

Andrzej Wierzbicki

# Polish-Belarusian Relations

Between a Common Past and the Future



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Andrzej Wierzbicki

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Between a Common Past and the Future



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## Introduction

Belarus is one of four states that arose on Poland's eastern border after the collapse of the USSR. Official contacts between Poland and Belarus were initiated in 1990 after the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic declared independence, and diplomatic relations between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus were established on 2 March 1992. Yet, the history of Polish-Belarusian relations dates from long before the beginning of the 1990s. It is important to remember that, for a very long time, Belarus and Poland were both part of the same state. As the Polish historian Marcei Kosman has written, those relations were therefore "very close, though not always idyllic" (Kosman, 1979, p. 6; Winnicki, 2015, p. 229-230). In turn, the Belarusian author Piotra Rudkoŭski has put it this way: "For Belarusians, Poland is something more than a neighbour. In the historical and cultural dimension, Belarus and Poland are Siamese twins" (Rudkoŭski, 2007, p. 185). Without undermining the sense of these arguments, an even bolder, unequivocal statement can be made – that, seen against Poland's relations with its other neighbours, Polish-Belarusian relations have involved the least conflict, and are virtually free of historically rooted mutual resentment and hatred. The memory of this common, relatively tranquil past is still very much alive in the consciousness of many Poles and Belarusians. It would seem, then, that nothing should stand in the way of continuing these healthy, relatively 'normal' relations – even today, when Belarus is an independent state. It is worth adding, after Andrzej Drawicz, that "it is difficult to consider relations between states in terms of the fault of either side. They always result from both objective factors and subjective conditions" (Bieleń, 1997, p. 17). If, then, there are no historical scores to be settled between sides, it shouldn't be difficult for them to exist as good neighbours.

This study is intended to provide answers to a basic research question, namely: Why can we not deem current Polish-Belarusian relations as "model" relations, but on the contrary, as relations featuring each side's suspicion and mistrust of the other's intentions? The cause of this state of affairs is to be found in the wider geopolitical context, which includes Poland's policy towards the east since the country's political transformation, including its policy towards Russia. On the one hand, then, we have

Poland's accession to NATO and the EU, and on the other hand Belarus's military alliance with Russia and its active participation in Eurasian integration projects. It would seem, however, that these should also pose no great obstacle to maintaining healthy, peaceful mutual relations. Participating in European integration need not lead to a conflict with states that are not involved (including, of course, with states that are interested in Eurasian integration), and vice versa. Unfortunately, however, with Poland and Belarus this is not the case. Polish-Belarusian relations are subordinate to Polish-Russian relations, including the current rivalry over the identity of Belarusians. This stems from a historical confrontation between the Polish and the Russian concepts of nationhood – mutually exclusive identities that intersect in Belarus. Poland's efforts are directed towards an occidentalisation of Belarusian consciousness, which would be furthered by the removal of Alexander Lukashenko from the power he has held since 1994. Certainly, Belarus finds itself in a border zone between the Byzantine-Orthodox and Latin civilizations. Disregarding this factor means a failure to understand the complex history of the country. It is worth emphasising that, in the above rivalry, it is the Russians who now have the advantage, mainly due to their shared past with the Belarusians, from the Rurik state, to religion (Orthodoxy under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Moscow) to ancestry, to language (the Russian language sphere, closeness of the Russian and Belarusian languages, and above all, the Cyrillic alphabet), to ethnic structure (a large Russian minority), to forms of authority and values – democracy and human rights are not what is most important to Belarusians. Russia also has the advantage of strong economies ties, and is seen as a guarantor of security since, until recently, Belarus saw NATO as its biggest threat. In favour of Poland, there are memories of an ancient, joint statehood, linguistic proximity (perhaps even greater than that between Belarusian and Russian) and influences of the Polish language, identification with the West and its higher standard of living (but with the requirements of democratization and the protection of human rights), and the perception of Poland as a representative of the European Union and the West as broadly understood.

Because, as stated above, Polish-Belarusian relations are a derivative of Polish-Russian relations, and because the perception of Russia as a “perpetual threat”, as a state that is striving to re-subjugate Poland, has been a determining factor in Poland's policy towards the east since 1990, Polish-Belarusian relations are to a large extent a function of Belarusian-Russian relations. The closer the latter, the less congenial the former. Poland has

not given up attempting to move Belarus's geopolitical orientation Westward, using for that purpose the ideology of "exporting democracy to the east" (Zięba, 2011, p. 69) – a mission of presenting freedom and Westernisation as a prerequisite for civilizational development. While for Belarus, its relations with Poland depend on whether and to what extent Poland tries to influence its internal political process, in line with the slogan "Don't try to teach us how to live". Belarus does not intend to withdraw from the process of Eurasian integration, yet is not against the idea of being a bridge between the European Union and the Russian Federation, and acknowledges the interests it has in common with Poland and other Central European countries: "Our objective strategic interests coincide to a large extent with the interests of Ukraine, to a significant extent with those of Poland and the Baltic States. All of those countries, though they belong to different groups, in the new stage will increasingly deal with the problem of securing their own interests, which differ from those of the superpowers, their allies and large countries. It is in this that we find an objective basis for our common interests" (Lukashenko, 2004). Here arises a certain asymmetry. By using its membership in the EU as an instrument for achieving its own goals and interests in its relations with Belarus, Poland also becomes a direct representative of the interests of that organisation, and even of other powers outside Europe, in the geopolitical rivalry over post-Soviet territory. While Belarus is politically oriented towards Russia, in its relations with Poland it strives to act as an autonomous entity, and not as an exponent of the interests of the Russian Federation – while this, of course, is not always properly understood.

It is in the Polish national interest to maintain friendly, neighbourly relations with all of its neighbouring states. Poland, as Andrzej Szeptycki writes, is "vitally interested in the adoption by its eastern neighbours of European standards (democracy, human rights, the rule of law, a free-market economy, respect for minority rights, etc.), wishes to develop cooperation between these countries and the Euro-Atlantic structures, and in the long run to expand those institutions, and finally, seems to be seeking to weaken Russia's position in the region" (Szeptycki, 2011, p. 294). At the same time, as noted by Stanisław Bieleń, "by its own choice, and partly under the influence of the expectations of certain Western states, particularly the United States, Poland took on the unrealistic role of the key actor working to weaken Russia's ambitions to retain and then rebuild its influence among the other CIS countries" (Bieleń, 2008, p. 24). Let us add, however, that such a view of Poland having an "international position as a

‘middle-sized’ state” is beyond its capability, and in a given situation may even harm Polish-Belarusian relations.

The nature of Polish-Belarusian relations, then, is determined by the following factors:

- 1) *the historical and cultural position* of the two countries situated at the point of contact between the Latin and Byzantine-Orthodox civilizations. Poland’s affiliation in this respect has been aptly described by Jerzy Jedlicki: “...the West created a higher type of civilization whose values serve as a universal standard and will therefore radiate to ever more distant countries; Poland indisputably belongs to this civilization, but is backward and immature in relation to the West; on the other hand, it is the most Western Slavic nation, as a result of which it has the mission of transmitting the beam of Western light further to the East” (Jedlicki, 1988, p. 31). In the case of Belarus, its civilizational adherence is different than that of Poland, though the final character thereof is ambiguous. In a study that serves to interpret the internal and foreign policy of Belarus – *Foundations of the Ideology of the State of Belarus* – it is written that “Belarus never belonged to Western Europe ethnically or culturally, but developed as an ethno-cultural community and as a country in the bosom of Eastern Orthodox Christian civilization and in the Eurasian geopolitical sphere” (*Akademiia upravleniia pri prezidente Respubliki Belarus*, 2004, p. 35). This does not question that Belarus belongs to Europe, but to Europe as broadly understood, not the European Union. The intention is to underscore that Belarus is specific and culturally separate, as the Belarusian President Lukashenko has pointed out: “We don’t choose the East and the West, or the East or the West – we choose Belarus, which, because of its history, because of its geography, because of its culture and mentality, will be in the East, and in the West” (Lukashenko, 2004)
- 2) *identity*, formed on the one hand by the memory of the historical affiliation of Belarusians with the Polish state and nation, and on the other hand by Belarusians’s strong feeling of unity with eastern Slavs, or adherence to the “Russian world”
- 3) *the geopolitical situation*, in which Poland and Belarus are each connected with powers vying for influence in the post-Soviet territories.

These factors show that, within this scope, the theory of international roles (Zajac, 2015), the category of international identity (Bieleń, 2015) or, indirectly, the category of rivalry (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2015) can all be applied in various configurations.

In order to verify the research assumptions made, that is, to present the current state of Polish-Belarusian relations, this work consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The Introduction sets out the theoretical assumptions and the conditions of Polish-Belarusian relations. Chapter 1, *Historical and cultural conditions*, shows the cultural and historical foundations that have shaped relations between the two states, from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the present day. Chapter 2, *Polish-Belarusian relations from the perspective of Polish policy towards the east*, concerns the broader context in which those relations have developed, particularly Poland's policy towards the east. It also examines the systemic conditions of the foreign policy of each country, their geopolitical positions, and their social and economic potential. Chapter 3, *Political relations*, traces the evolution of Polish-Belarusian relations in the political dimension that has determined other fields of cooperation – from the promising contacts at the beginning of the transformation to the “critical dialogue” conditioned by the internal and foreign policies of Belarus, to the challenges arising out of Poland's accession to the European Union, up to the “reconstruction” brought on in part by recent events in Ukraine. Chapter 4, *Difficult issues*, concerns such mutual problems as the historical dialogue, ethnic minorities – Poles in Belarus and Belarusians in Poland – and bordering crossing and visa issues. Chapter 5, *Economic relations*, covers such issues as the legal and treaty foundations of economic cooperation, cross-border cooperation, energy, and other areas of, prospects for and barriers to cooperation. Finally, Chapter 6, *Cultural cooperation*, looks at mutual contacts in the fields of culture and education. The monograph concludes with a summary, conclusions and recommendations.

In preparing this work, use was made of the literature directly concerning the subject of research, and to works that were helpful in the broader context. Polish-Belarusian relations are not completely absent from Polish academic literature. Many works on the subject have been written in the last couple of decades. There is Helena Głogowska's monograph *Stosunki polsko-białoruskie w XX wieku. Od Imperium Rosyjskiego do Unii Europejskiej* [*Polish-Belarusian Relations in the 20th Century. From the Russian Empire to the European Union*] (Głogowska, 2012). Other publications are anthologies, to which belong: *Belarus' i Pol'shcha. Polska i Białoruś* [*Poland and Belarus*], edited by Adam Eberhardt and Uładzimir Ułachowicz (Eberhardt and Ułachowicz, 2003), which contains contributions by both Polish and Belarusian authors; *Polska Białoruś. Problemy*

*sąsiedztwa [Poland and Belarus. Problems of Neighbours]*, edited by Henryk Chałupczak and Elżbieta Michalik (Chałupczak and Michalik, 2005); the two-volume *Polish-Belarusian Relations* (vol. 1: *History and Politics*, vol. 2: *Society and Politics*), edited by Stanisław Jaczyński and Rafał Pęksa (Jaczyński and Pęksa, 2009); *Polska i Białoruś w współczesnej Europie [Poland and Belarus in Contemporary Europe]*, edited by Józef Tymanowski, Aleksandra Daniluk and Józef Bryll (Tymanowski, Daniluk and Bryll, 2015) with the participation of Belarusian and Polish authors. It also made sense to consider both monographs and anthologies concerning Belarusian foreign policy, or how the country is situated in international relations. These include Rafał Czachor's monograph *Polityka zagraniczna Republiki Białoruś w latach 1991-2011 [Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus 1991-2011]* (Czachor, 2011), Józef Tymanowski's *Rola i znaczenie Republiki Białoruś we współczesnej Europie [The Role and Significance of the Republic of Belarus in Contemporary Europe]* (Tymanowski, 2017), and the anthology *Białoruś w stosunkach międzynarodowych [Belarus in International Relations]*, edited by Ireneusz Topolski (Topolski, ed., 2009). Worthy of mention among foreign publications is an anthology by Latvian authors in English, edited by Andis Kudors: *Belarusian Foreign Policy: 360°* (Kudors, 2017). Yet, within this scope there is a palpable absence of works by Belarusian authors, apart from a collection in Belarusian of documents and maps concerning the period 1918-1989: *Belaruska-pol'skiia adnosiny 1918-1989* (Snapkoŭski, 2013). In these and other publications, various aspects of Polish-Belarusian relations are addressed.

Also worthy of mention among other sources are studies on the history of Belarus, which must inevitably touch on the period when Poles and Belarusians lived within a single state – the Republic. Such works include those by the Polish historians Marcei Kosman (Kosman, 1979) and Eugeniusz Mironowicz (Mironowicz, 2011), and by Belarusian historians such as Malinowski (Malinowski, 2003), Vladimir Picheta (Picheta, 2003), Hiennadź Sahanowicz (Sahanowicz, 2001) and Zachar Szybieka (Szybieka, 2002). On the subject of the conditioning of the culture and civilization of Belarus, the most important works are the monograph and other articles by Ryszard Radzik (Radzik, 2009; 2012) and, among Belarusian studies, the monograph by Anatoliĭ Lazarevich and Il'ia Leviash (Lazarevich and Leviash, 2014).

The theoretical and methodological foundation of this work derives from monographs and studies by Józef Kukułka (Kukułka, 1998): *Po-*

*land's Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Stanisław Bieleń (Bieleń, ed., 2011) and *Teorie i podejścia w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych [Theories and Approaches in Research on International Relations]*, edited by Ryszard Zięba, Stanisław Bieleń and Justyna Zajęc (Zięba, Bieleń and Zajęc, eds., 2015).

The source materials comprise international treaties and agreements, documents, acts of law, monographs, scientific articles, reports, expert opinions, statistical data and press materials in Polish, Russian, English and Belarusian.

This work is distinctive in that it attempts approach the subject of Polish-Belarusian relations comprehensively, taking account of the latest processes and tendencies. The author does not aspire to the role of a 'dogmatist' who will not permit other views on the subject at hand. The research concept is original, and has not previously been employed in Polish academic literature. The author is aware of the monograph's shortcomings, but offers it in order to promote deeper reflection on the material it contains.

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## Chapter 1 Historical and cultural conditions

Belarus emerged as an entity taking part in international relations only in 1991. For this reason, institutional relations between Poland and Belarus as relations between two states only began to develop as from that point in time. Nevertheless, historically speaking, Polish-Belarusian relations as relations between two political and territorial groups – Poles and Belarusians – go back much further, despite the absence of a Belarusian state in the strict sense of the word. For centuries, the role of such a state was played by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, though the name provides no indication of this.

It is not possible to properly identify Polish-Belarusian relations in time and space without first determining when the Belarusian nation was formed, and the Belarusian state established. This is especially true because one can say of Belarus that it is “a little-known country”, both in Poland and elsewhere. For several centuries, Poland and Belarus had a shared history as part of a single state organism to which Belarus belonged as part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Relations between Poland and the Eastern Slavs inhabiting the eastern parts of the Polish state, where the Belarusians formed a distinct group, were affected by their having a separate religion (which was used instrumentally in the geopolitical rivalry taking place in Eastern Europe). It was that religion which to a large extent laid out the lines of the ethnic division between the Poles and the Belarusians.

### *1. Name of the state, ethnogenesis, the state- and nation-building process, Belarusian identity*

Belarus is one of Poland's neighbours to the east. Unlike Poland, it has no natural boundaries, and so it can be described as an open country, having no mountains or access to the sea, and is mainly flat, with some areas of marshland. The current name of the country was popularised within its current area only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is no full agreement among scholars as to the etymology of the name. The subject was first in-

vestigated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. The term “Biała Ruś” [“White Rus”], however, first appeared in the 12<sup>th</sup> century; it referred to the Duchy of Rostowsko-Suzdalski, situated in northeastern Rus. The phrase was meant to indicate a state that was “free, great and enlightened” and subordinate to no one, as opposed to “Black Rus”, which was threatened with subjugation by its neighbours<sup>2</sup>. After the Tatar and Mongolian invasion, the name “White Rus” shifted westward and was applied to the area of the Duchies of Vitebsk and Polotsk until these became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In Polish literature, the name “White Rus” first appears in the chronicle of Jan of Czarnków in connection with struggles among the Lithuanian dukes; in 1382, the chronicle states, Jagiełło’s uncle had him imprisoned “in a certain stronghold in White Rus called Polotsk” (Łatyszonek, 2010, p. 40). After a break of more than a century, the Italian humanist Filippo Buonaccorsi reintroduced “White Rus” to Polish literature, but without assigning the term to any particular geographical area. His conception was developed by the Polish geographer Jan of Stobnica, for whom “White Rus” covered all the Russian lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the Neman River and the Great Novgorod Republic. The final geographic form of “White Rus”, which approximates Belarus’s modern political borders, was provided in Polish literature by Marcin Kromer, in his work *Polska [Poland]*. He excluded Great Novgorod, Wołyń and Podlasie and, after the Union of Lublin, the region of Kiev. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, “White Rus” (*Russia Alba*) covered the lands of Vitebsk and Mogilev. The inhabitants of Belarus who were the ancestors of today’s Belarusians had not previously known the term (Łatyszonek, 2010, p. 42). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the creation of the Belarusian People’s Republic and the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, the toponym Belarus also acquired political significance, and finally stuck as the name of the area, with Belarusians as the name of its inhabitants (Vonsovich, 2005, p. 10).

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- 1 The term “White” before the name “Rus” has many meanings. One group of researchers considers that it derives from the “abundant snowfalls in this northern land”. Another group holds that the adjective “white” is connected with the predominance of white-coloured clothing worn by the area’s inhabitants, and with their fair hair.
  - 2 The division of Rus into “White” and “Black” also has a religious context. “White” denoted the area that had been Christianised, and “Black” those lands that were still pagan.

Belarusians belong to the Eastern Slavic nations. Among Belarusian scholars, there is no agreement as to the origin and emergence of a Belarusian ethnos. In every existing concept of ethnogenesis, we can find arguments confirming and casting doubt on the subject. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Krivich theory* was formulated; it was disseminated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the historian Vaclav Lastovski. The theory stated that the ethnic root and progenitor of the Belarusian nation was an East Slavic tribal association, the Kriviches (Evstigneev, 2005, pp. 25-26). Lastovski argued that the Kriviches were the most populous tribe inhabiting what is now Belarus and the surrounding areas, and proposed using the ethnonym Kriviches rather than Belarusians, and Krivia rather than Belarus. Another historian, Vladimir Picheta, held views close to this theory: he stated that the root of the Belarusian nation included not only the Krivichs, but also the East Slavic tribes of the Dregoviches, and partially, the Drevlians (Picheta, 2003, p. 17). The Polish historian Marcelli Kosman also leans in this direction, writing that “the Kriviches... exerted influence over a considerable number of the Baltic peoples: the Latvians and frontier Lithuanians, as well as the small Finnish tribe of the Livonians” (Kosman, 1979, p. 38).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of *Old Russia* also arose, proposed by Mihail Koialovich, among other theorists. It states that Belarusians comprise one component of the *All-Russian nation*, alongside Russians (Velikorosov) and Ukrainians (Malorusov) that emerged from the Old Russian nation, that is, the community of East Slavs that inhabited the area of Kievan Rus. Nowadays, Belarusian historians such as, for example, Hienadź Sahanowicz, believe that at that time there was no ethnic and cultural unity among the Slavs, even though they comprised a single state and political organism (Sahanowicz, 2001, p. 39).

The most recent theory of the ethnogenesis of the Belarusians stems from around the beginning of the 1970s. Its name – *Baltic* – points to a synthesis of the Slavic and Baltic tribes as a result of which the Belarusian ethnos arose. During this process, the local Baltic and, to some extent, Finno-Ugric, peoples were assimilated into the incoming Slavic population. The Belarusian ethnos was formed in the basin of the Dnieper, Daugava and Neman rivers. One of the authors of this theory was the Russian archaeologist Valentin Sedov (Vonsovich, 2005, pp. 5-8).

Each of the above theories finds both supporters and critics. Our goal is not to evaluate their credibility, but only to point out their variety. We assume, after Vladimir Picheta, that the emergence of the Belarusian nation

is related to what is known at the Lithuanian epoch, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when, as one Belarusian historian writes, Belarusians became detached from the other East Slavic tribes and incorporated into the state of Lithuania (Picheta, 2003, p. 17).

According to one concept of how nations originate, ethnogenesis, which results in the formation of an ethnic community, is deemed as the beginning of the process of the creation of a nation, that is, of social changes that are historical, cultural and political in nature. As a result of these, the ethnic community is transformed into a nation. As a rule, every national community has its own ethnic and cultural roots that are usually homogeneous, but may be heterogeneous. In accordance with constructivist thought, it is then that a nation arises as a conglomerate of various collectives in respect of which the ethnic community plays a consolidating role, and which takes on the form imagined on the basis of an invented tradition. In reality, the answer to the question of how nations, including the Belarusian nation, originate is ambiguous. To some extent, every nation is the result of both conscious activity and a natural process. From the political perspective, one determinant of the genesis of nations, regardless of the research approach accepted, is the state, which integrates the nation around a specific cultural root. Belarusians, one of the “small nations of Europe”<sup>3</sup>, had no national statehood of their own for a very long time, and so the assumption that “the nation creates the state” as the crowning achievement of the process of nation-building does not apply to them. In relation to modern Belarus, it would seem more appropriate to assume that “the state creates the nation”. If we accept the typology of the process of the formation of nations proposed by Miroslav Hroch, we find that the third, mass phase (Hroch, 2008, pp. 8-9) ending in the achievement of independence came for the Belarusians at the end of the 1980s, during the

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3 A term introduced by Miroslav Hroch referring to the nature of the process of the creation of nations, and not to demographic potential. According to Hroch, the “small nations of Europe” are communities that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the period of the awakening of national consciousness – were weak, had been violated, had no tradition of high culture expressed in their own language, or, in the majority, had an incomplete social structure. Inhabiting areas of multi-ethnic monarchies (the Russian Empire in the case of the Belarusians), if they wanted to take part in society they had to accept the identity and language of the nation that controlled the state. Over time, some members of the intelligentsia began to convince the other members of the community that they are a fully-fledged nation, and demanded equal entitlement for their language and autonomy, and strove to create their own elites.

time of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the USSR (Bukhovets, 2010, pp. 16-17; Radzik, 2012, p. 216). That event came as a surprise to many Belarusians. The emergence of an independent Belarus after the collapse of the USSR gave the Belarusian nation-building process a new impetus.

The preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus contains a reference to “the nation of the Republic of Belarus” and to the “centuries-long history of Belarusian statehood” (Konstitucija Respubliki Belarus’, 1994). From the inception of post-soviet Belarus, two conceptions of the process of the creation of the state and the nation have competed with each other (Leshchenko, 2004). They are crucial to our subject. Up until the middle of the 1990s, a conception that can be described as *national* prevailed, while thereafter, the *soviet* tradition has been in force officially. Both argue that Belarusian statehood began in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in the Polotsk and Turov principalities. The Principality of Polotsk, centred around the city of Polotsk, occupied an area corresponding to the northern part of modern-day Belarus. To the south lay the Principality of Turov, the second most important political body within the area of Belarus, with its capital in Turov. Each of these two conceptions, however, assigns those principalities a different role. In the national conception, which nowadays finds itself in the opposition, the principalities are considered as “the first independent states within the territory of modern Belarus”, and they are explained as Belarusian in that they were created by tribes that participated in the ethnogenesis of the Belarusians” (Sahanowicz, 2001, pp. 44, 60). Whereas the official narration emphasises that the principalities comprised parts of Kievan Rus, from which the conclusion should be drawn that “Belarusian statehood has Old Russian roots, and is strictly tied with the history of the statehood of the Russian and Ukrainian nations” (Vonsovich, 2005, p. 196).

The national conception also identifies itself with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and the Belarusian People’s Republic. Particular emphasis is put on the role of the GDL in the history of Belarusians and Belarus due to its importance in this part of Europe. It is stressed that the Belarusian lands constituted a large part of the territory of that state, that the Old Belarusian language was an official language in which the most important documents were drawn up and literature created, and that, demographically, a significant part of the population were East Slavs – the Belarusian proto-nation. The Belarusian historian Vladimir Picheta, who lived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, wrote on this subject expressly: “The Russian lands recognising the authority of the Duke of Lithuania retained their

internal autonomy. The Lithuanian state was a federation of regions weakly connected to the centre. Within it, the Belarusian nationality dominated. Rus exerted considerable influence on Lithuania: the Orthodox faith was disseminated, Russian law and customs were absorbed, the Russian language became the language of the state” (Picheta, 2003, p. 25).

Yet, because there was no Belarusian nation state for almost the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, the legacy of the GDL was practically absent from the consciousness of ordinary Belarusians (Kravtsevich, 2011, p. 84). The Belarusian People’s Republic, which existed for just a few years after the fall of the Russian Empire, is perceived as a real form of Belarusian statehood, an alternative to Soviet Belarus, but awareness of it is limited today to opposition circles. Adherents of this conception, in accordance with the processes of the politicisation, ethnicity and ethnicisation of the state characteristic throughout the post-soviet territories, have sought to transform Belarus into a mono-ethnic state. Having influence on the authorities in the first half of the 1990s, they attempted to implement the belarusisation of the country. This policy was founded on an appeal to the European roots of Belarusian culture, and on the negation of its connections with Russia. The Russian language was presented as the language of a foreign power. Adherents claimed that those inhabitants of the country who supported the existence of an independent state but did not speak Belarusian should be denied citizenship. This led to a situation where, paradoxically, after those adherents fell from power, the Belarusian language became synonymous with the opposition, and using it in public is now looked on with disapproval by the authorities. Historians favouring this conception tried to date the Belarusian ethnos as far back as possible, at the same time idealising its past. This European consciousness and separateness from Russia, however, were limited to a small part of certain elites, and were simply not understood by most people, which led to the conviction among those elites that it was necessary to implement a pro-Western internal policy invoking liberal democratic and foreign values, oriented towards integration with the European Union and NATO.

The official conception of the process of the creation of the state and the nation that has been in force since the mid-1990s does not reject the existence of the GDL as a “proto-Belarusian” state, but identifies the sources of the current Belarusian state in the East Slavic legacy of Kievan Rus and accepts the symbols of socialist statehood from the period of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. The ethnic and cultural content of this conception is Russian in nature, and not Belarusian, as in the first con-