the motive of KGB involved into the crime to suppress Belarusian culture. The interviewee also admitted the potential power of the legend which can become instrumental in many ways: from uniting various cultural and political forces to opening the KGB archives for general public which certainly means democratization. He recognized that the story of the missing draft as a legend (which did not prevent him from believing into it though), around which, applying folklore to the reality, it is possible to build national identity. That is how, as I discovered, it is viewed by many other Belarusian intellectuals promoting the legacy of Karatkevich.

Without openly contradicting the official ideology, the legend of the missing book along with the other legends about the lost national heritage, carries hope for ethnic consolidation and democratic changes, which must almost magically follow its exposure. Another artifact of such kind is the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, an Orthodox relic made in 1161 at the territory of current Belarus. Some claim that the Cross, mysteriously lost at the beginning of the Second World War in 1941, was stolen by Moscow secret services and is still kept in Moscow not for the sake of its cultural or material value, but to deprive Belarus of its holy grail, a symbol that could mobilize the nation. The story of the lost Cross pushed by the opponent of Lukashenko and the proponent of anti-Russian discourse, Zianon Pazniak, are supplemented by other efforts he undertook to uncover the crimes of Russians who, as he contends, have been purposefully destroying Belarusians.

These stories and hopes laid on the truth discovery are criticized by several scholars as utopian or cumbersome cultural trash. Yet, as actual fieldwork in Belarus helps to understand, these narratives are one of the few forms of creativity and political involvement available in the context of existing ideology. The condemnation of these belief narratives ignores common knowledge about repressions, rumors about surveillance and unfair punishments in Belarus. The belief narratives become parts of alternative realities and tools for the country's national development. They allow expressing the need of change without harming one's career and personal life. Trying to establish its own coherent complex of mythical narratives, limited by the threats to safety, the alternative discourse has to build upon this existing and approved knowledge accepted by the majority and not contradicting the officialdom. The ideologically approved memory about Karatkevich or the Cross – the recognized values – suits for that.

6. MAIN RESULTS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Belarusian case is atypical – if compared to other European countries – since its story of nationalist development characteristic for many post-socialist countries was too brief. The search for self-representation, national identity, and democratization is still taking place, not as intensively as other countries had in 1990s, but continuously and invariably. As a response to constant negotiation of these issues, various genres of political folklore emerge. They are to be analyzed in the context of Belarusian history and current Belarusian political situation. Following Scott's idea of each form of rule having not only its characteristic official transcript, but also its characteristic offstage features (Scott 1990: 12), I tried to present the unique features of Belarusian hidden transcript corresponding to the rule it originates from. I chose to publish on those issues which seemed most problematic and relevant to my interviewees.

For instance, even though many of today's Belarusian plots carry close resemblance to those of the Soviet times, their differences and variations reveal Belarusian specific concerns (Goldstein 2004: 36). In spite of the similarity of the Belarusian and Soviet political jokes, their main targets are different. While the Soviet totalitarian jokes laughed at the abundant ideology, the authoritarian jokes in Belarus, with no Marxist-Leninist doctrine, concentrate on Lukashenko's figure. Also, the Belarusian oral jokes employ flexible plots, applicable not only to strictly Belarusian or political jokes. These conclusions are only possible through the collecting of the oral jokes, which makes the need to distinguish between the results obtained from the analysis of real-life interviews and the Internet, underlining the importance of the offline interviews, neglected by the joke researchers.

Similarly, the interviews on the folk biography of the president disclosed the distinct Belarusian vernacular concerns. As I showed, despite following the general biographical pattern, Lukashenko's life story concentrates on certain issues – significant for the promotion or condemnation of the president's figure – by the official discourse or the opposition. Moreover, the official and alternative versions of Lukashenko's life story are not always discernible: they constantly intertwine, constituting a broader vernacular picture. The idea of vernacular religion becomes applicable here, proving that there is never an ultimate authority resource providing with an absolute truth. Rather, a variety of sources mixed with an individual's beliefs and motivations constitute a broad vernacular picture.

The impossibility of strong classifications into believers and non-believers, conformists and dissidents is reaffirmed by the piece of the research on Potemkinism. A statistical study dividing Belarusians into those who support or reject it is not possible, since every single individual has his or her own justifications and reasons to conform or defy the system. It is the folkloristic methods of open

interview and analysis that shows how polyvocal the whole picture is, how many pros and cons coexist in the view of one person.

There are, of course, certain tendencies. For instance, in the battle for the credibility of performance and for the rule over imaginaries, official and alternative discourses tend to present the surveillance differently. While the former exhibit it as a guarantor of stability and safety, the latter represent the cases of surveillance as blood-chilling crimes of Lukashenko. It is in this gap where manifold rumors about surveillance originate – becoming the only source of information about the issue. Due to the lack of accountability on surveillance in Belarus, the unverifiable rumors serve to shape cautious and alert behavior.

In this sense, the dichotomies the socialist studies are often criticized for – with certain concessions – appear to be fruitful for the analysis of certain issues. For example, it is in the sphere of alternative Belarusian discourse where the nationalist narratives inexplicitly undermining the official Belarusian power arise. The legends of the lost national masterpieces which originate in the alternative discourse are united by the modality pushing towards the search of ethnic identity and liberalization.

In spite of the existing divisions, the majority of Belarusians share the same narratives and images, even though they are translated differently by different media, causing the varying attitudes. Although I recognize the radicalisms, the concept of vernacular religion provides me with freedom from rigid divisions. As Leonard Primiano states, "one of the hallmarks of the study of religion by folklorists has been their attempt to do justice to belief and lived experience … by taking seriously what people say, feel and experience" (Primiano 1995: 41). This respect for the integrity of the individuals and their belief systems – whether religious or political – is a powerful side of folklore studies I tried to implement in my dissertation too. As the supernatural beliefs, political beliefs also result from actual experiences people had. That is why they cannot be characterized as either errand, or, conversely, as too truthful – thus not to be studied by folklorists. The respect and attention to political beliefs and political folklore genres can bring to the accounts much more fruitful than the statistic reports about the human rights violations, as the former expose major social divisions and concerns people have. For instance, the vernacular rules for telling political jokes or the contents of rumors provide information about social codes for living being a kind of cautionary tales. They become potential solutions for the anxiety-provoking issues. Accordingly, many other unverified belief narratives collected from the interviews can be fruitful in many situations where the truth remains concealed or inaccessible both to the people who care about it and to the researcher. These may be the narratives about corruption, bureaucracy, or immigration which provide the researcher with the knowledge of rules the individuals try to follow in corresponding situations. The elevation of people's own voices, aesthetic, and classificatory systems (Primiano 2012: 381) is essential for the folklore research. The study of rumors, among other genres, allows us to realize the potential of folklore to influence thinking and history, representing

different political and cultural values, illusions and hopes in the personal and community level; they provide "an inside into the history of the social and political mindset and attitudes of a generation" (Kalmre 2013: 133); finally, it is of great interest to capture their interplay between local and global plots (Magdalenic 1999: 31).

Contemporary Belarusian political folklore presents the unique material testifying the in-progress identity building, bearing a variety of genres and attitudes placed on the different scales from conformism to protest, and frequently emerging due to the strictness of the current political system. It becomes as much a mechanism of social cohesion and identity affirmation as of conflict and violence (Magdalenic 1999: 23), remaining betwixt and between different approaches, and characterized with certain intertextual links, essential to research. It sheds light on how and why people could be telling jokes, agree or disagree with the state, or be afraid of surveillance, allowing looking back at many questions remaining with regards to the former repressive states or the times of their transition.

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PUBLICATIONS

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1. **Anzori Barkalaja.** Sketches towards a Theory of Shamanism: Associating the Belief System of the Pim River Khanties with the Western World View. Tartu, 2002. 184 p.
2. **Татьяна Миннияхметова.** Традиционные обряды закамских удмуртов: Структура. Семантика. Фольклор. Tartu, 2003. 258 p.
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4. **Tiia Ristolainen.** Aspekte surmakultuuri muutustest Eestis. Tartu, 2004. 180 lk.
5. **Liina Saarlo.** Eesti regilaulude stereotüüpiast. Teooria, meetod ja tähendus. Tartu, 2005. 257 lk.
6. **Taive Särg.** Eesti keele prosoodia ning teksti ja viisi seosed regilaulus. Tartu, 2005. 264 lk.
7. **Risto Järv.** Eesti imemuinasjuttude tekstid ja tekstuur. Arhiivikeskne vaatlus. Tartu, 2005. 226 lk.
8. **Anu Korb.** Siberi eesti kogukonnad folkloristliku uurimisallikana. Tartu, 2007. 430 lk.
9. **Ergo-Hart Västrik.** Vadjalaste ja isurite usundi kirjeldamine keskajast 20. sajandi esimese pooleni. Tartu, 2007. 231 lk.
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18. **Andreas Kalkun.** Seto laul eesti folkloristika ajaloos. Lisandusi representatsiooniloole. Tartu, 2011. 284 lk.
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