ESAANZ
European Studies Association Australia and New Zealand

European Studies Assication Australia and New Zealand (ESAANZ)
Blog Series
Volume 1, Issue 11

Belarus: regaining national identity

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The events of August 2020 have placed Belarus at the forefront of the world's attention, adding a new page to the region's history of peaceful resistance to dictatorship, development of civil society and regeneration of national identity.

Over the last half millenium, this region, situated at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe, has changed hands many times; with each transition the identity of Belarusians - a Slavonic peoples distinct from modern day Russians and Ukrainians - has been forced to adapt to a new form. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first historical emergence of a clearly demarcated Belarusian nation, there was a brief national revival, while Aleksander Lukashenko, democratically elected as president in 1994, encouraged the new country to become Europe's last island of Soviet-style stability. Lukashenko, nicknamed "Bat'ka" (Father), a strict but caring patriarch, has ruled Belarus for 26 years, gradually replacing constitutional law with common unwritten rules. The political and cultural climate in Belarus had became especially harsh in the last fifteen years, as Lukashenko suppressed all opposition and began to eliminate his political opponents.

The danger of Covid-19 during this summer tipped the balance. Many Belarusian people realised that their leader did not care about their wellbeing, and this emotional component, coupled with the rigged presidential elections, triggered a political avalanche. Community self-organisation, mostly by women, during the Covid-19 disaster, awakened a previously relatively dormant society. Then followed Lukashenko's unscrupulous arrest of the potential male candidates for the elections, but here Lukashenko got into his own trap of male superiority: he did not deign to curb Svetlana Tikhanovskaia, the wife of opposition candidate and blogger Sergey Tikhanovsky. Moreover, he spoke about her in an intentionally dismissive way, framing her as a housewife unfit for political debates. Had there been a PR agency behind Svetlana's electoral campaign, they could not have invented a better sequence of events for her

ascendance. Svetlana joined forces with two other women representing the arrested or expelled competitors of her husband at the elections and gathered the support of thousands of people all over Belarus. People voted overwhelmingly for Tikhanovskaia not because she had a political program - she did not - but because she offered a simple promise of justice and the organisation of honest elections if she won. And she won!

Lukashenko's next mistake was disproportionately rigging the election results, which were followed by several nights of unprecedented police brutality towards the protesters and uninvolved passers-by, in which detained people were continuously beaten, tortured and even raped. At this juncture, women again came to the fore. On the fourth day of the protests, dressed in white, they lined the streets holding flowers. They spoke about their will in one voice: we demand respect, honesty, and an end to violence. They also spoke about fear and their wish to overcome it. They did not speak about liberalism, geopolitics, the European Union, or higher wages. Their desires were about the restoration of human dignity and inner freedom, saying to the autocrat patriarch: 'I am not afraid of you anymore'. Where the climate in Belarus had, over the last decades, begun to increasingly resemble a situation of domestic violence, these manifestations became the tipping point - the beginning of a people's revolution.

In general the protests in Minsk are dominated by people in their 20s and 30s, young professionals and by growing number of students. They are versatile in the use of modern technology, able to communicate on messaging platforms such as Telegram even when Lukashenko turned off the country's Internet. For these reasons the protests' format seems to be horizontally distributed, similar to those in Hong Kong, when there is no single centre or leader. It has allowed for the rapid formation of ground roots social collectives, when people find comrades among neighbours, school parents, in working enterprises, or unite to provide practical help to the victims of arrests, to sew huge protest flags, or when business owners distribute flowers, food and water to the chains of protesting women. It may be too early to describe these activities as the formation of a mutual aid economy operating outside the state, but they have the hallmarks of such collectives.

The events of August 2020 have once more brought issues of national identity to the fore. At the time of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, the Belarusian language was hardly used in the cities, and the identity of 'Belarusian' had no readily recognised visual, material markers either. As the protests expanded, people felt the need for unifying symbols, restoring the use of a simple white-red-white flag which traces its motives back to the medieval state of Belarus. The other intuitively adopted symbol was the white clothes of women, associated with the country's name, Bela, or 'white', Rus, and the white strips of fabric which Svetlana Tikhanovskaia suggested to wear on the wrist to help with counting exit polls at the day of the elections. Two weeks later women's white dresses were supplemented with red in the form of a scarf or decoration to match the colours of the white-red-white flag. A similar return is occurring with the Belarusian language. While most of the participants of rallies answer Belarusian correspondents in Russian, rallying chants often sound in Belarusian. Powerful protests songs also sound in Belarusian, unless of course it is Victor Tsoi's famous song 'Changes!'.

It seems as if in the course of a single month, Belarus has regained an almost lost national identity, and while at the core of this forming identity are freedom, humanity and dignity rather than nationalism, it is derived from deeply rooted national symbols.

Bio: Dr Elena Govor: Dr Elena Govor is an Australian writer and historian based at the Australian National University. She was born and educated in Minsk, Belarus. In 1990 she came to Australia, the country of her childhood dreams, and received her Doctorate in History from the ANU in 1996. She specialises in the history of Russian-Australian contact; among her books are Australia in the Russian Mirror: Changing Perceptions, 1770-1919, Melbourne: MUP, 1997; My Dark Brother: the Story of the Illins, a Russian-Aboriginal Family, Sydney, UNSW Press 2000; Russian Anzacs in Australian History, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2005; Twelve Days at Nuku Hiva: Russian Encounters and Mutiny in the South Pacific, Honolulu, UHP, 2010; From St Petersburg to Port Jackson: Russian Travellers' Tales of Australia 1807-1912, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2016 (with Kevin Windle & Alexander Massov).