

Ordinary Tragedy: “Perestroika” of Collective Memory about Chernobyl Disaster in Belarusian History Textbooks¹

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Abstract: The paper focuses on discursive strategies that are used by authors of history textbooks to construct Belarusian collective memory of Chernobyl disaster within the more general narrative framework of the historical legacy of “perestroika”. Discourse and narrative analysis of the relevant chapters of five secondary school and nine university textbooks of the time period between 1995 and 2011 has revealed two distinct discursive strategies within a common narrative framework. First, the “organicist” discourse positions Chernobyl disaster as a threat to the Belarusian gene pool and thus invokes the sociobiological version of ethnic nationalism within biopower and biopolitics discourse. This strategy emphasizes the preserver of collective memory as a passive sufferer. The second, opposing strategy presents the Chernobyl disaster as one of the initial conditions, rather than the consequence of the preceding historical period, and offers a role of active struggler. Both strategies construct collective memories of tragedy as a form of historical continuity.

Keywords: Chernobyl disaster, perestroika, Belarus, discourse, narrative, biopolitics, collective memory.

Introduction

Discursive construction of historical time in great narratives of national history is a subject salient for many diverse areas, such as metahistory, contemporary interdisciplinary narratology, nationalism studies and discursive psychology. This issue has grown so popular and influential that even some of the decided adversaries of social constructionism as such tend to admit its key ideas as pieces of universally obvious commonsense. (Motyl, 2010) This firm recognition may signify a demand for more specific empirical research, which, however, would not be merely illustrative, but could enrich the general theoretical and methodological frame with richer variations and deeper interpretations. This objective may be fulfilled by addressing more specific cases, and also by analyzing materials produced in those countries that are relatively underrepresented in the contemporary academic discourse.

The past several years have somewhat changed this situation of underrepresentation with regards to Belarus, due to the appearance of a number of new publications. (e.g. Bekus, 2010; Buhr et al., 2011) However, most of them give a broad overview of Belarusian national identity without much attention to its particular aspects, let alone their specific manifestations in discourse. In this paper we try to take a different perspective by using a narrowly defined set of Belarusian texts, namely, paragraphs from history textbooks related to the Chernobyl disaster.

The course in Belarusian history is taught both at Belarusian secondary schools and universities. At secondary schools, both Belarusian and world history are part of the curriculum for the whole duration of studies. The teachers must have at least a bachelor's degree in some area of social sciences and humanities that, according to the formulation in the diploma, allows teaching of “social sciences and humanities” or specifically, history. That is, secondary school history teachers are usually professional historians, but can also be philosophers, sociologists or specialists in cultural studies.

At universities, Belarusian history is taught as an obligatory course to all undergraduate students except those majoring in history (the latter have several courses on different historical period with a significantly deeper insight) during one semester, usually in the first year of studies. The lecturers are professional historians with at least, but not limited to a bachelor's degree, although not always specializing in Belarusian history, usually affiliated at faculties or departments of history, depending on the university's inner structure.

Both school and university textbooks are written by professional historians, usually holding high-ranking academic positions at universities or at the National Academy of sciences. Most textbooks, especially those of relatively large size, have more than one author, and university textbooks may include chapters written by researchers specializing in respective subjects. In order to be introduced in the teaching process, both secondary school and university textbooks require the centralized approval by the Belarusian Ministry of Education. At secondary schools, only one particular textbook is recommended by the Ministry of Education for a certain year of studies and prescribed to be used by teachers. University lecturers enjoy more flexibility in being able to recommend their students any textbook, or a combination of textbooks, so that university courses are more diverse than secondary school classes not only didactically, but substantively. University lecturers may also recommend their students refer to additional literature, including primary sources, although the syllabi must be based on textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. Thus, secondary school textbooks usually replace one another, while university textbooks, once officially approved, may be and usually are used simultaneously.

In our study we analyzed all the textbooks on Belarusian history dedicated to the period relevant to the subject of our study that are currently in use at Belarusian secondary schools or universities. These include five secondary school and nine university textbooks published between 1995 and 2011. The period of "perestroika" and the Chernobyl disaster as one of its key events are presented in various ways and at first glance do not offer a single interpretation, which makes the impact of these textbooks of collective memory unclear.

This apparent lack of clarity deserves special consideration, because textbooks are usually interpreted as an important element of the work on formation of memory and identity of the readers, usually performed by the nation-state. (Ferro, 2003; Barnard, 2003) Textbooks describe important and valuable historical events as realms of memory. (Nora & Kritzman, 1998) The event of the Chernobyl disaster is without doubt one of such realms of memory in recent Belarusian history. The place includes individual, family, collective and state aspects of memory. The important peculiarity of Chernobyl disaster as a realm of memory is that it is located in fields of communicative memory as a result of real experience, and also in cultural memory as a result of social and cultural translation. (Assmann, 1992) Another important feature of the Chernobyl disaster is its dual position as an ecological and political catastrophe, which places it within the realm of biopower and biopolitics in its Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2007; Foucault, 2008) representing a widespread form of modern rationality. (Rosanvallon, 1999)

To investigate the representation of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarusian history textbooks within the theoretical framework of social memory studies and the concept of biopolitics, we used specific methods of discourse and narrative analysis. In the first case, critical discourse analysis is probably the most widespread of all qualitative research methods, especially in similar studies, and, consequently has perhaps the most elaborate and rigorous methodology. (Gee & Handford, 2011; Fairclough, 2003) However, critical discourse analysis is aimed at revealing implicit ideological tendencies, while in the Soviet official texts the Marxist ideology was explicitly proclaimed and emphasized. In the Post-Soviet period, it was much easier for multiple ideologies to appear on the agenda and attract adherents than for the general notion of an ideology and means of its communication to alter

(Groys, 2010). In the Post-Soviet textbooks we analyzed, authors hardly make attempts at apparent objectivity, but, on the contrary, openly state their overall ideological positions and attitudes to particular historical phenomena. The in-depth, hidden side of these texts is the multiplicity of emergent strategies of coping with a plurality of alternative interpretations masked by apparently natural, but not neutral, evaluative position.

Considering this discourse organization we eventually decided against using critical discourse analysis in favor of the more appropriate approach of discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Another perspective that must be taken into account is the one that captures historicity of both content and purpose of the texts under attention. For this purpose we used narrative analysis in its hermeneutical, rather than structural type, according to László's classification (László, 2008), which is nearest to the "narrative narratology" introduced by Fludernik as a form of genre analysis of nonfictional narratives (Fludernik, 1996). Hermeneutical narrative analysis is focused on revealing techniques of creating in the target audience a shared horizon of expectations that is crucial for coherent sensemaking regarding historical events (Koselleck, 1995). The main purpose of the present research in its operationalized form is therefore to discover relations between particular discursive strategies and narrative patterns in Chernobyl-related chapters of Belarusian history textbooks and interpret possible implications of these simultaneous occurrences.

Results for Secondary School textbooks

The period of the second half of the 1980s, when the Chernobyl disaster happened, is labeled in Belarusian school textbooks as a period of "perestroika". The period is presented in textbooks on the history of Belarus and world history for tenth and eleventh grades (including additional literature (Kovkel & Yarmusik, 2010) and literature for testing (Sharova, 2010)). The textbooks usually have two identical versions (in Belarusian and Russian); as a rule, they are written by a collective of authors (two or more persons). The process of "perestroika" is usually described in a special section (4-6 pages) in textbooks². The political character of "perestroika" is marked ("Politics of perestroika" is a usual term), which shows that it is constructed as a deliberate and goal-oriented process realized primarily in the political sphere (including polity, policy and politics in English-speaking tradition), and then was transposed into other spheres, such as socioeconomic and cultural. The mode of narration about "perestroika" in textbooks ranges from neutral to rather skeptical toward its goals and results³. "Perestroika" is usually described as an event related to the Soviet Union as a whole with some peculiarities in Belarus (BSSR – Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic). The main logic of narration is usually presented as movement from the whole USSR to the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic as one of its parts.

The process of "perestroika" is usually described as a result of objective economic and social problems of the Soviet Union: "*Perestrojka byla veleniem vremeni. V obshchestve nakopilos' mnogo problem, reshenie kotoryh putem kosmeticheskikh popravok ne dalo by rezul'tatov*" ("Perestroika was a dictate of time. Many problems were accumulated in society, and superficial changes would be not enough") (Kovkel, 2008: 570). The transformation is described on both global and individual levels: "*Perestrojka zatronula vseh i kazhdogo v otdel'nosti.*" ("Perestroika touched all and everyone in particular.") (Fomin, 2006: 78) However, the realization of these objective changes--especially the action of central Soviet power and M. Gorbachev personally--are usually marked as "inconsistent" (Koshelev, 2009: 367). The transformation of values is presented as pernicious:

"Nachalsja process podmeny socialisticheskikh idealov drugimi idealami i cennostjami. Ideja social'noj spravedlivosti objavljalas' vrednoj i

nedosjagaemoj, jekonomika trgovno-bazarnogo tipa –vershinoj jekonomicheskoj praktiki. Nachali propagandirovat'sja kul't nazhivij i lichnoj vygody, a takzhe nasilie – to, chto v sovetskoe vremja schitalos' unizitel'nyj dlja cheloveka i obshchestva.” (“The process of substitution of socialistic ideals by other ideals and values started. Idea of social justice was declared harmful and inaccessible, and boistrous trade economy – as the ideal economic practice, The propaganda of the cult of easy gain, personal profit and violence – all that was declared as humiliating for Soviet people and society – started.”) (Novik, 2009: 191)

The evaluation of the collapse of the Soviet Union varies between moderately and emphatically negative (Russian terms ‘*raspad*’ and ‘*razval*’ - breakdown, disintegration) are used. Sometimes negative activity of Western states and organizations is mentioned:

“Oppozicija s pomoshch'ju Zapada predprinimala popytki, napravlennye na razval SSSR, unichtozhenie sushchestvujushchego stroja. Chtoby izbezhat' obvinenija vo vmeshatel'stve vo vnutrennie dela SSSR, byli sozdany mnogochislennye fondy, centry, sovety, associacii, kotorye oficial'no schitalis' chastnymi, negosudarstvennymi organizacijami, a fakticheski nahodilis' pod kontrolem zapadnyh specslužb.” (“Opposition supported by the West tried to disintegrate the USSR and to destroy the existing system. To avoid accusation of intervention into home affairs of the Soviet Union, many funds, centers, councils, associations were founded, which officially claimed to be private, nongovernmental, but in reality were controlled by Western secret services.”) (Novik, 2009: 193)

The Chernobyl disaster itself is mentioned in only one book, namely, “History of Belarus: synopsis for preparation for testing” by Sharova (2010). The name of the chapter is “BSSR in the 2nd half of 1980s. Politics of perestroika and peculiarities of its implementation in BSSR”. The structure of the chapter is the following: 16 main concepts (perestroika, democratization, reform etc.) with their definitions, chronology of the events, and short synopses of the main events (reasons for “perestroika”, its main forms, essence of political reforms). The chronology includes events from the years 1985, the beginning of “perestroika”, until 1993 - the suspension of activity of the Belarusian Communist party. The date of the Chernobyl accident (26.04.1986) is placed between “Election of Gorbachev as the General Secretary” (1985) and “Enactment of the Law ‘About discussion of important questions in the state life of the BSSR by the people’” (1988). The analysis of the Chernobyl disaster is conducted in a special part entitled “Influence of the Chernobyl accident on the economic situation in the BSSR”. The Russian word “*avaria*” (accident, crash) is used to name the event. It is analyzed mainly in an economic context regarding its influence and consequences for the Belarusian economy. No description of the accident is given, only the conclusion that the “*avarija prinesla Belarusi poteri, ravnye 32 respublikanskim bjudzhetam 1985 g*” (“the accident generated losses for Belarus, equal to 32 budgets of the year 1985”) (Sharova, 2010: 274). Additionally, the losses caused by the radioactive contamination of the territory, where over 2 million people lived and which fell out of economic use, were included. The special BSSR program for overcoming the consequences of the accident in the Soviet Republic is constructed as problematic, stressing that “*otselenie, lechenie i ozdorovlenie ljudej, sozdanie nadležashchih uslovij dlja truda i zhizni na postradavshih territorijah ostajutsja problemoj nacional'noj jekonomiki i v nashe vremja*” (“Resettlement, treatment and health improvement of people, creation of proper conditions for working and

living on the affected territory is still a problem for the national economy even today”) (Sharova, 2010: 274).

The other secondary school textbooks do not contain any mention of the Chernobyl disaster at all. This result can be expected for textbooks on world history (Koshelev, 2009), because the Chernobyl disaster could be replaced in collective memory by many other dramatic events important for the whole Soviet Union, which are the main focus in the textbooks. But the absence of any mention about the Chernobyl disaster in the textbook on the history of Belarus (Novik, 2009) is rather unexpected and counterintuitive, because it does not correlate with the common opinion - presented both in Belarus and abroad, both in expert's and public opinion - about the disaster as a very important event for Belarusian collective memory and a constitutive factor of Post-Soviet Belarusian identity. The fact of the absence needs reflexive explanation.

In our opinion, this absence can be explained by a number of reasons. First of all, all the textbooks present a big historical narrative, focused on political, economic, social processes. It is difficult to place the Chernobyl disaster, as a dual event - both natural (mainly ecological) and social - within this narrative. Secondly, the textbooks present the history of Belarus. Secondly, when more general and global events are depicted, they are usually described through vertical links between the whole and its parts. For example, the process of “perestroika” in the USSR in general is connected to peculiarities of its realization in Belarus. The Chernobyl disaster itself is not seen as an important event for the USSR as a whole and therefore it is not presented in the textbooks on world history, as has been shown. However, the disaster concerns not only Belarusian history, but also the history of its neighbors Ukraine and Russia. An adequate description of the event needs other historical narratives such as regional or comparative history approaches. Thirdly, authors of the textbooks evaluate the Soviet past with its technocratic intentions positively in general, and the event of the Chernobyl disaster does not correlate with the narrative of the successful economic and technological development presented by the mainstream Soviet narrative. It is possible to suppose that the event itself is placed in the textbooks within some horizon of expectations, marked as more general narrative about “perestroika”. Because of it the event is interpreted not as something extraordinary, but as one of the many “bad” events of this tragic period.

A pivotal issue regarding this interpretation presented in secondary school textbooks is whether it significantly impacts schoolchildren's understanding of the relevant historical events and, thus, whether Belarusian history textbooks are actually involved in the construction of collective memory. In order to answer this question we examined one of the ways secondary school students reproduce their notions of the Chernobyl disaster, namely the schoolchildren's paintings that were awarded first places in a competition dedicated to the commemoration of the Chernobyl disaster in 2011. The following three paintings were presented among others on the official website of the organizer, the Belarusian Department of the Russo-Belarusian Information Center on the Consequences of the Chernobyl Disaster of the Institute of Radiology of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Belarus (BDRBIC). As we can see, the textual representation of this multi-faced tragedy of the period is mirrored in these visual materials.



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The overall conclusion that can be made from these paintings is that they actually mirror the ideas and ways of representation that are transmitted by the textbooks. First, we can see, there are obvious differences in the style of paintings, which match the plurality of

the interpretations of the period of “perestroika” found in textbooks. Thus, the first painting presents a distinctly Soviet visual code, while the two others are more reserved and balanced in their coloring and images. Another common trait between the last two paintings and the textbooks is that in both the Chernobyl disaster is not depicted via unique signs directly related to the event, but via rather abstract symbols such as Chagall’s swaying clock in the third painting. The second painting could also reflect the villages abandoned and depopulated because of accelerating urbanization processes, which used to be a pertinent issue of roughly the same period of the 1980s. Interestingly, the apples in the second painting, despite the obvious contrast to the background, belong to the same motif of abandonment. Unlike in Ukraine, where an apple symbolizing the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge is a logo of the National Chernobyl Museum in Kyiv (Phillips, 2011), in Belarus such symbolic associations are not found in the public discourse. A different meaning can be found in Mikola Liashchun’s poem “*Aravitskiya yablyki*” (“Apples of Aravichy”), which is dedicated to “*kinutai viostsy*” (“abandoned village”) in Polesye where “*gulaye zhurba*” (“sorrow is walking”), “*pustechaju zieurayuts’ vokny*” (“windows have an empty stare”) and “*stagnali ad yablyk nalitykh sady.*” (“orchards moaned under the weight of ripe apples”) (Liashchun, 2007) As in the second painting, in the poem ripe apples with nobody to pick them, like empty windows, are a sign of abandonment and desolation. According to this, one might suggest, they construct the Chernobyl disaster as one part of the generally disastrous historical period. The conclusion therefore is that secondary school textbooks successfully transmit the notion of the Chernobyl disaster as one among many similarly tragic signs of the period.

Results for University Textbooks

The university textbooks initially present richer material for analysis compared to the secondary school textbooks, both in the length of relevant chapters and paragraphs and the apparent, albeit unexpected diversity of interpretations and evaluations. However, a closer and methodologically more rigorous scrutiny reveals underlying similarities in discursive strategies and an almost complete uniformity of the mode of narration about the Chernobyl disaster.

All the university textbooks on Belarusian history provide the same solution for one of the most pertinent historiographical issues, namely that of periodization, by placing the year 1986 within the period starting in 1985 and continuing up to the present time. This is true for textbooks that were published at different times during 1995 - 2008. All of them contain a chapter covering this period of time as a single historical entity. Thus, the milestone separating the present from the past is narratively constructed in the textbooks not as the actual collapse of the Soviet Union, but the start of “perestroika”, which is consequently portrayed as the prototypical part of the narrative. The declaration of independence that marked the end of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic and the appearance of the newly independent Republic of Belarus is thus an event among many, and not a fundamental transformation. Therefore, we may conclude that the protagonist of the relevant chapters in Belarusian history textbooks is not so much Belarus as the post-Soviet region as seen from the Belarusian perspective. This uncertainty of spatial boundaries of the narrative is in accordance with the permeability of its temporal limits, with “perestroika” as a transitional period, rather than any single event marking the end of the previous narrative sequence. This mode of narration emphasizing longevity and gradualness of change can be understood in Ricoeur’s sense as an attempt to overcome a traumatic break in narration (Ricoeur, 1990). Moreover, the period is portrayed as comprising almost exclusively tragic events, which

offers a sort of covert legitimization and consolation for any such single event, including the Chernobyl disaster.

This coping strategy mirrored in the revealed mode of narration explains the astonishingly little attention given to the Chernobyl disaster in most Belarusian history textbooks for universities. The event is usually described in one or two short paragraphs placed at an arbitrary position in the middle of the chapter with no special subtitle that would turn attention to the subject. The disaster is therefore regarded not as a separate subject worthy of special consideration, but as one among many aspect of a different subject; albeit, the latter within this universal mode of narration may vary considerably. For instance, the first edition of the most widespread textbook by arguably the most influential author among contemporary Belarusian historians, Yevgeniy K. Novik (1998), narrates the history of the period from “perestroika” to the present in the form of the four strictly differentiated plots dedicated to political transformations, economic reforms, cultural development (in the narrow sense of the word, as referring primarily to art and education) and international relations (Novik, 1998). The Chernobyl disaster is positioned as irrelevant to the first three plots of the narrative and is mentioned exclusively in the context of international relations, where readiness to provide financial help for Belarus and its recognition as the main sufferer from the ecological disaster is positioned as the decisive indicator of the place of Belarus in the global geopolitical border and particularly the degree of inclusion vs. exclusion.

“Na sesijah General'noj asamblei AAN shjerag vjaduchyh krain Zahadu, kab pazjuavicca ad charnobyl'skaj prablemy, stavili pytanne ab znjacci jae sa statusu mizhnarodnaj i peravodze ŷ rjegijanal'nuju. U takim vypadku Belarus' pavinna byla samastojna vyrashac' gjetuju prablemu. Janka pazbayljalasja dapamogi mizhnarodnaga supol'nictva.” (“During the sessions of the UN General Assembly, certain influential Western countries, in order to get rid of the Chernobyl problem, proposed to transfer it from the international to the regional level. In this case Belarus would have to solve this problem on its own. It would be deprived of the help from the world community”) (Novik, 1998: 445)

The second revised edition of the same textbook, which appeared ten years later (Novik, 2008), places the paragraph on the Chernobyl disaster closer to the opening part of the chapter, and therefore to the forefront, but quantitatively gives it twice as little coverage as the late Soviet anti-alcoholic campaign described immediately before it.

This mode of narration stresses the immediate consequences of the disaster, namely the need for unplanned budgetary spending, which deprived socioeconomic reforms of the necessary financial support. Thus, the Chernobyl tragedy is firmly placed within the generally tragic historical period and is paradoxically portrayed as an exceptional catastrophe at the global level, but not at the regional level, because the post-Soviet states including Belarus had simultaneously a lot of other afflictions to suffer. The exceptional status of the Chernobyl disaster is that, unlike the other events of the similar narrative status, it is sought to be globalized and this serves as a tool of integrating Belarusian history into the world history narrative. Surprisingly, the same mode of narration about the Chernobyl disaster is found in the two textbooks that openly differ from the previously analyzed one in evaluations of the main events, such as the attitude towards the Soviet Union in general. Both textbooks were written at the same institution, namely the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences, and to some extent by the same authors. However, the first textbook was published in two volumes in 1995 (Kastsjuk, 1995), and the second one is a six-volume set, with the final volume containing the relevant chapter published in 2011 (Kastsjuk, 2011). Both versions strive to

give to the Chernobyl disaster as much prominence as possible by dedicating to it special chapters with heavily emotionally loaded headings such as, “*The Chernobyl disaster is a threat to the gene pool of the Belarusian people*” (1995) and “*The Catastrophe at the Chernobyl nuclear power station and its impact on economics, social sphere and public morale*” (2011). However, a closer narrative analytic view on these chapters reveals that the authors lack the necessary narrative resources for achieving this goal. Both texts are clearly subdivided into narrative and non-narrative fragments, with only the latter giving full attention to Chernobyl and the former placing it within more general motifs.

Thus, as soon as the text starts focusing exclusively on the Chernobyl disaster without political, socioeconomic or broadly ideological generalizations, the narrative as a sequence of events gives way to the non-narrative enumeration of data about the catastrophe reflecting the area and intensity of immediate impact:

“Pravedzenae ŷ lipeni absledavanne vysvetlila 11 rajonaŷ u Gomel'skaj i 5 u Magiljoŷskaj ablascjah, zabrudzhanyh czeziem-137. Agul'nae jae ploshcha sa shchyl'nascju 15 ki/km² i bol'sh sklala 5568 kv. km. Na gjetaj tjerytoryi znahodzilisja 428 naselenyh punktaŷ, dze prazhyvali bol'sh za 100 tys. chalavek.” (“The research conducted in July identified 11 districts in the Gomel region and 5 in the Magiliou region affected with cesium-137. The overall territory with the density of 15 ki/km² amounted to 5568 km². On that territory there were 428 settlements with a population of over 100,000.”)
(Kastsjuk, 2011 : 577)

Such data are quite effective in creating the impression of a significant event, and the abundance of quantitative information, even though it can be understood only by experts who have the background for comparison, given the overall impression of objectivity and trustworthiness. Nevertheless, whenever this atemporal text is integrated into historical experience, the narrators seem to lose interest in the subject of the Chernobyl disaster *per se* and start portraying it as a consequence and/or prerequisite of certain political and socioeconomic events, confirming the authors' evaluation of the Soviet Union as a historical project in general. Overall, it can be concluded that the depiction of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarusian history textbooks for universities lacks distinct narrative emplotment, but is closely integrated into the great narrative of the “perestroika” period as an event of secondary importance with regard to the collapse of the Soviet Union and ongoing crystallization of Post-Soviet realities.

This narrative configuration can be found in all the textbooks and is more or less uniformly employed by all their authors, who differ considerably in their attitudes to the principal events of the historical period in question and, consequently, place the Chernobyl disaster within different discourses following different rules. As a result of discourse analysis, we identified two such strategies, past- and future-oriented. The key issue distinguishing between these strategies is the choice of a more general explanatory framework for the event, for in all cases, according to the results of narrative analysis, it is portrayed as incapable of introducing its own thematical and explanatory agenda.

The first strategy (past-oriented) is characteristic for those texts that contain traces of ethnic nationalism with essentialist and primordialist notions of sociopolitical entities. It should be noted at once that this discourse is not confined solely to the texts expressing predominantly negative attitude towards the Soviet Union and view the newly independent statehood as its antipode. Primordialism can be found in the textbooks not only with regard to emerging nation-states, but to the Soviet Union itself, because, for instance, according to Brubaker (Brubaker, 1996), the Soviet national policy by means of overt condemnation of

nationalism covertly caused reduction of its collective representation to the ethnic version. This strategy positions the Chernobyl disaster within an organicist discourse that views the event as a threat to a national or supranational social entity via the radical diminution or contamination of its resources. This strategy contextualizes the Chernobyl disaster within a broader framework of biopower or biopolitics. In some cases the resources under threat are understood as financial assets, which are presented in a naturalistic way as something objectively given and requiring special transformation in order to become somehow integrated into social reality and acquire political and ideological significance. In the more extreme cases the key resources are understood not only naturalistically as a reflection of Marxist materialist views on socioeconomic development, but sociobiologically.

“Gramadzjane Rjespubliki Belarus' zhyvuc' i pracujuc' u napruzhanjeh abstavnah i navat jekstrjemal'nyccch umovah, stvoranyh Charnobyl'skaj katastrofaj. Smjarotnaj pagroze padvjargaecca genafond belaruskaj nacyi.” (“The citizens of the republic of Belarus live and work under strenuous and even extreme conditions caused by the Chernobyl disaster. The gene pool of the Belarusian nation is under a threat of death.”) (Kastsiuk, 1995: 445)

In this case the Chernobyl disaster is perceived as a threat not to the outer, but to the inner nature of the population, with explicit use of terms like the “gene pool of the nation” despite its all too obvious negative historical connotations. In the first version of this discursive strategy the sociopsychological protagonist of ‘the people’ is confronted with diminishing naturalized socioeconomic resources. In the second case, contrariwise, it is not the outer environmental reality, but the protagonist that is subjected to naturalization via the organicist discourse, and the threat of qualitative contamination of the gene pool instead of a mere quantitative diminution of resources, which makes the Chernobyl threat much more ambiguous regarding its indicators and for this reason much more overwhelming, but at the same time less instrumental in evoking specific counteractions as opposed to passiveness and helplessness.

The second discursive strategy, which does not imply an organicist interpretation of the event, is not past, but future oriented and views the Chernobyl disaster not as a result of the preceding period, but as one of the starting conditions of the new historical reality. Thus, in one of the university textbooks the disaster is named an “ill omen” of the epoch symbolically, with implied reasons, but unclear causes, predicting the allegedly disastrous outcome of the whole policy of “perestroika.” (Treshchenok, 2005)

“Zloveshchim simbolom nachavshejsja ‘perestrojki’ stala katastroficheskaja avarija 26 aprelja 1986 g. na Chernobyl'skoj AJeS v Ukraine. (...) Katastrofa prinesla ogromnye zhertvy. (...) Fizicheskomu i moral'nomu zdorov'ju naselenija byl nanesen strashnyj udar, posledstvija kotorogo ne ustraneny do sih por i eshche dolgo budut skazyvat'sja na posledujushchih pokolenijah. Raspad Sojuza ostavil respubliku, po suti, naedine s jetoj bedoj, ogromnym bremenem navalivshejsja na ee jekonomiku” (“The ill omen of the start of ‘perestroika’ was the catastrophic disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine on April 26th 1986. (...) The catastrophe brought about enormous losses (...) The physical and moral health of the nation received a tremendous blow, the consequences of which have not been coped with and will have a prolonged impact on the latter generations. The collapse of the Soviet Union in fact left the republic alone with this calamity, which created an enormous burden for its economy.”) (Treshchenok, 2005 : 279)

Unlike the organicist discourse, in this case the key attention is given not to the deep-rooted causes, but to the immediate and possible long-term consequences, which are, as can be seen from this excerpt, stated, but not specified. Accordingly, in the organicist discourse the protagonist is viewed as a passive tragic sufferer who has to bear the historical fate without hope for subsequent alterations, but with well-grounded demands for restitution from whatever side might possess more or better resources. On the contrary, the second discursive strategy does not presuppose victimization as a tool of compensation. Here, the main emphasis is placed on the mutually exclusive, although never clearly delineated patterns of future historical development. The main character, the Belarusian people, is viewed not so much as a passive sufferer as an active struggler for prevention of the worst-case scenarios of post-Chernobyl as a symbol of broadly post-Soviet history.

As can be concluded from these results, in all the analyzed Belarusian history textbooks for universities the Chernobyl disaster is constructed as tragedy among many symbolically similar events and processes of the uniformly tragic period of “perestroika,” such as the anti-alcoholism campaign and its disastrous consequences, or the alleged appearance of the black market as a result of economic liberalization. The key specific trait of the Chernobyl disaster among other events bestowed with similar status is its role as a mediator between biological and political realities. Here, biological always remains biological and is always placed in the background, but political is constantly turning into biological (e.g. nation as a gene pool) and back, and the political reality made biological is given the most attention, especially as a source of explanation. Thus, the texts about the Chernobyl disaster in the university textbooks indirectly raise pertinent issues of the philosophy of history, such as the existence of universal historical laws, the relation between the past, present and future, and the protagonists of the historical process. As these general issues still remain unsolved, the Chernobyl disaster itself is subjected to generalization and does not form a separate narrative or discourse.

Discussion

As our analysis shows, the Chernobyl disaster is presented in Belarusian school and university textbooks as a single event, rather than a prolonged tragedy, and its place within the main structure of narrative about the period of “perestroika” is far from prominent. It is usually portrayed as not particularly different from other events of the period and interpreted as one of a series. These results must be recognized as surprisingly counterintuitive, because the common opinion usually envisages the Chernobyl disaster as a very important event for Belarusian collective memory and a constitutive factor of Post-Soviet Belarusian identity. The difference between the common opinion about the importance of the Chernobyl disaster and its description in school and university textbooks can be explained by a number of reasons which do not exclude each other and should be analyzed complementarily.

First, the time period of 26 years from 1986 to 2012 is significantly shorter than the term of 40 years necessary for the formation of a shared cultural memory according to J. Assmann, which partly explains why the analyzed materials offer no attributes of a realm of memory. (Nora & Kritzman, 1998) The individual memory about the events is still strong, emotionally tinged and undergoing the process of negotiation, which makes the event an object of communicative rather than cultural memory. (Assmann, 1992: 34-47) It is placed somewhere between the spheres of actual private memories not yet expressed in the public discourse and even actual politics, such as the *Chernobylskij Shlyach* (Chernobyl Way), to name one of the mass demonstrations of political opposition, and a coherent version of history as a collectively shared mode of narration striving towards rationality and coherence. (White, 1987)

The rationalist historical discourse about Chernobyl is currently in the state of formation in Belarus, and shared canons both of its presentation and interpretation are as yet fragmentary and incomplete. The authors of textbooks are obliged by their social role to place the facts belonging primarily to collective and not cultural memory as firmly integrated in the structure of a general historical narrative. Lacking adequate linguistic and methodological resources for attaining this goal, they immerse the event of the Chernobyl disaster within the rationalist great narratives of Belarusian history, accentuating political or socioeconomic aspects of the disaster. What unites these two versions, as described in the previous section of the article, is the resemblance between the rationalist discourse about the Chernobyl disaster presented in Belarusian textbooks and the Foucauldian discourse of biopolitics. The two main variants in this regard can be interpreted as purely biopolitical (the disaster as a threat to the Belarusian gene pool) and economically oriented (the disaster as a threat to Belarusian economy and society). Psychologically, such discourse about Chernobyl as it is presented in the textbooks is not so impressive as the communications of individual memory--for instance, its artistic representations in children's pictures commemorating the anniversary of the disaster.

This rationalization of historical narrative is unexpected not only with regard to the emotion-provoking subject itself, but also in comparison to the theoretical model of the great narrative of national history, which is supposed to be capable of eliciting a strong irrational response and sanctifying the national mythology. To some extent this contradiction can be explained by the Chernobyl disaster belonging to the period of "perestroika", which is particularly eventful and historically intense. It would be rather difficult to confine all its connotations within a limited field of collective memory representation, such as a single chapter of a textbook. As a result, the Chernobyl disaster was partially replaced by other events within the symbolic space of Belarusian collective memory for a number of reasons, such as invisibility and incomprehensiveness of its long-term consequences and the indirect impact on people via a biologically and geographically preconditioned environment, as opposed to a collapse of the ideological system that had been created by people themselves. Therefore, our initial hypothesis was that the event of Chernobyl disaster would be partly overshadowed in textbooks by the compensatory phenomenon of national revival, which is recognized as paramount for the period in many former Soviet republics, especially in the Baltic states, for example. But in fact the national revival is not presented widely in Belarusian textbooks, particularly in the more recent ones, regardless of the authors. Instead, general positions are suffused with negative evaluations, such as a dishonest form of struggle for political power, as we can see in the school textbook by Novik from 2009: "Jeto bylo uzhe, bezuslovno, ne kul'turno-prosvetitel'skoe, a politicheskoe dvizhenie. Shla samaja obychnaja bor'ba pod prikrytiem lozunga vozrozhdenija nacional'noj kul'tury" ("It was already not just a cultural-educative, but undoubtedly a political movement. It was a usual political struggle in disguise of the slogan for the revival of national culture." (Novik, 2009: 192) This scarcity of coverage of the national revival, just as for the Chernobyl disaster, can be explained by its traumatic nature. The national revival project in Belarus constitutes a social trauma both for its active participants and supporters (because it has proved to be unsuccessful), and by its opponents, who view themselves with regard to the national revival as sufferers from symbolic violence such as the enforced linguistic Belarusization⁵. The parity and linkage between the two phenomena is accentuated by the theme of the Chernobyl disaster initially providing most part of the popular appeal ever enjoyed by the national revival activists, insofar as this argument against the Soviet regime could compensate for the lack of their own program of actions.

The other aspect relevant to the representation of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarusian textbooks is the unsolved issue of counterbalance between partly complementary and partly

competing narratives of Belarusian vs. regional history in the time of the approaching collapse of the Soviet Union, which was perceived by insiders as the “Soviet world”. The Chernobyl disaster in this context is presented as one among many symbolically similar events constituting this dramatic process, which authors of the textbooks try to explain and understand. Placing the Chernobyl disaster among the apparently disorganized multitude of negatively marked events of the period makes its narrative genre akin to drama or tragedy. (Frye, 2000) This perspective sacrifices optimism to perceived rationality by finding a seemingly unprecedented ecological catastrophe and thus an appropriate place within some horizon of expectations (Koselleck, 1995), be it as one of the reasons for economical problems (Sharova, 2010) or as one of the manifestations of the allegedly unsuccessful character of the “perestroika” policy as such. (Treshchenok, 2005) As a result of the process of semiotization of the past, enriching it with new meanings while inhibiting more spontaneous responses as well as pragmatic analysis of consequences, the Chernobyl disaster becomes a sign or even a symbol (like the catastrophe of the Titanic, for example) of the whole period of “perestroika”. In such descriptions the Chernobyl disaster has a dual essence: as a ecological collapse, where the use of the terms ‘disaster’ or ‘catastrophe’ marks the unpremeditated and inevitable character of the event and prompts its recognition as irreversible and not amenable to correction or coping in the outer reality, and as a result of an ontologically significant social action. This double significance is contrasted with the strong technocratic component of the Soviet project, presented in ideology, mass culture and mass consciousness, which should also be taken into account. The event of the Chernobyl disaster as an unsuccessful result of technocratic development can be interpreted as psychologically traumatic for collective memory and destructive for technocratic values of technical progress. This is marked by the loss of faith in the scientific romanticism and its giving way to a more ancient mystique of occult beliefs and practices which are notoriously popular in many post-Soviet countries among representatives of widely different social strata.

In addition to undermining milder forms of belief in the progressive potential of natural sciences along with the exaggerated version of romantic visionary form of scientism, the Chernobyl disaster appears to have received a fatal blow to the matching technocratic notion of social progress. This idea of historical success guaranteed to those collective social actors who consciously and reflectively accept objective laws of historical development was bound to be more influential than many other parts of the Marxist doctrine because of its generality and comprehensiveness. Having undermined this mode of narration based on tracing specific events back to inevitable and rationally expected realizations of universal historical laws, the Chernobyl disaster could not be given a prominent place in a specific narrative. An alternative primordialist mode of narration, which is considered prototypical for the nationalist discursive toolkit, has proved equally unacceptable in the Belarusian case, partly because of its general unpopularity, especially among the target audience of textbook readers, whose ideas are closer to civic nationalism, (Buhr, 2011) and partly because of its own fragmentarity and resulting incapability to comprise yet another component.

To sum up, methodologically the case of representations of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarusian history textbooks is interestingly different from what is usually expected from discourse and narrative analysis. Typically, an analyst reveals socially constructed restrictions imposed by selected modes of narration and discursive strategies on the originally ambiguous content and forcing one interpretation among many alternatives as the only natural way of understanding. However, in our research the content itself is so traumatic, unambiguous and emotionally intense in the short-term perspective, that it destroys both literally (in historical reality) and metaphorically (in second-order grammatical structures of speaking historically) the mode of narration necessary for relating its long-term consequences. Instead of discovering a coherent mode of narration, we identify a number of secondary discursive turns

aimed at providing a sense of meaningfulness to compensate the lack of culturally shared meaning. It is this void amidst the ongoing process of narrative modulation that presents the historicity of Chernobyl disaster as both tragic and ordinary.

Notes:

1. The research presented in this paper is part of the project “Internationalization and Implementation of Western Educational Standards in Post-Soviet States: From Building a Network Toward Joint Research” (Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden)
2. Excepting books *Vsemirnaya istoriya, XIX – nachalo XXI v.* (World History, XIX-beg. of XXI cent., in Russian): textbook for 11 grade. Ed. by V.S. Koshelev. (“Perestroika” is described in paragraph called “Political reforming of SU” (3 pages and a notion in paragraph about cultural life) and Kovkel I.I., Yarmusik E.S. *Istoriya Belarusi s drevneishih vremen do nashego vremeni* (History of Belarus since ancient times till our times, in Russian) (“Perestroika” is described as a part of a paragraph called “Social, economic and political development of Belarus in 1980-90” (4 pages))
3. A skeptical variant of narration is presented in the books *Istoria Belarusi XIX-nachalo XXI v.* (History of Belarus, XIX-beg. of XXI cent., in Russian): textbook for 11 grade. Ed. by E.K. Novik. and *Vsemirnaya istoriya, XIX – nachalo XXI v.* (World History, XIX-beg. of XXI cent., in Russian): textbook for 11 grade. Ed. by V.S. Koshelev. The impression of a skeptical attitude is created by the evaluation of the goals and results of the process, realization of the goals (showing that officially proclaimed goals differed from real motives, such as the struggle for political power) in collective and individual actions and by the skeptical style of narration itself (usage of period-specific language of self-description in ironic quotation marks).
4. The competition was organized by the Belarusian Department of the Russo-Belarusian Information Center on the Consequences of the Chernobyl Disaster of the Institute of Radiology of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Belarus (BDRBIC).
5. In September 1990, “The State Program for the Development of the Belarusian Language and Other National Languages in the BSSR” was adopted by the Council of Ministers of the BSSR. Its implementation included a set of drastic measures, such as authoritarian linguistic Belarusization of secondary and higher education (thus, all university courses were to be translated from Russian to Belarusian by 1993-1994). This policy caused immigration of many dissatisfied university lecturers, especially those who graduated from the most prestigious Soviet universities, and a wave of complaints from the population. It appeared that most Belarusians, according to the 1989 Soviet census, considered Belarusian their mother tongue, but were not inclined to rapidly change their everyday habits of communicating in Russian.

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