In Search of Agency: Examining Belarusian Society from Below

Felix Ackermann, Mark Berman, Olga Sasunkevich

In 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice referred to Belarus as the "last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe."[1] In the twelve years since, this image has dominated not just mass media but also scholarly representations of Belarus. In recent times, new contenders to the title of "Europe's last dictatorship" have appeared: an aggressive and unabashed authoritarianism has risen in Russia and right-wing populism has gathered strength in Central and Western Europe. All the same, the "last dictatorship in Europe" remains a popular metaphor for describing the Belarusian situation. Furthermore, this sobriquet seems to refer to more than the current regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Rather, it extends an entrenched habit of thinking about Belarus as a quintessentially East European country, one lying in "shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism" (Wolff 1994). Under this view, Belarus is above all else an object, its population cowed and passive—at best dominated, at worst slaughtered by a succession of brutal rulers, domestic and foreign. Belarus is depicted as a "Bloodland," defined by its status as a setting for violence.[2] Its population is seen to have been subject to every kind of social engineering and economic up-

---

1 Condoleezza Rice: "I would hope that, particularly in Belarus, which is really the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe, that you would begin to see some democratic development," cited in: "Rice: Russia's Future Linked to Democracy," *International CNN.com,* 20 April 2005, http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/europe/04/20/rice.dougherty/index.html (accessed 8 February 2017).

2 In his book on the German and Soviet conquest of Central and Eastern Europe Timothy Snyder (2010a) refers to all territories under both occupational regimes as "Bloodlands." His focus on the link between ideology and the dynamics of mass destruction is not limited to Belarus, but Belarusian lands sit at the geographical center of the "bloodlands."

heaval including de-kulakization, collectivization, forced migration, and rapid urbanization and industrialization.

In this special issue, we seek to challenge this partial and stereotypical view of Belarus as a society shaped by repression and historical tragedy. We do this by taking up the question of agency and training our lens on contemporary Belarusians and their decisions, life-choices, and communal activities. The systematic investigation of human agency shows that urban Belarusian society is not one of quietude or non-activity. The Lukashenka government prevents meaningful elections and strictly limits practices of criticism in public space. However, the regime has not flattened Belarusian cultural life. Independently organized social events dot Minsk. They are well attended and their existence is not hidden. A minimal amount of searching turns up a variety of classes, clubs, lectures, and one-off gatherings. Some of these events are advertised off-line, through posters and handbills put up around town, and in bars and cafés. Alternative groups form and gather, even if they are excluded from the most prominent and central of public places.

We view such projects as occupying a hard-to-define gray zone of social activity. While careful not to cross any boundaries in such a way as to bring down the state's wrath, the often quite informal social groups described here navigate around rules meant to restrict or frustrate their activities. The goal of this special issue is to challenge the image of a dormant or passive population by showing the initiative, agency, and willfulness that mark the social activities found in this zone where the state's preferred cultural messages are neither accepted, nor necessarily wholly rejected.

This introduction serves two related purposes. The first is to look critically at the rhetoric of "the last dictatorship in Europe." This label works together with the reality of Belarus's rule by a repressive regime to produce an image of a population more or less automatically assumed to be demoralized and weakened in the face of political repression. Narrators of Belarus's history have dutifully addressed its rulers, invaders, disasters, and victims—the essential ingredients of political history. Yet, they have neglected the question of Belarus's social, economic, and cultural life, the

biographies of its diverse inhabitants, and the character of their day-to-day existence. This issue attempts to fill a small part of that gap by profiling the various modes of expressing agency in Belarus and in particular by examining the decisions made, actions taken, and discursive practices observed by Belarusian citizens from below.

Second, we offer a brief account of how agency can be imagined, exercised, and conceptualized in an environment where political freedoms are absent. How can individuals and groups articulate their own interests and ideas where freedom of speech is tightly regulated and the state, through its own cultural apparatus, attempts to dominate the public sphere? In our search for a nuanced and context-based understanding of agency as applicable to the analysis of past and present Belarusian society, we turn to discussions within post-colonial scholarship. Such scholarship has made it a paramount goal to uncover and reveal the agency of groups and individuals in cultural systems where a single discourse dominates and strives for exclusion of alternative visions of the good. In order to make clear that we do not conflate agency with autonomy or resistance, we further set out our position with regard to the German academic discussion of the relationship between citizens and the state in authoritarian regimes, a discussion inscribed in the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*. Combining those approaches, we understand agency as the capacity of individuals to actively position themselves in relation to the social, cultural, economic, and political processes that affect their lives.

Estrangement from Agency: "The Last Dictatorship" as External and Internal Discourse

Christening Belarus "the last dictatorship in Europe" has brought in its tow all sorts of negative distinction. Since the rise of authoritarian rule in the 1990s, Belarus has been represented as "an object of shame" by diverse interested parties (see Minchenia in this issue). Belarus is consistently portrayed against a background of more advanced, powerful, and democratic governments. Being defined as a defective state (perhaps because it is also considered a

failed nation (Pershai 2010)), which does not comply with the ideals of democracy and human rights, Belarus is deprived of its political subjectivity in the eyes of more powerful other(s). We use "other" in plural because the other-ing of Belarus comes not only from the so-called "West" but also from politicians, journalists, and intellectuals in neighboring countries. In particular, political and intellectual elites in the Baltic States and Poland often use the strategy of othering in relation to their eastern (or southern) neighbor. The othering of Belarus by its neighbors might be understood as an attempt to overcome their own historical objectification and semi-Orientalization by the West (Mälksoo 2011).

Besides criticism from outside, we can observe the practice of self-Orientalization within Belarus. Notions of eastern backwardness and barbarity are frequently used in internal discourses to frame the country's perceived social and political shortcomings. Indeed, many Belarusian writers, artists, and scholars have used self-Orientalization to their advantage in their professional production. One of the best-known and widely translated Belarusian contemporary novels is *Paranoia*, written in Russian by journalist and public intellectual Viktar Martsinovich (Viktor Martinovich 2009). Martsinovich depicts a dictatorial Belarus characterized by perpetual repression and constant surveillance, where totalitarian ideology penetrates all spheres of life including the most intimate relations between lovers. Like any work of art, the book is far from a documentary description of the country. However, most reviewers interpret the novel mainly as representation of the cruelty of the Lukashenka dictatorship (e.g. Ostrovsky 2013, Snyder 2010b), while the book itself allows various interpretations. This is just one example of how a focus on state actions leads to the complete overshadowing of Belarusian society, which almost completely disappears from view as a result. Thus, the discourse about Belarus produced outside and within the country can be seen as applied forms of "ideologies of Eastness" (Zarycki 2014) that combine external Orientalization with the intensive internal production of Orientalist discourses. We consider this special issue an attempt to move the emphasis away from suffering and victimhood towards

agency as playing a crucial role in shaping Belarusian society, politics, and history.

The imperative to examine Belarusian agency is further compounded by the scholarship on Belarus produced in Western academia and think tanks. Belarus, like most former Soviet republics, has only relatively recently attracted significant research interest in the West as a country worthy of study in its own right. Andrew Wilson opened his book *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (2011) with the statement that "in the Western imagination there are no proper countries between Poland and Russia" (Wilson 2011: x). Wilson rightly points out that Belarus has long existed and been studied in the context of its more visible and influential neighbors including the Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, German, and Soviet contexts, in which Belarusian statehood emerged. This existence in the shadows of powerful neighbors has significantly influenced the way local and non-local scholars look at the country. As a "Bloodland" between Germany and Russia, Hitler and Stalin (Snyder 2010a), Belarus is depicted as the space of national suffering from the whims of super-powers, cruel wars, technological disasters, and, finally, Lukashenka's political *diktat* (for a similar critique of the view on Belarus taken by Zaprudnik (1993) and Marples (1996, 1999, 2005), see Ioffe (2008)).

High-profile Western academics have not been alone in creating an image of Belarus where victimhood predominates. Within Belarus, local historians, journalists, and jurists have struggled publicly to make sense of tragedies whose newest contours no longer fit the historical narrative circulated during the Soviet period. The image of a heroic local population fighting on the Soviet side against Nazi Germany has begun to break down. Glasnost' era revelations echoed by scholarship over the last thirty years made clear the role of local forces in collaborating with the Nazis in atrocities against Belarus's Jewish and Christian population (Litvin 2000, Rein 2011, Tec 1993). Likewise, the reputation of Soviet Belarus as a heroic champion against German violence has been badly tarnished by Soviet crimes against Belarusian Soviet citizens whose remains have been found at Kuropaty (Kuznetsov and Basin 2007). The discovery of the culpability of large parts of the population has not led to a comprehensive attempt to hold responsible the indi-

viduals and institutions responsible for these atrocities. Rather, in the absence of an official or popular will for such an accounting, a focus has been placed on victimhood, often reckoned only in the very large numbers given of the dead and an assumed bare bones essentialist identity (Belarusian, Jewish, Soviet citizen, or peasant) attributed by the party making the claim.[3]

Conceptualizing Agency in Post-colonial, Post-Soviet and German Perspectives

Serguei Oushakine (2013) considers this post-Soviet focus on the representation of victimhood to mark a new form of post-colonial consciousness. In this respect, it is unlike post-colonial consciousness elsewhere. While post-colonial scholars of South Asia have searched for evidence of agency and resistance among those oppressed by the colonial order, historians of colonialism in the former Soviet space are relatively uninterested in "uncovering sources of subaltern agency within the structures of domination" (ibid.: 287). Instead, post-Soviet post-colonial scholarship has focused its energies on demonstrating the brutality of the various occupation regimes.[4] From this perspective, the local population is depicted as the victim of external powers whom it is unable to resist. In consequence of its powerlessness and as Oushakine has shown, with the assumption of its absolute separateness from these "outsiders," the

3 A broad ranging and lively introduction to various positions within official and informal Belarusian academia can be found in the transcript of a round table organized by the central Minsk newspaper *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* in February 2017; see "Kuropaty dolzhny stat' mestom obshchenatsional'noi pamiati," *Zviazda*, 28 February 2017, http://zviazda.by/ru/news/20170228/1488273239-kuropaty-dolzhny-stat-mestom-obshchenacionalnoy-pamyati-i-skorbi (accessed 19 June 2017). A further common way to draw a picture of the Belarusian twentieth century is to create a rigid dichotomy between the Communist authorities and ordinary people, with the latter represented by the trope of the *malenki chalavek*—a human, but rather passive object who is opposed and acted upon by powerful state actors (see for example Kashtalian 2016).

4 This is beginning to change, however; see for example Blacker, Etkind, and Fedor (2013) for a selection of essays applying post-colonial approaches to the politics of memory in the region and attempting to integrate national histories into larger transcultural and humanistic frameworks.

local population cannot be held responsible for the atrocities and crimes "they," *the outsiders* have committed. In the end, the externalization of possible sources of violence and domination "legitimizes the perceived lack of agency and moral choice, too" (ibid.: 298).

If official narratives of Belarus tend to prize claims of victimhood and disavow the agency of local actors, Alexei Yurchak, in his influential ethnographic study of the culture of late socialism, does the opposite. Yurchak went in search of how individual human beings—historical subjects—are able to exercise their agency in repressive environments. He argues that, "agentival capacity can also be entailed in acts that are neither about change nor about continuity, but about introducing minute internal displacements and mutations into the discursive regime in which they are articulated" (Yurchak 2005: 28). Among other instances, Yurchak gives the example of "deterritorialized" spaces in Leningrad of the late 1960s and '70s. Here, young people found places to dwell while disregarding the "authoritative signifiers" of the Soviet imprinted social reality. A woman, Inna, describes dropping out of the Soviet ideological system without resisting it. "We never went to vote. We simply ignored elections and parades… My only connection with Soviet life was through work and also through the university, which I rarely attended since I had no time" (cited in ibid.: 129).

Yurchak's scholarship draws on the work of his Berkeley colleague Saba Mahmood who analyzed the agency of women active in the Islamic revival in Egypt since the 1970s. Mahmood's work concentrates on a female piety movement where women gather in mosques to teach each other the social practices, physical conduct, and spiritual knowledge required to lead a maximally virtuous life. Such actions have astonishingly made it possible for women to assert themselves within a realm almost exclusively dominated by men. This led Mahmood to re-think how agency should be conceptualized, and to come to understand agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001: 203). Agency, thus, is not equivalent to "autonomy" in the liberal understanding of this concept as seen in the work of Locke, Bentham, or Mill:

> what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms (Mahmood 2005: 15).

Outside of cultural and anthropological studies, historians too have worked to understand how people make meaningful choices and exercise agency while living under repressive regimes. Using the concepts of microhistory and the history of everyday life *(Alltagsgeschichte)* West German historians starting in the 1980s undertook a broad re-evaluation of the role *ordinary people* played in the history of National Socialism in Germany. The aim here was to overcome a falsely erected and self-interested dichotomy that had previously prevailed in historical scholarship on the Third Reich. This dichotomy posited on the one side an active National-Socialist ruling elite and on the other side a mostly passive German population. According to one of the leading proponents of *Alltagsgeschichte,* Alf Lüdtke, the historical research of daily life practices and experiences reduces "the gaping distance between rulers and ruled…—a presumed gulf that has so often appeared to exonerate the majority of their guilt" (Lüdtke 1995: 4). A close look at the everyday behavior and mundane routine of historical subjects demonstrates their agency, and this, in turn shows how individual choices perpetuate or disrupt historical structures. In other words, when the agency of historical subjects is recognized, their description as victims becomes problematic since it does not describe sufficiently the variety of experiences that people live through within historical structures.[5]

In the West German case, this argument was formulated during the rise of social history whose advocates paid special atten-

5 At the same time, Lüdtke cautions scholars not to mistake "the act of taking historical subjects seriously" with "boundless sympathy" to all historical subjects (Lüdtke 1995: 25). Instead, he urges scholars to concentrate on the "genesis of experiences," i.e. the variety of daily choices and long-term decisions which people make in their everyday life and which can either challenge and change a structure or protect and support its continuity and stability.

tion to the structural socio-economic conditions in which individual decisions were made by industrial workers under National-Socialist rule. This was the starting point of a broad range of studies in historical anthropology, which ultimately went beyond the analysis of German blue-collar workers. After 1989, the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, drawn from Alfred Lüdtke's initial work, started a second life, when it was adopted by social historians of the German Democratic Republic. Even today the term *Eigen-Sinn* remains the best available translation for *agency* in German, as it means "willfulness, spontaneous self-will, a kind of self-affirmation, an act of (re)appropriating alienated social relations on and off the shop floor by self-assertive prankishness, demarcating a space of one's own" (ibid.: 313–14). Thomas Lindenberger, who is among the most outspoken proponents of the importance of *Eigen-Sinn*, emphasizes that the term is not synonymous with resistance, "but actually helps our understanding of why resistance and open rebellion did not occur where it would have been expected" (Lindenberger 2015). Acknowledging the divergence between agency and resistance does not make the Belarusian state any less repressive, of course. But it does, in our view, offer more analytical purchase than a strict top-down concept of authoritarianism. The latter does not explain the relative stability of the Lukashenka regime, nor does it explain the dynamic social processes witnessed in Belarus in the last decade.

Our objections should sound familiar to those who followed the progress of Soviet studies in the Cold War period. In the Anglophone academic context, our critique of the "last European dictatorship" label echoes broadly the so-called "revisionist" critique made of totalitarianism theorists from the 1960s onwards. The revisionists did acknowledge the existence of Stalin's cult-of-personality; the Communist Party's deployment of massively ideologized propaganda and effective monopoly within the political system; and the widespread use of terror. And yet they recognized that the presence of all these tools did not give the Bolsheviks unlimited power to shape society. Instead, scholars like Sheila Fitzpatrick, J. Arch Getty, and many others showed how compromised, ad-hoc and ham-handed Soviet attempts to control the population

were. They recognized the importance of interest groups, the promise of social mobility, and the appeal of Stalinism to the fears, dreams, and personal agendas of large numbers of men and women.[6] Our approach owes a debt to the revisionists.

This issue is also informed by the more recent literature on "Soviet subjectivities" (e.g. Yurchak 2005; Hellbeck 2006; Halfin 2007; Davoliūtė 2013; Fainberg and Kalinovsky 2016; Tsipursky 2016), This literature, with its new attention to autobiographical and first-person accounts, has afforded rich insights into the perspectives of actors—artists, officials, workers, the occasional writer, and committed diarists.[7] Again, there are connections here with the articles in this issue, whose authors, as part of their effort to offer a glimpse into the historical subject's inner world, weave into their analysis examples of first–person testimony and other forms of public self-expression by contemporary Belarusians. They remind us that, the widespread fixation on Lukashenka notwithstanding, Belarusian state and society is not and never has been a one-man show. Rather, it is a collective process encompassing a broad range of subjectivities that defy easy generalization, serving variously to question, to strengthen, or even simply to escape from the political and social status quo.

Counterspaces and State Control: Analyzing Public Expressions of Agency in 21st-century Belarus

The articles in this issue depict the vital conversations and efflorescence of social events taking place in contemporary Belarusian society. What does this vitality consist of, what are the conditions for its existence, and where are the limits to its expression? The contributors to this special issue grapple with these questions. Remarkably, this vitality is on display in Belarus in spite of (in

6 For a short reprise of the Totalitarianist/Revisionist debate, see Gleason (1984). For a book length treatment by the same author, see Gleason (1995).

7 In particular, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin pioneered the study of the relationship between the Communist Party's attempts to imprint its moral ideas and ethical conceptions on Soviet society and the subjective accounts of Communist reality as represented in autobiographies, diaries, and other semi-public sources.

some paradoxical ways, even because of) the regime's near total monopolization of political power. This monopoly translates into strict control over the institutions of governance complemented by surveillance over the most important physical spaces within the Republic of Belarus. Libraries, concert halls, central squares—these are spaces that would be considered public, or at least, for "the people" in a country like the Czech Republic, Poland, or Germany. In Belarus, these spaces are kept under a strict form of state supervision.

Vitality, of course, is not the same as dissent. Yet, there are physical spaces in Minsk, in Belarus—and more and more virtual spaces online—where Belarusian citizens are taking stock of their personal development, of their options, of the meaning of current events, and the value and steadfastness of certain discussible elements that characterize the dominant order. In some gray area between the public and private spheres, they are exercising their own interpretation of agency.

In her contribution to the special issue, Alena Minchenia explores a new phenomenon in Belarusian political culture. She examines the role of *shame* in the Belarusian political imaginary, analyzing normative public condemnations of the political status quo as a signature moment in a longer process of assigning meaning, value, and affect to Belarus's geography and present-day politics. She identifies shame as a prominent and widely used trope in online discussions. She interrogates the connection between the emotion of shame, the usage of the word, and the circulation of a broader discourse in which a sense of shame on the part of the Belarusian public is often assumed or implied. Empirically her work focuses on the public interpretations of the "Failed Revolution" of 2010, when a short wave of public protest followed a manipulated presidential election. In 2006 a few dozen tents on Minsk's central October Square were perceived by many as a non-successful attempt to turn the *Ploshcha* into a Belarusian equivalent of the Ukrainian *Maidan*. In 2010 the demonstration was ended by force very quickly, but online outrage flared for days. In her analysis of the online debate of the meaning of events of 2010, Minchenia situates the emotion of shame and its function and

meaning for social and self-criticism in Belarus within the larger theoretical debate about shame and the political consequences of emotions.

In her contribution, Elena Gapova describes yet another way of publicly practicing agency. She analyzes the public proclamations of Belarusianness and elaborates the changed meaning of the decision to use Belarusian instead of Russian in daily life. Gapova shows how this choice has transformed from a public political statement that once connoted active participation in oppositional activities towards a practice that signifies a new form of urban citizenship. Her empirical base consists of interviews with public activists of the new movement, who provide the civic initiative *Budz'ma* with their personal testimonies of why they turned to Belarusian and what it means for them. Gapova illustrates the inner dynamic of this process and how that dynamic is related to its public character; in doing so she compares this version of Belarusianness with the significantly different notion advanced by the Belarusian state.

Finally, Svetlana Poleschuk outlines the phenomenon of the recent "communication explosion" in Minsk, examining the efflorescence of independently organized lectures, round tables, and other public speeches that take place every week in the city. Recognizing 2012 as a watershed in the visibility of such public lectures, Poleschuk details the "flying cafés" and the Flying University that ushered in this new phase of civic-mindedness. The metaphor of flying refers to the shifting locations of the events and institutions Poleschuk describes, as well as the maneuverability and flexibility of the actors who organize them. Unlike the stable and rigid spaces of state institutions, the spaces of these alternative cultural and educational practices are often highly elusive and mobile. It is the flying mode of existence that allows these practices to survive and flourish. However, the author demonstrates at the same time the constraints and obstacles that the regime has deployed in an effort to disrupt these events and to prevent their organizers from acquiring institutional stability. Poleschuk seeks to outline the activity, institutions, and behavioral practices that underpin this semi-tolerated and unofficial, i.e. limited, public sphere. She shows

the role played by non-state collective organizations as well as the absence of state institutions whose competencies and responsibilities in a democratic or liberal country would make them natural sponsors, underwriters, or participants in these semi-formal public events. She discusses the hazards faced by arts programs and the place of the intellectual in this semi-free climate. This climate forces the actors in Minsk into a constant re-invention of spaces and practices of public discourse.

The three articles read together show that Belarus, despite all the limitations placed on the public sphere, is a society that is shaped by a variety of discursive practices, which claim certain spaces for the proclamation of diverse visions, bodies of knowledge, and ideas. Within a strictly limited space it is today possible to produce and participate in public lectures, or Belarusian language courses such as *Mova Nanova*, and even to attend meetings of the political opposition, as seen in summer 2016 during the campaign for the Belarusian parliamentary elections. Limits on public events are set by the state through the selective enforcement of the law. The case studies present a new type of public sphere, one that may be seen as a *counterspace* where ideas, norms, and behaviors that go against the state narrative can be articulated and practiced. However, in formulating these expressions of agency that take place in public, the actors take special care to avoid direct criticism of government's legitimacy. They are characterized thus rather by their ability to use existing social and political spaces for the expression of new ideas, practices, and discourses. These spaces are open to the public and limited in their scope at the same time. They are closely interlinked with communication processes, often taking place on the Internet, where social networks provide a virtual space for this kind of semi-public exchange.

The highlighted cases describe a specific change, which first emerged in Minsk but which is now also visible in Oblast towns such as Hrodna, Vitsebsk, and others. Yet, it must be acknowledged that despite their spreading popularity, the new public practices discussed in this special issue are atypical—the vast majority of Belarusian citizens do not participate in similar gatherings and

forums, and in fact detach themselves from any events of potential political significance. In our understanding, this, too, is a form of expressing agency—we view withdrawing from the public sphere as representing an active choice to opt out of social affairs beyond one's home and work place. For all these reasons, future research on Belarusian society could profitably include a broader sample of practices that express agency on the ground. It would be important here to include actors from a broad range of institutions, including those which are part of the so-called *power vertical* of the political regime, as well as businessmen who run small-scale enterprises all over the country, and other actors such as working migrants, less mobile pensioners, and active religious communities. Some of these perspectives are taken up by the recent scholarship, a selection of which is discussed in the book reviews section included in this special issue.

Outlook: Contextualizing, Visualizing, and Updating Belarus in 2017

The idea for this special issue emerged from a workshop entitled *Contextualizing Belarus: Belarusian Studies as Interdisciplinary Area Studies,* which was organized by Felix Ackermann and Olga Sasunkevich at the European Humanities University (EHU), a Belarusian university in Lithuanian exile, in Vilnius in 2015. The workshop raised the question of how the impact of globalization on area studies applies to researching Belarus. The workshop's second major goal was to bring together researchers with first-hand knowledge of Belarusian politics, society, and historical development to examine how the Belarusian case might be integrated into a range of broader theoretical discussions. We are grateful to the authors of the papers and the discussants for their insights and their critique.

The workshop was also an initiative aimed at discussing the mission of Belarusian studies within the EHU. The EHU was founded in Minsk in 1992 by a group of Belarusian scholars, among them the philosopher Anatoly Mikhailov, who after four terms as rector is today the president of EHU. The creation of the university

in Minsk was initially supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, and by Western European and North American foundations, including the Open Society Foundation. In 2004 the EHU was closed down by the Belarusian Ministry of Education. The formal reason for closing the University was that its lease agreement was not prolonged which ultimately led to the loss of the education license.[8] However, the real cause was EHU's autonomy, its strong connection to Western partners and donors, and its unaccountability to Belarusian authorities. EHU found a second life as a university-in-exile in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius in 2005, finding support from the European Commission, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and various European states. Against the background of EHU's difficult relationship with the Belarusian authorities, the question of how to professionally and scientifically study Belarus remains a crucial issue for its Vilnius-based scholars.

To give a concrete example of how today's Belarusian citizens search for the meaning of their history, we include a photo-essay by a colleague, Andrei Liankevich. Liankevich teaches photography at the EHU media department. He is also the author of the cover images for this and the next issue of *JSPPS.* Andrei Liankevich is among the best-known photographers in contemporary Belarus. He is actively engaged in semi-public spaces in Minsk through his organization of a variety of projects and events. He has worked as a curator at the art gallery *TsEKh,* and is responsible for the Minsk Week of Photography. In 2012 and 2013, he organized the World Press Photo Award in Belarus. Since 2013 he has been the head of "Month of Photography in Minsk." In his art project "Goodbye, Motherland!," parts of which are featured in this special issue, Liankevich depicts official visual narratives of the Great Patriotic War and contrasts them with his own perceptions and reflections. As he points out in a short essay, the Polish part of his family

8 The EHU rented its building from the state, in particular from the Belarus Presidential Administration. In July 2004 the lease was unexpectedly cancelled on the pretext that the building was required by the state. In turn, the university's educational license was revoked since the university was technically now in breach of the requirement that it provide educational facilities for its students.

originally came from the western part of Belarus; this territory was fully integrated into the Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic only after the end of World War II. Thus, he argues, his family's memories are outside of, and incompatible with the heroic narrative of the war that the Belarusian state promotes even to this day. In his work Liankevich plays with the artifacts that support or belong to the official state historical narrative. Employing pictorial interventions he challenges the state-constructed perspective and asks what the memorials and the street names mean today. At the same time, his work is informed by his ongoing research into his family's history during World War II. Thus, Liankevich is actively creating a link between the public, official discourse and a more private narrative of the war. Bringing them together in an unexpected visual way, he provokes the reader to rethink his or her perception of Belarusian history and represents history as a contemporary process of constant re-evaluation.

As we finalize this issue, Belarus is yet again in the news. In February–March 2017 thousands of Belarusians went into the streets in cities and towns across the country to protest against a new "parasite tax."[9] The scale and scope of the protests surprised many observers as well as the Belarusian authorities. There were not only political activists among the participants but also freelancers, pensioners, and other citizens who are dissatisfied with the most recent social developments in Belarus. A wave of arrests and the prosecution of participants followed. This crackdown reminds us of the ongoing process of negotiating what can be said in public and where. One effect of the crackdown was that no large-scale protests took place in Minsk on 26 April, the anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe, a regular day of protest for the opposition. Instead, the state's heavy deployment of special police units

---

[9] The new fiscal regulation targets those who are not officially employed or registered with an unemployment agency including migrant workers, who do pay taxes e.g. in Russia, but are still registered in Belarus. See: Amanda Erickson, "Belarus Wanted to Tax its Unemployed 'Parasites.' Then the Protests Started," *Washington Post*, 10 March 2017, https://www.washington post.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/10/belarus-wanted-to-tax-its-unempl oyed-as-parasites-then-the-protests-started/ (accessed 15 May 2017).

deterred most residents from making any direct public protest. These spaces remain strictly controlled by the state. And yet, at the same time, citizens are negotiating, challenging, and revising those limitations. As a result, the state suspended the execution of the "parasite tax" for one year and promised to review its definition of unemployment. Thus, officially the law is binding, but whether and if so how it is implemented implemented in 2018 will be subject to public negotiation between Belarusian citizens and Aliaksandr Lukashenka's administration.

Belarus is not likely to lose the label of "Europe's last dictatorship" any time soon, even though other European states have also begun to limit basic civic and human rights. But the citizens of Belarus will inexorably express their agency, finding ways, consciously and unconsciously, to position themselves vis-à-vis the state. This also includes actions by those who choose not to participate in public protests; and those who act on behalf of the state. Their motivations, perceptions, and individual decisions offer fruitful ground for future research.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to Julie Fedor for her valuable feedback on earlier drafts of the introduction. Her generous input helped clarify key points and greatly strengthened our argument. We also thank her for professional support throughout the entire process of working on the special issue.

REFERENCES

Blacker, U., Etkind, A., and Fedor, J. (eds.) (2013) *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Davoliūtė, V. (2013) *The Making and Breaking of Soviet Lithuania: Memory and Modernity in the Wake of War.* London and New York: Routledge.

Engermann, D. C. (2009) *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fainberg, D. and Kalinovsky, A. M. (eds.) (2016) *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Gleason, A. (1984) "'Totalitarianism' in 1984," *The Russian Review* 43(2): 145–59.
Gleason, A. (1995) *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Halfin, I. (2007) *Intimate Enemies: Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918–1928.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
Hellbeck, J. (2006) *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Ioffe, G. (2008) *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark.* Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
Kashtalian, I. (2016) *The Repressive Factors of the USSR's Internal Policy and Everyday Life of the Belarussian Society (1944-1953)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
Kuznetsov, I. and Basin, J. (eds.) (2007) *Repressivnaia politika sovetskoi vlasti v Belarusi.* Minsk: Mezhdunarodnoe istoriko-prosvetitel'skoe pravozashchitnoe i blagotvoritel'noe obshchestvo "Memorial."
Lindenberger, T. (2015) "Eigen-Sinn, Domination and No Resistance," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 3 August. http://docupedia.de/zg/lindenberger_eigensinn_v1_en_2015 (accessed 24 April 2017).
Litvin, A. (2000) *Akupatsyia Belarusi (1941–1944): Pytanni supratsivu i kalabaratsyi.* Minsk: Belaruski knihazbor.
Lüdtke, A. (1995) *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Mahmood, S. (2001) "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16(2): 202–36.
Mahmood, S. (2005) *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Mälksoo, M. (2011) *The Politics of Becoming European: A Study of Polish and Baltic Post-Cold War Security Imaginaries.* London and New York: Routledge.
Marples, D. R. (1996) *Belarus from Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe.* New York: St. Martin's Press.
Marples, D. R. (1999) *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation.* Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
Marples, D. R. (2005) "Europe's Last Dictatorship: The Roots and Perspectives of Authoritarianism in 'White Russia,'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 57(6): 895–908.

Marples, D. R. (2014) *"Our Glorious Past": Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War.* Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.

Martinovich, V. (2009) *Paranoia.* Moskva: AST and St. Petersburg: Astrel.

Ostrovsky, A. (2013) "Romantically Incorrect", *New York Times,* 7 June. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/books/review/paranoia-by-victor-martinovich.html (accessed 21 April 2017).

Oushakine, S. (2013) "Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space between Stalin and Hitler," in J. Buckler and E. D. Johnson (eds.) *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 285–315.

Pershai, A. (2010) "Minor Nation: the Alternative Modes of Belarusian Nationalism," *East European Politics and Societies,* 24(3): 379–98.

Rein, L. (2011) *The Kings and the Pawns: Collaboration in Byelorussia during World War II.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn.

Snyder, T. (2010a) *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin.* New York: Basic Books.

Snyder, T. (2010b) "In Darkest Belarus", *The New York Review of Books,* 28 October. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/10/28/darkest-belarus/ (accessed 21 April 2017).

Tec, N. (1993) *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tsipursky, G. (2016) *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Wilson, A. (2011) *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Wolff, L. (1994) *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Yurchak, A. (2005) *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zaprudnik, J. (1993) *Belarus at a Crossroads in History.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Zarycki, T. (2014) *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.