

## LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN TRANSFORMING BORDERLANDS (CASE OF NORTH-WEST BELARUS)

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*The North-West region of Belarus as an ethno-cultural bordering area demonstrates the tendency towards linguistic homogeneity with the sustainability of the identities of its communities. On the basis of a constructivistic approach the models of the identification process in the region are grounded. In the framework of these models the opportunities of interpretation of the present-day linguistic structure and specificity of linguistic processes are revealed.*

**Keywords:** ethnic and cultural borderlands, ethnic boundaries, identity.

### Introduction

The process of globalization is gradually changing the shape of the world transforming it into "a global village". This metaphor, once coined by Marshall McLuhan to describe the consequences of mass-media's ability to bring events from the far reaches of the globe (Lustig, Koester 1999: 4), now has a wider sense and reflects an increasing social and ethnic dynamics which breaks down political and cultural borders almost everywhere. Migrations, political and economic integration processes, development of the global net of communication, intensification of personal and institutional contacts, international tourism transform intercultural relations into everyday life reality. In this situation ethnic borders lose their traditional dimension as separation lines and become, according to Walter Minola, the space of mutual transition of what is one's own into alien and alien into one's own. From this point of view borderlands perceived as a space of cross-cultural encounters exist everywhere and are rather virtual than spatial phenomenon. J. Kuczynski (Center for Universalism of the University of

Warsaw) points out that "the border exists everywhere, and for this reason modern ideology of borderland, modern spirit of borderland are so continuously and daily necessary that they become an indispensable condition of the very human existence" (Kuczynski 1999: 100).

The nearest outcome of intercultural contacts is described by the category of acculturation. From the point of view of its core contents, acculturation is always a twofold process of acquisition and loss. On the one hand, neighboring cultures mutually acquire their patterns; on the other hand, they are condemned to inevitable loss of their own patterns, norms, artifacts, etc. The depth of acculturation differs in various bordering areas and depends upon numerous factors, but very often the loss of the mother-tongue and acquisition of another language (language of majority, official language, language of social and cultural prestige, etc) is the most vivid consequence of this process. Acculturation and the linguistic assimilation process brought to life the concept of the melting pot. From the perspective of this concept, mutual acculturation

perceived as an inevitable process in multiethnic societies sooner or later will completely break down the ethnic borders and will be replaced by a new type of community. Though the melting pot theory arose several decades ago and had to explain and predict the interethnic situation in the USA, its consequences are urgent for European areas with a complicated ethnic composition as well. In the context of modern liberal ideology the concept of cultural pluralism has been developed. From the point of view of this concept cultural diversity is regarded to be an undoubted value, and cultural heritage of big nations as well as small groups, including their languages, is to be under protection. The perspective of the inevitability of assimilation losses is to be overcome by real minorities-majorities partnership which is regarded as a guarantee for cultural sustainability and plurality. The idea of cultural partnership is being put into practice in most European countries, both members and nonmembers of the EU, it is confirmed by their legacy and institutionalized (education for minorities, etc). Though the concept of cultural pluralism is open to criticism, nowadays it seems to be an actual alternative to the melting pot perspective.

It is quite clear, that the efficiency of the policy towards cultural pluralistic society and partnership has to take into account the identity factor. Being a guarantee of cultural continuity, the sustainability of identities produces new and unpredicted patterns of linguistic behavior. Moreover, the vitality of identity may cause tensions and ethnic conflicts, as it happened a decade ago in linguistically heterogeneous Bosnia. The urgency of interrelation between identities and language is proved by numerous case studies upon traditional European bordering areas, such as North-East of Poland (Sadowski 1995; Sadowski, Czerniawska 1999), Lithuanian borderlands (Kasatkina 1996, 2003; Sutiniënė 1996) and of a new immigration in Denmark (Škodová 2004), Finland (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind 1999), Lithuanian Visaginas (Silavaitė 2002), etc.

The processes of social dynamics influence old bordering areas in Europe, and the case of North-West Belarus (Grodno Region) is not an exception. Being one of the most ethnically heterogeneous areas in Europe, it demonstrates tendency towards the melting pot in an explicit way. The Belorussian-Russian bilingualism, officially proclaimed in the country in 1995, in fact is expelled by the Russian monolingualism. The Russian language prevails in all the spheres of public life of the region: in education, mass-media, offices, clerical work, business correspondence, advertising, etc. An observer would hardly define the ethnic background of a person, for example, in the town of Grodno. Of course, as we shall see later, although the identity change in the region is in the process as well, nevertheless, the traditional identities are too strong and vital. So the interrelated processes of linguistic acculturation and identity change are not plane and synchronic. The Russian language speakers of the Belorussian, Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish and other ethnic background retain their identities. As compared with neighboring areas in Poland, Lithuania and other borderlands the problem of interrelation of identity and language in North-West Belarus has its specificity which needs both an adequate description and theoretical explanation. Although the necessity of study upon ethnic and cultural situation at the Belorussian borderlands is quite obvious, and certain aspects of the identities and interrelation among the ethnic groups of the region have been involved in the research process (Smulkowa 1999; Rusiecka, Kunowska 2001; Rozenfeld, Biaspamiatnykh 2001), the very problem of mutual interdependence between the identities of the population of North-West Beloruss and the linguistic situation in the region is yet beyond the research attention.

Taking into account the complexity of this problem the paper aims to analyse the interdependence between the linguistic structure of this area and the types of identities existing in Grodno Region. The analysis involves into discussion theoretical approaches towards identity,

ethnic borders and language on the background of constructivism. Constructivistic approach as a methodological tool seems to be the most appropriate for the following reason. The mainstream way of the comprehension of the identification process, as it is expressed in classical and modern theoretical works (Anderson 1983; Bloom 1990; De Vos, Romanucci-Rossi 1975; Eley, Suny 1996; Glazer, Moynihan 1976; Smith 1991; Želazny 2004, etc), is based upon the assumption concerning language as one of the main cultural factors of ethnic identity. Such an assumption is rather adequate and productive in the circumstances of cohesion and a marked character of ethnic or national and linguistic borders. Discussing the problem of a nation and “print language”, B. Anderson argued that print languages created unified fields of communication which enabled speakers of a diverse variety of languages to become aware of one another via print and paper. These people, consequently, became aware of the existence of the millions who share their nation and language (Anderson 1983: 44). As we shall be able to see later, the identity of the population of the area of Grodno Region is pluralistic and fluid from various points of view, and its plurality is not necessarily determined by the existing linguistic borders. Constructivistic approach is supposed to give an instrumental concept for adequate understanding first of all of Belorussian identity which is analysed in the paper in three main ways, namely, as a traditional, national and state identity. Besides that, being fluid and not final, the identity of Belorussians exists in various transitional forms and combinations in the framework of which more or less adequate types of linguistic behavior of its bearers are created and reproduced. In this way the constructivistic understanding of Belorussian identity reveals a certain homology between identity and linguistic structures on the scale of the country as a whole and in the case of the North-West Belarus (Grodno Region), which is in the focus of this paper as an object of study.

### **Case study of North-West Belarus (Grodno Region): primary analysis of ethnic and linguistic situation**

Grodno Region meets the scientific criteria of a bordering area proposed by A. Sadowski and accepted in modern theoretical and field sociology. A bordering area is conceived as a space presented by (a) several ethnic groups coexisting over time, (b) sustainable forms of interrelation between groups, (c) a specific type of personality simultaneously belonging to different cultures (Sadowski 1992: 5–6). According to these criteria, North-West Belarus (Grodno Region) may be regarded as an appropriate case study of the problem of interrelation between identities and languages in the broad context of sustainable interethnic relations.

As a case study, Grodno Region has several undoubted peculiarities. Firstly, it is located in the very center of Europe and for many centuries it has been the crossroad of intercultural contacts. Secondly, Eastern and Western civilizations meet here. Thirdly, it is the space of traditional interference, competition and coexistence of Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Fourthly, Grodno Region is located along the political border of the Republic of Beloruss with Poland and Lithuania. Fifthly, ethnic composition of Grodno Region is much more complicated than of any other region in Beloruss and is inhabited by the peoples belonging to Eastern Slavonic (Belorussians, Russians and Ukrainians) and Western (Poles) Slavonic groups, Baltic (Lithuanians) group with Germanic (Germans, a rather symbolic group nowadays), Semitic (the Jews, very considerable up to the World War II) and Turkish (Tatars) enclaves. The ethnic groups of the region are attached to different cultural heritage, symbols and artifacts, possess specific norms and values. Sixthly, different languages are spoken in the region: Russian, Belorussian, both literate and dialects, Polish, Lithuanian, Yiddish. All these ethnic and cultural groups have been coexisting in Grodno Region for centuries and consider

this area as their homeland. New immigration waves from the Post-Soviet States over the last decade increase the heterogeneity of this area (Tichomirow 2004).

A source for analysis of the ethnic composition and linguistic structure of the area is presented by the official data of the National Census of Belarus (1999) and by the summarized results of a study on the identity of ethnic groups of the region undertaken at the University of Grodno in 1998–2004. Official sources present a more detailed picture of the linguistic situation in the area, including three main indices: identification of a language as a mother-tongue; a language spoken at home; ability to speak a language.

Among the total population of the region 53 percent use the Belorussian language at home (mostly spoken), 39,4 percent use Russian. Among the urban population the usage of the Belorussian language at home decreases to 35,8 percent, while Russian is spoken by 65 percent (Population of the Republic of Belarus 2000: 59). Undoubted domination of the Russian language makes the very status of Russians as a minority in Belarus and in Grodno Region, where they constitute ten percent of the population, is questionable (Chinn, Kaiser 1996). At the same time Belorussian is named as the mother-tongue by the majority of Belorussians. The percentage of

those who fluently speak other languages varies from 11,6 percent among Poles to 3,9 percent among Belorussians.

The linguistic characteristics of ethnic groups of the region are summarized in the Table below.

A remark should be made upon the official data concerning the Belorussian language. As it was mentioned above, Belorussian (as well as any other language) exists in literate and spoken varieties. In the case of Belorussian its spoken varieties are very different (and often identified as *prosty*, i.e. “plain”, “simple”, or *trasianka* in the sense of “mixture”) and presented by a broad range of transitional colloquial forms between Belorussian and Russian being often closer to Russian than to literate Belorussian. That is why the bearers of spoken Belorussian (the majority of rural population and rural migrants to towns) are more eager to choose Russian in the situations of public communication. The official data presented above do not make difference between these varieties of Belorussian and may create an illusion of “Belorussian-Russian bilingualism”. Though it is not quite easy to find adequate sociological research tools of a precise evaluation of both varieties of Belorussian, it is clear enough that their social spheres of spread and functioning are different and unequal. As concerns the bearers of the Belorussian literate

*Ethnic composition of Grodno Region and functions of languages (percentage of the total population)*

Ethnic group (nationality)	Share of persons of corresponding nationalities	Out of the total number of persons of a given nationality those who named their mother-tongue		Out of the total number of persons of a given nationality those who named a language usually spoken at home	
		Belorussian	Russian	Belorussian	Russian
Belorussians	62,3	87,9	12,0	60,5	39,4
Poles	24,8	65,2	16,3	58,9	35,5
Russians	10,1	11,8	88,0	8,3	91,7
Lithuanians	0,2	*	*	*	*
Jews	0,1	14,0	76,9	6,2	93,3
Ukrainians	1,8	17,1	48,7	15,3	81,7

Source: *Population of the Republic of Belarus. Minsk, 2000.*

\* Official data are not given in the source.

language, their share does not exceed several percent of the total population. An observer often would find difficult to hear or communicate “pure” (i.e. literate) Belorussian in a public situation because the sphere of functioning of this language nowadays is limited mainly to the professionals and representatives of nationally-oriented elite (teachers and professors, writers, etc). Excluded to the margin of society, literate Belorussian has become similar to some kind of “esoteric” language which signifies the belonging of its bearer to a definite cultural sublevel. On the contrary, the colloquial *trasiianka* is spoken widely.

Such a differentiation inside the Belorussian language seems essential from the point of view of the goal of this work. The presupposition, that two existing and different varieties of Belorussian reflect differences in the specificity of the identity of Belorussians, seems to make sense and needs further approval.

The data on the usage of the Polish and Lithuanian languages were obtained in the course of field studies among ethnic groups of Grodno Region. 74,7 percent of the Polish population can speak the Polish language, 48,3 percent use it at home (speaking Belorussian or Russian as well), 26,3 percent speak Polish with friends, 13 percent use their native language in public life. The Lithuanian language is spoken by the groups of Lithuanians living in the villages located along the Lithuanian border, 51,8 percent of Lithuanians consider the Lithuanian language their mother-tongue, 15,3 percent usually speak Lithuanian at home (Biaspamiatnykh 2003).

The data presented above reflect the following tendencies of linguistic situation in Grodno area which can be defined as a three-level functioning of languages. The first level is characterized by the dominance of the Russian language in public life, as stated above. The reverse side of such a dominance is the alienation of the native languages (and cultures in a wider sense) of Belorussians and Poles. The second level is presented by native languages

of the ethnic groups of the region which are used chiefly in private life (communication with relatives, friends, countrymen, etc). The colloquial Belorussian as the “home language” shows its strong vitality and prevalence among other languages. It is widely spread among Poles and even Russians. Enough to say that 28 percent of the rural Russians of Grodno Region speak Belorussian (mostly colloquial) at home, and 22,1 percent named it as their mother-tongue. The third level reflects the tendency towards multilingualism (potential or actual) and is proved, besides other facts, by a high degree of knowledge of Belorussian as an official language and other languages. Literate Belorussian is obligatory at all the types of secondary schools with the Russian-language education. Moreover, some subjects at schools (the Belorussian history and geography, etc) are taught in the native language. The course of professional Belorussian vocabulary is compulsory in the Universities’ curricula. The Polish language is also popular among Belorussians and Russians who attend side by side with Poles optional Polish courses at secondary schools. Needless to speak about the prestige of English and other Western languages among young people of each ethnic background.

The general picture of the linguistic situation proves that it is not as plain and clear as it may appear to an ordinary observer. On the one hand, there is a vivid tendency towards linguistic homogeneity which coexists with ethnic diversity. One may conclude that ethnic and linguistic borders do not coincide in the region. This situation needs a more precise study from the stand point of the nature of ethnic borders. On the other hand, linguistic diversity still exists in the region. The languages of the ethnic groups have not faded out, though their functions are not equal to the function of the dominant language. The hierarchy of functions of the languages is the reality, which is connected with the specificity of identity of the ethnic groups of the region and roots in the historical traditions of cultural interrelation

among Belorussians, Poles, Russians and other nations of this area. Each level of linguistic hierarchy in the North-West Belarus needs a more detailed examination on the background of identification process in the area.

### **Identification process and ethnic borders in constructive perspective. Theoretical background**

A general approach on the study of identity in a multicultural area is based on the following assumptions concerning the very concept of identity. As a philosophical concept, identity has been used in two fundamentally opposed ways. Stefany Ortmann points out that in a more mainstream philosophical definition “identity” indicates self-sameness or what makes an object (a person, a group) unique. This categorization of identity involves a judgement about stability over time – an object is assumed to have a stable, unchangeable ‘core’ resistant to change. Opposed to this, is the post-structuralistic conception of identity, or rather identities, as being fundamentally fragmented and fluid, constantly transformed and by their very nature not given to endure over time (Ortmann 2004).

The first concept is usually identified as a positivistic one, and very often the positivistic idea of identity roots in its understanding as a primordial phenomenon. In the framework of this approach two main physical characteristics constitute the sense of identity: a body itself and distinctive marks on its surface, and the land to which a group is attached by birth. In this context the very group is perceived by its members as a “big family” with a deep feeling of belonging to it as its main feature. Because of a natural origin of these characteristics they are regarded as an unchanged over time personal property. They are often interrelated with specific personal names which mark the group belonging. Being subrational and traditional, these characteristics are often based on

mythological perception of ethnic reality and are beyond social discourse.

The second approach is closely connected with phenomenology and is based upon several principal ideas stated by E. Husserl and A. Schütz according to which social reality is the product of social construction. This assumption leads to the following conclusions. The first one points out the interpretation as the main method of social reality research. The second one underlines a relative character of social truth which depends to a great extent on values and changing interrelations of the object (Mamzer 2002: 15–16). Constructivistic understanding of identity is conceived as being fundamentally relational, at its core it is a process of identification and differentiation with “significant other”. As soon as the significance of “other” is flexible, the very fluidity of identity seems reasonable enough. We would add that identity is also a problem of choice.

From these positions, three possible models of identity of Belorussians are to be analysed. The first one is a traditional model. The second model of identity has been developed in the context of the Belorussian nationalism and is national in its origin. The third one is emerging as the essential element of the ideology of the Belorussian Statehood and may be characterized as state identity. None of these models exists in a clear explicit form. It exists either as the phenomenon of mentality or is scattered among texts of a political and social character. So the very object of study has to be reconstructed on the basis of the methods of sociology and narrative criticism.

### **Ethnic identity of Belorussians and the problem of linguistic borders**

The first model may be characterized as the ethnic model of identity of Belorussians. The aim of the analysis of that model is to find out the features which constitute Belorussian ethnicity in two ways: external and internal.

The first way is based on the procedure of comparison of Belorussians with what is called a “significant other”. Its aim is to find out the features which are conceived as distinguishing for Belorussians, differing them from other ethnic groups. The internal way aims at analysing the features identifying Belorussians among themselves.

Each model is interrelated with the problem of language. So understanding of the plurality of the identities of Belorussians on the constructivistic platform will give the key to comprehend the linguistic situation in the country and in its North-West borderlands.

Constructivistic approach towards identity has to take into consideration the notion of ethnic borders. The idea of the linkage of ethnic borders and identity, developed by F. Barth three decades ago, hasn’t lost its productivity (Barth 1969: 295). Following F. Barth, G. De Vos stated that “boundaries are basically psychological in nature, not territorial. These boundaries are maintained by ascription from within as well as from external sources which designate membership according to evaluated characteristics which differ in content, depending on the history of contact of the groups involved” (De Vos, Romanucci-Rossi 1975: 9). The following hypothetical characteristics of the ethnicity are reasonable to be involved in the discussion: territoriality, religion, language, a subjective sense of continuity of belonging (De Vos, Romanucci-Rossi 1975: 11–17).

The next step on the way to construction of the identity of Belorussians is to find “a significant other”. For many centuries Belorussians have had interrelation with four nations – Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians – with whom they had external borders. The fifth ethnic group were Jews who lived among Belorussians in small towns. But historically the interrelation with Poles and Russians was of greater significance than with the others, first of all for social, cultural and political reasons. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after the united Polish-Lithuanian state was created, till the middle

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Polish influence upon Belorussians constantly increased. In fact, Poles constituted the dominant group in multiethnic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and over centuries that resulted at least in three ways that are essential for understanding the formation of identity of Belorussians. Firstly, Belorussians lost their nobility which step by step converted into Catholicism and in that way became Poles. Secondly, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the so-called Russian language (in Beloruss that language is usually called the old Belorussian) as the official language of the Great Lithuanian Duchy was expelled by the Polish and prohibited. Thirdly, in the times of serfdom Belorussians experienced social oppression from the Polish nobility. So the division line between Belorussians and Poles was marked by differences of a religious (Catholicism – Orthodoxy, replaced for three centuries by the Greek-Catholicism), linguistic (Polish – Belorussian, or the so-called “*prosty*”, or “common” language) and social (nobility – peasantry) character.

As a result of the partition of the Commonwealth at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the territory inhabited by Belorussians became a part of the Russian Empire. Russians as the dominant nation became the next “significant other” for Belorussians. *Zapadnorusism* (“West-Rusicism”) as the official ideology of Russia denied the Belorussian ethnicity and regarded Belorussians as the western polonized variety of Russians, and the language of Belorussians – as a “spoiled” dialect of Russian. In 1839 Belorussians were reconverted into Orthodoxy. The events of 1863 led to prohibition of the Belorussian language, and the very name of Belarus was replaced by the North-West district. The Belorussian peasantry continued speaking their language which in fact marked their ethnic border with Russians. But due to the common religion – the Orthodoxy – and to similarity of languages the eastern border of Belorussians has never been as strict and determined as the western one.

Such a brief historical survey of interrelation of Belorussians with their Western and Eastern neighbors proves our presupposition concerning Poles and Russians as “significant others” in the process of formation of the Belorussian identity. That presupposition is verified by the present-day historic memory of Belorussians, reflecting the dominance of Poles and Russians over them in the past.

The assimilation of Belorussians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in fact has ruined the linguistic border and left the Belorussian people ethnically unprotected from the Eastern influence. As a result nowadays the Russian language dominates in public life, education, mass-media, advertising, etc. That is the reason why usually the present-day Belorussians are not eager to regard the Russian culture as a foreign one.

Belorussians do not identify themselves with Russians, though ethnic similarities between both peoples exceed differences. Common religion and language make the very problem of Russian-Belorussian differentiation questionable. Who are Russians from the point of view of Belorussians? Our observations confirmed by interviews show that they are the newcomers, the arrivals. Russians are those who came from Russia. They or their ancestors arrived to Beloruss from another land. The interrelation of Belorussians over the Eastern ethnic border discover the phenomenon of their “locality” (the equivalent to the Belorussian “*tuteishast*”) versus Russians as migrants. Belorussians were born in this land which is their homeland, their motherland. A strong feeling of adherence to the land of birth constitutes the main feature of the present-day ethnic identity of Belorussians. The feeling of belonging to the Belorussian people as a “big family” is rather typical too: “*I am a Belorussian. When I return home I am so happy and feel every Belorussian as my relative*” (from an interview with a person who works outside Belarus). In this aspect Belorussians’ perception of Russians as “the other” differs from their perception of Poles. Russians are “the significant others” who are regarded as the continuation of “us” as “our

elder brother”. So the Orthodoxy and strong feelings of adherence to the native land and people may be regarded as the traditional features of the ethnic identity of Belorussians. They have been created in the long-time process of coexistence of Belorussians with their neighbors, and they constitute the individual feeling of self. In this context the Belorussian language as a cultural phenomenon is connected with the locality of Belorussians and signifies their rural origin. That is why it is still often called by its bearers as *prosty* (“common”). On the contrary, Russian as the “elder brother’s” language is perceived as a tool for a super-local space of communication. Two centuries of cultural assimilation and ruining of ethnic border between the two peoples converted Russian into the language of city culture. As a result the Russian / Belorussian linguistic dichotomy indicates rather social than ethnic diversity. From this point of view the phenomenon of “Belorussian bilingualism” (Russian as the language of public life and Belorussian as “home language”) appears to be clearer.

### **Construction of national identity of Belorussians and the Belorussian language**

The next question concerns changing of the ethnic identity of Belorussians caused by the independence of the Belorussian State. Belarus received its sovereignty in 1991, and that core event in its history influenced its ethnic identity which started gradually transforming into national identity.

The construction of the present-day national Belorussian identity is based on theoretical linkage among identities, interests and actions. The mainstream values associated with this type of identity are the unconditional sovereignty of the Belorussian State and the rebirth and expansion of the Belorussian language. The statehood and the language are the main values which have to unite and consolidate Belorussians as a nation and differentiate them from the “others”, i.e. primarily from Russians.

The values characterized above are closely interconnected with the tradition of the Belorussian nationalism which originated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Without going into details of its evolution and theoretical background, which have been analysed (Zaprudnik 1993; Korshuk 2001), we would like to point out some of its crucial aspects regarding identity. Such an analysis seems to be essential from the research perspective because it demonstrates one of the possible ways of identity construction.

Kastus Kalinouski was one of the first heralds of social and national aspirations of Belorussians. He was the leader of the uprising of 1863 and sentenced to death which was executed in Vilnius. His “Letters from beneath the Gallows” and “Peasants’ Truth” express the maturity of his vision of the Belorussian identity. Belorussians are neither Poles nor Russians, they are peculiar people living between neighboring nations, but their national existence and development are prevented by Russians (“the Moscovites”). Russia, in the present-day terms, is regarded by K. Kalinouski as the “significant other” to Belorussians. Moreover, the significance of Russians is evaluated by the author in a very negative way – as a nation which dominates over Belorussians and which is mentally very distant to Belorussians. That is why liberation from Russia was the chief goal of K. Kalinouski’s activity. It is clear that differentiation of Belorussians from the eastern neighbor is of no vitality without an idea of internal integration of the nation. Another question concerns an identity platform for such an integrity. We do not find a direct answer to that question in K. Kalinouski’s writings, but a presupposition, that he saw such a platform in the Greek-Catholic (the Unite) religion, seems to be reasonable. The following passage proves such a presupposition: “Since the times of our ancestors we have had the Unite faith, that means that we, being of the Greek faith, acknowledged the Saint Fathers of Rome as the governors”. The Tsar of Moscow had ruined the Greek faith and replaced it by the Tsar faith called the

Orthodoxy. “Thus we were separated from the true God”, “We lost our spiritual merit – our Unite faith” (Kalinouski 1999: 42).

Further steps in that direction were made by Yanka Kupala, a famous Belorussian poet. In his youth he started writing in Polish, but later he chose Belorussian. As one of the creators of the modern Belorussian literary language, Yanka Kupala was seeking for the identity namely in the language. The philosophic core of his poetry at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lies in recognition of the fact that Belorussians are deprived of their national culture which is to be revived. He acknowledged with sadness that Belorussians confused “our” and “other”, they accepted “other” as if it were “our”. He would be happy to hear Belorussians speaking their language, singing their songs, etc. The further developments made Y. Kupala rather pessimistic about his dreams of improving the Belorussian identity.

Vaclau Lastouski and some other prominent Belorussian historians were eager to maintain the identity of the Belorussian people on the basis of its unique historic heritage. In that direction the well-known concepts of the Baltic sublevel of Belorussians, the Great Duchy of Lithuania as a medieval Belorussian state appeared. Moreover, to avoid a common root “rus” in the names of both nations attempts to replace the very name of Belorussians by other ethnic names, e.g. “the Krivs”, “the Litvins”, were made. At the same time Russians were often called “the Raseicy”, “the Moscovites”, etc. Worth to add, that the texts, in which the national Belorussian idea is expressed, can be easily recognized by a specific norm of spelling, usually called “the tarashkevitsa”, distinguishing them orthographically from the spelling officially adopted in Belarus. The last one is considered by nationalists as Russism noncorresponding to the Belorussian language.

These are the bricks which were put into the wall of the Belorussian national identity. That wall aimed at unifying Belorussians on the basis of faith, language and history and at

separating them from Russians. The type of identity constructed by nationally-oriented thinkers constituted the foundation of national rebirth in the late 1980s–early 1990s. In fact, in 1991–1994 the mainstream features of that type of the Belorussian identity were legitimized. They openly circulated in society and were reproduced by the new national educational system.

Today supporters of that type of identity constitute a relatively small part of society, but the majority of them are intellectuals or creative people. They openly explicate their identity speaking the Belorussian language. Due to their efforts the process of Belarusization of education and public life in the early 1990s was initiated. Some of them are politically-oriented and participate in actions for the statehood and against integration with Russia. Their most vivid symbols are the red-white-red banner, the *Pahonia* coat-of-arms, the 25<sup>th</sup> of March as the Liberty Day, prohibited by the present-day ruling regime.

The reverse side of the first type of the identity is a negative position towards Russia and the Russian language. The Russian State is perceived by supporters of this view as a potential threat to Belorussian statehood and the source of a new colonialistic expansion. Russia and Russians are accused of all the difficulties and problems of the Belorussian history and present-day developments.

Needless to say that supporters of the first type of the Belorussian identity meet misunderstanding and even hostility from the Russian-speaking majority, to say nothing of the Government and the official mass-media. The reason for such an unpopularity of the first type of the Belorussian identity among the rest of Belorussians may find its explanation in its rational and constructivistic character which has almost nothing in common with traditional identity. That is why there is a constant and mutual confrontation between the nationally-oriented minority speaking literate Belorussian and the rest of society. The minority is nega-

tively perceived by the majority as “extreme nationalists”, while the minority accuses the majority of its “unconsciousness”.

In the framework of the national type of identity the peculiarities of functioning of the Belorussian language as “a marginal language” as well as the phenomenon of its revival mostly among the young people can be understood. The revival of Belorussian nowadays is not a wide-spread phenomenon, nevertheless, it is a remarkable process motivated by contradiction between the ethnic and cultural identities of a person. Such a contradiction reflected in self-consciousness sometimes leads to “the cultural shift”, i.e. to deliberate change of cultural orientation of a person of a Belorussian origin. Belonging to the Russian-speaking cultural majority and brought up in the spirit of the Russian culture, such a person starts speaking Belorussian (even with people of his Russian-speaking surrounding, including the family, etc). Needless to say that such a shift requires personal strength and non-conformity and may be regarded as a guarantee for further existence of the Belorussian culture.

### **The Belorussian language from the perspective of State identity construction in Belarus**

The state identity may be regarded as a part of the official “ideology of Belorussian statehood” which is in the process of creation. Over the last two years there appeared dozens of publications on that issue. An academic course “The ideology of Belorussian statehood” is compulsory in the university and college curricula. The aim of this doctrine is to legitimize the present-day ruling elite and to unite the multiethnic and culturally diverse society under its government. The state ideology deals with various aspects of politics, history and culture of Belarus on the background of its interrelation with the Western world and Russia. Although the ideas concerning the Belorussian State identity are

not presented in publications in a systematic way, they are articulated in the contents of the analysis and need to be reconstructed for further research.

A methodological basis for such a reconstruction can be found in the Paul Ricœur's theory of identity. P. Ricœur's theory applies three main identity features, namely, the feeling of stability, the feeling of unity and the feeling of difference (Ricœur 1992). These features emphasize, in his understanding, a personal aspect of identity. But it is clear that any kind of ideology as a system of values of the whole is directed to a unit as a member of the whole.

The feeling of stability is maintained politically by various means: a strong political power, military protection, social and multiethnic peace. The idea of a strong power, which is traditional to the Russian nationalism, is modified and adopted on the Belorussian soil. The internal peace depends to a great extent on a peaceful character of Belorussians. "We are Belorussians, peaceful people" – the first words of the National Anthem of Belarus – are not accidental in that context. The feeling of stability must be guaranteed by political integrity with Russia.

The second feature of the Ricœur's theory is the feeling of unity. Such a feeling is derived from the integrity of society based on the absence of internal ethnic and religious contradictions and on a traditional mutual tolerance. Such an ethnic feature as the Orthodoxy must serve as a spiritual background for the feeling of unity.

The feeling of difference is based on a specific place of Belarus in Central Europe. It may be considered in terms of a traditional Belorussian "locality" spread to the scale of the whole country. Prof Y. Yaskevich points out that peculiarity of the self-identity of Belorussians is determined by the bordering position of its culture, that is why Belarus can't identify itself with any single political or cultural tradition. It has to find "its own way" (Yaskevich 2003: 58). The concept of a peculiar way of Belarus, un-

derlined in ideological texts, aims at creating the feeling of uniqueness of being its citizen.

Such a brief survey of some aspects of forming the State identity of Belarus shows that it is based on the soil of the traditional Belorussian identity combined with the elements of modified ideas of the Russian nationalism. The integrative basis for such a combination is the notion of the so-called "Belorussian way".

In the context of formation of the Belorussian State identity, based on a civic foundation, the linguistic situation is not articulated clearly. From the point of view of the present-day status quo the formal "Belorussian-Russian bilingualism" faces the perspective of further strengthening of its Russian component.

## Conclusions

A constructivistic approach reveals a pluralistic character of Belorussian identities on the scale of the country and proves its cognitive perspective being applied to the case of West-North Belarus. The linguistic situation in Grodno Region analysed in the framework of the variety of identities cannot be defined neither in terms of the melting pot (still existing diversity of identities interrelated with linguistic hierarchy) nor in terms of cultural pluralism (inequality of the functions of languages and absence of linguistic and cultural partnership). The plurality of actual identities of Belorussians varies on a large scale between negation of the very Belarushood (including the Belorussian language as "the artificial construction") and acquisition of the Belorussian culture by Russian-speaking Belorussians. Both positions constitute the ultimate points of this continuum. In the middle of this scale a rather fluid ethnic identity dominates at a close interrelation both with the official Russian and colloquial Belorussian.

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## KALBA IR IDENTITETAS PARIBIO TRANSFORMACIJOS SĄLYGOMIS

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*Baltarusijos Šiaurės vakarų regionas yra etnokultūrinio paribio pavyzdys. Čia pasireiškia kalbinės vienovės, išsaugančios jos sandų tapatumą, tendencija. Pasitelkiant konstruktyvistinę prieigą, grindžiami tapatumo procesų regione modeliai, leidžiantys interpretuoti šiuolaikines lingvistines struktūras ir kalbinius vyksmus.*

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** identitetas, etnokultūrinis paribys, etninė riba.

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