Chapter 17. Two Ideas of “Belarusianness”
The underdeveloped character of the Belarusian nation and the weakness of the Belarusians’ national self-consciousness is perceived as the main reason for the defeat of the nationalist movement and for the failure of the country’s democratization. The linguistic Russification is considered to be a symptom of the progressing assimilation and dissolution of the Russian-speaking cultural universe. A hypothetic consent to a political union with Russia signifies a refusal of state independence. Each of these factors, however, has a flip side. The majority of Belarusians are in favor of integration with their eastern neighbor; but only 12 percent would want to create a single state with Russia. The linguistic Russification in practice does not lead to a political pro-Russianess; rather it is the Belarusian-speaking population that manifests a greater readiness to integrate with Russia. Russian-speaking people in Belarus still call the Belarusian language their native mother tongue. Belarusians do not always differentiate themselves from Russians in terms of cultural identity, but at the same time they manifest a high level of “the pride index” of their Belarusianess. Moreover, those members of society that comprises “the denationalized majority”—that is, the supporters of the current regime—demonstrate their Belarusian identity as an object of pride and as the main principle for their self-definition. In other words, the complicated layout of the political, cultural, and linguistic components of the Belarusians’ self-awareness does not fit the simplistic image of a weak and underdeveloped Belarusian identity.

One of the ways to solve these paradoxes is to accept that there are two different ideas of “Belarusianess,” two conflicting concepts of Belarus, to which the Belarusian regime and political opposition appeal. It would mean to acknowledge that those who support the current regime are not nationless inhabitants, but rather the adherents of the Belarusian idea represented by the official discourse. At the same time, the concept of the alternative Belarusianess articulated by the Belarusian nationalist movement was constructed as a counter idea to the official Belarusianess and became groundwork for their political ideology.
Both ideas came to being as a result of different approaches to the development of the Belarusians’ history. The idea of Belarusianess represented by the official discourse is built on the basis of continuity with the Soviet past and in some aspects it is connected with the ideas of the Belarusian revival of the early twentieth century (e.g., ideas of social equality as the ground for national unity). For the Belarusian nationalist movement of the 1990s, the national revival became the main source when articulating the concept of an alternative Belarusianess as opposed to the Soviet development of the nation. Both the official and the alternative discourses aspire to generalize and “globalize” their way of representation of Belarusianess, both of them are declared to be the only true “Belarusian idea.” And in both cases the Belarusian “Motherland” appears as an “indivisible” ideological entity. To a certain extent, this can be seen as logical because, the national interest excludes particularity, because it implies the “wholeness” of the nation.1 In the developments taking place in the Belarusian political space one can discern numerous signs of the symbolic struggle for the right to represent the true Belarusianess. On the one hand, the Belarusian authorities mark the territory of their legitimization in terms of unity —Belarusian people, Belarusians. In fact, the manipulations in which the regime engages during presidential elections are required not to change the final outcome, but rather to modify the view of the Belarusian society’s political landscape. According to independent poll data, during the 2001 presidential election 49.8 percent of voters acknowledged that they supported Lukashenka, while 25.8 percent voted for the opposition’s candidate, Vladimir Goncharik.2 But according to the official data, these numbers were 75.65 percent for Lukashenka and 15.65 percent for Goncharik.3 In 2006 the picture looked similar: the official results announced by the Central Election Commission showed that 83 percent voted in favor of the current president, while 6.1 percent in favor of his opponent, Alaksandar Milinkevich.4 The Independent Institute of Socioeconomic and Political Studies opinion poll results showed that 58.2 per-

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1 Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power, 221.
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percent of the questioned voted for Lukashenka, and 15.8 percent for Alaksandr Milinkevich. The comparison of the independent opinion poll data and the Central Election Commission data indicate that the results of voting are not falsified to the point of changing the “winner.” By citing lower percentage of those who support opposition candidates, the authorities create a view of the Belarusian nation as unified and cohesive, thus locating the opposition out of the space of this “integral wholeness.” At the same time, the authorities have purposefully carried out the monopolization of the public sphere pushing the “third sector,” political parties, and non state-owned press off to the margins of public life. Their activity is not banned, but limited and restricted, and they are denied the right to speak on behalf of Belarusian people and Belarus. According to a 2004 presidential decree, privately owned Belarusian media were not allowed to use the words “national” or “Belarus” in their names. The striving for the homogeneousness of the Belarusian public space is also displayed in the response of the authorities to the street actions organized by political opposition. In most cases, such demonstrations are not banned, but nearly always their location is changed by the authorities. Instead of allowing the demonstrators to gather in centrally located squares and avenues, the events are moved to remote parts of the city, which are harder to reach and where these actions are secluded from the passersby. This relocation of the opposition’s meetings to the peripheries of Minsk symbolizes their exclusion from the center of the official public life.

Belarus is known as a country whose public space is free of commercial advertising. However, it is full of the so-called social advertising, in which the state presents and promotes itself to its citizens with the motto “For Belarus.” For the first time this slogan was used in 2004 to push for constitutional reforms in the country. The campaign was announced and promoted on TV, during public concerts, and on posters and billboards. Different adjectives were added to the slogan in order to specify the “desirable vision” of the official Belarus: “For prosperous Belarus,” “For genuine Belarus,” “For enlightened Belarus,” “For talented Belarus,” “For heroic Belarus,” “For Olympic Belarus,” “For stability,” “For independence.” This campaign was also used in the 2006 presidential elections, with the addition of a song played on Belarusian state television on the day of the elections. In 2007 the campaign “For independent Belarus” was launched aimed at promoting official Belarusianness. Meanwhile, the opposition’s political

and cultural discourses refer to the official Republic of Belarus as an anti-Belarusian political formation. “The independent state—the Republic of Belarus—actually is not a national state. Since 1994 the current regime has done everything to eliminate everything that is national here.”6 The position of the Belarusian nation in Belarus is defined by some Belarusian authors as “the position of a national minority that suffers from the policy of discrimination and enslavement.”7 As a cultural project, the Belarusian nation “remained at the level of subculture, one of many competitive programs of modernization of Belarus.”8 The antagonism between the contemporary Belarusian state and the Belarusian nation reached its climax in the Belarusian People’s Front’s statement adopted in 2003 by the Soym of the Conservative Christian Party—Belarusian people’s Front (CCP-BPF). “On the ethnocide and elimination of the the Belarusian nation,”9 of which the authorities of the Republic of Belarus are accused. The Belarusian nation,

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according to the opposition, is set against the Belarusian state. Opposition politicians behave as if there were no Belarusians at all among those supporting the governing regime. The opposition claimed that the nation in Belarus has nothing in common with the existing state. The article about the Assembly of Belarusian Intelligentsia held on March 16, 2003 and organized by the opposition in Minsk was titled “Belarusian Intelligentsia Says ‘No’ to the Ruling Regime.” March 25—the day of annual celebration of the establishment of the Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918—was announced by the Belarusian opposition in 2007 to be a “Day of National Unity.” On March 25, 2007, the day the opposition planned an annual street demonstration, the authorities launched their campaign “For independent Belarus.”

One manifestation of the struggle between the two discourses of Belarusianness has become the celebration of St. Valentine’s day. Every February 14 since 1997 the youth political organization Malady Front (Young Front) conducts street political actions under the slogan “I love Belarus.”

No one doubts that “Belarus” “loved” by these young people and “Belarus” presented by the official posters are two different Belaruses. As a rule, the Young Front gets no permission from the authorities to conduct its actions, thus their actions are perceived by the government as an

attempt of a symbolical “appropriation” of “Belarusian motherland,”
which had been already usurped by the official discourse. Despite the offi-
cial ban, the political “actions of love” continue to be conducted in Minsk
by the Young Front. Because the ban is obviously not working, the author-
ities have decided to organize their own actions of manifestation of their
“love” for Belarus.

Thus, on February 14, 2007, Belarus saw a true political struggle in the
field of declaration of love for the Belarusian motherland. Parallel to the
opposition’s action “I love Belarus,” the official youth organization Bela-
ruski Respublikanski Saiuz Maladiozhy (Belarusian Republican Youth
Union) conducted the action “For beloved Belarus.”

The thesis about two parallel concepts of Belarusianness allows us to
interpret the interrelations between democratization and nationalization
of Belarusian society in a different way. In this perspective, the national
weakness of Belarusianness can become its antipode—a special “strength,”
which makes it possible to render resistance to the systemic transforma-
tions that have gripped the entire geopolitical space around Belarus.