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Poland? Lithuania? Belarus? Names of Belarusians and their Homeland in the Historical-Cultural Context

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between ethnic and cultural contacts on the one hand and national identity on the other. The interplay is illustrated through the example of Belarus, whose history has been shaped by continuous interaction with other nations and cultures. The study analyzes the names used for present-day Belarusian lands and their inhabitants, as well as terms denoting “homeland.” Texts by prominent Belarusian writers and figures from cultural and political life serve as the factual basis for the analysis.

KEYWORDS: ethnic and cultural identity, contacts, texts, history, homeland

STRESZCZENIE

Polska? Litwa? Białoruś? Nazwy białorusinów i ich ojczyzny w kontekście historycznym i kulturowym

Artykuł poświęcony jest problemowi relacji między kontaktami etnicznymi i kulturowymi z jednej strony a tożsamością narodową z drugiej. Związek ten pokazany jest na przykładzie Białorusi, której historia to ciągły kontakt z innymi narodami i kulturami. Rozważane są nazwy współczesnych ziem białoruskich i ich mieszkańców, a także słowa mające znaczenie “ojczyzna”. Teksty znanych białoruskich pisarzy, osobistości kultury i polityki są podane jako materiał faktograficzny.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: tożsamość etniczna i kulturowa, kontakty, teksty, historia, ojczyzna

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Introduction

In the modern world, it is difficult to find an ethnic group or culture that has not been influenced by other, often neighboring, ethnic groups and cultures. More often than not, the history of an ethnos is a history of its interactions with others. Belarusian history serves here as an illustrative example and is analyzed in one particular aspect. This article is devoted to the Belarusian concept of “homeland,” its names, and the names of its inhabitants – Belarusians. It examines toponyms (the names of the territory of present-day Belarus), ethnonyms (the names of the ethnic group), as well as words denoting ‘homeland.’ The issue is explored through the texts of prominent Belarusian scholars and intellectuals who contributed to the national revival and left a rich textual legacy. Some of these texts have been published, while others are available only through online resources. They include poetry, journalistic writing, and memoirs, in which the homeland appears as a leading theme. It is evident that these authors reflected deeply on the idea of their homeland and frequently addressed it.

The chosen topic is particularly relevant in view of Belarus’s close historical and cultural contacts with neighboring countries – Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania – as well as the political developments in Belarus in recent years.

A short history of the Belarusian lands, their inhabitants, and their names

Over the centuries, the territory of present-day Belarus has been referred to by various names (*Русь* ‘Rus’,¹ *Русь Литоўская* ‘Lithuanian Rus’, *Літва* ‘Lithuania’, *Беларусь* ‘Belarus’), and its inhabitants have likewise been designated by different ethnonyms (*русiны* ‘Rusyns’, *літвіны* ‘Litvins’, *беларусiны* ‘Belarusyns’, *польскія беларусiны* ‘Polish Belarusyns’, *беларусы* ‘Belarusians’, *крывiчы* ‘Kryvichs’, etc.). The names of both the territory and its inhabitants have changed constantly since the emergence of statehood in these lands. The earliest political entity was the Principality of Polotsk. Later, on the territory of present-day Belarusian Pniamon’nie, the so-called *Lithuania Proper* (Latin: *Lithuania Propria*)² emerged. In the 1230s and 1240s, the Principality

1 When transferring proper names, I use the general principles of transliteration of Cyrillic names into English, with the exception of those cases when the spelling of the proper name has already been established.

2 For the history of research on the issue in Polish scholarship and a bibliography, see, for example, Ochmański, 1990.

of Navágradak,³ ruled by the first prince Mindaugas began to expand rapidly, annexing the lands of neighboring Baltic and Slavic principalities. According to Aliaksandr Krautsevich,⁴ the name *Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus' and Samogitia* reflects the three main territorial components of the state, and the order of their listing is the chronological order of their incorporation: first Lithuania, then Rus' in the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries, and finally *Samogitia* in the fifteenth century. The term *Rus'* also included the Ukrainian lands annexed in the fourteenth century (Krautsevich, 2013, p. 7).

The origin of the toponym *Litva / Lithuania* remains uncertain; and several hypotheses exist concerning the location of ancient Lithuania. Numerous etymologies of the name *Litva* have been proposed; the widely accepted explanation derives it from a hydronym – the name of the small river *Letauka*, a tributary of *Neris* (Ejdintas, 2013, p. 13). Mythological explanations have also been suggested. The Belarusian scholar Jazep Losik, one of the intellectuals later repressed by the Soviet authorities, wrote about this issue in 1921:

In the later period of its state independence, Belarus bore the name of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus', and Samogitia or, in short – the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL). Historical scholarship has not yet clarified why the Belarusian state was called *Litva / Lithuania* at that time. The names Rus' and Samogitia are clear, because the state consisted of Belarusians, as well as Ukrainians, who called themselves *Rusyns*, and of the Samogitians, who are now called Lithuanians in the literary language...

Litva, Liutva, Liucichy are the names of a Slavic tribe, and the expression *народ люты / narod liuty* means 'a people fierce and terrible to their enemies, yet brave for their friends.' When our Belarusian ancestors in past centuries called themselves *Litvins*, they knew what they meant. They knew that the Belarusian people, in addition to *Russes* or *Rusyns*, also included other tribes, such as the *Litva* tribe, which formed the foundation of the Lithuanian-Ruthenian state (Losik, 1921, pp. 12–22. From here on, the translation of the quotes is mine).

The threat of an invasion of knightly orders and the hordes of Batu contributed to the rapid consolidation of Slavic lands around Navágradak. By the fourteenth century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had become the largest East Slavic state. The shorter form of the state's name was gradually extended to the entire country. Almost all of present-day Belarus belonged to the Grand

3 Navágradak is the present-day Belarusian town of Navahrúdak. The Polish classic Adam Mickiewicz was born in Navahrudak, and it was about the area that he wrote: "*Litwo, Ojczyzno moja!*"

4 Aliaksandr Krautsevich is a well-known Belarusian historian who worked in both Lithuania and Poland, a developer and supporter of the hypothesis of the creation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) as a Baltic-Slavic state, see, for example, his book *Hiedymín (1316–1341). Kingdom of Lithuania and Ruthenia* (Minsk, 2012).

Duchy of Lithuania. As a result, Belarusians fully identify their history with this ancient state and its name.

Muscovite (Great) Rus' and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rus' and Samogitia developed in a similar way: both states pursued the goal of "gathering the Rus' lands." However, there were important differences (see Floria, 1997). For example, the GDL was more strongly orientated towards Western Europe.

The sixteenth century is considered the apogee of the cultural and political flourishing of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. However, constant wars with the Grand Duchy of Moscow led to the Union of Lublin in 1569, which united the GDL with the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland.

Boris Floria argued that the ethnic identities of the Eastern Slavs living in Muscovite (Great) Rus' and in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – developed as separate and distinct identities. Based on a wide range of manuscripts, written sources, and scholarly studies, he arrives at the following conclusion:

The study of writings produced in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Renaissance allows us to single out the last quarter of the sixteenth century as the period when these differences led to changes in the nature of the ethnic identity of the Eastern Slavs living in the Commonwealth. ... Later, fairly clear traces of the idea of "Muscovites" and "Rus'" as two different nations can be found in polemical literature that arose after the Union of Brest in 1596 (Floria, 1997, p. 16).

The author also examines the use of toponyms which, at different times, referred to different territories. He identifies the factors that determined not only the distinction between Belarusians and Ukrainians, on the one hand, and Russians, on the other, but also between Ukrainians and Belarusians themselves. In conclusion, B. Floria writes:

The historical paths of the Eastern Slavs living in the territories of the Commonwealth diverged in the same way as the paths of the Eastern Slavs once diverged on the territories of Russia and the Commonwealth (Floria, 1997, p. 27).

Rusyn? Litvin? Belarusian?

It was also during this period that the ethnonym *белорус* 'Belarusian' and the corresponding name for the lands of the present-day Belarus began to spread.

Numerous studies have been devoted to the name of *Белая Рус'*. One example is the book by Ales' Bely *Хроніка «Белай Русі»*. *Нарыс гісторыі адной*

геаграфічнай назвы (*The Chronicle of “White Rus’.” An Essay on the History of One Geographical Name*) (Minsk, 2000). The book includes a chronological table documenting the use of the name *Белая Русь / Belaya Rus’* (Bely, 2000, pp. 190–191). This table, along with the works of other authors, show that the name *Belaya Rus’* referred to different territories, namely, the Novgorod land, and Muscovite Rus’. In 1563, Ivan the Terrible captured Polotsk and nearby territories of present-day Belarus. The part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania seized by Muscovite Rus’, was referred to as *Belaja Rus’*. In the second half of the sixteenth century, Maciej Strykowski in his *Kronika polska, litewska, żmódzka i wszyskiej Rusi* (*Chronicle of Poland, Lithuania, Samogitia and All of Ruthenia*, 1582) used the term *Bielorussacy Litewcy* to refer to the inhabitants of Polotsk (Strykowski, 1846, p. 111). In 1586, Solomon Rysinsky wrote in Leipzig that he was a *Belarus* (Greek: *Λευκορώσος*). In 1627, *Belaya Rus’* was mentioned as part of the Commonwealth.

Leszek Bednarczuk writes:

for the Slavs – residents of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – such ethnonyms were used as *(belo)rusyn* ‘(Belo)Rusyn,’ *liab* ‘Pole,’ *poliak* ‘Pole,’ *podliasiak* ‘resident of Podlasie,’ *polesbuk* ‘resident of Polesia,’ *litvin* ‘Lithuanian.’ ... If we consider the Slavic ethnic groups and ethnonyms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, we see that designations of local identity such as *mozyrianie* ‘residents of Mozyr,’ *polochanie* ‘residents of Polotsk’ were used in the GDL; the polytonym *Litvin* was common to all inhabitants of the country, while the ethnonym *Rusyn* ‘Ruthenian’ referred to the Orthodox population of territories that had previously been part of Kievan Rus’ (Bednarczuk, 2010, p. 143).

Henadz’ Sahanovich writes: “In the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, I think, it was possible to be both *Litvin* and *Rusyn* at the same time – this did not cause conflict in the minds” (Sahanovich, 2003, p. 294).

The main conclusions of scholars regarding Belarusian ethnonymy in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Commonwealth (including the authors mentioned above as well as Bednarczuk, 2014; Dziarnovich, 2017; Halenchanka, 2003; Latyshonak, 2009, among others) can be summarized as follows:

- Local self-identifications almost completely replaced broader ethnic ones (as evidenced by written texts);
- Multiple self-identifications existed among the inhabitants of the eastern territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania;
- *Litvin* functioned as a polytonym meaning ‘a resident of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania’;
- *Rus, Rusyn* was the most frequent form of identification for the majority of the population of Belarusian and Ukrainian territories, i.e. the “Rus” lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and later the Commonwealth;

- A single ethnonym did not become firmly established, partly because there was no confessional unity of these lands. The name *Rus'* for the eastern territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania emphasized the Orthodox character of their inhabitants; nevertheless, it was perceived as "another *Rus'*." Some contemporary researchers distinguish between *Great Rus'* and the *rus'* of the GDL (the latter one written with a lowercase letter);
- The names *belorus*, *belorusec* 'Belarusian' began to be used for the Eastern Slavs of the GDL in the second half of the sixteenth century, while *Belaya Rus'* referring to the eastern lands of the Commonwealth appeared in the seventeenth century. Until the end of the nineteenth century, these terms were used sporadically, though with increasing frequency (see also: Rudenka, 2023, p. 274).

Ethnic and cultural identity through the names of the motherland

The name *Belorussia*, referring to the entire territory of present-day Belarus, and the ethnonym *Belorus* 'Belorussian' were finally established by the 1890s. The authorities of the Russian Empire supported the use of the name *Belaya Rus'* (*Belorussia*), as this reinforced the idea of a united Great Russia and a single Russian composed of three branches: *velikorossy* 'Great Russians,' *malorossy* 'Little Russians,' and *belorossy* / *belorusy* 'Belarusians,' as well as the concept of a single Russian language with Little Russian and Belarusian dialects. For example, the author of the three-volume work *Белорусцы* (*Belarusians*), Yefim Karsky, consistently used the toponym *Belorussia* and the ethnonym *belorus(s)y* (Karsky, 1903, I).

The ethnotoponym *Belarus'* was used only in the Belarusian language; its earliest known appearance occurs in the slogan of Kastus' Kalinowski's insurgents (1863–1964): «Kaho liubish? – Belarus.' – To uzaemna» ('Whom do you love? – Belarus – It is mutual').

Kastus' Kalinowski published the newspaper *Mużyckaja Prawda* (*Peasants' Truth*) and wrote his texts in the Belarusian language:

Maskal (Thr Muscovite)... wherever Poles, Lithuanians, and Belarusians lived, establishes Moscow schools, and in these schools they teach in the Moscow language, where you will never hear a word in Polish, Lithuanian, or Belarusian, as the people want it... (Kalinowski, 1999; *The 1863 Uprising in Byelorussia*, 1980).

The role of Kastus' Kalinowski in the formation of Belarusian identity is well recognized. In particular, it was Kastus' Kalinowski who began to use

the lexeme *бацькаўшчына* / *bac'kaushchyna* 'fatherland' in the meaning of 'country, which historically belongs to a certain people and which this people inhabits.' In the first *Letter from beneath the Gallows* (1864), Kastus' Kalinowski wrote:

*ja adno skažu pa szczyraj praūdzie: szto kali nam pad rondam polskim nie zaūsim bylo dobra, to jak maskal staū nami prawić, zrabiiū jon dla muzykoū czystae piekla na swiecie. Tut skazaci jaszczē treba, szto jon zmusiū nas pakidaci baćkaūszczyņu, iści ŷ rekruty, daj wajawaci nie za prykaz Boski, nie za praūdu i sprawiadliwaś, no za blum, za niawoliu nie raz prociū bratoū da baćkoū naszym...*⁵

I will say only one thing: that if we were bad under Polish rule, then when the Maskal began to rule over us, he created pure hell on earth for the peasants. Here it is necessary to say that he forced us to leave our homeland, be recruited [for the army], and let us fight not under God's command, not for truth and justice, but for stupidity, for slavery against our brothers and our parents...

Ty, adnak, Narodzie, nie dażydajsia, da z czym mozesz idzi wajawaci za swajho Boha, za swajo prawa, za swaju chwatu, za swaju baćkaūszczyņu.

But you, the People, do not linger, as to how you can go to fight for your God, for your rights, for your honor, for your fatherland (Kalinowski, 1999; *The 1863 Uprising in Byelorussia*, 1980).

The ideas and activities of Kastus' Kalinowski, a rebel, publicist, poet, proved that the "homeland" concept evolved from 'small homeland, place of birth' to 'native country' in the process of nation-building and national identity. In the Belarusian language, there are three words meaning 'homeland': *бацькаўшчына* / *bac'kaushchyna*, *айчына* / *ajchyna*, and *радзіма* / *radzima*. Along with the semantic development of the lexeme *bac'kaushchyna*, *Bel. ajchyna* also came to be used in the same sense of 'native country.' This can be seen in the poem by an unknown author from 1860–1861, stylistically similar to Kastus' Kalinowski's newspaper *Музыкакая Прауда*:

Уважайціж добра людзі:
з маскалем толку не будзе –
а ведайцеж што рабіць,
каб айчыну бараніць?!⁶

Look well, people:
there will be no peace from the Muscovite –
but know what to do
to defend the homeland?!
(<https://bnkorporus.info/korporus.be.html>).

5 Here and below, in the text examples, the spelling of the original is preserved.

6 Here and below, there are several examples from the Belarusian People's Corpus (bnkorporus).

Later, the word *падзіма* / *radzima* 'homeland' began to be used with this semantics – during the Belarusian Renaissance at the beginning of the 20th century. The development of the meaning 'small homeland, place of birth' > 'country, which historically belongs to a certain people and which this people inhabits' is connected with the establishment of a nation, national identity, ethnotoponym, and ethnonym.

Contacts and ethnic identity

Thus, from the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania until the 1920s, the homeland of Belarusians was referred to in various ways: firstly, as *Rus'*, *Rus' Litouskaja* 'Lithuanian Rus', *Litva* 'Lithuania'; later as the *Northwestern Krai*, *Belorussia*, and *Belarus*. The multiplicity of names was accompanied by corresponding ethnonymss: *rusyn* 'Ruthenian', *litvin* 'Lithuanian', *belorusyn* 'Belarusian', *belarus* 'Belarusian', *paliak* 'Pole'.

The ethnonym *Litvin*, *Litvins* is often used by the humanist elite of Belarus as denoting the best and the most patriotic part of the nation. For example, this ethnonym was consistently used by the classic of Belarusian literature Uladzimir Karatkevich, including in relation to himself, for example, in the novel *Каласы над сярпом тваім* (*The Ears of Rye Under Thy Sickle*):

Zhmudzins, Germans, Poles, and Belarusians lived there. ...my ancestors lived on this land for a hundred and seventy years, ate its bread, spoke its language, washed with its water, sang its songs... And that's not all. It's no difference, if I consider myself a Litvin, a Belarusian, a local – call it what you want... (Karatkevich, 2017).

Humanities scholars also use the name of an ancient tribe – the ancestors of Belarusians – *крывічы* 'Kryviches' and *крывіч* 'Kryvich' as 'a marker of national dignity'. For example, it was actively used by the Belarusian poet and publicist Uladzimir Zhylka, who was repressed in 1933: "Yes, I am a *Kryvich* and I want the world to have a *Kryvich* nation" (Zhylka, 1923).

Consider a few lines from a poem by I. Staubun:

Хто я – паляк, беларус, ці літвін –	Who am I – a Pole, a Belarusian or a Lithuanian –
бог толькі ведае праўду адзін.	god only knows the truth.
Я ж хачу працаваць увесь век,	I want to work all my life,
каб заслужыць імя – чалавек.	to deserve the name of man.

(<https://bnkorporus.info/korporus.be.html>).

A similar confusion of identity can be seen in the prose of the Belarusian classic Maksim Haretski:

Шалапутаў сказаў мне пра яго, што гэта «абруселы літоўскі паляк магаметанскае рэлігіі». Часам і Шалапутаў лоўка скажа
Shalaputau told me about him that he was a ‘Russified Lithuanian Pole of the Mohammedan religion’. Sometimes Shalaputau expresses himself aptly (<https://bnkorporus.info/korporus.be.html>).

The word *абруселы* / *abrusely* ‘Russified’ is a derivative of *rus* ‘part of the former GDL, i.e. Belarusian and Ukrainian lands’.

The ethnonym *paliak* ‘Pole’ can also be used in relation to a resident of Belarus – as a rule, for a confessional reason: Catholics have been called Poles in Belarus. The Belarusian classic poet Francishak Bahushevich wrote a poem *Хрэсьбіны Мацюка* (*Matsiuk’s baptism*) about how Cossacks asked a Belarusian what faith he was:

Ён кіпіць горай, пытаючы, лае,	He boils more, asking, scolding,
Крычыць, і б’ецца, і ў твар штурхае.	Screams, fights, and pushes in the face.
«Да хто ты, да хто ты, ці рускі, ці не?»	“Who are you, who are you, are you <i>Russian</i> or not?”
Я дай круціцца туды і сюды,	I began to spin here and there,
Думаю: што б тут сказаць яму мне?	I think: what would he say to me?
«Я не нашу, – кажу, – барады».	“I don’t wear a beard,” I say.
«Да ты, – ён кажа мне, – веры якой?»	“What faith do you have?,” he tells me.
Ці ты праслаўны, ці ты – паляк?»	“ <i>Are you Orthodox, or are you a Pole?</i> ”
«А дайце ж, паночку, – кажу, – мне пакой,	“Just leave me, sir, I say.
Да я ж тутэйшы, я ж казаў так!...»	I’m from here (<i>tutejsky</i>), I said so!...”

and then they forced him to renounce this faith:

О так-то хрысцілі мяне казакі	That’s how the Cossacks baptized me
З <i>тутэйшага</i> ды у <i>палякі</i> !	From <i>tutejsky</i> to a <i>Pole</i> !

(Bahuševič, 1921).

The lexeme *тутэйшы* / *tutejsky* in the above quote is also a kind of ethnonym. *Tutejsky* is not just ‘local, indigenous’. It conveys ‘one of us, friendly,’ and therefore ‘safe, under the protection of the local community’. To be *tutejsky* is thus much more important than being *Belarusian* or *Lithuanian*. This is an example of an ethnically specific concept that is not lexicalized in many other

languages, although local identity is important for any ethnic group at a certain stage of development.

Today, the confusion between the concepts of nation and religion, as in the poem cited above, can be found more often in dialect speech:

– А Вы католичка? – Я палячка. – А католики и поляки – это одно и то же? – Адно (Ошмянский р-н).

– У нас праваслаўных называлі – рускія, католікаў – палякі (Волковысский р-н).

(пример взят из: Antropov, Boganeva, Volodina, 2008).

‘Are you a Catholic?’ ‘I’m a Pole.’ ‘Are Catholics and Poles the same thing?’ ‘Yes, the same.’

(Oshmyany district).

‘We called the Orthodox people Russians, and Catholics were called Poles’ (Volkovysk district)

(an example is taken from Antropov, Boganeva, Volodina, 2008).

It is evident that the lack of a single toponym and ethnonym did not help strengthen ethnic and cultural identity. On the contrary, it indicated that the nation had not yet been fully formed and national self-consciousness remained weak.

In the case of Belarus, intensive ethnic and cultural contacts have had different character and different consequences at different historical stages. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a multinational, multilingual, and multi-confessional state, and it is often considered the golden age in the history of these lands. Later, however, very intensive contacts with Poland and Russia, combined with the absence of independent statehood, had a negative impact on the formation of the nation. Do intensive ethnic and cultural contacts contribute to a strong ethnic identity? The answer depends on many factors. An important role is played by statehood, the history of the ethnic group, and the preservation of language and culture.

Conclusion

The history of Belarus has affected the sense of the concept of “homeland.” The first Belarusian Renaissance at the beginning of the twentieth century and the formation of the Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918 brought hopes for national independence and a clear understanding of the “homeland” as a unique and priceless Belarus. However, it was at this time that the main contradictions of the Belarusian concept of “homeland” are revealed: the unstable name of the country and the blurred, unclear concept itself.

Today, the number of different names for Belarus and Belarusians has decreased significantly. Only the stable pair *Belarus / Belarusian* has remained, which indicates a strengthening of national identity. As it is known, the ethnotoponym *Belarus* was legally established as the official name of the state – *the Republic of Belarus / Belarus* – in 1992. The change of the official ethnotoponym (*Belorusskaja SSR* ‘Belarusian SSR’, *Belorussia* → *Belarus*) in this case accompanied profound social transformations and the process of nation-building.

The growth of national self-consciousness is also evidenced by the semantic development of the nouns *bac'kausbchyna, ajchyna, radzima* “place of birth, small homeland” > “country, which historically belongs to a certain people and which this people inhabits.” The meaning of ‘native country’ is listed first in dictionaries, and it is predominant in the works of well-known authors and in culturally significant contexts.

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