

COUNTRY REPORT: BELARUS

BORDERS

Subtitle: Borders and policy in Belarus

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Abstract: This study highlights the significance of the Republic of Belarus as a geographical centre of Europe and as a zone of EU strategic interests that may increase in the upcoming decade, at least until the realisation of the EU's Energy Strategy (approximately by 2020). Therefore, the EU is – objectively – interested in developing a partnership with Belarus both in the political and economic fields by promoting some EU values, co-operating in economic initiatives, and providing financial support (loans, investments, etc.). Belarus also is interested in regional relations with the EU, because the country has recently re-oriented itself both towards the East and West. Regardless of the non-democratic actions of the Belarusian leaders, it is in the EU's interest to continue to increase co-operation with the scholars and people of Belarus.

Keywords: Borders, Belarus, bilateral co-operation

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1. Introduction to the problem

It is not a secret that the contemporary state borders within the region of the former Soviet Union are still perceived by the population differently in comparison with the state borders of countries that have never been a part of the USSR. In the case of the Republic of Belarus, which currently has more than 3500 km of state borders,

only approximately one third of them resemble real, traditional ('stereotypical') state borders: these are the Belarusian borders with the European Union. As for the other two thirds of these state borders, theoretically, it is possible for a person to cross them and not even to see a frontier guard. Even now, twenty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, middle- and older-aged groups of the population often do not want to recognise these contemporary borders and disregard them as 'real ones', because they remember the time when there was one big country and no frontiers between the former Soviet republics. However, over the last twenty years, as the European Union was working on weakening the state borders between EU member states, the former Soviet republics were establishing new borders, sometimes accompanied by visa regimes for visitors from former 'brotherly republics' even before these countries became EU members.

In other words, there are two different processes in Europe related to EU borders: on the one hand, de-bordering within the territory of the EU allowing its citizens to travel without visas, and on the other hand the construction of new borders (a process of bordering and re-bordering) to protect the enlarged EU from other countries, which results in creating many problems for non-EU travelling citizens. The Republic of Belarus is a good example that shows the different intellectual discourses and theoretical approaches to these processes within a post-Soviet country, as well as the practical problems related to bordering, including disputed borders, border patrols, border demarcation, etc.

2. Critical overview of borders and policy in Belarus

In case of Belarus, state borders have been flexible for a long period of its history. In the last century this border instability was mainly determined by the changes in state powers as a result of the Russian revolutions and inter-state (world) wars. There is no need to describe the interpretation of the border changes that took place after the 1917 October Revolution and WWI. The present research focuses on the approach to the post-Soviet borders of the Republic of Belarus that has been mainly formulated in the first years of the post-Soviet period and further developed in the 1990s. Therefore, this highlights the last period of Belarusian history – the formation of the post-Soviet independent nation state. Being located in the geographical centre

of Europe, Belarus can play an important geopolitical role. This is why the borders of this state attract the interest not only of Belarusian elites and general population, but also of political actors in the European and even global arena.

The period of post-Soviet transformation gave birth to several different interpretations of the history of Belarus and its possible future development as an independent nation state. The so-called 'border issue' was a part of these broader discussions. All the major political actors who existed at the end of the 1980s – beginning of the 1990s were interested in presenting their own interpretation of the history of Belarus as the 'only true' and 'fair' version for the nation. Therefore, the academic works of this period that contributed to the interpretation of the past and the present of Belarus were somehow always related to the political struggles/ actors of the transition period. But what are the political forces standing behind the different approaches?

Like in neighbouring republics in the late Soviet period of the 1980s, Belarus (then the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic – BSSR) also had a mass public movement – the Belarusian People's Front – called 'Renaissance' (or 'Renascence' – in Belarusian, Адраджэнне). This movement appeared in 1988 (see Babkoŭ 2005). Renaissance was less active in Belarus than similar movements in the Baltic States or in Ukraine, however in the late 1980s and early 1990s its meetings also were being attended by thousands of supporters in Belarus – from the common people to academics and political figures, including deputies from the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR and local councils. Many Belarusian intellectuals joined this movement, especially those who considered Belarusian the only appropriate state language in the newly-independent Republic of Belarus.

Accordingly, famous historians, journalists, philosophers and writers published articles, poems, and scholarly works to prove that Belarusians had a long history of their own (shared with other ethnic groups) in a feudal state (the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) and later in 1918's short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BNR); also, the idea circulated that newly-independent Belarus should include lands in which ethnic Belarusians live, i.e. some administrative regions belonging to the Russian Federation, Lithuania, and Poland); the Belarusian language and culture was promoted as being equal to any other in Europe, meaning that Belarus should be

viewed as an 'essential and integral part of Europe' and soon should follow the 'Baltic way' of nation-building.

This nationalistic discourse was well-developed and especially visible in the early – mid-1990s. In order to legitimise this approach and anchor it in history, some past scholarly works were reprinted. For example, historical books by the famous scholar and politician of the beginning of the twentieth century, V. Ignatowski (Ігнатоўскі 1991), were published several times: the goal was to illustrate the broad geographical settling of Slavonic tribes that later formed the Belarusian nation; to establish the right of Belarusians to be equal to all other European nations, and be proud of their own culture, etc.

Contemporary historians (Арлоў 1997; Доўнар-Запольскі 1994; Сагановіч 1995, 2001; Шыбека 2003) also published books to support similar ideas, in which border issues – either for ethnic Belarusians or for the states in which they mainly lived before the twentieth century – were tied to the idea that Belarusians belong to European nations and therefore have to keep their distance from Russia. In particular, these historical works disclosed the unfair attitude of the Bolsheviks toward the issues related to the formation of the Belarusian nation and state in the early twentieth century. Thus, Trusau (2010) and Saganovitch (2001) showed that ethnic Belarusians were living beyond the contemporary borders of the Republic of Belarus due to the fact that the former Soviet administrative borders were artificial, and Stalin's nationality policies as a whole followed the imperial idea of 'divide and conquer'.

In the fields of the social sciences and humanities, this nationalist approach gave birth to a so-called post-colonial discourse¹. Supporters of this discourse criticised Russian cultural colonialism towards Belarus and its culture. According to proponents, because of Russia's colonial policy in the borderlands, Belarusian lands were considered 'marginal' and underdeveloped, Belarusian culture was suppressed, and Belarusian national identity was diminished or suppressed. This discourse was supported briefly by such national scholars such as I. Bobkov, V. Abushenko, and V. Akudovitch. However, this was only temporary and vaguely

¹ Actually, the post-colonial discourse was much more popular amongst the intellectuals in Ukraine, however, it also existed amongst Belarusian intellectuals.

developed as a discourse because it did not fit Belarus – the country has never been a colony – and by the twenty-first century it almost had disappeared and was considered by some authors as inadequate to describe the Belarusian situation (Filatov 2007, 12). Later in the new century, once the post-colonial approach was abandoned, intellectuals shifted to a post-modernist approach and stressed the close ties of the population with its specific culture and historical situation. At the centre of this idea were local contextual ties, language, construction of personality and reality through language, etc. However, there are no political parties that back this approach and, therefore, it is restricted to science and invisible in politics or international relations.

As for the contemporary political opposition, it is more orientated towards the European Union and does not discuss the borders with EU countries. From time to time these forces raise the issue of Russia's Smolensk region as being 'primarily Belarusian', but this is more rhetoric than politics. During the years of increasing globalism, these opposition figures supported the idea of the decline of the nation state; when globalism fell into crisis, they did not mind talking about 'strong nations' in the contemporary world. The opposition is not present in the official media, often choosing to publish short articles on the internet (see Karbalevich 2010; Filatov 2007). Another institution that strongly supports this direction of investigation is the European Humanitarian University – its finances and several journals (including electronic ones, like *Новая Эуропа*) are available for those scholars who support these views.

The second real source of political power – from the early 1990s until the present – has been comprised of many bureaucratic and political sectors of society somehow related to the previous Soviet regime. In present-day Belarus some of these groups became a 'new elite', which are often called 'neo-communist', although these groups have nothing in common with communism; it is just a marker, or symbol to be used (see Bugrova 2004, 10). Those scholars who support this powerful new elite represent the third, post-communist discourse. In terms of border issues, the elite supports the status quo, i.e. keeping the borders as they are and keeping a good relationship with all neighbouring countries. This neo-communist discourse is also supported by some academic works relating to history (both ancient and recent), literature, philosophy, etc. (Ермаловіч 2000; Бобков 2010, Улахович

2001, Беларусь 2007; Беларусь 2010). This discourse is also called a pro-state, or pro-presidential one. However, in some cases it copies the pro-Russian state discourse –for example, in the case of Shevtsov (Шевцов 2009), a famous independent political analyst who worked for a while in Russia and still has good connections with some Russian political and ideological circles. Living in Minsk, Shevtsov sometimes defends the idea of the unification of Belarus and Russia in a stronger way than official Belarusian political circles. However, in other papers he supports the idea of balancing East-West interests in Belarusian foreign policy.

Typical for this discourse is a) the full recognition of current state borders; b) an optimistic view of the future of the Republic of Belarus as being prosperous and friendly to all its neighbouring countries; and c) a change in its arguments in parallel to changes in state policies towards the West and East, i.e. sometimes Belarus is described as only a ‘small brother’ of Russia, while at other times Belarus is depicted as a country with a balanced foreign policy. It is worth adding that state TV (ONT, CTV, 1st Channel) and radio programmes support this discourse, while the internet provides space for any differing views and authors with opposing political views.

Past and contemporary scholars² have described the borders of Belarus of different time periods, especially those during the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The major idea behind such literature, in addition to historical and educational aims, has been to prove that the Republic of Belarus was founded as an independent state in 1991 based upon strong historical foundations. Previous Belarusian borders have not been relevant because they did not support an independent Belarusian state. Modern historians and political scholars also have written books on the borders of Belarus related to the present-day borders between the countries of the ex-Soviet Union – especially those of Belarus vis-à-vis the Russian Federation during the process of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States³. Finally, journalists and analysts also have participated in discussions on the foreign policy of Belarus in

² Scholars including Ігнатоўскі 1991; Ермаловіч 2000; Доўнар-Запольскі 1994; Ширяев 1991; Сагановіч 2001; Шыбека 2003; and Пичета 2003.

³ See Зенькович 2002; Мірановіч 2003; Шевцов n/d; Лобач 2008; Трусау 2010.

which border issues are involved⁴. Usually, such publications only partly relate to borders: the major topic is usually the foreign policy and international affairs of Belarus.

3. Historical overview of Belarusian borders in the 20th century

3.1. The Brest Peace Treaty of 1918 and the borders of Belarus

In the very first days of Soviet history, which also was the history of Belarus 1917 until 1991, a significant political event took place. Its official name is the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (Берестейский мир). This event dramatically influenced the fortune of Belarus, although this name was not in use at this time. As Russia was still in a state of war with Germany, the Bolshevik authorities in Moscow badly needed to stop the conflict and withdraw its military troops. However, by the end of 1917, a huge part of the territory of the former Russian Empire was occupied by German troops. The Bolshevik government made a decision to sign a peace treaty with Germany under any conditions. The treaty, signed between Bolshevik Russia on the one side and the German Empire, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Ottoman Empire, on the other, marked Russia's final withdrawal from World War I. A huge territory of the former Russian Empire (almost 25% of its population and industry) was taken away (in the case of Belarus, mostly by Germany). Although this treaty resulted in the territory of Belarus, as well as the territory of Ukraine and Lithuania, was occupied by German troops, in fact the treaty contributed to the independence of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania. Germany supported their independence, because the German powers wanted to keep these countries politically and economically dependent on Germany. Therefore, they recognised the newly-established independent countries.

Under such conditions the first Belarusian nation state – the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) – was declared on 25 March 1918 in Minsk. In the first official document on independence (Уставная Грамота) there was a statement that all the territories upon which ethnic Belarusians lived in a majority should be parts of

⁴ Helpful literature in this respect can be found at several useful websites, including: www.belaruspartisan.org; www.news.mail.ru; www.charter97.org; <http://zautra.by>; www.belinstitute.eu.

this Belarusian state: “regions of Mahiliou, Minsk, Hrodna, Bielastok, parts of Vilna, Viciebsk and Smaliensk regions” and some other smaller places. This decision to form an independent Belarusian state was a protest against the partition of ethnic Belarusian lands by Germans and Bolsheviks. All this territory was declared a united democratic Belarusian state, its borders determined according to ethnic Belarusian settlement. This was the difficult beginning of the history of a Belarusian independent nation-state – a history that was full of hardships and uncertainties ahead.

3.2. Ethnographic Belarus and the territory of Belarusian People’s Republic and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1918-1921⁵

The ethnographic territory of Belarus had been formed definitively by the beginning of the 20th century. It was delineated by the census of 1897. There were several geographical and historical centres of Belarusian territory where the national elites first were educated and then active. First of all, these were Vilnius (Belarusian – Wilnia) and Minsk (at that time – Miensk). One should add to this list Polatsk, Viciebsk, Mahiliou, Smaliensk, as well as some other cities, especially in the west of Belarus: Hrodna, Bielastok, Slonim, and Brest. By far, most conflict in the 20th century involved Vilnius, Smaliensk and Bielastok, i.e. the cities that played a great role in shaping Belarusian mentality at critical moments of history. All Belarusian philologists, historians and writers of the turn of the 20th century, especially after the (first in its history) census of 1897, believed Vilnius, Smaliensk and Bielastok to be Belarusian cities. This was noted by Adam Kirkor in his *Picturesque Russia* (Volume 3, 1882) and by Euhim Karski on relevant maps. Before and during World War I, Germans also considered these cities as part of Belarus. Over the course of the 20th century, these cities were several times included in Belarusian political formations (the Belarusian People’s Republic; Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, Lithuanian-Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic). When the Bolsheviks were giving these border cities to other countries or other Soviet republics, they were not guided by the public opinion of the people living there, but rather by immediate political benefits.

When the German occupation during WWI ended, especially after the Brest Peace Treaty, Smaliensk, where many Belarusian intellectuals happened to be,

⁵ The following section maintains the spelling of cities and names typical for prevailing papers of this discourse.

stood forward in history. It was here on 30 July 1918 that the 'Western Commune', legally part of the Russian Republic, declared itself to be the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). This happened during the 4th North-Western Conference of the Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks, which declared itself to be the first Congress of the Belarusian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (BCPB). The country's boundaries were defined on the same day. On 31 December 1918, the first Congress of the BCPB declared the Socialist Soviet Belarusian Republic and formed a government in Smaliensk. On 3 January 1919, the government set off for Minsk. However, already on 16 January a messenger was sent from Moscow to Minsk to inform about the decision to divide the Socialist Soviet Belarusian Republic and to create the Lithuanian-Belarusian SSR, which was a 'buffer country'. According to some accounts, in order to diminish nationalism in Belarus, it was decided in Moscow to take away three of its regions – Viciebsk, Mahiliou and Smaliensk. On 23 January, the Smaliensk section of the regional committee declared that it had left the BSSR.

On 2-3 February 1919, the First Congress of Soviets of the BSSR accepted that the three eastern regions were to be given to Russia and approved the decision to unite with the Lithuanian Soviet Republic. On 17-21 February 1919 the first Congress of Soviets took place in Lithuania as well. As a result, already on 28 February 1919 a new workers-peasants' government was formed in the new Soviet Socialist Lithuanian-Belarusian Republic that embraced the Minsk, Vilnius, Hrodna and partly the Kaunas regions. The capital was appointed to Vilnius. However, on 28 April the government of this republic moved hastily to Minsk while Vilnius was captured by the Polish army. Vilnius was later captured by the Soviets again in September 1939 and in July 1940.

In 1920, the Bolsheviks annexed part of Belarus to Lithuania and Latvia, which was planned as a step towards gaining these countries as allies of the Soviets against Poland. First, on 12 July 1920, a treaty with Lithuania was signed that gave Vilnius and a major part of the former Vilnius region inhabited by Belarusians (including the city of Hrodna) to Lithuania. In September 1920, Vilnius was captured by the Lithuanian army but then went back to Poland in October, when a satellite state – the Republic of Middle Lithuania – was proclaimed. A local government

election took place and in February 1922, Middle Lithuania officially became part of Poland.

On 11 August 1920, the Bolsheviks recognised Latvia and annexed to it the Dvinsk, Rezhitsk and Lutsyn areas, which were inhabited mostly by Belarusians. In return the Bolshevik Government won the right to use the Latvian ports of Libava and Vindava (which meant there was a profitable trade between the Bolsheviks and the West). In May-June 1921 Latvia gave to Lithuania the cities of Mazeikai and Palanga with the surrounding areas of 200 km². In return, Lithuania passed to Latvia a piece of land around Dvinsk (Daugavpils) of 299 km² that was inhabited mostly by Belarusians. As a result, the proportion of Belarusians in Latvia significantly increased.

In contrast, in 1920 the BSSR included only six areas of the former Minsk region. The republic's government made a formal request to Moscow to return the lost Belarusian cities and the territories. The issue officially was upheld in September 1922 as the enlargement of the country was argued to be useful in terms of defence. The local peasantry supported the idea of enlargement. On 7 March 1924 the BSSR received back 15 territories, including the cities of Polatsk, Viciebsk and Mahiliou, which comprised many, though not all the areas inhabited by Belarusians. In August 1926 Belarusian Party elites turned to Moscow with the request of getting back for Belarus the territory of Homel to the south-east of Minsk and three areas in Pskov region to the north-east, including the towns of Nevel', Vielizh and Siebiezh. In December 1926 some part of these territories were passed to Belarus, with the cities of Homel and Rechytsa (to the south-east of Minsk). Right up to the end of the 1920s there were negotiations on annexing to Belarus the areas in the Smaliensk region. However, with the beginning of the Stalinist repressions in the 1930s, these negotiations were reduced and then stopped.

3.3. Pre-WWII (1939): BSSR enlargement, transfer of the Vilnius region to Lithuania

In 1937, an idea arose to move the capital city from Minsk to Mahiliou. Two identical Houses of Government were built in these cities. However, in 1939 the situation changed rapidly. On 17 September the annexation of western Belarus (from March 1921, a part of Poland) to the BSSR (and the USSR) was initiated. Vilnius was annexed to Belarus, but already on 10 October it was given to Lithuania in return for

political profit in Lithuania-USSR relations. It was at that time that Vilnius received its current Lithuanian spelling (from Wilnia). A city in which traditionally there were several cultures that co-existed saw the Lithuanian police establish the national language, despite the fact that less than five per cent of Vilnius inhabitants were Lithuanian at the time. Poles and Belarusians who used to hold higher posts in city government, in the railway, enterprises, education, etc. were fired, while their positions were taken by Lithuanians coming from lands to the west of the city.

In September 1939, Bielastok also shortly was re-annexed to Belarus when the Soviet army stepped into Poland. It was here that a regional people's congress took the decision to join the USSR and BSSR. Bielastok was the regional centre up to the summer of 1944 when it was handed over to Poland, including part of the Bielavezha forest that did not belong to the Bielastok area before. In 1939 in south-western Belarus there arose boundary conflicts with Ukraine. In November 1939 Khrushchev wanted to annex to Ukraine the cities of Brest, Pruzhany, Stolin, Pinsk, Kobryn and Luninets (now the southern part and the capital of Brest region). However, these plans were not implemented. In August 1944 Polatsk, the historical cradle of Belarusian culture, was planned to be handed over to Russia. The head of the BSSR Panamarenka took on the role of Moscow-based negotiator in this and other disputes. Around 2000 km² of western Belarus also were annexed to Lithuania. On 10 August 1945 a law on the Soviet-Polish boundary was accepted and signed. According to it, Poland annexed almost all of the Bielastok region and areas in the Brest region, including the cities of Augustow, Bel'sk, Lomzha, Hajnauka, etc. In 1950, additionally some smaller towns were passed to Poland. To conclude, the paradoxical result of this was that Belarus, the only one amongst the victorious countries and one of the co-founders of the United Nations, lost its territory after the Second World War.

During Khrushchev's rule (up to 1954), there were some plans to annex Kaliningrad oblast of Russia to Belarus, with a 'corridor' from the Baltic Sea through Lithuania and Poland to Belarus. The city of Hrodna would go to Lithuania instead. Despite these ambitious plans, in 1964 the BSSR was enlarged by eight small villages to the east of the Mahiliou region.

3.4. Independent Republic of Belarus within the BSSR's administrative boundaries

In December 1991, the independent Republic of Belarus arose on the maps of Europe within its 1964 boundaries. However, at the end of the USSR's days, the issue of Belarus's borders became the point of discussion anew. The Presidium of the Supreme Council of the BSSR (the ruling political core) raised the question of Vilnius's destiny at a special inquiry. At the inquiry it was said that should Lithuania declare its separation from the USSR, Belarus would claim its rights to Vilnius region. At that point, some party politicians in Moscow were blackmailing Lithuania with the possibility of creating an autonomous Polish republic in the Vilnius region (of a kind of Transnistria in Moldova), so that the inquiry by the Belarusian authorities was welcomed by some of them. An attempt was even made (unsuccessfully) to create a military precedent on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border with a view to provoking mass violence.

At that very time, in the south of Belarus, some political forces promoted the idea of a 'Yatviagian' autonomous republic with its capital in Pinsk. Many analysts now recall these incidents as political provocations. In the same vein, several Russian politicians expressed the view in August-September 1991 that Belarus should give Viciebsk and part of Mahiliou regions to Russia.

After the Declaration of Independence (made on 27 July 1990; passed as a Law on 25 August 1991), it was necessary to clearly define the borders of the country. In Soviet times, only the Belarusian border with Poland had been defined and demarcated. After that, the borders with Latvia and Lithuania were defined. With Lithuania, there was a characteristic conflict over the railway station Gadutiski that was situated on the territory of Lithuania but used to belong to Belarusian railways. Only in 1994 did the Belarusian side officially agree to give the station to Lithuania with no compensation. On 26 October 1996 Belarus ratified the Treaty on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. This document defined and fixed the border on the basis of the 'Soviet' line of 1940.

The delimitation of the Belarusian border with Ukraine, although mostly done, is still a matter of negotiation. Belarusian-Russian borders call for delimitation as well. Due to the political climate of the 'Union State', many debatable and controversial land questions are still unresolved, or not even under discussion. One example is an accident between Russian and Belarusian foresters in the Viciebsk area that arose out of a controversy in the papers. As a result of this incident, the

parties defined a small piece of territory that would not belong to either party. The political aspect of the border issue is the principle of the inviolability of borders in today's Europe. However, plenty of other ethnographical, historical, and cultural interpretations of borders exist. They are often presented for granted in the textbooks and on the maps of neighbouring countries.

A new perspective that has recently opened up for Belarus is the new border regime that could be implemented with the neighbouring territories of the European Union that have been so important for the Belarusian nation. Although this regime was declared in early-mid 2010, after the presidential election of 19 December 2010 that was not recognised by the OSCE as fair and free, it is a question mark whether the EU countries will introduce the new border regime in full, as was planned, or not.

4. The Legal Basis of Contemporary Belarusian Borders and Recent Border Delimitation and Demarcation

There are several legal documents that regulate the current borders of the Republic of Belarus and neighbouring countries. The common basis of all the legal regulations is the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. Additionally, there exists the Law of the Republic of Belarus dated 21 July 2008 "On the State Borders of the Republic of Belarus" and a Resolution of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus dated 11 June 1993 "On granting the borders of the Republic of Belarus with the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Lithuanian and Latvia the republican status of state borders".

In general, Belarus does not have border conflicts and problems with state border delimitation and demarcation. As for the EU countries' borders, all the issues have been solved. The borders between Belarus and Poland were fixed and approved by Presidential Decree dated 10 November 1995⁶ – Polish-Belarusian Borders are delimited and demarcated. However, there are some political sections of Polish society that still consider the western part of Belarus as *kresy wshodni* (eastern borders), i.e. as part of the Polish state. These individuals are not in power, but they have some political influence and are visible in the Polish mass media. For this reason, in a speech delivered on 27 January 2011 in Parliament, President

⁶ Decree No. 455 «О правопреемстве Республики Беларусь в отношении некоторых договоров, заключенных между бывшим Союзом ССР и Польшей».

Lukashenko made a comment on the foreign policy of Belarus and touched upon this issue. He said, in particular, that the Republic of Belarus is always ready to develop mutually useful ties with West and East. At the same time, as he said, Belarus will never meet the demands of those politicians in Poland who dream 'to gain revenge' and reshape the borders between Poland and Belarus ('make it much closer to Minsk') established under Stalin. There exists a bilateral agreement between Belarus and Lithuania that regulates delimitation, demarcation, and the border regime⁷. Likewise, there is a bilateral agreement between Belarus and Latvia regulating the delimitation, demarcation, and border regime⁸.

As for non-EU borders, the situation is different in both the cases of Russia and Ukraine. Still, citizens these three countries do not need visas in order to cross their respective borders. The entire process of the demarcation of the state border between Belarus and Ukraine has not been finished. The reason is not political, but economic: according to the Belarusian point of view, the Republic of Ukraine did not pay its state debt to Belarus. According to the Republic of Ukraine, there is no debt at all. For this particular reason, an agreement between Belarus and Ukraine has been signed and ratified (in Ukraine – in 1997, in Belarus – in 2009). However, this agreement will not become law until the states exchange the 'Instruments of Ratification' (обмен ратификационными грамотами). The text of this agreement has not published publically⁹. The state borders between Belarus and Russia have never been defined by special agreements. Currently, both states are in the Union of Russia and Belarus. This status does not make it necessary to fix the borders in the same way as with other countries. However, this very situation induces some practical confusion and can even bring legal or political problems in case of any conflicts in the future.

5. Borders Within a Broader Political and Cultural Discourse

⁷ This agreement is the «Договор между Республикой Беларусь и Литовской Республикой о режиме белорусско-литовской государственной границы» and came into being on 7 July 2010.

⁸ This agreement is called the «Договор об установлении государственной границы между Республикой Беларусь и Латвийской Республикой» of 19 May 1995.

⁹ For details, see: Украина и Беларусь: демаркация границ «под вопросом». At: http://news.date.bs/economics_174022.html

Unlike the foreign media programmes oriented to Belarus and its development (e.g., Radio Freedom, Deutsche Welle Radio), there are no special programmes on borders on the state Belarusian TV and/or Belarusian state radio. The reason is simple: the state borders are not a topic for discussions at the state level. There are no conflicts on this matter between Belarus and its neighbouring countries. Therefore, state borders are discussed usually very rarely and people take them for granted.

However, there is a popular political discourse on the independence of Belarus: its internal development (both political and economic), the model for future development, the relationship with its neighbouring countries. On the one hand, the president and his official circles lead this discussion – when they try to explain the foreign policy of Belarus in regard to the Russian Federation and European Union. From this perspective, the Republic of Belarus follows its own independent way of development since the time when Lukashenko took office (i.e. from the mid-1990s). The president often repeats in his speeches that he is the major defender of state independence and that the Republic of Belarus will follow its own independent development without pressure from other countries.

On the other hand, the political oppositional circles (there is no single circle, but many) usually deliver another message: for some of them (Feduta), Belarus should be closer to Russia as its senior brother and best friend; for others (Statkevich), on the contrary, Belarus should be more close to the European Union and not a 'smaller Russian ally. Each party usually refers to the multi-cultural nature of Belarus: a multi-ethnic population, different religious confessions being native for the population, and especially the feudal history of Belarusians within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. On the basis of these cultural and historical arguments, Belarus is interpreted as a 'land in-between' (пограничье) that belongs totally neither to East nor to West (Titarenko 2009). The entire civilisation existing in this region (in the land in-between) is viewed as different from Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox civilisations (in the terms of Huntington). This civilisation covers a large part of Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Poland.

The major features of all borderland civilisations are combinations of some trends from both sides (in Belarus – from East and West). It refers to ethnic groups,

e.g. the Polish group in Belarus reflects the fact that Belarusian lands were part of Poland in the past. On the contrary, the Russian group highlights the belonging of Belarus to the Russian Empire, while smaller ethnic groups typical for the former Soviet Union indicate the Soviet history and the concept of the Soviet population as a 'multi-national pot'. Indeed, contemporary Belarus is a multi-ethnic country. There are some big groups that reflect Belarus' long history, and the rest reflects its involvement in globalisation – not so much in mass labour or forced migration, but rather in the regular movements of people. According to the last national census (2009), the five major ethnic groups are the following (Table 1):

Table 1. Distribution of the population of Belarus according to major nationalities.

| nationalities | people | per cent |
|---------------|-----------|----------|
| Belarusians | 7,957,252 | 83,7 |
| Russians | 785,084 | 8,26 |
| Poles | 294,549 | 3,1 |
| Ukrainians | 158,723 | 1,7 |
| Jews | 12,926 | 0,14 |
| Others | 295,273 | 3,1 |

Source: Results of the Census of the Population (2010).

There is no distinct difference between the urban and rural population in Belarus. However, more Russians live in the urban space than in villages, and more Poles live in rural areas than in cities. The reason of these peculiarities are in the history (not through forced migration). A clear tendency is growth of the urban population and decrease in the rural group: every year all rural regions lose population, and only Minsk city is growing very fast. The current distribution of the population is represented in Table 2.

Table 2. Urban and rural population of Belarus.

| Population groups | people | per cent |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|
| urban | 7 064 529 | 74,33 |
| rural | 2 439 278 | 25,67 |

| | | |
|-------|-----------|-----|
| total | 9 503 807 | 100 |
|-------|-----------|-----|

Source: Results of the Census of the Population (2010).

A more interesting criteria is language. The distribution of the population according to native language does not coincide with ethnic boundaries. As a consequence of the Russian and Soviet periods, a proportion of ethnic Belarusians consider Russian as their mother tongue. The Soviet politics of Russification also contributed to this process. Nationalists currently blame the government for the recognition of Russian as a second state language: although both Russian and Belarusian are mandatory at school, many schools have Russian as the language of instruction. The majority of the population speaks Russian at home and the workplace. Usually, people use Belarusian in political matters: to manifest their political views. It is a legal form of protest and dissatisfaction with the political regime in Belarus. However, this is true only for the intellectual elite. As for the common people, they mainly speak Russian in the cities and Trasjanka (a mixture of Russian and Belarusian) in rural areas and do not care about such protests.

The results of the last census demonstrate that Russian is still a major language in the country. Thus, amongst ethnic Belarusians almost 3,000,000 declared Russian as their mother tongue (amongst ethnic Russians only 22,000 said that their mother tongue is Belarusian). The biggest surprise was with ethnic Poles: amongst them only a bit more than 5% declared Polish as the mother tongue, while more than 30% named Russian, and much more than 50% named Belarusian. In the case of Jews, most of them named Russian, and less than 10% named Belarusian, and 2% – the language of their nationality. This situation is a regular topic for discussions in independent media. Thus, Radio Freedom discussed this issue in Autumn 2010 actively: one of the editors of the Belarus section of this programme, Jury Dragohrust, worries that the number of those who named Belarusian as their mother tongue declined from 73% to 53% during the period between two censuses. He worries even more because the number of those who speak Belarusian at home declined from 37% to 23% (2010).

Sociological surveys also confirm this tendency of decreasing groups who actively use Belarusian. Thus, according to one national survey in 2007¹⁰, 57% of citizens of Belarus read media and books only in Russian. 38% can read both Russian and Belarusian, and only 4% said that they read media and literature only in Belarusian. As these authors concluded, it is not only a result of forced Russification, but is an objective reflection of the significance of Russian; therefore, nobody can stop the process. It means that language is not a distinctive border in Belarus any more with the exception of the nationalistic elite: they know Russian, but speak Belarusian.

As for religious confession, the census did not ask about religious belonging. On the basis of many sociological studies it is known, however, that more than 50% of people identify themselves as Orthodox, approximately 10% as Roman Catholics, and 1% as Protestants. Other religious identities are not significant, however, they include Muslims and several small sects. Overall, there are 25 to 27 registered groups, depending on the particular year (see Titarenko 2010). As one may conclude, the population of Belarus is indeed culturally dissimilar, so cultural borders are blurring and not play a role of dividing the population. All of these divisions – even the language of everyday life, the most touchy item – are virtual (or political) lines of division, or virtual borders in Belarus.

6. Summary: Belarus and the EU Neighbourhood

After the EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007, the EU recognised that the eastern EU borders had to be secured on the mutual basis of co-operation with its non-EU neighbours. The so-called 'Eastern Europe' became very important. Therefore, the EU started to pay more attention to its eastern neighbours in contrast to its previous interest only in Russia. For example, in order to prevent migration, it was necessary to make the borders hard and help the non-EU countries with new equipment, implement some common rules, etc. Surely, the EU had in mind also the promotion of political reforms, human rights, law enforcement in this region, etc. It was a

¹⁰ This was mentioned in a volume printed by Belarusian intellectuals, *История имперских отношений: беларусы и русские* (2008, 4).

question of promoting security (economic and political) as well. In other words, the EU started to challenge the idea of Eastern Europe as a zone of Russian domination.

The hidden aim was to postpone possible applications by the non-EU former Soviet states to the EU while still integrating them into the economic and political EU zone of influence, and promoting further economic and political reforms. It was the case with Ukraine, Georgia, and possibly with Moldova. The concept of a “Wider Europe” was constructed. Belarus was not even considered as a part of this Eastern European Neighborhood Policy until the very end of its formation. However, Belarus also was invited to join the EENP because this programme could not be complete without Belarus. In 2008, before the parliamentary elections in Belarus, President Lukashenko released political prisoners and therefore pleased the EU. The long-term diplomatic and political EU sanctions against Belarus were removed, and Belarus was finally invited to the EENP. Lukashenko did not attend the May 2009 inaugural summit in Prague, however, the country became a part of the EENP.

This improvement in the relationship between the EU and Belarus helped not only to legally fix and strengthen all the EU borders with Belarus. Some new border agreements were signed in 2010 to ease the border regime for people living in the so-called ‘border zone’ (within 30-50 km of the border). Currently, such agreements exist for all 3 EU neighbouring states: they allow people from both sides to get special long-term permission for border crossing within this ‘border zone’ with a payment of €20 for a 5-year visa (compare to the regular EU visa cost of €60). However, these agreements were not yet functioning by December 2010. Additionally, it was announced that Belarus would probably ease the visa regime for citizens of the three Baltic states and Poland when they were visiting the Lake Naroch resort region¹¹. These changes became possible only due to the EENP.

At the same time, neither the EU nor Belarus consider the EENP as an instrument to bring Belarus closer to the EU to the point of real integration with a possibility of joining this community. Politicians in Belarus realistically are facing the situation as a ‘diplomatic improvement’, not as an invitation to joining the EU in the future. Therefore, the EENP did not much influence the mass consciousness of the

¹¹ For details, see: <http://news.mail.ru/inworld/belorussia/politics/4436607>

population. Thus, a so-called ‘European identity’ amongst the population is still at the same level (approximately, one third) as it was several years before 2009. It means that 35-40% respondents (citizens of Belarus) support the idea of joining the EU. However, almost the same number of citizens do not support this idea. Needless to say that such questions do not mean or propose in practice this option: it is only an imaginary alternative between the EU and Russia, while both options seem very problematic in the nearest future. To illustrate this situation, see Table 3 with survey data made by an independent research institute (IISEPS in Vilnius):

Table 3. Dynamics of answers between 2002-2009 to the question “In case of a referendum in Belarus on whether it is worth joining the European Union, what would your choice be”? (in %).

| Date (month/year) | 12/02 | 03/03 | 09/05 | 11/06 | 12/07 | 09/08 | 12/08 | 03/09 | 06/09 |
|-------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Yes | 60.9 | 56.4 | 38.0 | 36.6 | 37.1 | 26.7 | 30.1 | 34.9 | 41.4 |
| No | 10.9 | 11.9 | 44.0 | 36.2 | 35.0 | 51.9 | 40.6 | 36.3 | 39.8 |

Source: iiseps.org

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