

Making Sense of the Post-Soviet Capital: Politics of Identity in the City of Minsk¹

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Abstract

Independence in 1991 and the need to construct a new national identity have drawn the attention of national post-Soviet political elites to the capital cities. Minsk was unique in this process because the set of possible cultural interpretations was initially limited there to post-war architecture that represented the Soviet power and its attributes. In this study, I analyzed cultural narratives in the space of Minsk as represented by the names of the places, the outer look and decorations of the city. For this purpose, I conducted content-analysis of historical and modern names of the city objects, and interpreted the strategies of building new national identity by the authorities. I found that the current narrative of national identity in Minsk is constructed on the basis of the 1945 Victory of WWII and the pre-communist 19th century history of the city's development. These are symbolically promoted and legitimized strategies to interpret Minsk. Moreover, the current project of national identity in Minsk strives for a monopoly, thus cutting down on the sources of other identities of the city. However, new capitalist features are increasingly including Minsk into global capitalist dynamics.

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, all the post-Soviet capitals faced major challenges in relation to their status, image, and functions. There was no more superpower influence coming from Moscow; neither was there a necessity to subordinate to the “center.” By contrast, to a greater or lesser extent, all the capitals of the newly established countries had to transform themselves so as to represent the nation-state. Belarus found itself in a tough situation of searching for acceptable cultural patterns (Krivolap 2008:378; Titarenko 2009:37).

Capitals have always been at the heart of symbolic representation of current politics of identity (Milerius 2008:53). During Soviet times, all the major buildings, objects, and the

very organization of the capital city were subject to serious manipulations with a view to impress foreign visitors or the residents of the countryside coming to the capital. Moreover, in the post-Soviet period, capitals faced a double challenge, for they appeared on the political map in the conditions of late capitalism and advanced cultural consumption, while the countries they represented were drowning in economic, social and often moral crises in the 1990s. In addition, as national capitals, post-Soviet cities in Europe had to address the cultural trauma of the Holocaust (Alexander 2004a:199), which eliminated much of the cultural diversity and polyphony of the cities' oral histories.

In such conditions, when there was acute necessity for a capital city to build its own strong national identity that would keep the society together, the simplest way to start building a new society was to make use of available symbolic resources. First of all, names of main streets were changed. New heroes appeared out of the Lenin-named avenues cloned previously all around the former Soviet Union. There arose new names, and new monuments were erected as well, often in the memory of intellectuals deceased during Soviet repressions or historical figures important to the nation's history. The Soviet mechanisms of regulating symbolic space through references to ideology broke down, and the capitals excitedly desynchronized by putting accents on national narratives (Milerius 2008:51). In Minsk, Lenin Avenue was renamed after the 16th century printing pioneer Francysk Skaryna.

Later, when independence of the countries established itself as a political reality and foreign investments and building projects started coming to former Soviet countries, the very image of capital cities modernized. A vivid example of this process is Vilnius where high rise buildings are now an integral part of the overall very traditional city landscape. By contrast, since 1991 Minsk has not experienced major financial investments or external cultural influence. In large part this has to do with the non-democratic trends in the political and economic development of the country since the mid-1990s. Political and economic support from Russia made the authoritarian Belarusian political establishment relatively autonomous and independent of the international environment, making it possible to limit freedom of speech, introduce censorship, and take over division of powers (Tilly 2008:66). As a result, the country has been hailed as non-democratic, and it did not get as much support from the Western countries as other post-Soviet and post-socialist Central-Eastern European states. For instance, in 2006, foreign investment into Belarus did not exceed US \$750 million, while the country's demand for investments at that time was assessed at least at US \$5 billion.

For the city of Minsk, being the capital of a politically isolated eastern European country meant that any transformation would have to be managed with local symbolic and

cultural resources. Post-colonial and Creole strategies have been suggested as possible ways of interpreting the project of Belarus as a nation (Babkou 2005: 8). One of the main points of these discussions has been the language issue. As the current political regime developed, frequent reference was made to the Soviet past, one of its key elements being the dominance of the Russian language. Since the mid-1990s, the Belarusian language which, as a national language (as elsewhere in the post-Soviet space) was widely used in parallel to Russian, has been almost totally pushed out of the official discourse (Gapova 2008:31). Today, the majority of Minsk's population uses Russian in their everyday life, which, coupled with Soviet architecture and anti-capitalist political rhetoric, create the impression that Minsk is still a Soviet city stuck in time, the socialist version of T. Campanella's "City of the Sun" (Klinaŭ 2008). These and other features of the political regime reflected in the identity of Minsk have made the latter a very attractive object of study.

Lately, Minsk has attracted quite significant academic interest resulting in a series of publications, mostly by Belarusian authors, but by foreign academics as well. One of the most representative among them is a collection of articles titled *Belarusian Format: Invisible Reality* (2008) published in Vilnius by European Humanities University (EHU), the Belarusian university in exile (on EHU see Mikhailov 2009). The book provides an overview of cultural and visual trends in Belarusian media space, from the problems of political struggle in the spheres of language (E. Gapova) and identity (A. Ousmanova), to cultural production (M. Zhabankov) and the development of global capitalism (A. Gornykh) and strategies of structuring the space of Minsk (A. Krivolap, A. Sarna, B. Cope).

These scholars point out that identity negotiation and construction develops according to specific patterns in Belarus. First, because of the struggle between Soviet and European historical discourses on Belarus, the national language can not function as a mobilizing factor (Gapova 2008:31). Moreover, even non-political initiatives get political treatment because they can break the present power equilibrium of isolation to the outer world and relative equality of the people within the country. Second, the choice between political alternatives through media discourse is turned into the moral choice between Good and Evil, whereby the value of stability (understood in the widest sense) is to legitimate the elimination of all kinds of mediators (cultural, economic, political) and new forms of control in the name of the common good (Gornykh 2008:184). Third, any form of Otherness such as homosexuality is treated in Belarusian political discourse in a conservative way by the authorities and the opposition alike. The socio-cultural trajectory of the Soviet past seems to persist (Ousmanova 2008:327). As a result, any freedom of political thought is discredited in the official media,

and even political discourse itself turns out to simulate democracy rather than propose alternative strategies. Moreover, as Zhbakov notes on the cultural production in Belarus, the culture in the country is authoritarian, which means that its ideals are linearity and transparency and that it is concerned with reproducing the same myths over and over again. Its main difference from capitalism is that there is no competition which could develop the culture into a natural mosaic (Zhbakov 2008:149-155). More specifically, the strategies of “formatting” the symbolical space involve the following: nomination (as depersonalization and abstraction from the previous names); symbolization (as metaphor creation); legitimization (creating official link between the concept and its image coined before); organization (production of events and their use as mobilizing resource); stigmatization (as internal closure of a strong exclusive collective identity), and stimulation, which involves direct engagement of certain social groups into events (Sarna 2008a:239-245). As underlined by Sarna, recently the active redistribution of cultural resources has taken place which gives the authorities the power to territorialize the urban space of Minsk and give ontology to certain political objects and events (Sarna 2008a:263).

A detailed analysis of media coverage of the parade on the Independence Day yields an interesting interpretation: moving the place of the parade in a cultural landscape that has mostly remained Soviet in its monuments and names, could be an attempt to reconstruct the models of power and subordination from the Soviet past (Krivolap 2008:376). In the directed action of the parade “heterotopia,”² old Soviet symbols get loaded with new meanings that address different age groups and show legitimate ways of treating national symbols, so that the parade itself appears as a “commercial” for the authorities (Krivolap 2008: 384). The same issue of old symbols in new political context can also be grasped from the phenomenological perspective. Cope refers to the metaphor of specters that wander around the city when “the time is out of joint” (Cope 2008:502). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the old sculpture and architecture that abounds in Minsk has represented the hollow forms of outdated ideals calling for the “future of the past” as it was seen in days gone by. In the post-Soviet times these appeals are inadequate. Moreover, there is nothing Belarusian in the Soviet monuments, i.e. the latter do not correspond to the need to build a national identity (Cope 2008:520). As a result, Minsk of the 2000s evokes mixed feelings: the physical organization of the city communicates controversial messages as to how to read the city, with old heroes and old ideals in the new context (Cope 2008:519). At the same time, the rural features of Minsk such as tractors in the street, communities of elderly women in the blocks of flats, weekend migration to the country at harvest time, or the darkness of the most parts of

the city at night, also contribute to the mixed feelings about Minsk as a city and generate a seeming incongruence to its status as the capital (Cope 2008).

Generally, the “Belarusian format” produced in Belarusian political and media contexts turns most public actions into political events and makes wide use of Soviet objects, although giving them new meanings. In the post-Soviet context, it represents a strategy of limiting global capitalism while trying to cope with the local cultural resources. In the context of Minsk studies, however, no systematic analysis has been done as to the changing body of the city as a whole or the shifting dynamics of its cultural references after 1991. The purpose of this paper is to investigate these issues.

Another collection under the title *P.S. Landscapes: Optics for Urban Studies*³ was published the same year in Vilnius (Milerius 2008). This volume focused on post-Soviet cities in a comparative perspective. In contrast to other collective works on post-socialist cities (such as Stanilov 2008), this volume turns to the lesser known cases of Astana, Baku, Minsk, Tashkent, and other cities. This volume is different from other accounts of post-socialist cities in Central-Eastern Europe in that it analyzes the countries of the former Soviet Union where the “synchronizing” and “controlling” regimes of life were much stricter. In addition, changes came to the post-Soviet countries later and more slowly. Much attention is given to finding the common trends of post-Soviet urban development such as the disappearance of a unifying politics of cultural “synchronization” (N. Milerius), postmodern treatment of national history (K. Medeuova), growing diversity and segmentation of urban population (A. Kosmarski, S. Rumyansev), and strategies and practices of structuring the public space in Minsk (A. Sarna, E. Trubina).

In his essay, Milerius states that the Soviet regime used urbanization as a tool to synchronize different social spaces by putting the same objects with identical contents into different cities. When conversion of meanings stopped in the 1990s, the Soviet space itself disappeared (Milerius 2008:47-49). The Soviet regime left very little space for personal freedom (Soviet collective memory was disciplining and centralized). After 1991, the cities turned into laboratories of experiments with the past; they grew in new differences and became more differentiated (Milerius 2008:56-61). An important aspect of post-Soviet capital cities is the postmodern treatment of history. According to Medeuova, postmodern principles of city building (here, in Astana) include: plurality, compromise between technology and human beings, active intrusion in the past and myth production, narrativity, double coding that implies ambiguity and experiments, and decentrality (the wandering center) (Medeuova 2008:184-186). Minsk seems to have borrowed from the narrative and mythology aspects of

this list, while completely ignoring plurality. Moreover, other capitals such as Tashkent and Baku provide more evidence to the diversity of post-Soviet development (Kosmarski 2008; Rumyansev 2008). While such features as destruction of the historical center and commercialization of the urban infrastructure, privatization and segmentation of space (gated communities, ghettos) could be named as common trends in post-Soviet cities (Kosmarski 2008:195), the degree and configuration of each of them is different.

Of special interest to this study are two articles in the volume dedicated to Minsk. One of them addresses the strategy of illuminating the old buildings along the major streets which cross-cuts the narrative of “Minsk as a clean city” promoted by authorities (Sarna 2008b). “Glamour” is used here to describe a strategy of managing objects and political practices in the city where the struggle for cleanliness grows into maintaining emptiness of public spaces, to the “sterilization of urban environment” and where political actions are treated as “dirt” to be avoided (Sarna 2008b:337). Rich glimmering decorations on the buildings appear as substitution for the poor investments in the city while unification of the life-style and lack of public places (in contrast to evident heterogenization in other capitals) become distinctive features of the post-Soviet development of Minsk. As a result, national identity is constructed by passive visual perception of the narrative (Sarna 2008b:346). In her analysis, Trubina (2008) considers the development of the public sphere. The author comes to the conclusion that under conditions of strict regulation of the use of public places and overpoliticization of the urban space, citizens of Minsk tend to reinterpret official monuments⁴ and nurture an appetite for diversification through “democratic imagination” (Trubina 2008:365).

In general, this volume sets an informed context for a study of Minsk that is mostly overlooked in comparative studies. Analyses of post-Soviet urban development provide evidence of differentiation and major changes, even the reinvention of cities from their core (Astana). Case-studies from the volume provide important ideas for my study, especially those concerning public space and unification of the urban life-style in the context of building new identity.

Post-Soviet capital cities are also at the center of a collective work titled *Post-Soviet Capital Cities: Minsk, Vilnius, Baku* published by Belarusian State University in Minsk (Therborn 2009). Here, Minsk is considered along with other two capitals as a common object of study from different perspectives: comparative analysis of post-Soviet development (L. Titarenko), consumption behavior of Minsk dwellers (E. Lebedeva), and official strategies of urban planning (A. Rubanov). The contributors outline the factors that structure the patterns of everyday behavior in Minsk. Its strategy of development can be situated

somewhere between the “global” city of diverse nations and cultures and the “national” city that tends to promote national values and traditions. Minsk bears the imprint of a “socialist city” as it was imagined after the War. As a city it was planned to represent the Soviet power and Soviet life; however, after 1991 it had to be reorganized to represent the national identity as well. With no historical clues to alternative identities, Minsk did not cut away its Soviet past but had to grow national features out of an initially denationalized context (Titarenko 2009:36-37). Global cultural trends also get their place both in the consciousness of citizens and in city plans. Despite comparatively poor development of private enterprises in Minsk, the value of consumption is growing among the citizens (Lebedeva 2009). At the same time development strategies of the city (up to the years 2020 and 2030) allow for many more private investments and reorganization of the functions of the capital to make it greener and more comfortable for living (Rubanov 2009:144). These accounts provide the sociological framework for approaching the cultural narratives in Minsk.

There has also been research where Minsk figured as a case-study, either as artistic reality (Klinaŭ, 2008) or as an exemplary socialist city from a sociological and historical perspective (Bohn 2008, 2009). While in the first case much attention was given to personal memories and artistic properties of Minsk as a project of socialist architecture, in the second case Minsk was considered as a typical scene for changing images of the socialist city.

Overall, Minsk receives considerable attention as an object of study. However, the city is still rather closed to the international public, primarily due to the current political regime, whose influence on the symbolical image of the city is in the focus of this article as well. Evidence abounds in support of the argument that a new national identity is being constructed, or even that it is already present in the city. In this article, I will examine major changes in the symbolic organization of Minsk in the post-Soviet years, arguing that these are part of the new identity politics.

In what follows, I outline specific historical conditions which have framed the development of Minsk in the last half century. Then I proceed to the analysis of cultural references reflected in the names of streets and objects around the city, in their historical dynamics and spatial dispersion. To continue, I analyze the hierarchy of official holidays and distinctive features of their festivities. In conclusion, I sum up the present politics of identity-in-the-making that already reconfigures not only the symbolical but also the physical core of the Belarusian capital.

Historical Background to the Post-Soviet Development of Minsk

Historically, Minsk developed quite slowly as a city. In the first census in 1897, it numbered only about 90,000 citizens, the majority of who were of Jewish descent (43 percent in 1909). It also included groups of Belarusians, Poles, Russians, and Tatars.⁵ The country's multinational character was reflected in the language policy: in 1921-1941 there were four official languages in Belarus: Belarusian, Polish, Russian, and Yiddish. In contrast, in neighboring Poland where ethnic minorities comprised almost a third of the population, Polish was the only official language. This had to do with the socialistic-democratic character of national politics in the USSR in the 1920s.

Before 1941, the ethnic structure and size of Minsk remained more or less the same. Despite the industrialization of the 1920s, Minsk was not turned into a major industrial center, for it lay "too close" to the hostile capitalist countries to put heavy industry there (before 1939, the border was only about 40 miles to the West of Minsk).

During the war years of 1941-1945, up to 300,000 people were killed on the territory of Minsk, and about 80 percent of the whole city's population vanished. The Minsk ghetto was the largest in the country, and pogroms were regular there. By September 1942, of 100,000 people living in the ghetto, fewer than 9,000 survived (Dolgovich 1994:66). Jews from Belarus, but also from France and Germany were killed in and around Minsk and neighboring territories.

After the bombing of 1941 and the battles of liberation in 1944, not only did many city dwellers vanish, but the city itself was practically ruined. Little remained to remind one of the old times, and only a few citizens carried the memory of the pre-war cultural milieu. K. Schlegel calls this succession of city destruction (people and buildings alike) and then total postwar Sovietization "urbicide" (Bohn 2009:68).

After the War, intensive reconstruction works started. Volunteers from all over the Soviet Union came to Minsk. The city's population skyrocketed, growing by 97 percent between 1950 and 1960 (see Table 1). Since then, the population of Minsk has not decreased, and the city itself expanded tremendously⁶ (See Table 1). Even in the 1990s, when the populations of post-socialist capital cities decreased, Minsk would still attract newcomers (Stanilov 2007:24). At present the issue of limiting the influx of people is discussed in the government, even though this goes counter to demographic trends: the country population has been going down since 1991, and has by now decreased by half a million, which is about five percent (Wikipedia).

Table 1. Dynamics of population in Minsk, 1939-2009 (Wikipedia)

Year	Population (thousands)	Growth (percent)
1939	237,5	-
1950	273,6	15
1960	538,5	97
1970	915,5	70
1980	1304,0	42
1990	1623,5	25
2000	1688,1	4
2009	1829,1	8

In the inter-war period, like other cities of the region, Minsk was characterized by competition among various ethnic and religious groups. The public sphere was significantly politicized (Bohn 2009:68). After the Second World War, the city's population homogenized culturally due to the great influx of people that the national cultural milieu could not absorb. Also contributing to this homogenization was the physical outlook of revived Minsk. The old patchwork of the city's quarters was mostly replaced with the new understanding of the city. The principle of functionality was now *ultima ratio*. Coupled with the growing distance between the city and the country, this led to the unprecedented movement of the rural Belarusian population to the city. The process of ruralization of the city unfolded (Bohn 2009:72). For the city this meant rapid growth of typical Soviet blocks of flats not distinguished by any artistic value, as well as transformation of everyday culture of the city. For those people who moved from the country, Russian was the language of urban culture, and with a scarcity of "natives," Minsk grew quickly and expanded its territory. However, the quality of such "urbanization" may be doubted. According to some accounts, new growing cities were more like "vertical villages" (Bohn 2009:72) while the mores of the people took decades to transform.

In the 1960s Minsk started to take on the image of a "heroic city," the title given to the city by the Union authorities. Partisan struggle became an emblem at that time; social tensions were to be overcome by joint mythology of the war and emphasis was placed on industrial development (Bohn 2009:73).

In the 1970s the historical center was significantly modified. Where there had been old streets and compact settlements of Jews and Tatars, new buildings, public gardens, and

new streets arose. These were to symbolize the triumph of Soviet architecture and linear perspective, so that the whole city would be “cleaned” from its pre-modern, non-Soviet past. Often this process involved major changes to the historical heart of the city, downtown. As a result, a rich cultural layer was practically washed away from the city’s history.

In the 1980s Minsk expanded further. Compared to 1945, its territory had grown many times over. Minsk absorbed nearby villages, and blocks of flats appeared quickly on the outskirts. Due to the cross-like form of the city itself, the potential of growth for Minsk is very high. Even now it expands most intensively along the Brest-Moscow highway running from South-East to the North-West of Minsk.

Newer parts of the city were local centers of cultural and economic life. However, major objects, including city parks, cinemas, and department stores, drew a significant part of the population to the city center. In the 1990s, this trend developed into an even greater asymmetry. In the times of economic crisis small-district infrastructure fell into decay, and main streets gained in importance. At the same time, many religious buildings were revived in the 1990s. Religious life in the capital was re-animated, and new churches were built throughout the city. Many sacral objects (although not all⁷) that survived Soviet times were renovated and became new symbols of the city.

In the 2000s, there was a building boom in Minsk. People from smaller cities and from the country were moving into the capital in search of life opportunities. Several buildings were constructed and reconstructed. Starting from the opening of the long overdue Palace of the Republic in 2001 situated in the very center of Minsk,⁸ a whole series of such building events followed. To name just a few, in 2003, the 19th century town hall building was restored. In 2004, a new building of the railroad station made of glass and metal was erected. In 2006, a new ambitious building of the National Library was completed, with much debate concerning the project itself, its location and the political purposes of such an undertaking.⁹ On New Year’s Eve 2007, a three-level underground shopping mall, “The Capital,” situated under Independence square was completed. In 2009, the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet reopened after reconstruction. However, it looked surprisingly more Soviet than before. For instance, sculpture figures were put to the roof of the building “as provided in the original project of the 1930s.” As a result, the theatre (as well as other renovated buildings¹⁰) now embodies the ambitions and spirit of the current political regime. Images copying those of the Soviet past communicate strong symbolical messages to the present. Objects created in the 1930s obtain their second life, which is semantically loaded, for they reflect not the modern trends but an attempt to repeat the past, with its outdated

heroes and goals. Thus, it is easy to get the impression that Minsk is a city of specters (Cope 2008), “a Shadow of the Empire, a city of an artificial sun and splendid theatrical sets” (Klinaŭ 2006:15).

To be sure, repeating the past anew is not the only current trend in the spatial reorganization of Minsk. In the last few years the city has been developing its entertainment, tourism and business capacities with new sport arenas,¹¹ high-class hotels, and cinemas¹² for the first time since 1991. In 2007 and in 2008, two major hotels were opened after reconstruction in the city center (the pre-Soviet “Hôtel d’Europe,” ruined during the Second World War, and “Crowne Plaza,” built in the 1930s, formerly “Belarus”). In 2010 the first 15,000 seat stadium “Minsk-Arena” was opened. Major reconstructions are planned through 2030 within the Strategic plan,¹³ which is to be signed by the President in 2010. Much new infrastructure is to appear in Minsk for the Ice Hockey World Championship in 2014. The city’s territory is to transform along capitalist lines, to provide more space for consumption, modern infrastructure and office buildings. Some territories have been sold only recently, mainly to investors from the Middle East. Although such trends of city development are rather typical for the region, this is quite unusual both to the city and to its citizens, in a country that has not seen much international investment¹⁴ and where private ownership of land has been very limited.¹⁵

In addition to commoditization, the city space is getting diversified. As people move to Minsk, more social divisions are becoming apparent. In fact, the population of Minsk is disproportionately high in relation to the country’s population. The population of Minsk is now higher than that of any of the six regions of the country. In no other country of comparable population in Eastern Europe is such a great proportion of the population (almost 19 percent)¹⁶ concentrated in the capital. Moreover, compared to the capitals of neighboring countries, Minsk is relatively small for such a population (117.9 sq. miles). The density of population in Minsk (15,539 p/sq.mile) is almost twice that in Warsaw (8,575.5 p/sq. mile) or Vilnius (3,605 p/sq. mile)¹⁷. Most people live in blocks of flats (Trubina 2008:372), while the city center is quite small and multifunctional. The asymmetry of infrastructure that concentrates around the major streets and squares of the capital, coupled with the masses of people that live in Minsk, make the urban space of the Belarusian capital a powerful resource for building a new national identity.

To summarize, social and cultural conditions have made Minsk a convenient construction site for the project of the socialist city. Destroyed during the war, it provided “ideal geometry” (Klinaŭ 2008:106) for a new socialist society. After the collapse of the

USSR, many people moved from and into the city, but it never stopped growing. In the 1990s, Minsk became more ethnically and culturally homogeneous and big streets adopted new, nationally significant names, while no major changes were made in the space of the city itself. By contrast, in the 2000s intensive renovation and building have started which, surprisingly, make the city look more Soviet-like and more impersonal at the same time. There are many indicators that in the coming years the city will experience a rapid shift to a more capitalist and consumption-oriented organization. However, for the time being, Minsk is a concentration of both people and cultural objects with no rival in the country, which makes it an effective environment for launching the identity politics of the present political power.

Political Framework of Politics of Identity

A new national project was bound to arise in a post-Soviet country like Belarus. Pro-Russian political orientations, the use of Russian as the predominant language of communication, and international isolation have hampered this process. The issue of building a new national identity has become important for the authorities and the civil society alike, though at different times and for different reasons.

On the one hand, with new political developments in the region such as enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and the new, pragmatic energy politics of Russia that began in 2003, the country needed a strong national identity as a means of social integration. Already in 2002, a national youth organization BRSM, based on the model of the Komsomol (the Soviet-era youth organization), was created. In 2003, “Ideology of the Belarusian State” and “History of the Great Patriotic War” were introduced as compulsory subjects to every curriculum at the university level, which was not difficult under the present centralized system of higher education. In 2004-2005, anniversaries of liberation of the country from Nazis and the Victory of 1945 were widely celebrated, not in the least to strengthen support for the current regime. The country’s population is aging, and support of the elderly people who often nourish the memories of “good old Soviet times” gains in importance.

On the other hand, after a rise in public protests in the beginning and the middle of the 1990s, authorities systematically suppressed any competition for power; this has been especially true since 1996 when the political regime changed to a presidential republic. The state’s dominating position on the issues of public concern has not been shaken since 1991: the state controls the labor market, pension funds, and major industries; it has wide

censorship capacities in arts and culture. The nature of Soviet urbanization must have had much to do with it (Bohn 2009:73). For people who moved from the village, the state manifested protection and welfare. Even now, newcomers integrate gratefully into the existing urban order even though there is little civil society, and there is general social distrust and lack of public debate. In this respect, despite its cultural heritage, today's Minsk is far from the ideal of the European city characterized by its heterogeneity, developed civil society, and mass consumption (Bohn 2009:69). Rural forms of living were still evident in many parts of Minsk in the 1990s, with strong neighborhood identities, social control, and even kitchen gardens near blocks of flats (Cope 2008:510). However, in light of ongoing shifts this appears to be a remnant of the Soviet past and not part of the post-Soviet social system in Belarus.

Nowadays, the urban space is growing increasingly privatized; citizens want to mitigate the effects of superpoliticization of public life that characterizes the city. In fact, the authoritarian nature of the current political regime has left an impressive mark on the structure of public space in the city. Citizens miss openness and participation in public life, but there are no negotiations with the public on the issues of public concern in Minsk (Trubina 2008:375-6). Those public protests and collective actions that happen get neither adequate media coverage nor due response from city and national authorities.¹⁸

Since the current Belarusian regime has clearly expressed its ambition to political monopoly in the country, it is worth looking at the field of the symbolic. In the symbolic struggle for the production of common sense, for the monopoly of legitimate nomination, all the previously gained symbolic capital plays its part (Bourdieu 1994:199-200). Symbolic power acts as "worldmaking" and often expresses itself by putting labels that divide and unite society by a single act, for example in choosing lenses of looking at social divisions, or in selection of what should be visible and what should not. What manifests itself in discourse is thus real (Bourdieu 1994:203-6). The politics of national identity should be expected to, first, favor the cultural images close to the current regime and, second, try to eliminate any competing discourse.

In short, the current political regime strives for monopoly in structuring the public sphere in Minsk as the center of political struggle in the country. The "invisible" competition of political projects comes to the surface in the politics of naming and in the symbolic structuring of everyday life and holidays. As Bourdieu noted, the field of the political is the place of struggle for power that takes the form of competition over a monopoly of speaking and acting in the name of the "uninitiated." In addition, symbolic power has a direct

relationship to the credit given to authorities (Bourdieu 1993:205-209). This is a powerful instrument, because the population that gives this credit agrees to abide by the authorities' rules. In a situation where political competition is suppressed and public debate does not function properly, the potential impact of such a monopoly on the development of urban culture tends to be destructive. As a consequence, "anomie symbolic space" is being produced, where reality is "hyperreal" (Baudrillard 2006:149): the existing symbolic order is glorified, natural mechanisms of competition in cultural production are broken, and the main symbolic production is myth repeating itself (Zhbakov 2008:142-143). Thus, political decisions dictate how the city's past, present, and future are to be viewed, and create the framework for everyday life in the city.

Cultural References in the Current Politics of National Identity

To understand the politics of (re-)naming in Minsk, it is important to reconstruct the sources and reasons for the current "pro-Soviet" orientation of the discourse on national identity in Belarus. These pro-Soviet elements include strong references to the heroism and cultural trauma of the Belarusian people during WWII, conspicuous reverence to the veterans, also of a populist nature, and the wide use of rhetoric of solidarity among the Slavic nations, especially during the 1990s.

The key cultural pattern here is the Great Patriotic War (i.e., the part of WWII in which the Soviet Union fought the Nazis, 06/22/1941 - 05/09/1945). The War was indeed traumatic for the population of Belarus; a great proportion of them (estimated from one quarter to one third) were either killed or died of starvation and disease. The image of Belarus in WWII within the USSR was based on the ideas of a nationwide struggle with the Nazis, of selfless heroism and of unprecedented readiness to sacrifice one's life for the country (Sitnikova 2008:413). WWII, presented as the Great Patriotic War, is now part of the national narrative and discourse of cultural trauma in Belarus (Gapova 2008:48). For traumas to emerge at the level of the collective, social crises must become cultural crises. Traumas are the result of the acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity (Alexander 2004b:10). For post-war Belarus, the War turned into such a cultural trauma. It was dramatized in public life and in art, and for Minsk it became the turning point in its own history.

An important function of cultural traumas is normative. By allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social

understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation (Alexander 2004b:24). The current narrative of Belarusian identity also employs this mechanism. However, here it serves as part of ideology and thus, as argued by Slavoj Žižek, as part of the social reality itself (Krivolap 2008:389). Its function is to cover social reality from its real – and traumatizing – essence. In other words, authorities stick to this pattern and use it to the fullest as a means of social mobilization and integration.

The architecture of Minsk is directly used in the process of re-creating the new, post-Soviet image of the capital. However, the lion's share of the street names and buildings in the city center refers to the war-time heroic deeds and their coverage. In social time, the “recent past” refers to the events of 60 years ago, and the “distant past” to the time of the Russian empire (19th – early 20th centuries). While the former cultural pattern is commonly employed as the city's *Gestalt*, the latter serves as a background for it. This background consists of renovated 19th century buildings, as well as imitations of such buildings (in the city center) and city sculptures portraying “typical” city dwellers of that époque – a postman, a market woman, a photographer – as well as other, non-historic figures that animate an otherwise monotonous urban space. However, it is interesting that no sculptures of famous inhabitants of Minsk have been erected so far, and those dedicated to historical figures of national importance are situated on the university campus, half-hidden from the public eye.

The Soviet “heritage” of Minsk is far from unambiguous. On the one hand, the city grew and revived during Soviet times. Now it is almost a thousand years old, but its image was formed in the 1950-1970s. On the other hand though, the Soviet past in Minsk is two-faced, with the façades of buildings looking imperial-like, and the backyards made of grey faceless bricks (Klinaŭ 2006:11; Klinaŭ 2008:173). The outer “glamour” of cleaned and renovated Soviet buildings that strikes one at first, is contrasted by their inner spatial organization. That is why Minsk has been called a city where one “does not know how to treat what one sees” (Cope 2008:519). If not the buildings themselves, then probably their names could give us some directions.

The names of the streets and squares in Minsk are almost exclusively those given during the Soviet era. Generally, they have not changed since 1945, which means that all the paradoxes of Soviet naming are still there. For instance, there is an area in one district of Minsk that refers to the Baikal region in Siberia. There are also numerous streets referring to nature, or to features of local landscapes. Such “neutral” names in Minsk were not employed as an undermining practice during Soviet times as, for example, in Vilnius.¹⁹ By contrast, the majority of streets and squares, especially in the city center of Minsk, refer directly to the

Soviet times and the idols and ideals of those times. While in neighboring Vilnius removal of the statue of Lenin is still considered a symbolic act of exceptional significance that destroyed the foundation of ideological Soviet narratives on the past and present (Milerius 2008:57), Lenin still stands on the main square of Minsk.²⁰ Although Lenin square was renamed Independence square in 1991, the adjacent underground station was given back the name “Lenin square” by authorities in 2008.

Only a few streets were renamed in the 1990s. They are the main avenue (as mentioned above, it changed from Lenin Avenue to Skaryna Avenue) and the main square (from Lenin Square to Independence Square). Additionally, a few streets were returned their old names related to religious practices (e.g. Calvary Street). Only new streets in Minsk were sometimes given the names of historical personalities. All the central objects remained Soviet in their appearance and names.

In 2005, not long before Victory day, two major avenues were renamed by President’s decree. The main avenue named after F. Skaryna, the first printer in Belarusian, became Independence Avenue, so that now it ends with Independence Square. In addition, the avenue named after the popular Soviet leader Petr Masherov (killed in a car accident in 1980) was renamed into the Avenue of Victors (here with the meaning “those who have won the Great Patriotic War”). The President justified these changes by referring to “requests of the veterans;” however, the public was not involved in the decision.²¹ This event matches perfectly the strategy of nomination as described by Bourdieu, for every new authority during the 19th and 20th centuries in Minsk changed the names of the main streets first of all. Such an act in peace time could then be interpreted as a direct demonstration of symbolic power.²² Also operative, it could be argued, is the need of authorities to arrange a place for parades – the demonstration of the dominance of the current political order that take place every Victory Day and Independence Day. Such an attempt would be done to overcome dependency from the past, and to (re)-construct the models of domination from the past on a smaller scale (Krivolap 2008:376).

To sum up, making use of new differences on the basis of former, “synchronized” Soviet patterns is common feature of post-Soviet space (Milerius 2008:61). That is why renaming avenues was rather a gesture of distancing from both the internationalist narrative of Soviet times and the nationalist one of the early 1990s alike. Most names in Minsk remained from the Soviet past, but this is not plain inertia, but rather a considered strategy of symbolic framing of the new national narrative. Oddly enough, the current national narrative

in Belarus manifests itself with the help of “international,” or non-national, Soviet labels which, after 1991, have ceased to be commonplace. Dynamics of renaming point to the fact that the current political regime has created a symbolic space comfortable for itself, not only with “suitable” names of the streets and “neutral” (uncontested) cultural objects, but also with its own locus for parades. The latter is of special significance, and will be addressed in the following section.

Narrative in Image and Action

In the 1990s, military parades in Minsk that were held on the Victory and Independence Days took place in front of the House of Government and the Lenin sculpture before it. Nowadays, such parades happen in the newly named Avenue of Victors, close to the new major sports objects, and the obelisk “Minsk – the Hero City.” The names of the festivities remain the same, but in 1996 Independence Day was moved from July 27, the date of the Independence Declaration of 1990, to July 3, the day of Minsk’s liberation from the Nazis in 1944. In 1995, a year after A. Lukashenka was elected President, two other major issues of symbolic representation were adopted through a referendum – the status of Russian as another official language (along with Belarusian), and the issue of new national flag and emblem (a return to slightly modified Soviet symbols was proposed). Both were accepted by the vast majority of the population. In retrospect, it is possible to conclude that these were the first major steps in building new identity politics based on the Soviet model.

Since then, the visual representation of new power has grown in importance. Two cases that I address here are parades on Independence Day, and the nation-wide campaign “For Belarus!” that started in 2004, just before the October referendum where the two-term limit for one person to be elected President was lifted.

Parades and other solemn festivities are a major part of building the national identity. They provide visual expression of the dominating cultural discourse. In this light, certain features of “festivity order”²³ in Belarus are of special interest. Authoritarian culture idealizes transparency and linearity; it concentrates on mass production of ideological myth that knows no competition (in contrast to capitalism). Such culture is excessively informative and acts as “collective hallucination.” Such a culture does not turn naturally into a collage of subcultures, or a mosaic of different life-styles (Zhbakov 2008:142-155). For Belarus, such features of authoritarian culture have meant a massive attack of “official culture,” with controversial messages and prescribed, top-down mechanisms of cultural selection.

Official, bank holidays in Belarus are numerous. They include former Soviet holidays of Victory Day (May 9), Revolution Day (October 25), Labor Day (May 1), Women's Day (March 8); religious feasts of Orthodox and Roman Catholic calendars – Christmas (December 25; January 7) and Easter.²⁴ In addition, two holidays are ancestors' remembrance days of pagan origin – Dziady (first Saturday before November 8) and Radaŭnitsa (second Tuesday after Easter). The only official holiday commemorating independence is Independence Day (July 3); Constitution Day is not a holiday. This “festivity order” is characterized by syncretism; it mixes together opposite worldviews, and thus testifies to its own hyperreal nature that crosses out any material proof and value of the festivity itself.

Under closer analysis, official holidays in Belarus (which implies they are bank holidays that include official celebrations, organized parties at work, and, often, shifting the working days in the country to make “long weekends”), in an attempt to reconcile the conflicting historical identity of the country, end up putting together contradictory values and ideals. By definition, the Soviet holidays (like October Revolution Day) imply the values of secular internationalism and class solidarity, thus running counter to the values embedded in religious holidays and any holidays celebrating the 1991 independence alike (notably, there are no bank holidays dedicated to post-Soviet independence). Within religious holidays, in turn, there are holidays of Christian and pre-Christian origin. Both Orthodox and Catholic holidays (which use different calendars) are officially celebrated. In addition, there are two holidays of pagan origin (which are officially church holidays, not pagan ones). Because on official holidays state employees do not go to work, and they constitute a vast majority of the working force in the country, most people are put into a puzzling situation where they, even unwillingly, “celebrate” on occasions that have historically been in conflict among themselves. In a situation of homogenizing authoritarian culture, this leads to the inflation of even those cultural values and ideas that were initially shared by the people and to the growth of cultural relativism in the country in general.

However illogical in its current state, the festivity order in Belarus nevertheless functions as a year-to-year cultural practice that combines different cultural logics in visual representations devoid of substance (neutral or “positive only” images). As a result of such syncretism, the value of state holidays as symbols of national unity and cultural identity fades away, simultaneously encouraging “pragmatic” (and, in fact, impersonal) treatment of any holiday that falls into the official festivity order. Moreover, such a set of holidays is unique in the region; neighboring countries have clearer visions of their national narratives, be it

liberation from the Soviet regime (Lithuania) or celebration of the post-Soviet political order (Russia).

The most abundant festivities held in Minsk itself²⁵ are (in order of importance) Independence Day, Victory Day, and City's Day. Let us briefly refer to their ceremonies.

The City's Day is the least symbolic of the three. It is a day of festivity that has no symbolic connection to the past²⁶ but is rather a matter of convenience: citizens have already come from summer vacations, and the weather is still good and warm for open-air fairs and pop concerts. This is a mass feast of consumption, of a rather local scale.

By contrast, Victory Day is a national holiday, an important annual event, with much rehearsal and preparation to the parade and concerts that take place during the day at different locations. The main venue is Victory Square with the Victory monument and eternal flame. The feast ends with fireworks. Veterans are the main official heroes of the day; many of them wear proudly their military uniform with decorations (see Figure 1). The solemn nature of the holiday refers directly to both collective cultural trauma and subjective family experience of the people. However, fewer veterans are alive now, so the festivities increasingly involve other elderly people, and more often allow for idealization of the war deeds and Soviet past for the country.



Figure 1: A World War II Veteran with Foreign Students. Photograph by the author.

Independence Day is, in its turn, the most vivid and picturesque occasion for manifestation of the new political order. Its rituals have changed during the 15 years of the presidential rule of A. Lukashenka. While in the 1990s the parade took place on Independence Square, in the 2000s (2004 and 2005 were especially rich in anniversary festivities) it moved to the present venue on Victors' Avenue. Although during the 1990s the parade was held and conducted in Belarusian and was transmitted only by one official state television channel, in the 2000s the language used was Russian, and it was on all major channels (Krivolap 2008:370). The parade's venue is now located quite far from the city center in a specially arranged place that is transformed for this special occasion. In the 1990s and in the 2000s alike, the festive processions involved a "traditional" set from Soviet times: gymnasts, sportsmen and sportswomen, but also riders on dancing horses, and pairs of ballroom dancers dancing to military marches. However, in 2004, on the 60th anniversary of the Minsk liberation, the parade also included a whole exposition of goods produced in the country (TV-sets, refrigerators), and bronze-covered bodybuilders on floats (Krivolap 2008:384). The event somehow resembled Stalin-era parades and even was featured on news channels in European Union countries.

However, I would argue that any references to the Soviet times should not be understood literally. Even the fact that higher officials including the President now wear military uniform during the parade, this is also part of the "decorations," as is a column of "partisans" on horseback, with false beards and moustaches. Researchers have called this parade a "seeming carnival" (Krivolap 2008:384), and an "anti-carnival" (Sarna 2008a:243). It is a carnival because the participants are obviously wearing costumes. However, it is a controlled action, not abolishing and devaluing the power but rather increasing existing social divisions. The parade's major function is to consolidate the existing political order through symbolic reference to the "heroic Soviet past" that is used today as a rhetorical device and irrefutable argument against the opponents of the regime (Sarna 2008a:243). In other words, despite numerous references to WWII, the current political regime is clearly a post-Soviet project referring to the Soviet past and, namely, to the Victory, as a way to gain public support.

The Independence Day festivities are a serious political instrument indeed. The solemn events, although only a show, are actively used for shaping identities. For example, in 2008, during the evening festivities that normally end with fireworks, there was an explosion of an improvised explosive devise.²⁷ This case was treated ambiguously by the public; only a

few believed this to be a terrorists' attack; rather it was perceived as a "set up occasion" to threaten and increase control over society.

Apart from specific events of annual festivities, there is also the everyday visual discourse through which authorities speak to the people. Since 2006, there are multiple posters in Minsk streets with different images and a few slogans, saying "For Belarus!" or "We are Belarusians!"²⁸ These images are grouped around "representatives of the State" (military men, the police) and representatives of different social groups (farmers, workers, miners, etc.). "Society" is represented by schoolchildren, students, and young parents (Korenko 2008:298-299). These billboards carry rather paradoxical messages.

First, the inscription is done in Belarusian, which is uncommon for the officials, who almost exclusively use Russian both in their written and oral speech. Some posters are done in Russian, and some in Belarusian; the languages are never mixed²⁹ (Korenko 2008:311-312). Second, they provide an idyllic vision of the country that respects its national culture, but is also innovative and modernized. Last, these inscriptions are a vivid example of building national identity: they connect the name of the nation with distinct ideal images of social reality and teach one to be happy with what one sees. As artificial long-term memory leaves no space for freedom (Milerius 2008:56), these posters impose their imaginary reality by cutting into everyday life. This is a common trend in the region; however, a few features make this poster campaign distinctive. The author(s) of these posters is unknown to the public, which makes them even more impersonal and mythological. Neither do they represent the middle class or businesspeople of the country (Pigalskaja 2008:219-229). In general, while being a socially acknowledged phenomenon of recent years, these posters have not received feedback from the public debate, and the interest power behind them is both self-evident and unknown.

Visual representations of new national identity in Belarus are quite impressive in the culturally monolithic Minsk streets. In their arrangement, the visual images around the city give quite a clear vision of the current political order. The "cultural tissues" of both everyday life and formal holidays are penetrated by the old Soviet figures being reinterpreted into new national symbols. The Soviet past is revived in today's present as an instrument of political struggle. However, this is not the only past that comes into play. Different reminiscences intertwine in the present political narrative. Belarusian authorities have created a unique cultural model working only in the present-day closed environment (Ousmanova 2008:21). A new hierarchy of important dates and images has been invented, and by the late 2000s, the construction of new national narrative, albeit controversial, has been completed.

Conclusions

The urban space is originally structured and penetrated by power relations (Krivolap 2008:379). If in the 1980s Minsk matched ideally the notion of the Soviet city, with “standard” street names, public objects, and citizens’ self-consciousness, in the 1990s some of the names were changed to more region- and nation-specific ones. However, no radical changes were made to the city: no Soviet buildings were demolished, and the streets in the city center still bore the names of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. In the 2000s, a symbolic U-turn was made that corresponded to the authorities’ strategy of building a new national identity. This included clearing the space for new symbols carefully chosen from the available ones.

On the one hand, there is a stable (and widely constructed) historical reference to the Second World War that marks the cultural trauma of Belarusians as a nation. Although events of this War are not covered by centuries of legends (as, for instance, the alternative cultural narrative of the Great Duchy of Lithuania as the prototype of Belarusian statehood), it is amazing how successful this image has been so far in Belarus.

New sports venues and cultural objects make up the “outer look” of Minsk. The image is beautifully framed by the street illumination along Independence Avenue, to the building of the National Library that shines with hundreds of lights in the evening. In the daytime, Minsk is also “shining” with its clean streets and clear discourse (Sarna 2008b:342).

In the identity building politics, the regime of A. Lukashenka has widely turned to such strategies as nomination (giving names and clearing names, thus depersonalizing cultural memory); organization (production of events related to important dates, and political mobilization through them); and stimulation (Soviet-like appeals and actions oriented at different target groups, which has also involved mimicry and copying the alternative narrative) (Sarna 2008a:249-255). These mechanisms are not new; however, they have been used effectively for cultural legitimization of the new power and for the creation of unique national identity built on Soviet cultural patterns.

Capitalism has come, including private housing and shopping malls. New objects that are to be built in Minsk according to the Strategic Plan-2030 will make the city look much more like other cities of the region.

Until now, post-Soviet Belarus has developed in a “pocket of history” where it is possible to preserve the old symbols under new conditions. As a result, Minsk could not develop as a heterogeneous urban environment. Only single meanings are often sanctioned by the authorities; the public sphere is very limited.³⁰

Attention to the completeness and purity undoubtedly exerts significant influence on the perception of Minsk among tourists and city dwellers. Alternative and parallel discourses are not welcome; moreover, they are often eliminated from the public scene by being described as impure or superfluous. There is the “inner look” of Minsk as well, not glamorous or officially sanctioned, and it contains the features that, behind rhetoric, are mostly invisible to tourists and even to the city dwellers themselves.

As a result of current cultural politics, the space of cultural production is systematically narrowed. Not only is public space shrinking, but the very premises for multiple discourses on national identity are eliminated. The right to one’s own point of view is vanishing in the politics of a clean and exemplary city. The politics of selecting national symbols and constructing canonical cultural patterns has contributed much to the homogenization of the symbolical space in Minsk. The city’s image is amplified by cultural narratives that underline its socialist past, but overall it does not allow for the diversity that is commonplace elsewhere in the region. The majority of Minsk’s residents moved there after 1944, and since 1991 the inflow of people from other cities and from the country has not stopped. Hence, the issue of cultivating the city’s elite is high on the agenda. In 2008, a debate grew around whether Minsk can be called a city, because of the agricultural past of many dwellers, their ties to the country, and the general level of rural features in many residents’ culture and behavior.

Recently, much attention has been drawn to the “phenomenon” of Minsk as a socialist city, sometimes in more extravagant versions of the “Sun City” (Klinaŭ 2008), or the “city of triumphant glamour” (Sarna 2008b). Shallowness and “double-facedness” make the city surprisingly transformable. It has been claimed that Minsk adjusts to the present time, and that change lies in its core (Klinaŭ 2008:107). I would argue, however, that the shrinking of cultural diversity provoked and implemented by the current official politics of national identity may petrify the very possibility of social and cultural innovations in the city. To be sure, the possibility of Minsk’s revival as a dialogue of social and cultural narratives, which it used to be at the beginning of the 20th century, is always to some extent open. However, the physical reorganization of symbolical space that took place in the past 20 years has influenced significantly the outlook of the city. For the time being, the current identity politics tends to combine the Soviet cultural narrative with features of mass consumption. The city of Minsk has become the factory of images for a new Belarusian identity.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Sarah D. Philips for her thoughtful comments and help in preparation of this article.

² Heterotopia is described here, after Foucault, as an ideally organized space of illusion, an isolated social space framed in time that combines incompatible realities and employs significant images for special purposes (Krivolap 2008:373-374).

³ “P.S.” wittily refers simultaneously to post-socialist, post-Soviet, and post-Soros conditions of urban studies.

⁴ This matches perfectly the concept of tactics by Michel de Certeau (Trubina 2008:364). Tactics are the weapons of the weak, where people tend to avoid the ways of behavior prescribed by authorities. That is why citizens may use the available urban space by following the strategies induced by power and by devising their own ways to navigate the city.

⁵ Tatars have lived in certain parts of Belarus since the 14th century when, according to the historical accounts, they were invited by the Great Duke Vytautas to settle there and help fight against the Teutonic knights in the North of the country. In the beginning of the 21st century, the most populous communities of Belarusian Tatars lay to the North-West of Minsk in Iuje area and to the South, in Pinsk area.

⁶ For instance, motor works built on the outskirts in the late 1940s had by 2000 turned out to be close to the city center, so that they now require transfer.

⁷ One notable exception concerns the church of the former men’s Dominican monastery situated in the center of Minsk to the right of the Orthodox Cathedral. Since Soviet times it has been part of the State Archive of Theatre and Cinema. In 2005-2006 there was a long campaign when believers asked the authorities to give the church back to the Roman Catholic Church. Despite persistent actions and media coverage, the building remained an archive. This can be partly explained by the central position of the building and possible profits from investors. For instance, the neighboring territory, which included the remains of the medieval monastery, was sold to become a restaurant.

⁸ Due to unfavorable economic conditions of the 1990s the building of the Palace of Republic, which started in the mid-1980s, was finished only by 2001 to become the place for all Soviet-like official mass events, from “President’s Christmas Tree” to the “All-Belarusian People’s Gathering.” However, already by its opening, the building’s constructivist style was long out of date, so that its nicknames among the citizens became “The Mausoleum” (allusion to Lenin’s mausoleum in Moscow) and “The Sarcophagus” (allusion to the protection cover put onto the Chernobyl power station after the explosion of 1986 in which the country suffered greatly).

⁹ The new National Library building was needed because the old building resurrected in the 1930s became too small. In addition, it was situated next to the President’s residence, and now when the new building is functioning, this territory is going to become part of the government buildings. The building process of the new National Library turned into a serious public issue. The choice of the project was contested, and the public opinion about it was

divided, so that many citizens now despise the building. Moreover, the location for the future building (damp land far from the city center) was said to be a bad choice. A special national lottery was issued to raise the money for the building. The atmosphere around the building site was full of Soviet-like connotations (like the poster in front of the site saying “We build the future together!”). To make it worse, the building process itself was completed very quickly, so that a number of serious mistakes are said to have taken place during the construction. For the time being, the new National Library is used not only as a library; it has become one of the places to visit with obligatory school excursions – along with the Museum of the Great Patriotic War – and a place for meetings at the highest political level as well. It was built in the form of multi-faceted ball often called “The Diamond” and is illuminated in the dark every night until 11 p.m.

¹⁰ This is similar to the Military college for young boys named after Suvorov situated next to the Opera Theatre (in the 19th century this used to be a theological seminary) which was also renovated in the 2000s. After renovation, statues of pilots and military men were raised on its fronton, while all around the walls of the building, the plaster decorations were restored in the form of an open book with the names of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin.

¹¹ With some exceptions, in the 1990s, new “Ice Palaces” arose around the country, including one in Minsk that opened in 1999. The trend was popularly ascribed to the President’s love for ice hockey.

¹² In 2009-2010 two cinemas reopened after reconstruction – the first multiplex in the country and the first 3-D cinema. A small new cinema also opened in the “Stolitsa” mall in the very city center.

¹³ According to the Soviet plans of reconstructing cities to make them more socialist, a Development Plan for Minsk was approved back in 1938. Due to the need for complete post-war reconstruction, a new Plan of Minsk with 500,000 citizens was designed in 1946. However, because of rapid population inflow, the Plan had to be amended in 1954 and 1958. In 1965, a new General Plan was accepted that was designed for a city of 800,000 citizens. The population kept rising very quickly, and in 1974 the Plan was changed to make it 1.2 million people. In 1979 a new General Plan was developed until 2000 for a population of 2 million (Rubanov 2009:139). In 2000-2003, like many other post-Soviet cities (e.g. Vilnius), Minsk developed without a plan. In 2004 a new Strategic Plan of sustainable development till 2020 was devised by the decision of Minsk authorities taken in 2001. The Plan was designed by the architects of a specialized state-owned design bureau “Minskgrado” with assistance of the Committee on architecture, city development, and land management of Minsk authorities. The Plan was approved by Minsk executive authorities and deputies and came into force the same year. In 2009, amendments were made that took into account motorization (by 2020 it should reach 350 per 1,000 Minsk citizens, which is relatively low, see Stanilov 2007:278), further population inflow (the country’s population is shrinking; in 2009 it was already less than 9.5 million people, which means that further growth of Minsk over 2 million people would cause major demographical disproportions), and the need to develop the spatial infrastructure of the city (at the moment the mean density of population in Minsk is at least twice as high as in Kyiv, Warsaw, or Vilnius). The General Plan is the main architectural document that defines the development perspectives of urban territory and building on it. Such a Plan is normally oriented on long-term perspectives and embraces all spheres of city life (Rubanov 2009:140-141). The initiative of developing the General Plan and its final

approval are done by the President. Not only city development but development in every major sphere of life in the country is still done in five-year plans.

¹⁴ Post-Soviet countries in general did not enjoy as many foreign investments as did countries of Central-Eastern Europe. The latter liberalized earlier and were geographically and culturally closer to Western Europe and included common borders. Compared to other post-socialist countries and the Baltic states, Russia and Ukraine got much less foreign direct investment (less than US \$500 per capita in 2004 compared to US \$1,500 per capita in Poland, and more than US \$4,500 per capita in Hungary, see Stanilov 2007:28). Due to high political and economic risks, foreign direct investments in Belarus were even smaller. According to UNCTAD, in 2006 they comprised only about US \$350 million (\$350 per capita) – which is about the level of Hungary in 1990.

¹⁵ There is only limited private property on land in Belarus. The issue was proposed by the initiative of the President and put on the referendum of November 1996. Almost 83 percent of the people voted against “free trade in land” (the wording of the question). Other issues of that referendum proposed by the President included: new variant of the 1994 Constitution (with more rights given to the President than to the Parliament, supported by 70 percent), changing the Independence Day from July 27 (Declaration of Independence, 1990) to July 3 (liberation of Minsk from the Nazis, supported by 88 percent), and the abolition of the death penalty (80 percent voted against). The results of this referendum were not recognized by Western countries. However, they were put into action in the country itself. There are now three forms of land use: rent, lifelong use (e.g. for family houses in the villages), and property. Before March 2010, when a piece of land in Minsk was sold to an Oman-owned firm, there were no precedents of a foreign company owning property in Belarus. Nor did local firms acquire major enterprises as property. The phenomenon of the “oligarchs” (typical of other post-Soviet states as well) in Belarus formed in the context of scarce natural resources and almost no privatization. Thus the core positions were available to the highest state officials. Overall, oligarchy in Belarus is characterized by lack of publicity (there are no “official” oligarchs like Abramovich in Russia or Tymoshenko in Ukraine). However, there exists the status of “privileged importer” (i.e., with special conditions provided by the state) or, e.g., the multi-purpose “Special Fund” of the President with no public control over it.

¹⁶ Countries of Eastern Europe after 2007 (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and – disputably – Russia) and members of the European Union neighboring Belarus (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) are quite different in area and population, ranging from 2.2 million in Latvia to 141.9 million in Russia. According to the available official statistical data [see Wikipedia], the proportion of the population in the capital city is 4.5 percent in Poland, 6.1 percent in Ukraine, 7.1 percent in Russia, 16.7 percent in Lithuania and Moldova, 18.9 percent in Belarus, and 31.8 percent in Latvia. Thus the highest proportion is that of Riga in Latvia. However, the population of Latvia is almost four times less than that of Belarus, and the population of Lithuania and Moldova – almost three times less than in Belarus. All in all, the fact that almost every fifth citizen of Belarus lives in Minsk makes the city a very important object of study, especially when compared to other cities in Belarus.

¹⁷ See “Minsk,” “Vilnius,” and “Warsaw” in Wikipedia.

¹⁸ City authorities are represented by the executive power of Mingorispolkom (“The executive committee of the city of Minsk”), and the mayor appointed by the President, with

no city parliament. There are deputies from Minsk in the local Councils who, officially, appoint the executive power. In fact, even the legitimacy of the local elections is under question.

¹⁹ According to one of the latest studies of street names, in the Soviet period many streets in Vilnius were named after fruits (e.g. Cherry street) and natural objects and phenomena (e.g. Garden street) in order to avoid the canonical practice of giving Communist street names. In Vilnius even the streets named after K. Marx and F. Engels, which would normally run through the very city center (as in Minsk), were given to small circle streets in the suburb [Presentation of the study “Memory Workshop Europe: Memory of the World War II in the City Landscape of Eastern Europe” made by R. Balockaitė, A. Kazakevich, and A. Lastovski, Minsk, November 23, 2009].

²⁰ As he does in many other cities of Belarus, but also in such major cities of the region as Kharkov (Ukraine) and Kyiv (capital of Ukraine). In fact, the destiny of the Lenin statues that were one of the main “synchronizing” and leveling mechanisms in the Soviet space, reflects quite clearly the degree to which the current political project in the post-Soviet country distances itself from its Soviet period of development.

²¹ Normally, the procedure of changing the street name requires consent of the people living on that street. However, in the case of the capital city and its major streets, decisions should be taken in a public discussion for they represent the issues of general concern. In general, the public debate taking place before any change can be made to the city landscape demonstrates the effectiveness of democratic mechanisms in the city. For instance, in Boston or Manchester, any art object can be installed only after complicated but systematic negotiations between the city authorities and art entrepreneurs, potential sponsors and representatives of the city community. By contrast, in the post-Soviet space, decisions on erection of new objects of art in the urban space (not to mention more serious and constant actions) are often made by the highest authorities behind closed doors (Trubina 2008:358).

²² For instance, the street that has been renamed most often in Minsk is its main avenue. In the Russian imperial period it was named after the governor (Zakharievskaya). In the 1920s it was Sovietskaya (Soviet) street. In the 1930s it was renamed Stalin Avenue. During the Nazi occupation it was renamed again. After “dismantling the cult of Stalin” the avenue was renamed after Lenin, only to change to the name to F. Skaryna in 1991. In 2005 it was renamed again, this time to the more impersonal Independence Avenue. The street’s record of frequent renaming invites interesting comparisons.

²³ Under “festivity order” I understand the hierarchy of official (bank holidays) and unofficial (widely celebrated but not bank holidays) state (all-national) holidays in the country as reflected in the arrangements of official festivities dedicated to celebrating certain events. Although presumably traditional, this “order” of festivities has been quite dynamic in the post-Soviet countries since 1991, and could be used as an analytical element of comparison among the countries. Here, I use the term “festivity order” to be able to draw dividing lines within the heterogeneous mix of official holidays in Belarus.

²⁴ Forty-four percent of the population is Orthodox, and six percent are Roman Catholics; both confessions are traditional. In Belarus Easter is celebrated officially for only one day (namely the first day, which is always Sunday).

²⁵ There is a “wandering” holiday of the harvest’s end in the beginning of September (“Dazhynki”) that, as a state holiday, is another symbolic innovation of the current political order, and it is held in small cities around the country, but not in Minsk.

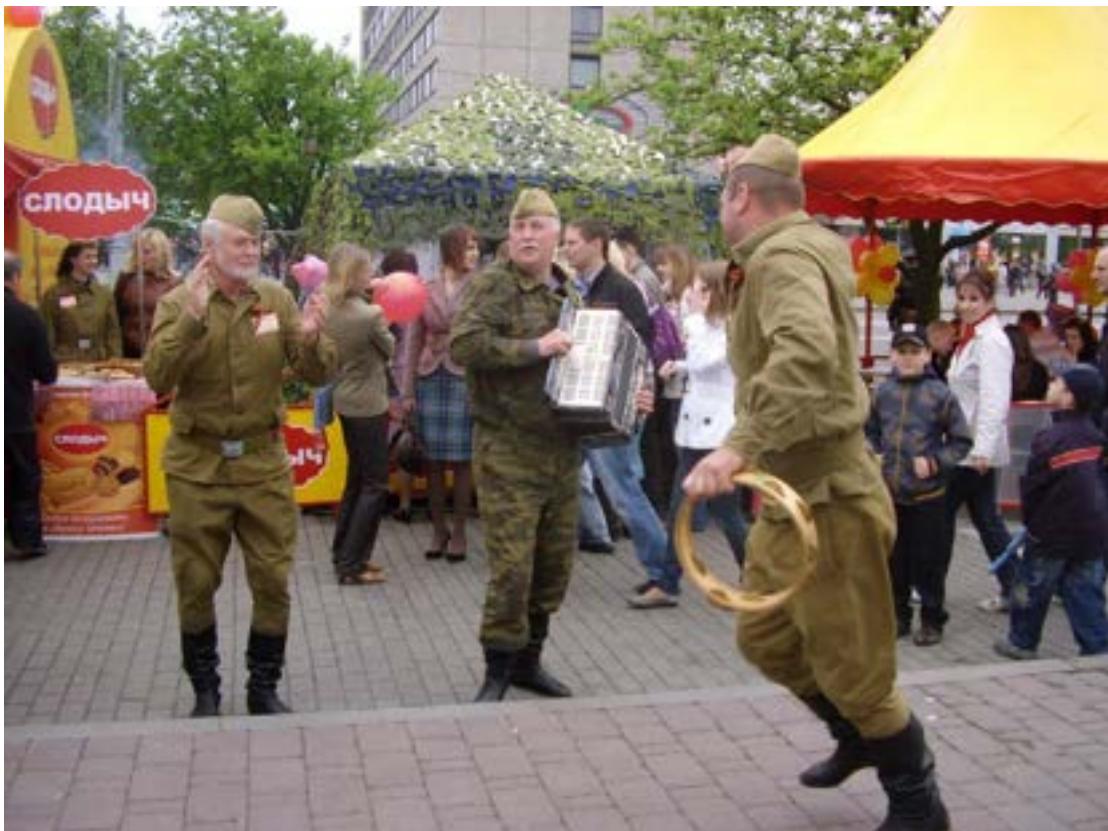
²⁶ City’s Day in Minsk used to be celebrated since Soviet times on July 3, and was moved in 2000 to the second Saturday of September to make it different from the new Independence Day. During 1996-1999 they were both celebrated on July 3. By contrast, the official history of Minsk dates City’s Day back to 1067 when it was mentioned in a chronicle.

²⁷ No one was hurt and no one has taken responsibility for the explosion. However, in the following months young men were massively summoned to the police to register their fingerprints.

²⁸ The “For Belarus!” poster series, although not carrying any explicit political message, was initially launched in 2006, the year of Presidential elections. Both series are still widely represented in the streets of Minsk. A collection of these posters can be retrieved on the site promoting A. Lukashenka as the possible President of Belarus and Russia – see <http://www.lukashenko2008.ru/articles/agitaciya/72/?page=1>.

²⁹ Otherwise, Belarusian and Russian are quite often mixed in the daily speech of persons all social strata and in the official media. The mixed usage of both languages most often can be explained by the rural origin of Minsk dwellers. The Russian language spoken with Belarusian pronunciation and occasional Belarusian words is quite common for people coming from rural areas all over the country. It is called “trasyanka” (a noun of verbal origin, from *shake*), and in particular, it is the language that many higher officials speak (not Belarusian). The mix of two languages is also present in the everyday life of Minsk citizens (titles or names in the street); however, the practice of double names (in Belarusian and Russian) is still marginal. Most documents are now printed in Russian only.

³⁰ For instance, a former Catholic church that now serves as a state institution has not been given back to worshipers even after a long public campaign. Of similar concern is the prohibition of 11 newspapers in 2003 and violent suppression of the street protests in the late 1990s – early 2000s, the latter epitomized by destruction of the protest camp and the arrest of people on October Square after the presidential elections in March 2006.



Artists imitating Soviet soldiers at leisure time. Photography taken by the author.



"St. (1) George's Ribbons" were symbols of victory in WWII in the festivities of 2010. Photograph taken by the author.



Field-kitchen at the Victory Day Celebrations, 2010. Photograph taken by the author.

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