

Western authors consider Belarus an 'Orthodox' country, religious identity is in fact not so significant. As a small nation, moreover, Belarus does not support 'great-power nationalism' that is typically associated with a country like Russia. Indeed, other kinds of traditional identity – ethnic or tribal – are not popular among Belorussians. Belarus is currently home to more than one hundred ethnic groups that coexist in peace. Ethnic nationalism is not common even for Belarus's political opposition parties, whose leaders are mainly not 'pure Belorussians.' For example, as Ioffe discovered, Paznyak, Shushkevich, Milinkevich have some Polish roots. For this reason, the opposition parties prefer to adopt the position of civic nationalism, which is connected to citizenship identity. These facts confirm the observation made by W. Pawluczuk that ethnic or religious identities cannot fully illuminate our understanding of contemporary Belorussian identity.

Finally, the political powers that ruled over Belorussian lands from time immemorial were foreigners. Hence, the native population could not speak their native language: under Polish rule, people spoke Polish, under Russian rule, Russian. This is why speaking foreign languages has never been a problem for people living here – in order to survive they have always learned foreign languages. Today, the younger generation of Belorussians is ready to learn foreign languages at an even higher level if this will entail a better quality of life for them.

Because of these peculiarities of national history, Belorussians have often identified themselves as 'locals' or 'tutejŝyja' ('people living here'). It means that they prefer their local or native identity over others (Vasiucenka 119). The same preference is typical for Belorussians today: it is more important for them to keep their place in the social and political order. Wars or foreign affairs do not concern or worry them as much, and even the power of their own state is not important to them (Belorussians used to be obedient to the authorities but they do not support the idea of state authority as Russians do). In order to make them more interested in state and foreign affairs, one should offer Belorussians real improvements in their lives that will directly affect their personal interests. That is why the basic interests and values of Belorussians, as several surveys have shown (Titarenko 55), are the traditional ones of family and personal prosperity.

#### East or West Orientation?

The process of constructing Belorussian identity can also be discussed with the help of two ideal types (or models of discourse) – 'West' and 'East' – that are integral to the process of identity construction in Belarus. Some aspects of both traditional identity and citizenship identity, to varying degrees, can be found in the Belorussian case. According to P. Sztompka, the dichotomy reflects the Soviet heritage of polarizing West and East in the public consciousness of Eastern Europeans. That is why the value system of 'Homo Sovieticus,' which was deeply rooted in the mentality of communist society, was put in direct opposition to Western culture. This conflict can be described in the following nine oppositions: collectivism and individualism, security and risk, constant status and personal career, conformity and innovation imperative, state responsibility and personal responsibility, reliance on state protection and reliance upon oneself, public participation and privatization of life, equality of income and meritocracy, and dogmatism and pluralism/tolerance (Sztompka 14).

The values of Belorussians almost completely coincide with those of Eastern Europeans listed by Sztompka. The following six values describe Belorussians as 'Easterners': desire for security, constant status, conformity, state protectionism, blaming the system for personal problems and failures, and equal distribution of income.

At the same time it should be noted that Belorussians have at least two qualities that make them more Western: their tolerance and the importance in having a private life. As for the ninth opposition – collectivism or individualism – there is a kind of generational 'watershed': the older (war and post-war) generation prefers the social relationships and values of collectivism. Among the present day younger generation, individualism is more noticeable and preferable. In general, however, Belorussians are still closer to 'Eastern' than 'Western' values.

#### Conclusion

Present-day Belorussians do not have a clear social identity. The lack of a dominant identity makes the process of consolidating the nation rather difficult and uncertain. There are no universal values shared by the majority of people to unite all the citizens of Belarus as one 'we-group.' Belorussians identify themselves primarily as 'native' people oriented to their families; however, they can also be viewed as law-obedient people who conform to the political regime.

In conclusion, contemporary Belorussian identity is multi-leveled, ambivalent, and uncertain. This is typical of any borderland identity. It is a mixture of traditional (religious, local, ethnic) and modern (political, sub-cultural) identities and, therefore, reflects influences from both East and West. Neither Western nor Eastern models of discourse are fully appropriate in describing Belorussian identity. From the Western perspective, it can be considered as 'peripheral' while from the perspective of Belorussians themselves, it is viewed as traditional and deeply rooted in the historical background of their country.

Dr. Titarenko delivered a talk, 'Belorussian Identity in the Process of Transformation,' in the Democracy and Education Open Seminar at ULS on 26 February 2006. This amended version is reprinted here in the original English courtesy of the author.



## Students in the Field: Damian Dudała

'Many hard-of-hearing people turn out to be outsiders in social life because they find it impossible to communicate, study and work in a society that is not sensitive to their needs,' says Damian, an undergraduate in the Department of Special Education at the University of Lower Silesia. This state of affairs compels his research on the barriers faced by students with disabilities in the arena of secondary education. In the Fall, Damian will spend a semester at the Bradford College in the north of England, where he will conduct research for his thesis, a comparative study of the experiences of activists in the local Deaf community and its counterpart here in Poland. He will work with the Bradford Association for Deaf People and the Bradford Deaf Children's Society, conducting interviews with a selection of its 450 members. Damian plans to investigate the history of anti-discrimination measures undertaken in Great Britain, and the impact they have had in the lives of people with disabilities. In particular, he will examine programs including components such as positive discrimination that do not have wide currency in contemporary Poland. But Damian's interests are not merely academic; he plans to use his research to advocate for the elimination of the obstacles faced by the disabled as they pursue their studies.

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