

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE

FAKULTA SOCIÁLNÍCH VĚD

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Diplomová práce

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Jiří Volák

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**“Acts of Resistance”:
Productions by Belarus Free Theatre from
2005 to 2015 as an Alternative Articulation
of Belarusian National Identity**

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Autor práce: **Bc. Jiří Volák**

Vedoucí práce: **Mgr. Daniela Kolenovská, Ph.D.**

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Abstrakt

Cílem práce je přehledně podat současné koncepte národní identity v Bělorusku prostřednictvím jejich kulturních projevů. K tomuto účelu byl vybrán případ Běloruského Svobodného divadla (BFT, česky též jen Svobodné divadlo) jako příklad alternativní kultury v letech 2005-2015. S ohledem na využitou divadelní techniku *verbatim* je analyzováno pět her, na jejichž základě jsou načrtnuty závěry ohledně alternativní společnosti a jejího vztahu k jazykovým a dalším národním otázkám.

Klíčové otázky jsou tyto: Jaké jsou hlavní konkurenční projekty běloruské (údajně slabé) národní identity? Využívá Svobodné divadlo kulturu, aby prosazovalo určitou vizi v rámci debaty o národní identitě? Jakou jazykovou politiku Svobodné divadlo uplatňuje a o čem to svědčí s ohledem na debatu o národní identitě?

Po nastavení teoretického rámce práce věnuje pozornost pokusům o charakterizování Běloruska pod vládou prezidenta Aljaksandra Lukašenka s uvedením základních faktů o jeho nástupu k moci. Následně je zkoumaná opozice se zvláštním důrazem na otázky národní identity. Prostřednictvím práce nezávislých intelektuálů jsou představeny trendy diskurzu v alternativní společnosti. Svobodné divadlo až poté, aby mohla být zhodnocena jeho role uvnitř debaty o národní identitě.

Zároveň lze výzkum považovat za obecnější úvod do otázky role alternativní kultury pro formulaci národních myšlenek, což se nemusí týkat výhradně Běloruska. Proto je značná část textu věnována teoriím nacionalismu a jejich interpretacím.

Abstract

The study aims to make sense of contemporary conceptions of national identity in Belarus *via* their cultural manifestations. For that purpose, the case of Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) has been chosen as an example of alternative culture in 2005-2015. Five plays are analysed with respect to the employed verbatim technique, and conclusions concerning the alternative society and its relation to language and other national issues are drawn.

Key questions are: What are the major competing projects regarding the (supposedly weak) Belarusian national identity? Does Belarus Free Theatre use culture to promote a certain vision within the national identity debate? What language policy does Belarus Free Theatre employ and what does it say about the national development?

After setting theoretical background, the study follows attempts to characterise Belarus under the rule of president Aliaksandr Lukashenka, offering basic facts about how he came to power. Then, the opposition is elaborated on, dealing specifically with the national identity issues. Through work of independent intellectuals, discourse trends within the alternative society are exposed. Only then Belarus Free Theatre is deeply observed, so its role within the national identity debate could be assessed.

At the same time, the research is regarded as a general introduction to the question of alternative culture's role in formulation of national ideas, not uniquely concerning Belarus. Therefore, a substantive amount of text is dedicated to theories of nationalism as well as how they are interpreted.

Klíčová slova

Bělorusko, identita, nacionalismus, alternativní kultura, divadlo verbatim, národní symboly, jazyková otázka, běloruský, Lukašenka

Keywords

Belarus, identity, nationalism, alternative culture, verbatim theatre, language issue, Belarusian, Lukashenka

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Prohlášení

1. Prohlašuji, že jsem předkládanou práci zpracoval samostatně a použil jen uvedené prameny a literaturu.
2. Prohlašuji, že práce nebyla využita k získání jiného titulu.
3. Souhlasím s tím, aby práce byla zpřístupněna pro studijní a výzkumné účely.

V Praze dne 7. dubna 2016

Jiří Volák

Poděkování

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**INSTITUT MEZINÁRODNÍCH STUDIÍ
TEZE DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE**

Jméno:

Jiří Volák

E-mail:

jir.volak@seznam.cz

Semestr:

letní

Akademický rok:

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Běloruské opoziční divadlo a jeho význam v kontextu společenské transformace Běloruska

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Vedoucí diplomového semináře:

PhDr. Kateřina Králová, Ph.D., Doc. PhDr. Luboš Švec, CSc.

Vedoucí práce:

Mgr. Daniela Kolenovská, Ph.D.

V čem se oproti původnímu zadání změnil cíl práce?

Hlavní cíl práce zůstává, totiž s využitím případové studie projektu Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) nabídnout odpověď na otázku, nakolik může v současnosti posloužit divadlo coby účinný projev protirežimního vzdoru. Přestože česká kultura obsahuje bohatou zkušenost divadla v rámci disentu, podařilo se prokázat, že česká transformační politika tuto skutečnost ve vztahu k Bělorusku nevyužívá. V důsledku toho budu hledat teoretické ukotvení blíže kulturním teoriím, teorii politického divadla a teorii disentu jako specifické formy kultury. Nadále mezi vedlejší záměry patří zmapovat cíle, vize a strategie tvůrců z Belarus Free Theatre, návaznost her na jednotlivé aspekty společensko-politického života v Bělorusku, sledovat reálný dopad projektu a ve výsledku zvýšit povědomí o něm v České republice, na jejíž intelektuálně-kulturní dědictví se zejména s ohledem na osobnost Václava Havla a fenomén normalizačního bytového divadla autoři vědomě odkazují.

Jaké změny nastaly v časovém, teritoriálním a věcném vymezení tématu?

Vzhledem k novým skutečnostem je oproti původnímu projektu upuštěno od zaměření na oficiální transformační politiku České republiky vůči Bělorusku. Případovou studii jsem dále vymezil časově počátkem v roce 2005, kdy byla v běloruštině uvedena první inscenace souboru (jedná se o hru 4.48 Psychosis od Sarah Kane dotýkající v Bělorusku obzvlášť tabuizovaného tématu sebevražd). Zvláštní pozornost věnuji roku 2010, který je považován za zlomový jak z hlediska liberální složky běloruské společnosti vzhledem k falšovaným prezidentským volbám a vzápětí násilně potlačeným demonstracím, tak i pro samotné fungování běloruského opozičního divadla, jehož ústřední členové v

důsledku represí režimu emigrovali do Londýna. Produkce exilové větve Belarus Free Theatre se během necelých čtyř let stala etablovanou a inovativní součástí britské a světové divadelní scény. Sledované období mám zatím v záměru ukončit rokem 2015, ovšem jako reálné se nejeví využít datum prezidentských, které je stanovené na listopad 2015.

Teritoriálně zůstává práce rozkročená mezi Bělorusko a Spojené království s tím, že obě odnože Belarus Free Theatre mají sice jednotný program a cíle, ale diametrálně odlišné podmínky k provozování politického divadla, respektive projevu alternativní kultury. Práce se věnuje i roli tohoto rozdílu: exilová sekce je velmi pozitivně přijímána publikem i kritikou a má k dispozici prestižní scénu uprostřed Londýna, zatímco inscenace v Minsku jsou pod přísným dozorem státu s minimální možností oslovit širší veřejnost a nejvíce odpovídají definicím "bytového divadla".

Jak se proměnila struktura práce (vyjádřete stručným obsahem)?

- 1) Úvod (představení tématu, výzkumné otázky a cíle práce, stav lidských práv jakož i kulturní scény v Bělorusku)
- 2) Metodologická část: přístup ke studiu politické role divadla a alternativní kultury
- 3) Narativní část: Belarus Free Theatre a jeho portfolio od založení, politické události ovlivňující fungování spolku, porovnání částí souboru působících v Minsku a v Londýně
- 4) Analýza vybraných her a rozhovorů s autory s poukázáním na společenská témata příznačná pro život pod běloruským režimem, jichž se inscenace dotýkají
- 5) Závěry z narativní a analytické části - dopady působení divadla po r. 2010 na aktéry z řad I) běloruských obyvatel a opozice II) západní veřejnosti III) politický režim IV) samotné herce
- 6) Závěr

Jakým vývojem prošla metodologická koncepce práce?

Vzhledem k větší orientaci na záměry autorů, hry a jejich interpretaci je nezbytné od počátku zvýšenou pozornost věnovat teorii divadla a politické funkci kultury. Toto teoretické zakotvení slibuje rozšířit metodologický rejstřík práce a nabízí příležitost k zasazení projektu Belarus Free Theatre do fenoménu opozičního divadla kdekoliv na světě. využitelný nejen pro případ Belarus Free Theatre, ale pro studium soudobého opozičního divadla kdekoliv na světě. Jednou z přednostních otázek navazujícího studia je, zdali Belarus Free Theatre lze definovat jako "politické divadlo".

Které nové prameny a sekundární literatura byly zpracovány a jak tato skutečnost ovlivnila celek práce?

Během uplynulé doby jsem využil své stáže na Ministerstvu zahraničních věcí ČR ke konzultacím a prohlédnutí dokumentů, díky nimž jsem opustil záměr zaměřit práci na transformační politiku České republiky. Z dalších primárních zdrojů jsem zhlédl několik záznamů divadelních her vytvořených souborem a navázal kontakty pro budoucí rozhovory s členy BFT (ty mám nicméně v úmyslu provést až po jasném vybudování metodologické základny). Sledovaná sekundární literatura se v této fázi týká zejména metodologie (např. monografie Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre od Eriky Fischer-Lichte, monografie Jonathana Boltona Světy disentu či článek

od Barbory Schnelle: Politické divadlo a jeho dvě německé tradice). Ukazuje se, že politické divadlo má širší záběr a definice a objevuje se i v jiných teritoriích a obdobích, než jsem původně předpokládal. O to větší výzvou je pro diplomovou práci utvořit vhodné teoretické zakotvení.

Charakterizujte základní proměny práce v době od zadání projektu do odevzdání tezí a pokuste se vyhodnotit, jaký pokrok na práci jste během semestru zaznamenali (v bodech):

- přehodnocení teoretického rámce práce (česká transformační politika vůči Bělorusku pomíjí podporu místní kultury)
- pokrok ve směru k teoriím politického divadla
- zpřesnění časového rámce studia
- zpřesnění struktury práce
- kontakty na autory a spolupracovníky Belarus Free Theatre

Podpis studenta a datum:

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Vedoucí diplomového semináře		

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1 Introduction

Theatre traditionally holds a prominent rank within the Belarusian national development. Yanka Kupala, a classic poet and playwright writing in Belarusian, created at the beginning of the 20th century a play called *The Locals (Tuteishia)*. Satirically commenting on the national indifference among his compatriots as well as on the tragedy of Belarusian geographical location, he set the plot to the city of Minsk during the World War I. There is a double digit number of characters on-stage, but only three of them consider themselves to be “Belarusians.” According to one of them, a rural teacher and national agitator, all other characters are “renegades and degenerates”. Balancing just in between the Polish and Russian influences and Catholic and Orthodox churches, switching languages according to profitability, never taking a clear political stance, they represent *tuteishia* – those who are uninterested in the national grand project but still call Belarus their home.

It is nearly one hundred years after the opening of *The Locals*, and Kupala made it to the schoolbooks of suddenly independent Republic of Belarus. However, different visions of Belarusian identity competing on the cultural battlefield are as actual as before: in October 2015, Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian journalist and author writing in Russian, has been awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature. Despite that, her works of art do not seem to be praised by proponents of the Belarusian government she is critical to, nor by more radical members of the nationalist camp who do not perceive her as a representative of authentic Belarusian culture. Is language in the Belarusian conditions really so important? Will it ever be possible for somebody or something to become a “champion” whose opinions and cultural production would be unanimously accepted by the Belarusian society as a whole? Is there national identity to speak of that could be articulated through culture?

Throughout my research, I try to make sense of contemporary conceptions of national identity in Belarus *via* their cultural manifestations. For that purpose, the case of Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) was chosen as an example of alternative culture. Employing the relevant theories of nationalism, I attempt to determine what role Belarus Free Theatre plays within the alternative (not official) debate on Belarusian

national identity, and how its productions promote certain sets of symbols and arguments, if at all.

Even though the company has acquired since its foundation in Minsk in 2005 a degree of international notoriety for its activism and endurance when facing the authoritarian regime, it is not the only theatre in Belarus that could be analysed for this objective. For instance, there used to be another “Free Theatre”, a small independent troupe which started to operate in 2001. Inspired by absurd protest productions by the Polish group *Orange Alternative*,¹ they do colourful street performances in Brest. However, as time went by and the Free Theatre I focus on emerged, the first Free Theatre started to be associated with the second Free Theatre, resulting in the first Free Theatre’s harassment by the regime and a decision to change the name to *Wings of a Slave (Kryly Khalopa)*.² In other post-Soviet republics, there are also countless theatres dealing with social and political issues similarly to Belarus Free Theatre. Uzbek drama troupe *Ilkhom*, for example - established in 1976, is generally perceived as the first independent professional theatre company in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). It managed to survive the fall of the USSR and became a “*beacon of freedom of thought and expression*” in Central Asia.³ Hence, messages concerning the state-society relations that Belarus Free Theatre conveys both home and abroad are not uniquely tied to this case.

No matter the content, Belarus Free Theatre stands out due to its working method that is relevant for the national identity debate – firstly, essentially all performances are authorial, thus the text carries meanings that relate to the contemporary state of society, and secondly, plays are created through careful collection of primary sources, reproducing opinions and arguments already present within the (alternative) community. This approach known as *verbatim* has been already used to cope with the contemporary reality elsewhere in the post-Soviet space – most notably, a Moscow-based troupe *Teatr.doc* has been experimenting with the method in Russia since 2002. Belarus Free Theatre is specific, but its experience is not isolated.

¹ See Padraic Kenney, *Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

² Tania Artsimovich, “‘Kryly Khalopa’: Khutchei, dyskamfortnae mastatstva,” *pARTisan* 26 (2014): 12, www.partisanmag.by, accessed January 1, 2016.

³ Mark Jenkins, “Magical, Courageous, Provocative and Probing,” in *2011 Prince Claus Awards*, Amsterdam: Prince Claus Fund (2011): 50.

1.1 Hypothesis and research questions

I argue that cultural activities by Belarus Free Theatre serve as an articulation of those voices within the alternative national identity debate that deem ethnic and linguistic determinants of Belarusian nationhood secondary.

The complementary research questions of the study are stated as follows:

- 1) What are the major competing projects regarding the Belarusian national identity?
- 2) Does Belarus Free Theatre use verbatim techniques to promote a certain vision within the national identity debate?
- 3) What language policy does Belarus Free Theatre employ and what does it say about the national development?

1.2 Methodology and thesis structure

The research is considered a case study with predominant elements of discourse analysis. In detail is covered a period from 2005 to 2015, that is ten years beginning with the company's foundation in March 2005 and ending with another Lukashenka's election victory in October 2015.

Thesis structure suffers from an intentional duality - every chapter is split into two major separated units. To be able to assess trends within the national identity debate of the alternative society, conceptions of nationalism need to be introduced first. And to be able to assess the BFT's relation to trends within the national identity debate, it is necessary to understand its communication practice – the drama technique they employ. Therefore, the first theoretical chapter (2) demarcates working apparatus borrowed both from the theatre and nationalism theories.

The second chapter (3) follows attempts to characterise Belarus under the rule of president Aliaksandr Lukashenka. After going through the communication barrier within the Belarusian society, basic historical facts about Lukashenka's coming to power and labels that the regime receives from the emigre intellectual community and independent scholars, attention is drawn to the regime's self-perception, or rather how it pushes through the society its own discourse on Belarusian identity (*e.g. via media*).

State symbols and arguments based on Soviet history are elaborated as a part of the official “national ideology.”

The third chapter (4) deals with the opposing image of Belarusian national identity which draws inspiration from aspects of Belarusian past and geographical location very much different to the official national ideology. After describing the historical role of nationalist political opposition and how it has influenced a debate on nationhood, I explore recent works of independent (not official) Belarusian thinkers to present a colourful portrait of the alternative models of national identity. Despite the plenty of discourses, some trends in the discussions are found and denominated for further use.

In the fourth chapter (5), the case of Belarus Free Theatre is elaborated in the context of previous findings. Even though the company doesn't define itself as a political theatre, I document its development in 2005-2015 and artistic approaches exhibited, and come to a conclusion that its productions fit well the conception of the verbatim political theatre as defined in the first chapter.

Through the lens of verbatim theatre, I analyse five productions and determine how they relate to struggle over national identity. I focus on appearance of national symbols (elaborated in the second and third chapters) on-stage as well as on choice of characters and lines that might reflect a particular view within the discussion. The advantage of the verbatim theatre lies in verifiability of the (political, social) claims that the company makes, their comparative intelligibility, and particular links to real events and persons that can be validated. Conclusions (6) drawn from the content analysis follow.

1.3 Limits and challenges

Because of the rather unconventional theme and construction of the thesis, there are specific challenges that had to be taken into account. Most notably it is the character of theatre itself – it is the only major art form that has to be performed, *i.e.* its sheer existence depends on creating a link between stage and auditorium. Theatre is directly related to the time and space it occupies, whereas a play written in a closet and unperformed merely a work of literature. Without publication, production on stage cannot be considered theatre. As Vladimír Just notes in his analysis of Czechoslovak theatre under communism, it is an essential fact to realise in the case of alternative

culture – theatre can be performed secretly and illegally, but still, it needs a “*constant dialogue between performers and audience*”, *i.e.* a theatrical *community* in order to survive.⁴ Therefore, BFT’s pieces analysed in my paper are not plays read, but plays seen,⁵ including the audience’s reaction to them.

Since I operate with “soft” disciplines along my work, I find it desirable to sum up at this point what are *not* intentions of this study, to leave no doubts. The paper does not aspire to answer the questions of factual state of the arts freedom in Belarus. It is not about assessing impact of the official state policy on the society either. I do not possess suitable tools to evaluate quantitative impact of the BFT’s performances, and I definitely do not try to decide which of the described conceptions of Belarusian national identity is “correct”. Instead, only the state of thinking about the Belarusian identity debate is mapped, so the case of BFT’s production could be analysed in this setting as an articulation of newer trends and ideas.

1.4 Literature and resources

Belarus Free Theatre is not unknown within the global theatre community, and there has been a number of journalistic accounts and even a 2014 documentary movie focusing on themes of anti-regime resistance.⁶ The academic resources concerning the troupe are very scarce, and include short accounts in cultural columns and journals (independent Belarusian or Western), the most relevant of which being an article by Kathleen Elphick on power struggle of BFT and the Belarusian state.⁷ The only direct mention printed in the Czech setting is an article by the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Sergei Elkin published in a Belarus-centred issue of theatre revue *Rozrazil* in 2011.⁸

For the lack of a complex work mapping the phenomenon otherwise often referred in popular news and theatre reviews, I find it extremely valuable to set the phenomenon of BFT into a broad context, *i.e.* the national identity discussion. For the

⁴ Vladimír Just, „Divadlo – pokus o vymezení: Prolegomena ke každé příští historii alternativního divadla, která se bude chtít stat vědou,” in *Alternativní kultura: Příběh české společnosti 1945-1989*, ed. Josef Alan (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2001): 449.

⁵ This concerns plays as seen performed in London in November 2015 and their video records.

⁶ *Dangerous Acts Starring the Unstable Elements of Belarus*, directed by Madeleine Sackler (2014), New York: HBO, 2014.

⁷ Kathleen Elphick, “The Belarus Free Theatre: Performing Resistance and Democracy,” 452°F: *Electronic journal of theory of literature and comparative literature* 10: 111-127, accessed January 1, 2016, www.452f.com.

purpose of grasping culture as an instrument indispensable for articulation of “alternative Belarusianness”, a work by the Belarusian author Nelly Bekus is crucial.⁹ In a sense, I find my work to be a follow-up to her comprehensive analysis of contesting ideas of national identity in Belarus (and their manifestations, also briefly mentioning early stages of BFT). Nevertheless, I try to go beyond her clear-cut division into official v. alternative visions of Belarus.

For that purpose, a detailed account on alternative thinking regarding the national identity by Liudmila Volakhava is very useful.¹⁰ In a similar, though more opinionated manner, different discourses on language and identity within the alternative community are explored by Grigori Ioffe or by Rene L. Buhr and Steven M. Hoffmann.¹¹ And of course, the anthologies edited by Belarusian representatives of alternative society (principal is a tome assembled by Valiantsin Akudovich)¹² or a comprehensive monograph on Belarusian nationalism by Yuri Shevtsov.¹³ Nearly classic books on Belarusian society by authors like David R. Marples and Jan Zaprudnik or were also taken into account.¹⁴

To understand the official state ideology, several sources besides Lukashenka’s speeches are used, especially an official historical narrative assembled by Aliaksandr Kavalenia.¹⁵ A useful introduction to the functioning of the state is also offered by several authors in an introductory book by editors Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson and Rosalind J. Marsh.¹⁶ However, I have to admit a predominance of secondary literature comprising accounts by Western and exiled authors, supplemented with some other, for instance Polish views (Ryszard Radzik on national identity).¹⁷

⁸ Sergei Elkin, “Běloruské Svobodné divadlo - život na pozadí politiky,” *Rozrazil* 39/40 (2011): 64-69.

⁹ Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative “Belarusianness”* (Budapest New York: Central European University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Liudmila Volakhava, “Aktuální alternativní koncepce běloruské identity,” *Politologická revue* 1 (2013): 106-132.

¹¹ Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Grigory Ioffe, “Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, No 7 (2013): 85-118; Rene L. Buhr and Steven M. Hofmann, „Language as a Determinant of National Identity: the Unusual Case of Belarus.” *Language in Different Contexts* 4, No. 2 (2011), 60-72.

¹² Valiantsin Akudovich and Ales Antsiapienka (eds.), *Antalogia suchasnaha Paustavannia.” Antalogia suchasnaha belaruskaha myslennia* (St. Petersburg: Nevskii Prostor, 2003).

¹³ Yuri Shevtsov, *Objedinennaya naciya: fenomen Belarusi* (Moskva: Evropa, 2005).

¹⁴ David R. Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers); Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus at Crossroads in History*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Aliaksandr A. Kavalenia et al., *Historia belaruskai dzjarzhaunasci u kanci XVIII - pachatku XXI st.: u dzviuch knihach*.

¹⁶ Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson, and Rosalind J. Marsh (eds.), *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

¹⁷ Ryszard Radzik. *Kim są Białorusini?* (Toruń : Marszałek, 2003).

On a theoretical note, key scholars in the field of nation studies are introduced in the text. To that, I would add that anyone trying to understand nationalism in post-Soviet space should benefit from reading Rogers Brubaker's work.¹⁸ To assess political theatre, tandem of two well-arranged publications on verbatim theatre edited by Paul Brown, and Will Hammond and Dan Steward is worth mentioning.¹⁹

The Czechoslovak vector mentioned in the preliminary hypotheses has had to be limited for remarkably different state of national development in respective countries. However, the Czechoslovak experience with alternative culture was harnessed in a publication edited by Josef Alan,²⁰ which is used in the theoretical chapter operationalizing alternative culture as a sociological category. Plus, assumptions by Denis C. Beck concerning a role of authorial theatre in society (based on the Czechoslovak case) happened to be especially relevant for my study.²¹

Similarly to other authors dealing with Belarusian issues, whenever I work with statistics and public opinions, I put to good use a long-term work by Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies.²² It should be also stated interviews with the BFT's members (from November 2015) were used only complementarily to make some artistic intentions of the company clearer, and the theatre analysis relies on performances rather than on statements.

1.5 Terminology and transliteration

Although there is not enough space for an appropriate semiotic analysis, I frequently operate with terms that should be explained. By the term "*alternative culture*" I commonly refer to any creative production which is not promoted by the state or in accordance with its (official) cultural stream. It can but does not have to protest the system, as examined in the first chapter. The phrase "*political theatre*" is used to denominate any theatrical activities reacting to the state of society and its activities on local or international level. Therefore, it is meant in a wider sense than a cultural

¹⁸ Rogers Brubaker. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Will Hammond and Dan Steward (eds.), *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (London: Oberon Books, 2008); Paul Brown (ed.), *Verbatim: Staging Memory and Community* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2010).

²⁰ Josef Alan, "Alternativní kultura jako sociologické téma," in *Alternativní kultura: Příběh české společnosti 1945-1989*, ed. Josef Alan (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2001): 9-59.

²¹ Dennis C. Beck, "Gray Zone Theatre Dissidence: Rethinking Revolution through the Enactment of Civil Society," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 23, No. 2 (2009), 89-109.

agitation simply strengthening certain political values and arguments through influencing the audience. “*Documentary theatre*” and “*verbatim theatre*” are its subsets.

Terms “*alternative society*” or “*alternative community*” are used interchangeably and comprise political opposition, but they also include a wide array of people and activities that do not consent to the official ideology, even if they are silent. “*Opposition*” does not necessary mean oppositional parties’ members, it comprises basically anyone publicly expressing their dissatisfaction with the system of power in Belarus (independent intellectuals and émigrés included). When referring to the nationalist opposition (represented *e.g.* by the Belarusian National Front), term “*nativists*” is also employed.

I consider the regime to be authoritarian, as explained in the second chapter. Terms that do not sound neutral (such as “*Western values*” or “*Victory Day*”) are used to keep and emphasise symbolic meanings which they carry within discourses of those who employ them.

Finally, when writing down proper names connected with Belarus, I prefer the Belarusian form - *i.e.* *Lukashenka* instead of *Lukashenko* - if not stated otherwise. For the transliteration to Latin script, I use the American Library Association and Library of Congress rules (without diacritics) - *i.e.* *Lukashenka* instead of *Lukašenka*. The same transliteration source of rules is applied to Russian.

2 Theoretical framework - alternative culture, verbatim theatre, and nationalism

Anyone conducting research including political aspects of theatre has to face an elementary problem: in the last few decades, relevant categories and methods have been developed mostly by theatre practitioners themselves, resulting in a number of approaches that makes it impossible to find a suitable umbrella theory. For that reason, I have decided to concentrate on methods employed in specific plays by the BFT rather than on trying to classify the troupe’s work as a whole. After finding out shared methodological attributes, I have chosen to analyse the BFT’s production through lens of *verbatim theatre* – a segment of political or documentary drama with closely defined characteristics. These characteristics and ways how to assess them are introduced in the

²² Website www.iiseps.org, last access April 1, 2016.

following subchapter, taking into account a specific role of alternative culture as a phenomenon in undemocratic regimes.

By the term alternative culture I mean a broad range of unofficial activities which divert from the “mainstream” production, as it is – in regimes strictly controlling the cultural institutions such as Belarus – presented by the state. Alternative culture might include underground groups and political dissent, although that would be just a fragment of its activities which can take on many forms – and all the same, it might be meant as an alternative to culture produced by underground groups and political dissent.²³

The negative definition toward the official discourse is not the only attribute, as Josef Alan argues in his essay based on the alternative culture in former Czechoslovakia. One is especially relevant – alternative culture is usually gradually incorporated into the “mainstream” which it criticises. *“Alternative culture is not only always connected to mainstream; it also eventually becomes mainstream.”*²⁴ I bear this potentiality on mind when analysing the Belarus Free Theatre and how it represents the ideas of the Belarusian alternative society.

The alternative forms of social life and culture also, as noted by Alan, serve by the definition as a motor of civic society. That results in their ambivalent position of alternative culture within the system of political power within undemocratic regimes: *“Even though they can have primarily apolitical goals, they enter with theirs interests and attempts to make them legal to the political scene and in some cases (...) even become significant political movers.”*²⁵ Or, in other words, the alternative culture can play a significant role for strengthening the democratic development.

2.1 A short survey on political, documentary and verbatim theatre

According to verbatim theatre playwrights and experts such as David Hare or Robin Soans, the mission of this technique is to “*give voice to voiceless*”²⁶ or to provide listening ears to voices who usually go unheard, “*to provide a setting, the stage, where*

²³ Josef Alan, “Alternativní kultura jako sociologické téma,” 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ Ibid., 28.

²⁶ Dedre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 128.

his voice can be heard is to provide an amplification of an otherwise lost voice."²⁷ Curiously enough, Svetlana Alexievich has been in the media associated with the same goal – giving voice to the voiceless through her novels. What does it mean? Can the alternative Belarusian community be perceived as a group that has been silenced (by the regime, by the lack of international interest) – and if yes, what is the message that should resonate? But first, it is necessary to set the verbatim theatre within a wider scale.

As most of those few authors specifically dealing with political aspects of theatre argue, we can observe a substantial decline in political function of mainstream theatre productions throughout the 20th century. For instance, an American political scientist Margot Morgan claims that despite their efforts to utilise theatre as a means of promoting social change and political education, such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw, Bertold Brecht or Jean-Paul Sartre eventually succumbed into the post-modern world. They accepted a situation in which internal and existential rather than public and practically-political art was preferred. In her perception, artistic freedoms of both Western liberal democracy and capitalism are to blame, *“making it difficult if not impossible for playwrights committed to a political understanding of their work to succeed in locating venues and audiences.”*²⁸

I will take the liberty of passing briefly by the early 20th century and its highly politicized generation of Brecht or Erwin Piscator, an author connected with the Communist Party of Germany in the Weimar Republic who is widely considered to be a founding father of modern political/documentary theatre.²⁹ The reasons for limited space he receives in my study is that his work was not intended as artistic – on the contrary, he wanted to use theatre as tribune to share his political viewpoint to the uneducated working class, to *“radically cut off”* the dramatic culture, and to *“do the politics”* instead.³⁰ He did so in the interwar period through so called *Living Newspaper* shows inspired by sketches commissioned by the Soviet Department of Agitation and Propaganda (*Agitprop*) which presented information on a progress of communism to a vast population. As the name of the sketches suggest, the documentary theatre in this elementary sense is produced through media materials, news footage and other materials

²⁷ Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim...*, 32.

²⁸ Margot B. Morgan, “The Decline of Political Theatre in 20th Century Europe: Shaw, Brecht, Sartre, and Ionesco Compared”(PhD. diss., State University of New Jersey, 2008).

²⁹ Ulrike Gade, Meg Mumford and Caroline Wake, “A Short History of Verbatim Theatre,” in *Verbatim: Staging Memory and Community*, ed. Paul Brown (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2010, 11.

available to public. However, the founders of the Belarus Free Theatre declare that they have a completely opposite intention than the Piscator's political/documentary theatre – they only want to be able to express themselves freely *via* the art, and they abhor the straightforward *agitprop* use of a stage.³¹

Although the beliefs that theatre has to serve solely political means have died out with the World War II, some practices of the Piscator's political/documentary theatre such as a use of modern technology were revived west of the Iron Curtain in the 1960s and 1970s with a second wave of interest in the documentary theatre.³² Early activities by Harold Pinter, a British playwright and friend of the BFT's founders, as explained in the last chapter, belong to this era as well. At that time, verbatim theatre broke away from the documentary theatre as a distinctive art form in the United Kingdom, especially due to works of Peter Cheeseman who produced several plays by interviewing locals in a small town of Stoke-on-Trent.³³

From this point on, studies on purpose and form of the verbatim theatre were written, and finally can be retold. What are its attributes, and what makes it socially relevant?

The employment of the term verbatim theatre has been most frequent in the UK³⁴ - in the 1980s, Derek Paget, himself a drama lecturer and practitioner, analysed Cheeseman's work, coming up with a (not binding) definition. He concluded that verbatim theatre comprises interviews “*done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place.*”³⁵

It should be noted that the method of staging interviewed speech was allowed through technological advancement – that is, quite simply, a widespread availability and affordability of tape recorders. A tone of a voice, background sounds or slips of the tongue, they all offer a significantly higher potential for dramatization and characterisation than a statement which is just transcribed. A progress in the field of

³⁰ Erwin Piscator, *Politické divadlo* (Praha: Svoboda, 1971), 37-38.

³¹ Nikolai Khalezin, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

³² Ulrike Gade, Meg Mumford and Caroline Wake, “A Short History of Verbatim Theatre,” in *Verbatim: Staging Memory and Community*, ed. Paul Brown (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2010), 14.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Which is a place on a map of the theatrical world from which and its post dramatic tradition the Belarus Free Theatre largely draws inspiration.

³⁵ Derek Paget, “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques”, *New Theatre Quarterly* 3 No.12 (1987), 317, www.ebsco.com, accessed January 1, 2016.

recording (and other) technical devices has been key asset for the verbatim theatre, and the BFT is no exception, as I am arguing later.

Equally important for the purpose of my research is a Paget's finding concerning the need of "*feeding back*" to the communities from which the theme has been summoned. According to his assumptions, this can happen by two means, which are: (1) during the actual process of making a play; and (2) in performing the play.³⁶ For instance, transferring the Paget's claims to the object of my case study, the BFT enters the alternative Belarusian community and convey a certain message within it twice. For the first time if they pick a person to interview (a victim of state repressions, for instance), and initiate cooperation with them, and for the second time if they perform her or his story to the people, who most likely include members of the same alternative community. Moreover, it might happen that the community is not only represented (thus, its ideas manifested) through the production of verbatim theatre, but it might create a new (temporary) community as well, people drawn "together for an evening to sit and think about a faraway place"³⁷ – that is a case of plays based on material collected in one country, but performed or even premiered elsewhere.

Overall, it should be said that the verbatim playwrights and theoreticians (despite having different opinions on methods and definitions) agree that the process of creating a verbatim play is as meaningful as performing it. Or, as Hammond and Steward sum it up, "*verbatim is not a form, it is a technique; it is a means rather than an end.*"³⁸

They also elaborate on ethnic issues pertaining to the verbatim theatre which are similar to challenges faced by journalists. And if there are doubts whether traditional media can be trusted, the theatrical depiction on the same events and characters is somehow seen as more trustworthy, more real. "*Immediately, we approach the play not just as a play but also as an accurate source of information. We trust and expect that we are not lied to. When this claim is made, theatre and journalism overlap, and like journalist, the dramatist must abide by some sort of ethical code if their work is to be taken seriously.*"³⁹

³⁶ Ibid..

³⁷ Caroline Wake, "Towards a Working Definition of Verbatim Theatre," in *Verbatim: Staging Memory and Community*, ed. Paul Brown (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2010), 5.

³⁸ Hammond and Steward, *Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

The journalistic approach has become most significant after September 11, 2001, when the verbatim theatre has experienced a great upheaval especially in the USA and the UK.⁴⁰ As Gare, Mumford and Wake note, “*documentary theatre seems to make a resurgence in politically turbulent times.*”⁴¹ Times and places, it should be added. Times and places when and where it can activate the community and achieve “*opening up of discourse on several fronts as expected of political theatre.*”⁴²

However, to enrich a discussion within a society, the verbatim theatre needs a topic. A topic relevant for the people interviewed (the *represented community*) which could have impact on the people attending the performances (the *created community*, if they are not the same). I believe that themes crucial for the alternative Belarusian society, which to some extent appear in any topics concerning the relation of the state and its people, are the questions of national identity, self-identification and an ideological split within Belarus, questions that the BFT need to relate to whenever they operate through verbatim theatre with the alternative community’s members.

2.2 A short survey on nations and nationalism

To understand the importance of the discussion regarding the Belarusian national identity, its possible outcomes and terminology it operates with, one must succumb to theories of nations and nationalism. Of course, it is beyond scope and aim of this research to substantially cover a general state of knowledge on why and how nations emerge, and attempt to answer where in this framework Belarusians belong. However, when proponents of a certain vision of the Belarusian society try to do so, the works of key academics who have shaped the way how we think about nation-building are being repeatedly summoned. Therefore, the following subchapter is written with regard to the preliminary research on arguments employed by the independent (non-state) intellectuals, which are further elaborated on in the later chapters.

Art and culture and have always been related to nationalism, if not outright articulating it. As Craig Calhoun, a recent theoretician of nationalism emphasising the

⁴⁰ Keystone plays collected, written and produced in the 21st century, paving the way to others from other regions, include David Hare’s *The Permanent Way* (2005) and *Stuff Happens* (2005), Robin Soan’s *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006), *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2006) by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, or Tess Berry-Hart’s *Someone to Blame* (2012) and *Sochi 2014* (2014), just to name a few.

⁴¹ Gade, Mumford and Wake, “A Short History of Verbatim Theatre,” 16.

⁴² Ester Žantovská, “The Limits of the Representation of Authenticity: Documentary Drama and Politics Today,” *Litteraria Pragensia* 20, No. 39 (2010), 84.

“discursive formation”⁴³ and rhetorical aspects of the nation discussion, notes: “*The discourse of nations is couched especially in terms of passion and identification (...). Nationalism has emotional power partly because it helps to make us who we are, because it inspires artists and composers, because it gives us a link with history (and thus with immortality).*”⁴⁴ This diversity and subjective character of various nationalisms - which are “*determined by historically distinct cultural traditions, the creative actions of leaders, and contingent situations within the international order*”⁴⁵ - make it impossible to find a single general theory or typology to study them all.

The fundamental (and notorious) tension within the literature on nationalism divides “*constructivists*” and “*primordialists*”, in other words, proponents of the modernist vs. the ethno-cultural theories. The issue in question is an ontological nature of nations: where do they come from? Major representatives of the constructivist/modernist school, such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner, don’t treat nation as something inherited – instead, it is perceived as a novel product of modernisation, a construct which has been enabled among other things due to mass, impersonal, context-free communication between individuals, which became necessary with urbanisation and industrialisation in the 19th century Europe. As Gellner argues, citizens, to be able to cooperate under the modern conditions, must share the same culture (in a broad sense). And in order to acquire the set of means and skills necessary, the official schooling system for creating the “*universal high culture*” is needed.⁴⁶ And from the need of structured education comes another Gellner’s assumption, which is relevant for the notion of alternative culture and state-society relation in my study: the national project can be ensured only by the nation-state, since only the state can offer conditions for promoting and supervising the universal high culture.⁴⁷ In this context, nationalism equals an urge to acquire a nation state, the only institution that can ensure development of the national identity to a certain community.

⁴³ To put his research simply, Calhoun (similarly to Rogers Brubaker and other younger authors) instead of looking for a universally operative “manual” how to assess the national building strategies emphasizes the “soft” character and subjectivity of the human experience concerning national and other identities, and analyses the particular debates on nationalism. In practice, that means that nations are seen as constituted not only by certain features, but by claims that are commonly made on these features. Nations are defined by attempts to define nations. It sounds like a sort of vicious circle, and it is a sort of vicious circle.

⁴⁴ Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁶ Arnošt Gellner, *Národy a nacionalismus* (Praha: Josef Hříbal, 1993), 47.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

The primordialist/ethno-cultural school, on the other hand, considers nations to be authentic, and focuses on the historical and symbolic preconditions and other supposedly objective features which express national identity. As historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith believes, nationalism is “*a form of culture – an ideology, a language, a mythology, symbolism and consciousness – that has achieved global resonance and the nation is a type of identity whose meaning and priority is presupposed by this form of culture.*”⁴⁸ Going back to Calhoun’s moderate criticism, it is indeed problematic to try to assess such a subjective set of values – however, Smith is aware of that, claiming that in long-term, the basic ethno-cultural characteristics produce a pattern which can be rediscovered and traced down. In this sense, “*...nationalists have a vital role to play in the construction of nations, not as culinary artists or social engineers, but as political archaeologists rediscovering and reinterpreting the communal past in order to regenerate the community.*”⁴⁹ Although he emphasises the need of scientific methods for such a revival, it comes as no surprise that these words might resonate within the nativist groups, such as those promoting the rapid national “resurrection” in the 1990s Belarus.

There is another distinction important for the state-society relations, however. In the 1940s, aside from articulating arguments remarkably similar those of Smith (whom he preceded), historian Hans Kohn came up with conceptions of “Western” and “Eastern” nationalisms. From this perspective, the Western nationalism originates in the politically aware middle class which was influenced by the Enlightenment, thus the nationalism is essentially rational and universally relevant. The so called Eastern nationalism, on the other hand, has been (for the absence of abundant townfolk) developed and promoted by a small number of enthusiastic intellectuals, who often looked for an inspiration in the countryside. The rural component has brought a feeling of a “mystical” nation tied to a land, an organic community with genuine national tales, folklore and a “soul”.⁵⁰

Even though the strictly territorial vector of the approach has been mostly rejected, Kohn’s distinction between rational and a mythical conceptions has been transformed into the typology of “civic” and “ethnic” nationalism, which has been

⁴⁸ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Hammondsworth,: Penguin Books, 1991), 91-92.

⁴⁹ Anthony D. Smith, "Gastronomy or geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations." *Nations and Nationalism 1*, No. 1 (1994): 3-23, 19.

⁵⁰ See Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (New York: Collier Books, 1967).

employed by a significant share of authors across fields of study. For example, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, witnessing decolonisation in Africa, has noticed the potential tension between these two projects. The attractiveness of the ethnic (*primordial*) ties might eventually overcome a state ideology and threaten the civic nationalism where it has been already established, potentially resulting in violent conflicts.⁵¹ This thought should be considered for those post-Soviet states such as Belarus, Ukraine or Russia that decided to base their citizenship on the civic principle following the dissolution of the USSR.⁵²

While the constructivists generally tend to underestimate the role of culture and emphasise the role of nation-state in defining the national character (culture, identity), according to the primordialists such as Smith, “*the reality in which the national unity is formed, refers to the level of symbolic culture, and in this sense the importance of the state is subsidiary and in no way predetermines the nation.*”⁵³

Going beyond the traditional primordialist-constructivist division, a typology by Miroslav Hroch should be briefly mentioned – even though he initially omitted the Belarusian case in his comparative studies, it is not rare for his work to be used as argument to assess the level of the Belarusian self-determination. In his detailed account, similarly to Smith, he does not consider the nations to be constructed from above and pays attention to the role of emotions in accepting the national identity⁵⁴ – on the other hand, nationalism is still perceived as a political ideology with a goal to mobilise population, an approach closer to modernists. Hroch defines three underlying phases of the national movement based on the progress in spreading the national idea, branded as Phase A (the period of scholarly interest), Phase B (the period of patriotic agitation), and Phase C (the rise of mass national movement, or reaching the “*integral nationalism*”).⁵⁵

The individual phases are allowed through social communication and other conditions characteristic for the capitalist transition – no matter when such a development takes place (be it in 19th century in Europe, or the late 20th century in the

⁵¹ Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Free Press, 1963), 110, cited in Calhoun, *Nationalism*, 31.

⁵² Unlike Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania preferring to turn to their national history of independent states based on ethnicity.

⁵³ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 28.

⁵⁴ Miroslav Hroch, *Národy nejsou dílem náhody: příčiny a předpoklady utváření moderních evropských národů* (Praha: SLON, 2011), 45

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

post-Soviet space), Hroch links nationalism to the emergence of capitalist society. And, based on the industrial and historical development at the point when the national movements emerge, the types of “*integrated*”, “*delayed*”, “*early*”, and “*disintegrated*” national development are specified. For the Belarusian discussion, the key theme is when the Phase C occur – if at all. A delayed type initiates the Phase B before industrialism, but the Phase C is delayed to the point where the society has developed a class-conscious proletariat dealing with social rather than national issues, thus hindering the establishment of national identity. A disintegrated class begins the national agitation after the industrial progress,⁵⁶ for which the mass phase comes even later, if ever.

3 Belarusian state, society, and the national ideology

The following chapter aims to capture outcomes of the current academic discussion relating to the character of Belarusian state and society and its citizens’ sense of national identity. A comparatively significant wave of international interest in Belarus can be tracked back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, introduced by oppositional figures and Western observers who were trying to raise awareness and make sense of surprisingly smooth Lukashenka’s consolidation of power. When trying to explain the failure of democratic character of the country between 1991 and 1994, scholars rooted within a framework of nationally minded Belarusian opposition emphasised the relation between democracy and nation. Nation was perceived in an ethnic sense, as seen in Smith’s comments on the development after the breakup of the USSR saying that it is “*the continuing power of myths, symbols and memories of ethnic chooseness, golden ages and historic homelands that has been largely responsible for the mass appeal of ethnic nationalism in the aftermath of the Cold war and the demise of the Soviet empire.*”⁵⁷

First sometimes shallow analyses of the situation summarised that the hopeful nationalist opposition has been defeated by the “Soviet styled” dictator because of the lack of self-consciousness among majority of the society. According to this idea, the national self-identification has lost a momentum common elsewhere in Europe when it was partially suppressed and Russified, and the national conception was reworked during

⁵⁶ Which might be enabled by a denationalizing power, borrowing the Marples’ terms, occupying the geographical space of Belarus (such as the USSR).

⁵⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.

the Soviet period.⁵⁸ Applying the Hroch's typology, cultural anthropologist Yulia Cherniavskaia goes into details and elaborates on the history of Belarusian national movement, among other things noticing that even the national revivalists of the late 19th and early 20th who taught Belarusian were responsive to the polyethnicity in the area and the local (*tuteishi*) instead of ethnic self-definition.⁵⁹ Because of the delay, Belarusians had not reached the level of *integral nationalism* on a way to capitalism as expected, and the Phase C came only after the establishment of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1920, highly reformulated or hindered by the Soviet propaganda.⁶⁰ In this sense, we can talk about the delayed, or even disintegrated (through the conception of *homo sovieticus*) national development, leading into problems with conveying the national idea to masses in contemporary Belarus.

The arguments problematizing the level Belarusian national identity, while popular for removing a part of the blame for the failure of the nationalist project in early 1990s from the actions of its proponents, the Belarusian National Front (BNF), were already confronted and revised by several authors.⁶¹ Nevertheless, they paved the way for further assessing the questions of identity, language and culture as factors remarkably important for the socio-political development of Belarus and the state-society relations.

More considerably, there is a distinctive split within the society caused by several factors ranging from urbanisation and regional variety to media repression and official propaganda. Consequently, any public discussion concerning the identity and future of Belarus nowadays is deformed and it cannot reach the whole range of the

⁵⁸ Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, 41.

⁵⁹ Yulia Cherniavskaia, "Pět paradoxů národního uvědomění Bělorusů," *Rozrazil* 39 (2011): 26-31

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶¹ For example, a novel and valuable critical summary of the nationalism debate is that of Aliaksandr Pershai. According to this Belarusian professional in cultural studies, the conceptions which perceive Belarusians as an underdeveloped nation based on employing criteria of rich Western societies should be replaced. Curiously enough, this is not only a problem of those who like Cherniavskaia imply directly through Hroch's and other nationalism theories that Belarusians are "late", or otherwise insufficient as a nation – there is, supposedly, the same initial presumption in many other conceptions, like the ideas of *tuteishasts*, borderlands, or even the pro-Russian, Slavic stances. Those "totalities" should be rejected, saying that Belarusians have indeed emerged as a nation, but "*due to the political, historical, cultural, and economic peculiarity of the region, the Belarusian national identity and sense of belonging has produced an "unconventional," minor form of nationalism.*" - Aliaksandr Pershai, "Minor Nation: The Alternative Modes of Belarusian Nationalism", *East European Politics and Societies* 24, No. 3 (Summer 2010): 393.

I largely present the conceptions that Pershai opposes as major ideas in the alternative debate in the following chapter.

"Minor Nation: The Alternative Modes of Belarusian Nationalism", *East European Politics and Societies* 24, No. 3 (Summer 2010): 379-398.

population. As Nelly Bekus, a Belarusian social scientist dealing with nationalism, puts it, “*the Belarusian society resembles two movie theatres divided by a wall, where two different movies about their life are being projected onto either side of the wall. (...) The other side of the wall can also be seen from one’s own side of the screen, without having to be interested in the real existence of those people, or their opinions, desires, and problems (even if some of them live next door).*”⁶²

Before elaborating on both sides of the “communication wall” and their understanding of Belarusians, their national identity and their status in the contemporary world, I need to summarize basic facts relating to the history of independent Belarus, the regime’s practices, its recent development and presumed goals; in order to be able to characterise what state-society relations the Belarus Free Theatre and the Belarusian alternative cultural scene react to.

3.1 Labelling and defining the state and the society

Assessments of the political situation in Belarus have been made repeatedly after 1994 by different authors, creating labels that have aimed to describe the Lukashenka’s specific system of power. As far as traditional political categories used by Western observers are concerned, the Economist’s Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index which evaluates electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties,⁶³ as well as the latest Freedom House’s Report leave no doubt and keep filing the regime into the worst performing category: “authoritarian”, and “not-free”, respectively.⁶⁴

I do not intend to dispute these terms. For the purpose of my research, however, they are not satisfying enough. Concerning the nature of the regime, political scientists Jan Holzer and Petr Hlaváček offer a valuable account which is founded in classification of undemocratic regimes by Juan Linz.⁶⁵ They notice exceptional stability of the

⁶² Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 176.

⁶³ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2014, Democracy and its discontents*, 7, <http://www.sudestada.com.uy/Content/Articles/421a313a-d58f-462e-9b24-2504a37f6b56/Democracy-index-2014.pdf>, accessed January 1, 2016.

⁶⁴ *Freedom in the World 2015*, 20, www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015, 20, accessed January 1 2016.

⁶⁵ See Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

Lukashenka's power structure, for which it should not be considered a hybrid regime.⁶⁶ Quite exceptionally for the region, Belarus after 1994 is considered to fit within the Linz scale, being a “‘standard’ authoritarian regime with its resulting manifestations and consequences” which include a specific “combination of charismatic, idealistic and legalistic legitimacy, linked to the Soviet era.”⁶⁷ In a similar manner, Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh claim that the regime conceals a “dictatorial style of polity building” under a democratic “scaffolding” presented externally. They brand it as a *façade regime* – despite efforts of the government to present itself otherwise, it is in heart authoritarian. In accordance with their assumptions, I exhibit terms connected with authoritarian rule throughout the thesis.

I have mentioned „branding” in the previous paragraph – it is quite symptomatic that especially authors connected with exile and/or alternative Belarusian community tend to address a nature of the regime beyond simple statements that it is authoritarian. For instance, Belarusian political scientist Vitali Silitski focuses on the aggressive practices of the government, which attempt to preserve power *via* preemptive attacks (in opposition to reactive answers under *manipulative authoritarianism*) against potential threats such as emerging opposition, civil society, or the independent media), and call them “preempting democracy.”⁶⁸ In other words, authoritarianism which strikes first such as the Lukashenka's is *preemptive authoritarianism*.

Stanislav Shushkevich, a prominent scientist and a pro-democratic politician of 1991-1994, frames whole regime in as “*neocommunist*.”⁶⁹ The crucial reason for this label lies within the regime's ideology composed of putting stress on bureaucratic, centrally planned state free of private property, social equality, radical atheism, refusal of individual freedom and, most notably, the nostalgia for the country's communist past, which still majority of the society respond to.⁷⁰ Other authors, on the other hand, address the limitations like supposed lack of sufficient ideology, authoritarianism without clear rules and goals, and general patrimonialism, coming to the conclusion that

⁶⁶ Alternatively also called illiberal democracy, the term is often witnessed in the context of transitioning post-Soviet space. It denominates a regime in between democracy and authoritarianism, usually with severe shortcomings as far as allowance of civil society and opposition as well and employment of state violence are concerned.

⁶⁷ Petr Hlaváček and Jan Holzer, „Lukašenkovo Bělorusko. Případová studie nedemokratického režimu,“ *Středoevropské politické studie* 7, No. 4 (2005): 424, www.ceeol.com, accessed May, 2010.

⁶⁸ Vitali Silitski, „Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus,“ *Journal of Democracy* 16, No. 4 (2005): 85, www.ceeol.com, accessed May, 2010.

⁶⁹ Stanislav Shuskevich, *Neokommunism v Belarusi* (Smolensk: Skif, 2002), 114.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 136-139.

Lukashenka's governance is a new sort of "*sultanism*". Consequently, the only possible way to end the regime would be to overthrow it.⁷¹

The uniqueness of the Belarusian case in Europe even led some researchers to a use of a specific term – "*lukashenkism*".⁷² Political scientist Margery MacMahon as early as in 1997 described in accord with most of the Belarusian opposition of that time that among key features of *lukashenkism* belong heavy reliance on security forces and repression of media, disregard for democratic institutions and values as well as "*avoidance of vital economic reform with an expressed preference for the state-led policies of the Soviet era*", and "*an active policy of reuniting Belarus with Russia*".⁷³ The last one is a topic which numerous authors concerned themselves with in the 2000s,⁷⁴ although recent developments show that despite the enactment of the Eurasian Economic Union, Lukashenka's interest continue to lie within the national sovereignty, and it seems he is well aware of that.

How did all these definitions revolving around one dictator come into being? By which means has he tightened the grip around the country, and what historical conditions have allowed it?

3.2 Consolidation of Lukashenka's power

Lukashenka's rise to power in the newly independent Republic of Belarus came as a surprise to a large majority of politicians both from the democratic opposition and "the Party of Power".⁷⁵ Initially after his election to the Supreme Soviet in 1990, Lukashenka has positioned himself as an open-minded politician, criticising the Party's conservatism and unwillingness to perform market reforms. Reacting to the public dissatisfaction with the economy and politics after 1991 however, he briskly changed

⁷¹ Steven Eke and Taras Kuzio, „Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus,“ *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 no 3. (2000), 535-537.

⁷² Margery MacMahon, „Alexander Lukshenko, President, Republic of Belarus,“ *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 13, No. 4 (1997): 133..

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁴ See for instance Valer Bulhakau: *Belarus - Russia Integration: Analytical Articles* (Minsk: Analytical Group, 2003), or Anastasia Nesvetilova, "Russia and Belarus: The Quest for the Union; or Who Will Pay for Belarus's Path to Recovery?" in *Contemporary Belarus...* (Korolesteva, Lawson and March, eds.): 152-164.

⁷⁵ A term "the Party of Power" represents formerly communist deputies and it came to being after the dissolution of the ruling communist party, proclamation of independence, and restoring the national symbols in September 1991.

his course and sided with the pro-government majority, supporting Vyacheslav Kebich's plan of establishing a military and monetary union with Russia.⁷⁶

As former communists further worked on cementing Kebich's power, taking advantage of the system and discrediting the opposition by blaming it for the economic unease, Lukashenka took advantage of the animosity within the parliament, and became a chairman of the newly established anti-corruption committee in June 1993.⁷⁷ Scores of the BNF's deputies helped him to his victory, hoping that Lukashenka's activities would uncover corruption of the old guard. He indeed attacked the government officials, but not before he ousted Shushkevich as a Speaker of the parliament and his major opponent.⁷⁸

Lukashenka's potential was empowered by the Party of Power as well – the constitution adopted in March 1994 established a presidential republic, well within the general sentiment that parliamentary democracy had been inefficient and corrupt. The ultimate goal of the law was to secure an absolute success of Kebich in the next election, thus returning the control over the state to the hardliners.⁷⁹

Lukashenka seized the opportunity, filled the public space with more corruption allegations increasing his popularity,⁸⁰ and as a result, the change-seeking citizens entrusted him the presidential mandate: in a first round of the fair election, Lukashenka received 44.82 % of votes. Other politicians unlike Lukashenka failed to capture the average voter, thus Kebich gained 17.33 %, the BNF's leader Z. Pazniak 12.82 % and independent democrat Shuskevich 9.91 %.⁸¹ Consequently, he won the second round on with 80.34 % of the vote.⁸² Most significantly, the development leading to the election show that Lukashenka portrayed himself as a “*defender of Belarusian interest*” and sovereignty (better than the other candidates) as early as in 1994.⁸³

⁷⁶ Vitali Silitski, “Explaining Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Belarus,” in *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, eds. Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson, and Rosalind J. Marsh (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 48.

⁷⁷ Kathleen J. Mihalisko, „Belarus: retreat to authoritarianism“, in *Democratic changes and authoritarian reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova*, eds. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 241.

⁷⁸ Silitski, “Explaining Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Belarus,” 41

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Silitski, “Explaining Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Belarus,” 42.

⁸¹ The other two candidates, A. Dubko and V. Novikau received 5,58 % and 4,29 % respectively. See Aliaksandr A. Kavalenia et al., *Historia belaruskaj dzjarzhaunasci u kanci XVIII - pachatku XXI st.: u dzviuch knihach*, 608.

⁸² Ibid..

⁸³ Silitski, “Explaining Post-Communist Authoritarianism in Belarus,” 43.

The acquired role of the president and its authority has been fundamental for consolidation of Lukashenka's power as well as promoting his national ideology. When independent post-Soviet republics emerged, there has been a debate on the issue of presidential regimes in the area, mostly concluding that the less democratic the system is, the stronger the presidential powers are – and notably, as Anders Åslund puts it: “(...) *postcommunist practice shows that presidential systems recreated the Communist Party apparatus.*”⁸⁴ The usage of bureaucratic practices and apparatus from the communist past is a denominating aspect and cornerstone of Belarusian regime in practice – nevertheless, the central structures originating in the era before the independence must not be mistaken for the official ideology that I attempt to characterise in this chapter.

The following years witnessed a decay of the multiparty democracy, culminating in November 1996. Resulting from a conflict between the president and the parliament, Lukashenka has called a referendum as a tool giving him powers to dissolve a parliament, which he later indeed did. The model of dictatorship relying on popular support through referendums (be it true or falsified), common among the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, was further exploited in 1999. Lukashenka's term in office was coming to an end, thus he altered the constitution *via* a referendum so he would remain in power for two more years.⁸⁵

Putting aside the well discussed and omnipresent threat of (preemptive) state violence, the use of referendums, as well as largely falsified elections in 2001, 2006, 2010 and 2015⁸⁶ has gone hand in hand with media control. In general, official relation towards the media landscape can be tracked in Lukashenka's public speeches, in which he repeatedly called media a weapon of mass destruction with journalism being a state profession serving as a state's strongest weapon (with proclamations being less militant in last few years).⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Anders Åslund, *How Capitalism Was Built: The Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 239.

⁸⁵ Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson and Roalind J. Mash, “Introduction: Paradoxes of Democratisation in Post-Communist Belarus,” in *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, eds. Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson, and Rosalind Marsh (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2003), 4.

⁸⁶ See OSCE reports, OSCE, “Elections in Belarus,” <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/belarus>, accessed January 1, 2015.

⁸⁷ Lukashenka, Aliaksandr, “Interviu nedziarzhanskym srodkam masavai infarmatsyi,” *The Official Internet Portal of The President of the Republic of Belarus*, August 4, 2015, http://president.gov.by/by/news_by/view/intervju-nedzjarzhaunym-srodkam-masavaj-infarmatsyi-11883/, accessed January 1, 2016.

In his recent analysis of mass media in Belarus, Belarusian sociologist Oleg Manaev brilliantly elaborates on privileges and support given to the state media as compared to alternative outlets, effectively allowing the state to dominate the public discourse and formulating value system for the “*common majority*”.⁸⁸ But despite the obstacles for independent reporting and a restrictive new media law enacted in 2009 (which codified deliberate denial of accreditation to journalists without any explanation by the state, whose work was deemed as unnecessary), the alternative media still exist and are active - however limited their reach is only to their target audience, the “*advanced minority*”. This state of the autocratic state with state and non-state media (that is two coexisting, alas not cooperating “*media subsystems*”) is deeply rooted within the structure of the Belarusian society. The division within the society demands two different sets of values and world views being represented by two categories of media, Manaev argues, which is influenced by an exceptionally low trust of Belarusian citizens towards each other.⁸⁹

Indeed, the split within the society is not uniquely tied to the media, and the regime has other tools to take advantage of the “*common majority*” set of values, no matter whether they are genuine, or constructed by the regime itself. Therefore, for the purpose of researching how BFT relates to the government actions vs. the alternative viewpoints, it is inevitable to specify sources and shapes of the official ideology.

3.3 The official national identity project

It would be too simplistic to assume that Lukashenka is just “*a dictator without an ideology, only with a business plan*” as Tom Stoppard, a famous playwright and vivid supporter of Belarus Free Theatre, said among his more apt observations concerning the regime in Belarus.⁹⁰

In fact, the ideology of the state started to be developed as soon as the 1990s, formulating three basic values of the official approach to build Belarusians’ relation to their state: strong presidential powers, socially oriented economy, and traditional Christian values (or Orthodox, more precisely, thus often leading to use of the term as

⁸⁸ Oleg Manaev, “Media in Post-Soviet Belarus: Between Democratization and Reinforcing Authoritarianism,” *Demokratizatsiya* 22, No.2 (2014), 218.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁰ Tom Stoppard, “Accidental Tyranny,” *The Guardian*, October 1, 2005. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/oct/01/theatre>, accessed January 1 2016

interchangeable with an abstract notion of East Slavic culture).⁹¹ Here comes the Lukashenka's vision of the Belarusian national identity.

In 1990s, Lukashenka was portrayed as primitively pro-Russian not only by the nationalist opposition, but by foreign observers analysing his steps towards integration with Russia as well. This international aspect easily led to an oversimplification stating that the principal government's domestic cultural and language policy's goal was a Russification of the country, in other words, that the Lukashenka's autocracy equals official Russian interests and world view.⁹² The specific national ideology could be more easily spotted as the integration project has lost its appeal to the Belarusian leadership in the 2000s, when there were signals that further advantages of the economic support from Russia were to be conditioned by incorporation of Belarus within the Russian Federation (thus threatening to undermine the absolute presidential authority in Belarus).⁹³

The ideological strategy of the state was eventually publicly revealed in March 2003 when the president formally envisioned a new "*national ideology*" to his ideological management. As even a brief look into the official statements and president's speeches confirms, during the years since the March declaration, the official discourse has assigned to the terms "*nationalism*" and "*national*" a contradictory sense – on the one hand, Lukashenka is never far from blaming the opposition for "radical nationalism" especially when summoning the language issue, e.g. claiming that he prevented radical nationalists from ousting "*not only the Russian language, but also all Russian people from Belarus*" and speaking of nationalism as something inheritably alien to the Belarusian nation.⁹⁴ On the other hand, there has been a rapid increase in exploiting the term "*national*" within the public sphere – cases of state institutions such as Yanka Kupala National Theatre, National Academy of Sciences or First National Television and Radio Broadcasting Company were lately accompanied by adding "National" to the titles of the Minsk II airport or the historical archives.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 213.

⁹² Ryszard Radzik, *Kim są Białorusini?*, 139.

⁹³ Natalia Leshchenko, "The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, No. 8 (2008), 1421.

⁹⁴ Lukashenka, Aliaksandr, „Vystupenie na plenarnom zasedanii XV Vsemirnogo kongressa ruskoi pressy,” *The Official Internet Portal of The President of the Republic of Belarus*, July 20, 2013, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki-belarus-aglukashenko-na-plenarnom-zasedanii-xvsemirnogo-kongressa-ruskoj-6327/, accessed January 1, 2016.

⁹⁵ Leshchenko, "The National Ideology," 1425.

Based on her analysis of the articles in *Sovetskaia Belorussia*, a mouthpiece of the government, and other primary sources related to the state world view, Bekus further examines the discourse relating to the “*national ideology*”, coming to the conclusion that the concept is used as a synonym with “*ideology of statehood*” and all that it represents. Furthermore, we can observe that the state has no problem in distinguishing the “*ethnic nationalism*” from its own sense of patriotism and national identity, labelling the former as a threat for the true Belarusian nation and its sovereignty which is influenced and supported by the West.⁹⁶ But if Lukashenka shuns the ethnic form of nationalism, what are the singularities and qualities of the *state* national ideology (if we accept that there is such), what are its ideas, instruments, and intentions?

Belarusian analyst based in the UK Natalia Leschenko comes up with a term of “*egalitarian nationalism*”, indicating the collectivist character and the argument of the national unity allowing Lukashenka to bend the society according to what he declares as national traits. From this viewpoint, the centrally-based economy, for instance, is advocated by claiming that it reflects “*the national traits of collectivism and egalitarianism, and, no less importantly, a national disinterest in materialism and individualism.*” The Belarusian egalitarian nationalism and the Lukashenka’s rule thus “*acquired a symbiotic relationship, in which one strengthened the other.*”⁹⁷

The collectivism of Belarusians is promoted by the state as contrapuntal to the Western individualism, which fits into the larger image of strictly positioning “*native-ours*” against “*foreign-western*”, which explains stress given by Lukashenka on the theme of alleged foreign financing of the NGOs, independent media and civil activists, and at the same time constant denunciation of the West as powerless, warning anyone against dealing with it. Or, as he stated during an interview concerning the Crimean crisis: “*I will tell you honestly: the western world is a sham. (...) They are not capable of anything and one should think twice before dealing with them. They can deceive you and they deceived me many times. And then, to save face, they started demanding to democratize, devalue, hold elections in a proper way, and release political prisoners.*”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 214 - 215.

⁹⁷ Leshchenko, „The National Ideology,“ 1021-1022.

⁹⁸ President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko answers questions of mass media representatives, March 23, 2014, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/president-of-the-republic-of-

However, to hold its ground, the negative self-definition distinguishing Belarusians from the West must be supported with a positive vision, which has been found in the national “tradition”. In the March ideological declaration, Lukashenka notably said that one should not give in to borrowing foreign ideals, values, and aims, since “(...) *our own traditions, ideas and values, goals and destiny, make the backbone of our people. They are not made up, but gained by the means of suffering of our people.*”⁹⁹

The notion of suffering brings up (besides the already mentioned collectivism and focus on the unity within the state, be it through religious, or cultural Slavic notion), historical experience and its contemporary delivery by the state.

Although none of the significant periods in history of the region of today’s Belarus are omitted by the state in the media and educational system,¹⁰⁰ as Bekus points out: “*Those periods of history, when Belarusians together with the Poles or Lithuanians were members of the same states, are declared to be alien to the Belarusian tradition, which is more linked to the periods of history related to czarist or Soviet Russia.*”¹⁰¹ The Soviet past in particular is worth looking into, since myths of the recent past and nostalgia of the “*common majority*” belong among cornerstones of the state ideology.

In contrary to the notion of a denationalising strategy supposedly launched by the Soviet officials, the regime declares the USSR’s language and cultural policy as favourable. It is not an ambition of this research to determine a factual role of the Soviet governance in preserving the Belarusian identity, but in accordance with the Calhoun’s theory of nationalism I believe that the perception matters – as Victor Chernov puts forth in his analytical article, Belarusians flocked behind an overreaching Soviet idea because of feeling of their own “*ethnomarginality*”. In this sense, not fully nationally conscious Belarusians remembering extreme suffering and losses during World War II have found meaning of their sacrifice in a superior “*Soviet-Belarusian*” patriotism, making them the “*most Soviet of the Soviets*”.¹⁰² The pride on their “*Soviet self*”, as I

belarus-alexander-lukashenko-answers-questions-of-mass-media-representatives-on-8348/, accessed March 1, 2015.

⁹⁹ Aliaksandr Lukashenka, „Doklad na seminare rukovodiashchikh rabotnikov po ideologicheskoi rabote,” March 27, 2003, www.president.gov.by/press29213.html#doc, accessed March 1, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ See Aliaksandr A. Kavalenia et al., *Historia belaruskai dzjarzhaunasci u kanci XVIII - pachatku XXI st.: u dzviuch knihach*.

¹⁰¹ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 218.

¹⁰² Viktor Chernov, “*Nishcheta ideologii ili ideologiia nishcety*,” *Filamaty* 3, no. 6 (2003), 48-49., <http://data.minsk.by/>, accessed January 1, 2016.

have come to calling it, has been then fostered and bolstered by the Lukashenka's regime.

Similarly to Russia, the Great Patriotic War bears symbols that are seen as an undisputable part of the Belarusian identity: most notably an idea of a heroic partisan. The victory in the war is in the official ideology connected directly to obtaining independence. From Lukashenka speeches during the 70th anniversary of the Victory Day (which he celebrated in Minsk, not in Moscow, sending yet another message abroad concerning the Belarusian sovereignty) one can realise that term "*Motherland*" has been adopted to denominate both Belarus and the whole USSR. This duality of "Soviet" and "Belarussian" continue, as Lukashenka stresses that there is no use in distinguishing and contesting in which of the Soviet nations defeated the "*brown plague*",¹⁰³ since most soldiers perceived themselves as a part of "*the great Soviet nation*."¹⁰⁴ Moreover, any relativization or disrespect are harshly condemned: "(...) *that war turned out to be an unbelievable test of endurance for the Belarusian nation. We cannot forget that those who besmirch the Great History are trying to take away our feeling of national pride (...)*"¹⁰⁵ To put it simply, Lukashenka's words highlight that the officially approved identity include a concept of "*Belarusianness*" naturally coupling with the concept of "*Sovietness*", both of which are underpinned and fortified by the Great Patriotic War myth.

The air of continuity with the post-war Soviet Belarus is further supported *via* state symbols, which have become a visible matter of contest between opposition and the state. Relevance of the red-and-green flag, as well as the coat of arms nearly identical to the one belonging to the former BSSR, was clearly expressed by the president on the national day dedicated to these state symbols. According to him, by honouring them, Belarusians are united and they pay "*a tribute of respect to the invaluable achievements of our forefathers who fought in the battlefield and in the rear to defend the right to have a decent life and work in the native land.*"¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Aliaksandr Lukashenka, "Alexander Lukashenko wishes Happy Victory Day to all Belarusians," *The Official Internet Portal of The President of the Republic of Belarus*, May 8, 2015 http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/alexander-lukashenko-wished-happy-victory-day-to-all-belarusians-11346/, accessed January 1, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Aliaksandr Lukashenka, *The Official Internet Portal of The President of the Republic of Belarus*, My 7, 2015, http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/solemn-meeting-timed-to-70th-anniversary-of-victory-in-great-patriotic-war-11354/, accessed January 1, 2015

¹⁰⁵ Ibid..

¹⁰⁶ Aliaksandr Lukashenka, "Solemn meeting timed to 70th anniversary of Victory in Great Patriotic War," *The Official Internet Portal of The President of the Republic of Belarus*, May 8, 2015

When thinking about intentions why these ideological constructs and strong rhetoric is employed by the government, Leshchenko offers a logical explanation. With a help of a recent official propaganda campaign *For Belarus (Za Belarus)*, she re-explores the question of national unity. Billboards portraying every possible age, occupation and gender emphasise the common will of the absolute majority – therefore anyone deemed as unfitting can be identified as a threat for the unity.¹⁰⁷ Through the use of the illusion of undivided society, any dissent is branded as either irrelevant, or harmful to Belarusian identity (or both, since Lukashenka’s speeches do not shy away from ambiguity).

More importantly, the national ideology is a proclamation penetrating to the international affairs – it is not aimed at the domestic audience only, it represents the Belarus’s distinctiveness abroad. A clearly formulated accent on sovereignty becomes a profitable tool in Lukashenka’s balancing between Russia and the EU. Furthermore, it serves as a shield against any potential attempts at democratization of the country, shunning them as foreign powers endangering the Belarusian way of life. Hence, with a help of the ideology (which includes Soviet anti-Western hostility *and* the new Belarusian independence rhetoric), Lukashenka has minimised an impact of Western democratic thinking on the significant part of the society.¹⁰⁸

Effects of the official strategy and their dynamics can be roughly traced through opinion polls by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS). When looking at the statistics, during the last two Lukashenka’s presidencies, we can notice two turning points – 2010/2011, when the major protests were violently subdued and the economic crisis erupted, and early 2014, when the Ukrainian crisis escalated. Years 2010/2011 witnessed a radical decline of general trust in Lukashenka (from nearly 50 % in September 2010 to 25 % in September 2011, while 60 % of respondents said that they didn’t trust the president anymore after the crisis hit).¹⁰⁹ This fact is reflected with public reaction to the official doctrine – despite all president’s hateful comments towards the West, for the first time in independent Belarus, desire to join the EU won over a pursuit of further integration with Russia among the majority of

http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/alexander-lukashenko-sends-greetings-on-day-of-state-emblem-and-state-flag-of-belarus-11347/, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Leshchenko, “The National Ideology,” 1424.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 1426.

¹⁰⁹ IISEPS, “Dinamika belorusskogo obshchestvonnogo mieniia,” Public Opinion Survey, January 2015,” <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=114>, accessed March 1, 2016.

citizens.¹¹⁰ The trend has been reverted in 2014, however, with half of the population against rapprochement with the EU blaming it for the escalation in the Eastern Europe, while Lukashenka's popularity soared to nearly 60 % (and seems steady).¹¹¹ Looking at the numbers, which constantly show that the president enjoys higher trust among low-educated and elderly people,¹¹² it can be *passingly* argued that Lukashenka's bet on rhetoric of defending national sovereignty during the Ukraine crisis has worked well for him, while the "*common majority*" is still very sensitive to external factors of influence (Russian media's take on the world events included).

To sum up the findings of the subchapter, while the exile and independent scholars emphasise the undemocratic nature of the regime and its harmful character, the official national ideology presents Belarus both home and abroad as a united country, culturally different from the West. It creates and exploits myths related to the Imperial Russian and in particular Soviet periods of history, while harshly condemning hypothetical ethnic nationalism of the opposition, connecting it to a supposed Western treachery. Grigori Ioffe adds that the generally Russophile profile of the government's ideology, reflecting a major segment of the society, has deep roots in the past, allowing Lukashenka to benefit from a predominance of Orthodox tradition in Belarus,¹¹³ making it more than just an empty proclamation.

Jan Zaprudnik, a visible figure of Belarusian exile in the USA, nevertheless finds a bright side to the official ideology from the point of possible democratization. Relating to a Vasil Bykau's postulate that saving of the Belarusian nation depends on national self-awareness, he comes to a conclusion that Lukashenka with his accent on sovereignty (and the whole concept of "*egalitarian nationalism*" as Leshchenko calls it) might be doing Belarusians a service in a long term. That is by defending the statehood meanwhile the new generation is growing up into active contributors to developing a nation identity in a civic sense, overcoming ethnic nationalism of the traditional 1990s opposition.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ IISEPS, "Khorosha Evropa, da ne pro nas," Public Opinion Survey June 2015, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=842>, accessed March 1, 2016.

¹¹¹ IISEPS, "Molodec! Takym i dolzhen byt prezident.", Public Opinion Survey, December 2014, <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=893>, accessed March 1, 2016.

¹¹² *Ibid.*.

¹¹³ Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, 68.

¹¹⁴ Jan Zaprudnik, "Belarus in Search of National Identity between 1986 and 2000," in *Contemporary Belarus. Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, eds. Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson, and Rosalind J. Marsh (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 122-123.

4 Political opposition and alternative conceptions of Belarusian national identity

Before moving on to the BFT's role as alternative culture's actor reacting to the regime's image of Belarus and its national idea, it is necessary to briefly explore the democratic opposition's position and arguments in counterbalancing the Lukashenka's ideology – that is, to map the alternative conceptions of national identity and their discourses.

But first, it is necessary to realise that unlike Western scholars dealing with Belarusian nationalism, who are essentially neutral as far as their framework allow them, the independent (unofficial) intellectuals in Belarus and exile write not only about, but also *for* the alternative community. They are personally invested in improving the state of population's national self-identification in Belarus, and although they use terms by Western scholars on nationalism, the meanings might be shifted. Or, as Pershai who was cited in the previous chapter notes, "*Belarusian researchers of nationalism as a rule write for pro-nationalist activists, the urban intelligentsia, and other educated groups that express their public interest and right to participate in a Belarusian future.*"¹¹⁵

4.1 Nationalist opposition and its identity discourse

Traditionally, those opposition figures which reintroduced the notion of Belarusian identity in an ethnic sense through the language reforms in early 1990 have been denoted as representatives of an image of Belarus alternative to the view presented by president Lukashenka. Even though I argue that the anti-Lukashenka opposition as mirrored and developed within the alternative culture covers wide array of opinions, development and actions of the nationalist opposition are still fundamental for understanding the mental framework in which the proponents of alternative Belarusian identity operate, and it sheds some light on already elaborated government's aggressive attitude towards nationalism.

Similarly to Baltic Soviet republics, a mass movement called Belarusian National Front "Revival" (*Bielaruski Narodny Front "Adradžėńnie"*, or BNF) emerged in 1988. The generally present conditions for social mobilisation in the USSR were

empowered locally by two events further influencing the sense of Belarusian identity within a significant part of the society. First of those was a revelation of an account of mass graves of victims of Stalinism in the *Kuropaty* forest, which has become a symbol of Soviet repression of nationally conscious Belarusian intelligentsia.¹¹⁶

Secondly, the full impact of the Chernobyl disaster on the Belarusian territory (according to the estimates, more than 70 % of the fallout hit the BSSR, creating a contaminated *zone* with critical medical consequences for its inhabitants)¹¹⁷ was uncovered as late as in 1989, which provoked accusation of the republic's leadership of subservience to Moscow at the expense of national interests,¹¹⁸ as well as a general wave of dissatisfaction with the Communist Party leadership.

With the sovereignty declared in June 1990, the Belarusian society faced a dilemma of which set of national values to build the new state on. As Buhr and Hoffman note, this would require choosing either the cultural (ethnic, primordial) national identification, which would consequently mean refusing the Russian language, or “*they could embrace the co-existence of their titular national language and the Russian but this would force the choice of a ‘political identity’.*”¹¹⁹

At first, it seemed that Belarus would follow the Baltic way, strengthening the role of the Belarusian language. Under the activist chairmanship of Zianon Pazniak, the BNF played a significant role in setting the tone of the public discourse, which led the Supreme Soviet of Belarus to declare Belarusian as the only official language of Belarus as soon as in January 1990. In compliance with the ethnic definition of the nation, the enacted language legislation spoke about the Belarusian language not solely as a communication device, but as a “*soul of a nation*” as well.¹²⁰ Minority languages were to be protected, and the educational and bureaucratic measures necessary for transition from the major Russian language to Belarusian were to follow.

Although there was a serious resistance among the bureaucracy towards the language reforms, as well as a lack of sufficient knowledge of Belarusian among more than a half of the population, the efforts under the Kebich's government led to some

¹¹⁵ Aliaksandr Pershai, “Minor Nation: The Alternative Modes of Belarusian Nationalism”, *East European Politics and Societies* 24, No. 3 (Summer 2010): 393.

¹¹⁶ Zaprudnik, “In Search of National Identity...”, 113.

¹¹⁷ See David R. Marples, *Belarus, From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

¹¹⁸ Zaprudnik, “In Search of National Identity...”, 114.

¹¹⁹ Buhr and Hoffman, „Language as a Determinant of National Identity,” 68.

¹²⁰ Zaprudnik, *Belarus at a Crossroads in History*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 139.

progress in reintroducing the language.¹²¹ However, the national development promoted by the BNF and its supporters was effectively halted by the referendums of 1995, formally granting Russian equal rights to Belarusian. The absence of supportive measures practically led to further decline of Belarusian in everyday use.

Thus, the language issue became a critical issue for the democratic opposition to Lukashenka, initially revolving around the BNF. Based on the prevalent conceptions of national identity as presented by the nationalist opposition and their attempt of linguistic “revival” (*Adradžeńnie*) in early 1990s, the historical argumentation (such as looking back to a supposedly golden age of the Belarusian culture and language) has been of prominent importance in the discussion.

While the Lukashenka’s regime celebrates the Soviet period and its symbols, the nationalist opposition focuses on earlier history. The idealised Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) in the 16th century has acquired a unique role in the collective memory as a realm which allowed a sufficient differentiation of the Belarusian language from the neighbouring ethnicities. During that period, it was used by nobles and peasants alike and it was present in the official state documents which supported development of its literary form, and *The Skaryna’s Bible* written in the Belarusian variation of Church Slavic was published.¹²² The usage of Belarusian dwindled under the Polish influence following the creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569, however, and when the area became a part of the Russian empire in 1795, the split between Polish as a language of powerful and Belarusian as a language of powerless continued for several decades.

The process of Russification which intensified after “Polish” revolts against the Russian Empire in the 19th century further hindered attempts to return Belarusian into the public sphere until lifting the language restrictions in 1905. From that moment to the World War I, a number of publications in Belarusian emerged, including the *Nasha Niva* journal. Significantly, it was restored in 1991 and remains to be a proponent of the traditional language-oriented and pro-western definition of the Belarusian nation, its articles offering testimony concerning the national identity discussion within the opposition).

Despite the positive national and linguistic development just before the war, the most desired source of arguments for the nationally aware opposition has come to be the

¹²¹ Zaprudnik, “In Search of National Identity...,” 116.

¹²² Buhr and Hoffman, „Language as a Determinant of National Identity,” 66.

independent Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) of 1918-1919. The short-lived state has envisaged a set of national symbols which were adopted by the Republic of Belarus in early 1990s, and from then on, the public appearance of the white-red-white flag, as well as *Pahonia* – a coat of arms depicting a mounted knight dating back to the GDL – has become an oppositional challenge to the official discourse based on the Soviet era symbols. Therefore, this set of symbols goes beyond the simple representation of the first statehood, it is perceived as a manifestation of “free”, unofficial community – a fact which is, by the way, expressed in one of the analysed plays. Moreover, the historical BNR promoted the Belarusian language and culture in terms of traditional cultural nationalism on whose ground other East-Central European states emerged after the World War I.

The resemblance to the nation-building west of the BNR¹²³ fits well among key historical arguments defining the national identity by the nativist camp – generally, those historical symbols and events that represent the supposed “Western character” of the Belarusian nation, together with Polish and Baltic elements of the respective state projects are highlighted, while Russian cultural and linguistic influence is diminished in the discourse. Typically, historians supporting the democratic opposition and pro-Western set of values (while not necessary the nationalist political project, as explained later) emphasise the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania stating that “*some articles of the Statute, for instance, the death penalty for homicide, the presumption of innocence, the limitation of serfdom, the declaration of religious tolerance exceeded the codes of law of the Western European states of the time.*”¹²⁴

4.2 Alternative discourses in the national identity debate

Coming back to the current discourses within the idea of alternative Belarusian identity, there has been significant criticism towards the rigid ethnic nationalism of the BNF under Pazniak's leadership. The BNF, according to some Belarusian authors, contributed to dividing the society in early 1990s through factual ostracising of Russian

¹²³ The myth of genuine Belarusian state well embedded within the Western civilization has been further strengthened by the fact that in New York, there is a government in exile representing the Belarusian People's Republic as the oldest existing exile government in the world.

¹²⁴ Uladzimir Rouda, “Zapad est Zapad, Vostok est ili mogu li oshibatsia krupneishe politologi sovremennosti?” *Belorusy I Rynok* July 26-August 2 (2004), as cited in Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 199.

and *trasiianka* speakers,¹²⁵ thus eventually helping Lukashenka to obtain their support. As Yuri Shevtsov argues, the nationalist opposition was partially responsible for failure of the democratic procedure since it ignored the bilingualism of the society, which he considers to be an inherent part of the Belarusian cultural identity.¹²⁶ In general, Shevtsov, in contrary to the discourse traditional among alternative intellectuals, endorses much criticised regionalism of majority of the population as well as its lack of interest in the national identity promoted by opposition, and defines Belarusianness as a method of living in the vulnerable geographical area. This involves a specific ability to coexist with or within larger national states without being assimilated – an attribute of Belarusian national identity which forms the Lukashenka’s ambivalent relation to the union with Russia - balancing to survive.¹²⁷

This focus on *tuteishasts*, the specific form of localism in the Belarusian area, as an alternative within the alternative society – as an alternative to the nationalist project has been further developed in the independent intellectual discussion. G. Ioffe uses the term of “Creole consciousness” to label the politically articulated extrapolation of *tuteishasts*,¹²⁸ borrowing the term from the Ukrainian intellectual debate concerning the Russian-Ukrainian dichotomy, which was in turn inspired by the Spanish colonialism. In this sense, Creoles are regionally minded, “colonised” members of the society effectively functioning as a pre-national community that values economic welfare the most, thus it is easily controlled by an authoritarian regime. It is no wonder that this conception has been introduced in Belarus by authors assembled around the pro-Western journal *Arche* (e.g. V. Bulhakau) as a way to define pro-regime and patriotic citizens mostly speaking *trasiianka*, and often brings along rather pejorative use. Upon closer examination of attributes of Creole consciousness as researched by U. Abushenka – that is, discourse of liberation, mythical approach to history (the Great Patriotic War), return to the orthodox/Slavic identity, and discouraging from the use of national language (Belarusian)¹²⁹ – it can be concluded that the conception is mutually interchangeable with the Lukashenka’s state ideology as described above. Therefore, the Creole idea is relevant as a reference point for the alternative intellectual community

¹²⁵ Trasiianka is a term for uncodified mix of Russian and Belarusian. It has evolved together with the Soviet bureaucratic system that common Belarusians had to communicate with, and it is almost exquisitely prevalent in the countryside.

¹²⁶ Shevtsov, Yuri. *Objedinennaya naciya: fenomen Belarusi* (Moskva: Evropa, 2005), 77.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹²⁸ Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, 90.

¹²⁹ Vladimír Abushenka, “Mickiewicz kak ‘kreol’: ot ‘tutejskich geneologii’ k geneologii

debate, but not as an alternative identity competing with the regime, and definitely not as a national idea that would be manifested through the alternative culture.

Opponents facing the Lukashenka's state ideology have naturally turned to the symbols of Western democratic system, which the domestic propaganda uses as a target of hate. This elementary pro-Western approach was well-articulated in late 1990s through commentaries by Stanislav Bogdankievich, emphasising underdeveloped political culture in the country and authoritarian character of the regime rather than the supposed linguistic and civilizational divide. According to the pro-Western narrative, the regime deliberately distinguishes itself from Europe by promoting Asiatic model of power which is "*based on the dominance of the administrative authority, on the economic and political domination of the bureaucracy.*"¹³⁰ The true Belarusian national idea lies in building a completely sovereign state with strong civil society that would ensure the rule of law. And, as a result of rule of law, economic welfare and sensible existence would also be ensured – however, by blocking the democratic development, the state makes acknowledging and fulfilment of this form of Belarusian identity (that is genuinely democratic, European way of life) impossible.¹³¹ Since the basic idea of this approach is that the nation can only exist within liberal democracy, therefore the regime necessarily has to be changed, its power remains within political declarations and cultural manifestations. Nevertheless, N. Bekus claims that the adherents of this liberal, pro-Western vision of Belarus who base their arguments on comparison with European countries, still form a majority of the alternative authors.¹³²

Typically, the various supporters of democratization use national symbols from the past (GDL, BPR) as an expression of Western values, sympathy for which may but may not be based on Belarusian ethnic nationalism. Moreover, they draw inspiration not only from the national, but widely European history – symptomatic is the case of Charter 97 echoing the Czechoslovak opposition movement in 1970s. Reacting to the 1996 Lukashenka's referendum, its signatories attempted to overcome their political and confessional differences for the sake of making "*Belarus a free, sovereign and prosperous European country, where human rights are protected, where there are no*

'tutejshastsi'", <http://belintellectuals.eu/library/book/259>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹³⁰ Stanislav Bogdankievich, "Belaruskaia natsionalnaia idea," *Adkrytaie gramadstva* 6, No. 1 (1999), <http://data.minsk.by/opensociety/1.99/2.html>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*.

¹³² Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 198.

political prisoners and everyone can live in dignity."¹³³ The signatories (including Nikolai Khalezin, nowadays leading the Belarus Free Theatre), made a significant step from the anti-Russian and cultural/ethnic focus of the nationalist opposition – still, the centrepiece of the liberal approach is clear: Belarus is Europe.

The European character as an inherent part of the Belarusian national identity has been elaborated and emphasised by various authors from different settings – to cover a majority of arguments, one would need to reach beyond limits of this paper. However, there has been an intellectual movement of pro-democratic activists who find the idea of solely European identity of Belarusians to be too restraining and inaccurate.

Firstly, the language issue and cultural identification is once again present in the debate, challenging the notion that Russian speakers are more likely to be pro-Russian and anti-European, while Belarusian speakers support the democratic opposition. This group within the democratic movement is well represented by journalist Yuri Drakakhrust – intrigued by statistics, he has emphasised the fact that Russian is more spoken in urban areas, Minsk most notably, where the people are at the same point most critical towards the regime, and referred to the generally high use of Russian within the population (reaching more than 60 % in last several years, while Belarusian has remained around 30 % and speakers of *trasianka* declined to 20 %).¹³⁴ According to Drakakhrust, ignoring the numbers by the pro-democratic activists who usually try to prove Belarusian's European (synonymous for democratic) identity by disassociating Belarus from any Russian legacy is only harmful to the opposition movement and its sense of common ground. He claims that the Russian-speaking liberals are not too noticeable *"because it would be stupid to fight their linguistic preferences now that the regime is stifling the Belarusian language and culture, not Russian. But this is not to say that such a fight will not commence under the conditions of free society."*¹³⁵

Therefore, he warns from underestimating the linguistic divide within the opposition, and proposes to reject either linguistic community's monopoly on Belarusian nationalism in advance, so the scenario of the linguistic conflict of 1990s weakening the democratic potential would not repeat itself. There has been progress in

¹³³ Appendix: The Text of Charter Charter '97 in *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and implications for the West*, eds. Margarita M. Balmaceda, James I. Clem and Lisbeth, L. Tarlow (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 462-463.

¹³⁴ IISEPS, "Dinamika beloruskogo obshchestvonnogo mieniia," Public Opinion Survey, January 2015," <http://www.iiseps.org/?p=114>, accessed March 1, 2016.

¹³⁵ Yuri Drakakhrust, "Zhaneuskaia kanventsia dlia vainy kulturau," *Arche* 3 (2004), cited in Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, 85.

the matter of cooperation since 2000s, however, which first had to emerge from several vivid debates within the alternative community, when traditionally minded opposition assembled around the major alternative journals defended Belarusian as the proper language for the democrats. To illustrate the feelings of the other party, S. Alexievich who writes her novels in Russian added: “*The people from Arche and Nasha Niva do not represent Belarusian people. What they represent is their dream about Belarusian people.*”¹³⁶ In overall, the Russian speaking “liberals” and their supporters argue that the vision of Belarus as culturally related to Central and Western Europe cannot come at price of overlooking linguistic and cultural reality relating to the major part of the population. This rational, overarching approach sounds a lot like a representation of civic nationalism.

Another conception within the alternative identity discussion stems from the notion of civilisation divide in which Belarus occupies the “space in between”. Significant in this sense is work by Ihar Babkou (Bobkov) and his idea of Belarus as *borderlands* – unlike with the conception of Creole nationalism which is based on *tuteishasts* - a lack of higher national ambitions and resisting foreign influences - Babkou speaks about specific Belarusian heterogeneity created by mixing different cultural traditions, and absorbing them.¹³⁷ This transcultural character of the Belarusian identity has to be widely accepted instead of promoting one of the national projects, be it by the opposition, or by the government – only then the integrity and content of the Belarusian national identity can be guaranteed.¹³⁸ This approach, converted into a notion of Belarus being a “*bridge between the West and the East*”, never mind the historically high overuse of this term in other European regional discourses, has obtained a degree of praise among Belarusian stakeholders who find it crucial for the Belarusian identity, as former minister Vasil Lyavonu says, “*not to thump the chest, not to get into self-isolation, and not to oppose ourselves to either the West or the East.*”¹³⁹

In accordance with relativizing the viability of the ethnolinguistic project expressed by preceding authors, leading Belarusian philosopher V. Akudovich concludes that for the historical conditions (multilingualism, multiculturalism, multiconfessionalism), Belarus has no potential for being solely “*Belarusian, Russian,*

¹³⁶ Svetlana Alexievich cited in Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, 88.

¹³⁷ Ihar Babkou, *Etyka pamezzia, transkulturalizm iak Belaruski dosved.*” In *Antalogia suchasnaga belaruskaga myslennia*, ed. V. Akudovich and A. Antsypienka (St Petersburg: Nevskii Prostor, 2003), 68.

¹³⁸ Volakhava, “Aktuální alternativní koncepcie,” 118.

or Polish, Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, either pro-Western, or pro-Russian."¹⁴⁰ Therefore, instead of seeking reasons for the lack of interest in the traditional national project among the majority of Belarusians, the independent research should be focused on avoiding clash between two major visions alternative to the state ideology – that is the ethno-cultural nationalism vs. civic nationalism. Eventually, he expressed that in the “*God’s post-modern project*”¹⁴¹ that Belarus is, the only plausible solution would be to deconstruct the bureaucratic centre of the state and its national ideology, and persuade proponents of the ethnic nationalism to clear the way for civic nationalism similar to the USA or France.¹⁴²

This is by no means a complete overview of thoughts intending to define the conception of the (alternative) Belarusian identity and the role that alternative society should play in the future of Belarus. The debate is extraordinarily rich and complex, and various authors both in Belarus and abroad struggle to classify the opinions briefly framed above into categories. For instance, G. Ioffe focuses on the linguistic facet, differentiating three national projects – the Creole nationalism of the state, the traditional oppositional nativist/pro-European project, and so-called Muscovite liberals represented by Drakakhrust and other Russian-speaking opponents of the regime. N. Bekus, on the other hand, splits the idea of “alternative Belarusianness” into two approaches which are based on the notion of historical tradition and geopolitical location: Belarusians are either Europe, or an “in-between nation.”¹⁴³

However, this summary has not been in vain, quite the reverse – there can be tracked key trends present in the identity discussion throughout the last 10 years. Most of the cited alternative thinkers, no matter their background, to some extent mention decline and/or unsustainability of ethnic nationalism, and propose other options for national self-determination: Babkau’s bidding for embracing the transcultural identity can be read as “*an implicit appeal to synthesize the available national projects, perhaps under some civic nationalist umbrella.*”¹⁴⁴ Zaprudnik acknowledges the significance of

¹³⁹ Vasil Lyavonu, interview with Valer Bulhakau and Agnieszka Komorowska, *Belarus: Neither Europe, nor Russia*, eds. Valer Bulhakau, Agnieszka Komorowska (Warsaw: Batory Foundation, 2006), 127.

¹⁴⁰ Valiantsin Akudovich, *Kod adsutnasci* (Minsk: Logvinau, 2007), 130, cited in Volakhava, “Aktuální alternativní koncepce,” 120.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴² „Valentin Akudovich vyskazel mnenie o koncepcii formirovania beloruskoi nacji,” Naviny.by, November 14, 2010, http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2010/11/14/ic_news_116_355377, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁴³ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 204.

¹⁴⁴ Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, 100.

statehood (even if represented by Lukashenka) for the formation of national identity, thanks to which - with enough Western support - can the civil society thrive.¹⁴⁵ Akudovich puts forth a realisation that despite the nationalists, Russian (Eastern) culture and language as well as Polish (Western) ethnolinguistic presence will never be displaced in the area – in this constellation, it might be possible to overcome the lack of trust among Belarusians not only *via* civil nationalism, but also through the common use of English in the future.¹⁴⁶

So, the common thread present in the mentioned texts is the hope of overcoming the divide within the Belarusian society, most notably through the conception of civic nationalism. Moreover, Bekus claims that there is rather surprisingly a unifying symbol of Europe – even though there are different visions as to what place in the world should Belarus occupy, “*to realize the idea of Belarus as a cultural bridge between Russia and the West it has to move away from Russia and toward Europe to reach neutrality. Thus, ‘Europe’ becomes a symbol of alternative Belarusianness.*”¹⁴⁷

5 Belarus Free Theatre

The previous two chapters mapped the split within Belarusian society *via* diverse visions of Belarusian national identity – one by the state, and a number of intertwined conceptions present in the alternative discourse. Finally, let us have a look on where within this framework does the Belarus Free Theatre stand. Does the company mirror the elaborated debate of alternative intellectuals? Which ideas and national symbols resonate in the analysed verbatim plays?

5.1 Development and theatrical approaches in 2005-2015

Founded in March 2005 under the title Free Theatre (*Svabodny Teatr*), the project by journalist and playwright Nikolai Khalezin and his wife Natalia Kaliada, a writer and a theatre producer, was intended as a way to portray issues present in contemporary Belarus which were omitted by traditional dramaturgy in the state and local theatres. They reacted to the rigidity of drama in Belarus caused by the fact that all

¹⁴⁵ Zaprudnik, “In Search of National Identity...,” 122.

¹⁴⁶ Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus*, 100.

¹⁴⁷ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 197.

professional theatres¹⁴⁸ are owned by the state and/or under tight control of the Ministry of Culture which finances them. And, as Khalezin adds, the openings are always attended by a ministry official ensuring that nothing controversial is performed.¹⁴⁹ For these reasons, BFT has been never registered in Belarus as a theatre company.

The initial momentum for new theatre approaches promoted by the Free Theatre was provided through a playwright competition for new authors – 123 writers originating in nine countries (mostly from the post-Soviet space) took part, with 30 young authors from Belarus alone.¹⁵⁰ The competition aimed on collecting works of alternative authors continued to be held underground in Belarus from 2005-2010, and the first prize was awarded to the Russian playwright Viacheslav Durnenkov. The competition was renewed in 2014 in the United Kingdom together with a publication of winning pieces (in Russian and English language versions).¹⁵¹

Following this first success that revealed a vivid interest in alternative (unofficial) approaches to drama production in Belarus, the organisers decided to offer new opportunities to new thespians *via* creative workshops and classes promoting civil engagement side by side with novel artistic methods. For this purpose, international cultural representatives were contacted as soon as in 2005, including leading socially engaged theatrical figures such as Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard or Václav Havel. Foreign performers and experts were invited to share experience with the Belarusian students. This feature became a key element of majority of courses in the so-called Fortinbras laboratory, an underground arts school founded in 2008. The international factor has been present in the Free Theatre's activities ever since.

The company as such started to produce performances in May 2005, when Khalezin and Koliada were joined by experienced theatre director Vladimir Shcherban, then working at the National Theatre of Yanka Kupala. The Ministry of Culture prohibited to show a new play he produced at the National Theatre (*Psychosis 4.48* by Sarah Kane), and so he decided to contact the Free Theatre he had heard of before because to the playwright competition.¹⁵² They worked together not only on execution of *Psychosis 4.48* (*Psykhoz 4.48*) in 2005, but on every production since then. The

¹⁴⁸ By professional theatres, I mean registered companies that have a stage where they regularly perform, and generate income through their operations.

¹⁴⁹ Nikolai Khalezin, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, 235.

¹⁵¹ See Belarus Free Theatre, *Belarus Free Theatre: New Plays from Central Europe: The VII International Contest of Contemporary Drama* (London: Oberon Books, 2014).

British play subjectively dealing with a phenomenon of depression, self-harm, sexual identity and suicidal behaviour, whose message was further stressed when the author committed a suicide soon after completing the play (at 4.48 am as predicted in the title), was in the Belarusian context perceived as a text about personal liberation, Shcherban argues.¹⁵³

In the following years the effort to collect alternative authors under a single roof was supplemented with collecting stories. Before producing a play by a Russian playwright Natalia Mochina, *Techniques of Breathing in Confined Space (Tekhnika dychannia v bespavetranai prastory)* in 2006, Khalezin invited Belarusian authors to write about Belarusian cultural identity. The result, which comprised several short plays, came out under the title “*We. Self-Identification*” (*My. Samaidentifikatsyia*, 2005), and deconstructed the lofty national myths presented by the government and the opposition through a realistic depiction of construction workers’ earthbound, banal talks. Although the labourers did not debate politics, their lack of respect towards their work branded as of uttermost symbolic importance by the regime, their swearing and indifference, made for a play charged with politics. The production largely based on authentic conversations recorded by Pavel Rossolko at the National Library construction site toured to Moscow in 2006,¹⁵⁴ and it foreshadowed a later predominant use of verbatim technique by the Free Theatre.

Kaliada recently in one of her numerous interviews for the Western media commented on how the decision to further focus on authorial theatre was made: “*We made a list of the 16 taboo topics in Belarus, such as religion, World War II, political kidnappings, murders, death squads and so on. And we decided that every new show we made would constitute an ‘artistic explosion’ about these taboos.*”¹⁵⁵

This approach to the national issues expressed *via* the documentary drama further crystalized in a next play written in 2006 by Khalezin, about Khalezin: *Generation Jeans (Pakalenne Jeans)*, an immersive autobiographic account on an urge to fight for freedom, in this case represented by a symbol of denim cloth. Following this

¹⁵² Vladimir Shcherban, “Psychosis 4.48 or Coming Out of Vladimir Shcherban,” *Ministry of Counterculture*, June 16, 2015, <http://moc.media/ru/67>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*.

¹⁵⁴ Claire Bigg, “Belarus: Underground Troupe Brings Cutting-Edge Theater To Moscow,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, February 3, 2006, “<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1065395.html>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁵⁵ Carol Rocamora, “It’s all about the Execution in Belarus Free Theatre’s New ‘Trash Cuisine’ May 2015,” *American Theatre*, May 4 2015, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/05/04/its-all-about-the-execution-in-belarus-free-theatres-new-trash-cuisine/>, accessed January 1, 2016.

and other productions openly critical to the regime practices, Khalezin's plays were forbidden from performance in Belarusian theatres, regardless of their content.¹⁵⁶ However, as Khalezin says, censorship could be expected: "*The more important goal is to deal with auto-censorship, be it for fear or lack of funds.*"¹⁵⁷ The BFT reacted to the ban on Khalezin in that way that it has basically stopped producing not-original plays, and almost exclusively performs plays written or co-written by Khalezin.

After *Generation Jeans*, the documentary theatre shifted with *Being Harold Pinter* (*Bych Haraldam Pinteram*, 2006) – a performance based on early plays and a Nobel Prize acceptance speech by Harold Pinter, a leading British playwright in the field of socially engaged drama which has developed greatly in the UK since 1960s. The Free Theatre combined Pinter's focus on domestic violence and humiliation with the reality of state repression, claiming that a cruelty present in a family is not far from the state violence, since both of those root in the lack of mutual understanding and tolerance. Or, looking back at the divide within the Belarusian society and its narratives, it can be understood as a communication barrier that might be intentionally created by the regime enforcing its power. The barrier becomes real in a powerful and iconic moment of the play iconic for the whole Free Theatre when characters are trapped under a plastic sheet, suffocating and powerless, facing the abstract violence.¹⁵⁸

Zone of Silence (*Zona mauchannia*) and *Discover Love* (*Spastsihaiuchy kakhanne*, 2008), two performances of 2008 closely following the methods of documentary drama, are analysed below. Both of them deal with taboos and violence in contemporary Belarus, which is an imprint characteristic for essentially all the BFT's productions.

During the 2011-2015 period when the founders worked from exile in London (see below), the BFT reinforced its position as an activist theatre with several more productions – *Minsk 2011: A Reply to Kathy Acker* (*Minsk 2011: List da Kechi Aker*, 2011) reimagining a punk story *New York '79* in contemporary Minsk filled the mood of the failed anti-regime protests and the government tabooing sexuality, *King Lear* (*Karol Lir*, 2012) performed in Belarusian, *Merry Christmas, Ms. Meadows* (*Shchaslivaha Rastva, Mis Midaus*, 2013), challenging the role of gender and identity, *Trash Cuisine*

¹⁵⁶ Elphick, *Belarus Free Theatre*, 114.

¹⁵⁷ Nikolai Khalezin, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015

¹⁵⁸ See Ben Bratley, "Political Theater, Brought to You by the Politically Powerless," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/07/theater/reviews/07pinter.html?_r=0, accessed January 1, 2016.

(*Piakelnaiia kuchnia*, 2013) spectacularly confronting the capital punishment in Belarus and elsewhere in the world on the background of international culinary show, *Price of Money* (2014), another show casting international actors, dealing with facets of capitalism, *Red Forest (Chyrvony les)*, 2014), a production inspired by a story of the Chernobyl disaster supplemented with other ecologic issues in the contemporary world, and the most recent play, a verbatim testimony of three jailed Belarusian activists, *Time of Women (Chas zhanchyn)*, 2015). The traditional performances were now and then alternated with international campaigns such as *Give a Body Back*¹⁵⁹ or protests against the Ice Hockey World Championship 2014 in Minsk.

Meanwhile, the officials in Belarus shut down the famous hut (*hatka*) – a wooden house on the outskirts of Minsk where BFT found shelter for performing, rehearsing and organizing workshops in 2007-2013, making those who stayed in Belarus a travelling band again.¹⁶⁰ Let us have a brief look at other regime's actions against BFT and how they are reflected in the BFT's cultural production.

5.2 State pressure and the BFT's role within the alternative society

Performed first at the Graffiti bar in Minsk (after being refused at 27 other venues), *Psychosis 4.48* not only initiated the artistic collaboration, but drew the regime's attention as well. As the case of the first play performed implicate, contemporary playwrights preferred by the Free Theatre as well as authorial production cover topics tabooed in Belarus, such as suicides, forced disappearances, or the LGBT community. Therefore, the Ministry of Culture which is responsible for monitoring theatres¹⁶¹ has not allowed the Free Theatre to register as a drama company and to act on a legal basis.

¹⁵⁹ *I.e.* a flash mob being performed in London and other Western capitals by the BFT members who act as dead bodies lying on squares, covered with sanitary sheets. The intention is to draw international attention to the case of Vladislav Kovalyov and Dmitry Konovalov who were sentenced to death for alleged responsibility for the Minsk metro bombings in 2013, and promptly executed. Kovalyov's mother opposes the verdict, starting a petition for abolishing the capital punishment in Belarus. Meanwhile, she is unsuccessfully trying to persuade the security forces give her her son's body so it can be buried according to her wish.

¹⁶⁰ Tania Arcimovich, "Hatka: Znaistsi svoi insaid," *pARTisan 26* (2014), partisanmag.by, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁶¹ In the highly bureaucratic Belarusian system, theatres are state-owned, state-financed and linked to the professional education, thus minimizing a potential for innovation and natural development. See for example Brendan McCall, "Entretiens: Art, mensonges et vérité dans le Bélarus contemporain," *Revue sur l'Est*, February 6, 2016, <http://www.regard-est.com>, accessed March 1 2016.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Shcherban was dismissed from the artistic director position at the Yanka Kupala National Theatre most probably because of his association with the Free Theatre. While functioning unofficially in the Minsk underground, the troupe quickly grew its audience despite hurdles one has to experience to visit any of the performances. To avoid the regime repression as much as possible, anyone interested typically calls a phone number to reserve a seat, then he or she receives a text of a meeting place one day ahead of the performance, and from there he or she is accompanied to the actual staging place – usually a private apartment of one of the supporters. For the limited performing space and small although popular productions, the factual impact of the theatre activities in Belarus can be a subject to discussions.

Since the theatre officially does not exist, it cannot charge any entrance fee, or they would be a subject to a prison sentence. Audience members are asked to bring their passports in case of a police raid, and for the same purpose, there should be always a bottle of wine present – to prove that the assembly is not a theatre performance, but just a wedding party. The company has, as Natalia Kaliada mentioned in an interview with a theatre critic Ben Bartley, borrowed the ruse from the dissident era of the former Czechoslovak and Czech president Václav Havel.¹⁶² It was not helpful enough, however, in August 2007 (several weeks after some of the Free Theatre members met Havel at his cottage in the Czech Republic) during a production of Edward Bond's *Eleven Vests*, “a portrait of rebellion against institutional authority.”¹⁶³ Actors and audience members alike were arrested by a heavy-armed police squad and held for several hours in a detention – a scene which at first could be (and was) easily taken for a part of the performance.

At the same time when the repressions intensified, the state and its media subsystem (to use the Manaev's words)¹⁶⁴ kept silent concerning the Free Theatre activities. The theatre soon became well known among the Belarusian opposition and the international theatrical community,¹⁶⁵ but the official outlets ignored the fact – after all, legally speaking, the company did not exist, so there was nothing to write about. In between 2005 and 2015, there has not been a single mention of the Free Theater in the major state-owned newspapers *Zviazda* (in Belarusian) and *Sovetskaia Belarussia* –

¹⁶² Ben Bratley, “Banned in Belarus, but the Shows Go On,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/07/theater/reviews/07pinter.html?_r=0, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁶³ Bratley, “Banned in Belarus.”

¹⁶⁴ Manaev, “Media in Post-Soviet Belarus,” 222.

¹⁶⁵ Tania Artsimovich, “Kryly Khalopa”, 12.

Belarus Segodnia (in Russian).¹⁶⁶ The Russia-oriented tabloid *Komsomolskaia Pravda* mentioned the Free Theatre in its cultural column twice – the first article talked about the playwright competition in 2005, before the theatre activities became explicit, and the second one came out under the title “*Samantha from the ‘Sex and the City’ Wants to Go to Belarus*”. It described the support that the British actors expressed for the Free theatre and observance of human rights in Belarus – however, the original message shrank to the slogan “*Zhivie Belarus*” (Long live Belarus) shouted by the actors and a respect for suffering through the World War II in Belarus mentioned by one of them.¹⁶⁷

The key turning point for the company development became in December 2010, when founders of the Free Theatre were forced into the exile for their allegiance to mass demonstrations against the declared presidential election results. The protest was violently suppressed, with several oppositional presidential candidates injured and more than 600 people arrested, including Andrei Sannikau whose candidacy was supported by the prominent members of the troupe. Despite the sudden change of plans, Khalezin, Kaliada, and Shcherban managed to take advantage of their artistic ties with Tom Stoppard, and met with Jude Law, Siena Miller, Kevin Spacey and other British actors who helped them obtain political asylum in 2011. With support of the thespians who according to leaked information later that year appeared on a Belarus “blacklist” of artists banned to perform in Belarus, the company now known under the name Belarus Free Theatre continued to write, and perform both in Belarus and abroad, its members remaining in close touch due to the modern technologies and an ability of travel rather freely out of Belarus.

The Lukashenka’s regime’s approach remained similarly ambiguous (that is harassment and official silence) throughout the whole 2005-2015 period, and, as Clare Robertson, the theatre’s general manager and producer based in London told me in an interview, the Belarus Free Theatre’s activities abroad are closely observed by the regime. It responded to them in a way similar to the arrest after the visit at Havel’s in 2007: “*Whenever we have a large event and get more attention in the United Kingdom or elsewhere, we usually get reports from the company members in Belarus that the police is tightening its grip.*”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Sb.by, Zviazda.by, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁶⁷ Olga Shestakova, “Samanta iz ‘Seksa v bolshom gorode’ chochet v Belarus,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, April 4, 2008, <http://www.kp.by/daily/24074/310993>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁶⁸ Clare Robertson, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

The situation when a part of the company operates in the UK and part in Belarus, for which the exiled founders call the Belarus Free Theatre a “*two-headed beast*”¹⁶⁹ brings on several questions I dare not to try to answer with this paper, such as whether the exile diminishes, or empowers the capability to influence the non-democratic regime *via* alternative culture. However, relevant for this research is a matter of artistic approach and a narrative it conveys. Even though the plays are still the same and none are produced specially for the foreign audience, the societal role of the occasional performances, festivals, campaigns and discussions abroad differs from half-secret theatre meetings in Belarus.

As Kaliada’s PR appearances on stages across Europe and in the USA, and her perpetual activities through social sites confirm, the crucial goal is to raise awareness about what the company brands as “the last dictatorship in Europe” and other human rights infringements globally. As well as to raise money – Belarus Free Theatre depends on donations which come usually from the artistic and Belarusian émigré community, a list of supporters that BFT calls “Blacklist.” Other financial resources have been acquired through foreign grants and foundations, an association with famous British thespians has indeed helped in that matter.¹⁷⁰

Concerning the PR and pressure to Western politicians through culture, Kaliada bluntly said in a November interview: “*What is enough for Western democracies in order for them to start paying attention to? It is not enough to be killed anymore.*”¹⁷¹ If we take into consideration a notion present in the current British verbatim theatre discourse, that is that “*cultural diplomacy is not restricted to nation states. NGOs and other non-state players have conducted cultural diplomacy and even theatre diplomacy*”¹⁷², the Belarus Free Theatre can be seen as an example of (“counter”) cultural diplomacy, offering a detailed picture of (alternative) Belarus abroad, which competes the image based on the national ideology ventilated through the official state diplomatic channels.

But how to assess the importance of performing in Belarus, within the regime they are critical to, at half-hidden venues? Borrowing the Dennis C. Beck’s analysis of authorial alternative theatre in socialist Czechoslovakia, it can be noted that open,

¹⁶⁹ Khalezin, Nikolai, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015

¹⁷⁰ Clare Robertson, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

¹⁷¹ Natalia Kaliada interview by Verity Healey, <http://moc.media/ru/261>

¹⁷² Nicolas J. Cull, *Black Watch: Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy* (Los Angeles: California State University, 2007), 12.

collective creation (such as the BFT's Fortinbras laboratory) has a therapeutic effect, its contained space "*offering individuals a lived sense of civil society.*"¹⁷³ Therefore, the importance does not lie in the message embedded within the plays and agitating the audience as much as in the whole social experience that actually matters. Moreover, the BFT's productions strengthen this impact by adding food and discussion after their performances, with meetings often exceeding to vivid conversations to early morning hours. To put it simply, the theatre goers know that they are not alone. According to Beck, it was the Czechoslovak authorial theatre that envisioned "*freedom, solidarity, democracy, and national identity that the isolated dissidents' works could not match, and in this lay its attractive power as well as its ability to reach and affect large numbers of people.*"¹⁷⁴ Although the Minsk underground case does not allow reaching a dramatic part of the general population, the principle of pointing out shared traumas and conveying and humanizing marginal oppositional thoughts to broad audience, thus overcoming the divides within the alternatives conceptions of national identity, is equally present.

The term of "activist theatre" was used in the previous paragraph on purpose – as Khalezin said: "Political theatre does not thrill us. It is a term employed by journalists—in fact, we don't declare any political idea. We just claim that people doing theatre should be able to pursue a freedom in art and their own moral integrity."¹⁷⁵ However, relating to the context in which documentary theatre method is mostly discussed, any verbatim theatre re-enacting statements of public figures should be considered as political – or, in a more radical sense expressed Steve Waters, any drama troupe performing in a "world that increasingly seems to get by without theatre" makes a political statement just by its sheer existence.¹⁷⁶

At the same time, the artistic method developed by the Belarus Free Theatre at the Fortinbras laboratory, and labelled as "total immersion" operates within a framework of verbatim theatre, empowered by the personal investment of the company members. As the authors state, one of the foundations of the theatrical approach is to "*work with documentary material when the carrier of the initial information is the student himself. During the work cycle, he develops various role models: a journalist,*

¹⁷³ Beck, "Gray Zone", 96.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁷⁵ Khalezin, Nikolai, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

¹⁷⁶ Waters, "Political Playwriting: The Art of Thinking in Public," *Topoi* 30 (2011), 138.

researcher, playwright, actor, artist, director.”¹⁷⁷ In practice, that means that actors listen to the stories from their life or vicinity, and collect them in a similar manner like Rossolko secretly did at the construction site to gather the material for *We. Self-identification*. In addition, for the level of communication and sharing within the alternative Belarusian community, the people portrayed as characters sometimes come and see the performances in person¹⁷⁸ – a case which is rare in the Western verbatim pieces dealing with public affairs.

Another peculiarity of the BFT which diverges from the mainstream productions of verbatim theatre is the fact that the BFT not only represent the community,¹⁷⁹ but they are a part of it. That is because (1) according to the conception of total immersion, the actors often tell stories of their own lives and (2) the alternative culture in Belarus is on personal level closely connected (if not identical) with the political opposition to the Lukashenka’s power. The stories they record and perform concerning for example imprisonment are usually personally relevant to the theatre members and audience as well.

The technical advancement, crucial for the development of verbatim theatre in general, has been of particular importance to the BFT. After the forced exile, Kaliada, Khalezin and Shcherban direct the productions in Belarus *via* Skype, and every performance starts with them greeting the audience through a videoconference. Verbatim records and videos are often heard and seen during their performances, and in an attempt to raise awareness about alternative culture worldwide, they have their presence to new platform. BFT launched a webpage called Ministry of Counterculture (in Russian and English) in early 2015. It should serve as a forum for sharing ideas and documents for and from socially engaged artists.¹⁸⁰ However, the webpage was hacked in May 2015, its content erased and disabled for several days by unknown attackers.¹⁸¹

5.3 An analysis of BFT’s productions

In the following section, five plays are analysed with regard to the BFT’s reflection of the official state ideology and practices and the troupe’s account on the

¹⁷⁷ “Total Immersion,” <http://moc.media/ru/total-immersion/6>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁷⁸ Like Irina Khalip and Irina Krasovskaya from the *Time of Women* and *Discover Love* (pieces discussed below) who attended the November 2015 performances in London.

¹⁷⁹ According to the Paget’s conception.

¹⁸⁰ “Ministry of Counterculture,” <http://moc.media/>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁸¹ The BFT associates them with the Lukashenka’s regime.

national identity discussion. For this purpose, the productions of *Generation Jeans*, *Discover Love*, *Zone of Silence*, *Time of Women* and *King Lear* were chosen. First four authorial plays represent the most clearly the verbatim theatre technique in terms described by Hammond and Steward, thus they are than more accessible for a study than more experimental performances by the BFT – plus, their whole cast is Belarusian, primarily dealing with Belarusian specifics. *King Lear* is an exception – its importance for further study doesn't lie in the text itself, but in the fact that as the only BFT's play, it is performed in Belarusian.

All other productions are in Russian, or, as the later international shows show (*Trash Cuisine*, *Price of Money*, *Red Forest*), in English and/or Russian. Robertson concludes that the choice of languages is largely pragmatic, to reach a broad audience. However, the choice made for *King Lear* was artistic and political, since the use of Belarusian served “*as a symbol of national rebellion – the production was created as part of the Cultural Olympiad and our inclusion, representing Belarus, was in itself a challenge to the Belarusian government.*”¹⁸²

5.3.1 King Lear

The play was first showed at the Globe to Globe festival in 2012, which required Shakespearean plays performed in national languages – a fact that, for understandable reasons, became an issue in the Belarusian case. Even though a great part of the invited performers were major established (and registered, for that matter) theatres in respective countries, and although the traditional state-owned National Theatre of Yanka Kupala regularly performs in Belarusian, BFT was picked as a representative of the Belarusian culture instead. After the 2015 rerun, Kaliada remembered a moment when the troupe was asked to perform in Russian to reach bigger audience, and replied intricately: “*No way!*”¹⁸³ The company refused to play in Russian on the premise of performing *King Lear* in national language, and as a reflection of national strife in Belarus and other current topics they are familiar with, an artistic objective they try to fulfil in all their productions.

The result diverges from the Shakespeare's original textually at some point – such as when opening moments of the performance refer to the national myth of the Great Patriotic War. Edmund, a young illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester, is

¹⁸² Clare Robertson, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

forced by his father to write and recite a simple “poem” commemorating the Gloucester’s role in the Victory Day: “*For all your pain and all your scars, we are grateful, veterans.*”¹⁸⁴ Both Gloucester on wheelchair and his brother in arms Kent are depicted as disabled war veterans, whose presence is crucial for the ruler since they “*metaphorically enable the existence of the state and all its members through the ongoing investment of their own bodily wholeness.*”¹⁸⁵ The emphasis on the role of the World War II for regime legitimacy remains in various artistic expressions throughout the performance. Similarly to the Belarusian reality, constant repetition of the war theme is present – later in the performance, Edmund is brutally kidnapped, handcuffed and made to recite the poem again by his father, while expressing thanks to veterans for his good life.

The actor of King Lear himself, Aleh Sidorchik, offers a rather uncommon picture of the ruler – instead of being a man getting mad, he is revealed as a jovial prankster and tyrant at the same time. He is not presented as old – rather, he is a middle-aged man unable to grasp reality. Although it is not a simple caricature, King Lear intentionally shares some characteristics with Lukashenka, as it was generally expected upon the BFT’s choice.¹⁸⁶ One of his daughters during a false flattering song address him as *batka* or father, a term commonly used to refer to the president by his supporters. *A propos*, singing is a key segment of the show, using the stage to revive national Belarusian traditions, choirs and costumes.

When his youngest daughter Cordelia does not praise King Lear and the whole country, resulting in her banishment, the BFT’s Lear is not broken – instead, he threatens with an iron gauntlet he is wearing, a symbol of power. At one point in the play, he is stripped of it by mundane, bored officials who fill in a record of arrest, listing the gauntlet among other confiscated items of the prisoners, and making fun of it whilst trying to wear it – metaphorically switching power positions just for the sake of it.

¹⁸³ Natalia Kaliada, interview by Georgie Weedon, recorded after King Lear, London, November 11, 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Translated by the author from *Za vashu bol, za vashi rany, my udziatshnyia, viterany.*

¹⁸⁵ Natalia Khomenko, “Shakespeare’s Shadow: The Belarus Free Theatre’s King Lear at the Globe Theatre,” *The MIT Global Shakespeare’s Video & Performance Archive*. August 17, 2005, <http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/blog/2015/08/17/shakespeares-shadow-the-belarus-free-theatres-king-lear-at-the-globe-theatre/>, accessed January 1, 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Keren Zaiontz, “The Right to the Theatre: The Belarus Free Theatre’s King Lear,” in *Shakespeare beyond English: Global Experiment*, eds. Susan Bennett and Christie Carson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196-197.

The reminder of the KGB procedure and the state violence, well fitting into the theme of cruelty present in the original play, is further elaborated with an expressive execution of Cordelia by the officials' hands. Pointing out ferocity of capital punishment is then alternated with the regime's attempts to make sense of death of the prisoner, forging its record– *“we see the interrogators, galvanized into action by the appearance of their superior, (...) creating a document that links the captives to public unrest, terrorist threat, and economic sanctions.”*¹⁸⁷ BFT simply transplants practices witnessed in Belarus, and the London audience largely accepts and understands the irony.¹⁸⁸

From a broader perspective, the BFT's reimagined King Lear can be perceived as an innovative take on the experience with politically motivated Shakespearean pieces in the USSR. Especially after the 1973 death of Grigori Kozintsev, a theatre and film director who used his adaptations of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to convey ideas of individuality and humanity (through characters forced to confront a system of repression and ferociousness),¹⁸⁹ Shakespearean plays were often simplified as either socially conservative moralities performed by the Soviet state and regional theatres, or as an “innocent” space for hidden messages.¹⁹⁰ The BFT managed to take advantage of the history of Shakespearean performances in the region, reframe it, and highlight the Belarusian national tradition at the same time.¹⁹¹

5.3.2 Generation Jeans

An autobiographic monologue performed by Nikolai Khalezin employs simple, personalized means to narrate a story of growing up while longing for freedom - a story experienced across time and space. The play opens up with an anecdotic description of a “grey” flea market in Vilnius where young Belarusians went to buy real jeans since fake jeans *“look like jeans, but aren't jeans. Just like Lithuania at that time, sort of homeland, sort of foreign country.”* Then he waves a Lithuanian flag. A nostalgic and humorous description of Lithuanians wearing several layers of denim jackets and jean

¹⁸⁷ Khomenko, “Shakespeare's Shadow.”

¹⁸⁸ It should be noted, however, that there were many Belarusian audience members at the November production.

¹⁸⁹ Zdeněk Stříbrný, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) I should be added that the Kozintsev's conception of „grey-haired rebel who accuses injustice and demands that the world change or cease.“ (ibid.) offers a substantially different image of King Lear than the tyrant beaten by the ill-fate of the BFT's.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 115.

pants to sell them to strangers on a street (while chewing on pickles not to look suspicious), offers a positive memory in a same way that the traditional national narrative remembers the Lithuanian heritage.

Minsk in the 70s and 80s offer a different and drabber picture, however (*“There was no flea market in Minsk. Therefore, everything was different.”*). In the next scene, Khalezin reenacts his first interrogation by secret police conducted because of young Khalezin trading four pairs of jeans. Switching between the roles of officers and young Khalezin, he offers the audience a detailed manual on how one should behave in that case (like in *“At this point your face would have to blaze up with righteous anger that meant you cared more about your country than whether those arseholes would return your stuff.”*). The practical advices how to behave when facing the regime’s repression remain further engrained in the Khalezin’s story skipping to the 1994 with the storyteller’s dilemma what to do with his life.

With nearly naïve simplicity, he explains how he decided to become an activist, using the same recurring motif: “Dictators don’t like jeans. They like dark suits and military jackets. (...) Politicians don’t wear jeans, jeans are worn by freedom fighters. (...) I don’t like suits, that’s why my place came to be on the barricades.” As well as in prison, after he was arrested after a peaceful protest in 1998 as the following chapter of his narration reveal. The main lesson taken from that is, again, simple: “Jeans were meant for freedom. It’s a nonsense to wear them in jail.”

A lightened portrayal of the prison conditions, practices, and friendships told as if the narrator shared his personal experience as a useful piece of advice for the theatre goers (potentially getting detained at some point of their lives) is interrupted near the end of the spectacle with another memory. Khalezin talks about his friend whom he never met. Consequently, the friend is introduced as Jan Palach who committed self-immolation to protest the widespread apathy following the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia – at the time of the event, Khalezin was 5 years old, eating a breakfast. Through Palach’s intimately and respectfully paraphrased story, Khalezin explains his own life motivations: *“Burning his body, he [Palach] sent his spirit free. (...) The spirit that had the strength to inspire a new generation to fight for freedom.”*

Khalezin concludes that Palach and other personalities he calls a “jeans generation” are *“the people of freedom. They don’t belong to a certain group or race or*

¹⁹¹ King Lear, by William Shakespeare, directed by Vladimir Shcherban, Young Vic Theatre (performed at a secret location), London, November 11, 2015.

class.” Throughout the performance, various flags emerge in his hands as the story evolves – first the Lithuanian, then the British and American flags altogether, later the Czechoslovak, the Polish one after that, and eventually, the white-and-red Belarusian flag appear. But they are arched over by a flag made of jeans – recalling a history of the 2006 after-election protests that were labelled as denim or jeans revolution. During that event, a member of the Belarusian youth movement *Zubr* replaced a torn white-and-red flag with his denim shirt.

Both the quoted text, symbolic use of the national flags, and small pieces of denim fabric (which are handed to the audience members at the end of the performance) let out a powerful message concerning the Belarusian alternative movements. The idea of freedom is not solely national - the jeans are all-embracing. Thus, through the *Generation Jeans*, BFT has become an unmistakable representation of those voices calling for inclusive, unified, democratic opposition disregarding the strictly nationalist vector within the alternative conceptions of national identity.¹⁹²

5.3.3 Time of Women

The theme of imprisonment is likewise present in the newest of the BFT’s plays, *Time of Women*. A piece co-written by Kaliada and Khalezin retell the story of detained journalists and activists Natalia Radin, Nasta Palazhanka and Irina Khalip, who is a wife of the oppositional presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau. The plot revolves around events following the mass demonstrations in December 2010, starting with an actual voice record of Irina’s arrest when she was on her way to visit Sannikau, who was lying injured in a hospital after the protest crackdown by the security forces. This piece of original material used well within the intentions of verbatim theatre innovations seemed to give a strong impression to the London audience.

Conversations of the three friends trying to retain their mental composure in a small prison cell, wondering for how many years they are going to be sentenced follow. But for the aim of this study, a character of the KGB officer Orlov is specifically relevant. During half-comical interrogations using different realistic methods how to persuade each woman to cooperate with the secret police, while casually sipping instant noodles, his personality is not presented to be simply evil or dangerous. Instead, he is a

¹⁹² *Generation Jeans*, by Nikolai Khalezin, directed by Vladimir Shcherban, Young Vic Theatre (performed at a secret location), London, November 5, 2015.

characteristic product of the system, repeating the tediously same arguments that the regime's proponents use.¹⁹³

First of all, he blames the oppositional presidential candidates (namely Sannikau and Shuskevich) for provoking social disorder – in this narrative, they alone are responsible for consequential arrests: *“I didn't bring you to the square, they did! They made sure you'd be thrown in a prison!”* When Natalia asks Orlov whether he likes his job, his answer is: *“Yes, of course, because the state needs it. There is no need for yours,¹⁹⁴ but there is one for mine. (...) That's why we are different.”*

His personal motivation to support the state doctrine is further illuminated when he repeatedly mentions his material unease. Orlov revokes his concerns for a lack of food when he was a child, and in one line he excuses his previous rage through economic unease: *“You fucking revolutionaries are getting American grants, and I don't have money to buy a coat my wife sent me for.”* The guilt for the economic hardships transposed to the topic of alleged Western influence fits perfectly into the Lukashenka's political exploitation of the national ideology.

The popular notion, usually presented by silent Lukashenka's supporters, concerning the supposed nonsensicality of the opposition movement is summed up when Orlov talks to Irina: *“You have a very biased perspective, Irina: you are good, we are bad. You are for the people, we are against. Yet, we've kept the country in order for two decades.”* Eventually threatening, he compares the situation of the alternative activists with the USSR: *“You believe you are smart, modern, technological. And in fact, (...) you are like Soviet dissidents – you can't beat the system.”* From this viewpoint, it is better to side with the winner – the regime.

Due to these mentions on the background of the plot, we can observe not only the mind games that the KGB play, but more notably the characteristic ideological debate between the regime proponents and the opposition. In this framework, Orlov serves as a clear physical expression of *tuteishasts* – a person that follows the Lukashenka's lead for material reasons, at the same point intentionally downplaying the role of alternative ideas and their capability to succeed. While his appearance in the play is still documentary, based on real interviews with the detained women, his humane depiction, the dramaturgic choice of words and focus on his arguments show more than a random KGB officer – Orlov stands as a representation of a whole segment of the

¹⁹³ As described in the second chapter.

¹⁹⁴ She works as a journalist.

Belarusian society that feels linked to the regime's ideology and is personally invested in its success.¹⁹⁵

5.3.4 Discover Love

Discover Love, a piece tackling an issue of forced disappearances, is based on a personal story of Irina Krasovskaya, whose husband Anatoly (together with his friend, politician Victor Gonchar) was kidnapped in 1999, and hasn't been heard of since then.

Similarly to other verbatim plays analysed here, *Discover Love* opens up with a description of growing up in the USSR. Maryna Yurevich playing Irina re-enacts her relationship with her grandmother, who refused a black and white vision of the world offered by the communist leaderships ("*Her world was colourful like a patchwork quilt.*"), and claims that childhood forms one's opinions forever. Irina adds her experience with radio, waking up every morning at 6 am with the Soviet anthem on air: "*Hatred for the Soviet anthem has been ingrained in my mind ever since.*" On the other hand, thanks to evening bedtime stories narrated in Belarusian, she felt, in her own words, peace and tranquillity for which "*the Belarusian language has had a home in my heart forever.*"

The major part of the play centres on a love story of her and "Tolya" (performed by Sidorchik). As with other BFT's productions, props on stage are minimal but visually effective, such as a bed, with its quilts being changed several times throughout the play to demark different phases in Irina's life, or scattered oranges that are later smashed by the masked representative of the state violence. As the action unwraps, Tolya is portrayed both as an Irina's partner and a teacher, with her quoting some of his words relevant both for their marriage and the society as a whole (among other things: "*Nobody has the right to command others or be their master. (...) There is only the common desire to be together.*"). Later on, she concludes the story of their shared lives by stating that finally, she was happy.

"*And then I was killed,*" Tolya replies.

At this point, the play ventures beyond a strict reproduction of facts characteristic for verbatim theatre – Irina's authentic description of her hopeless search for Tolya is altered with his (unproved) detailed account on of how he was (supposedly) murdered. However, as Katherine Elphick notes in her study on the BFT's power

¹⁹⁵ Time of Women, by Nikolai Khalezin and Natalia Kaliada, directed by Vladimir Shcherban, Young Vic Theatre (performed at a secret location), London, November 10, 2015.

struggle with the regime, the Tolya's testimony is well-founded in the play, functioning as a representation of all people silenced by the regime through their death – those that cannot be interviewed anymore. She explains: “*His telling illuminates information hidden by the state, and his representation in the act of performance gives him agency beyond his death by filling a void of information on his disappearance with a story that reveals the violence performed by the state.*”¹⁹⁶

Like in *Generation Jeans*, the local Belarusian experience is interrupted with a memory of a similar case somewhere else at a different time. In *Discover Love*, the story of the Polish priest Jerzy Popiełuszko is revived – after branding him as a “freedom fighter”, the actors give a detailed description of how the Polish communist secret police beat him to death in 1984. A prayer follows.

The play closes with a citation from the 2005 draft for the United Nations' Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, while related portraits of missing people are screened. Yurevich walks on the stage telling numbers and names of various countries, explaining that “*we are not talking about the number of tourists visiting those countries.*” The reminder of hundreds of thousands of people kidnapped worldwide sets the Belarusian experience within a global scale – an attitude which is even more present in the later BFT's plays such as *Trash Cuisine*, *Price of Money*, or *Red Forest*.¹⁹⁷

5.3.5 Zone of Silence

The longest of the plays elaborated in my study, “a *modern Belarusian epic*” about everyday realities in Minsk, is composed of three parts: *Childhood Legends*, in which the actors perform stories of their own past, *Diverse* for which they were asked to collect untraditional personal stories from the streets of Minsk, and *Numbers*, which are basically statistics being performed in short sketches.

The *Childhood* part offers stories of casual tyranny present in the Belarusian society – such as from the hands of teachers. Yurevich talks about her dancing class trainer, whose harassment she finally learned to resist – only to be subjected to a bureaucratic revenge when the trainer's husband asked her “*only one last question*” during her *choreography* exam: “*What did Plato write in his 'Laws'?*”

¹⁹⁶ Elphick, *The Belarus Free Theatre*, 121.

¹⁹⁷ *Discover Love*, by Nikolai Khalezin, directed by Vladimir Shcherban, Young Vic Theatre (performed at a secret location), London, November 6, 2015.

The theme of suicides, recurring throughout the BFT's work, being a complete taboo in Belarus, is present in a story by Yana Rusakevich, who took pills as an adolescent, and was saved by her parents. The both topics, violence and suicides, are joined into one in Sidorchik's telling of his relation with his son, transcending into a story of how the child hanged himself on the belt that his stepfather used to punish him with, so he would avoid further beating and humiliation.

Diverse portrays persons from margins of the society and their tales performed by artists who spoke to them. The outcasts' true faces are eventually revealed through a screening of the collected video materials. The first two characters, an armless guitarist called Zhukov and a black gay called Marat, give a secondhanded testimony of an unfair system of orphanages, mental hospitals and other institutions meant to take care of the population.

Then, a lady dressed all in red appears on stage with a Soviet marching band – the audience gets acknowledged that it is Kalantai, an elderly woman wholly dedicated to the Communist party, promoting the ideology whenever she can with an intention help the young generation. Her personality is an exact manifestation of “Soviet Belarusian” and an explanation of the nostalgia for the Soviet times, which is strongly present even when she comments on the account of the Belarusian national history: *“Whatever they say about Stalin, thanks to Stalin we began to stand firmly on our feet.”* As it is revealed *via* her speech, her concerns are primarily related to children. *“Today kids are under stress,” she says.* The lady has fond memories of her upbringing at a children's home, which allowed her to meet children from the whole union that were sent to a camp in Urals: *“We had all nations there – we lived so harmoniously.”* Admiring Lenin, her desire is to obtain his portrait painted when he was little – because Belarusians would not exist if it were not for him. She concludes her feelings: *“it was a good life. I didn't have to have to think about anything like you do. You have to think about everything these days!”* The Soviet times sound like a good alternative to the complicated modern society.

The final chapter of the production titled *Numbers* takes up a challenge of expressing (through bodies) otherwise cold statistics that state the state of the Belarusian state. For that purpose, usually simple props are used, which start to make sense at the instant when a due number is screened – such as when three men on the stage have potatoes put in their mouth like muzzles, and the screen states that Belarus occupies the 157th position in the media freedom in the world.

A girl that can't dance because of a heavy military boot enclosing her foot is accompanied with information that one third of Belarusians lost their lives in the World War II, and that about 1.5 million suffered repressions in course the Stalinism.

Potatoes, symptomatic Belarusian commodity, are again used to physically show a level mortality and a decline of population (*"By 2050, the current population of Belarus will decrease by 28.2 % to 6.96 million people."*). The potatoes are symbolically sorted out and a thrown into two bins. A story from October 2006 when 242 Belarusian cows broke the electric fence, swam over the Bug River and illegally crossed the Polish border is revived by the female actors, followed by a message that about 40 % of the adult population, 70 % of young people and 85 % of students expressed an intention to emigrate.

I have described just a small segment of statistics included in this section of the play – however, the performance closes with a scene of uttermost significance for the questions of identity. While the actors sing and play, names of characters of Belarusian origin flash out on the screen. It is important to notice that they range from émigrés (Isaak Asimov, Shimon Peres) to Soviet locals (Andrei Gromyko, Felix Dzerzhinsky), from actors (Harrison Ford, Kirk Douglas) to scientists (Boris Kit, Józef Kowalewski), from Russian speakers (Svetlana Alexievich) to characters crucial for the Polish self-identification (Adam Mickiewicz), to name a few. The inclusion of a broad scale of characters bearing various heritages seems like a statement – of course, it has an informative sense, but it also puts all people sharing the same roots on the same level. No matter which ideological group they belong or which nationhood they identify with (or are identified with), simply having direct relation to the Belarusian space justifies their appearance on the list.¹⁹⁸

5.4 Conclusions of the productions analysis

Throughout all five plays, we can observe few red threats coiling.

Firstly, BFT clearly expresses its negative relation to the structure of power in the Belarusian state. Lukashenka is seen a rather comical figure, subject to voice impressions in several of the BFT's plays.¹⁹⁹ However, although it initially might not

¹⁹⁸ *Zone of Silence*, by Nikolai Khalezin, directed by Vladimir Shcherban, Young Vic Theatre (performed at a secret location), London, November 7, 2015.

¹⁹⁹ BFT takes advantage of his covered voice and broken language skills which are easily recognisable in *King Lear* or *Price of Money*, for example.

seem so, the criticism of the regime, its use of violence and its tabooing pathologies in the society is just one layer of the BFT's work. A comment concerning the national identity indirectly breaks through the plays, distinguishable through the knowledge of Belarusian debate and theatrical approaches employed.

For its form of verbatim theatre, BFT uses realistic stories and authentic testimonies, usually of those persecuted by the regime. But they are supplemented with minimalistic visual setting and sets of symbols valuable for the alternative community, including national flags and songs or indications of the Soviet past. This motif is most visible in *Generation Jeans* and its use of national flags or Western music as a symbol of "freedom".

The broader European pattern is emphasised, especially through the shared history of shared "freedom fighters", Popieluszko, Palach and other people artistically labelled as the "generation jeans". Hence, the Western connection is not enacted through ethnicity, but *via* the universal values – Belarus is Europe, since it is facing same challenges to democratic development as experienced elsewhere. It is an articulation of liberal, prodemocracy stance based on civic nationalism of Akudovich, Babkau, or the group that Ioffe calls "Muscovite liberals."

The pro-regime views are not ignored in the performances, however, a substantive part of the respective performances is given to representatives of the regime's representatives. Motivations of minor characters as in case of KGB officer Orlov who articulates *tuteishasts* (Shevtsov) or the Creole consciousness (Abushenka) with nearly every sentence are mentioned and elaborated. A setback is that these pro-regime characters are not usually created from interviews with regime proponents themselves, and in some scenes only silent masked men symbolising the abstract state violence are present. BFT explores other arguments filling up the pro-regime side of the debate and present in the national ideology with curiosity and understanding, such as the Kalanatai's story of her pro-Soviet sentiments.

Whenever BFT refers to Belarusians, the ethno-linguistic sense of identity yields to references to citizenry, self-perception and a shared geographical space (as in the *Zone of Silence* ending). Still, the language component is present at least as a symbol of "free Belarus" (see *King Lear* performed in Belarusian for the political reasons). Together with the national white-red-white flag, Belarusian remains to be used by a large part of the alternative community to protest the regime (shouting in Belarusian

during the demonstration, for instance), and that is reflected and respected in the BFT's productions.

6 Thesis conclusions

Belarus Free Theatre defines its goals as simply acquiring artistic freedoms in Belarus and a right to live under a regime where anyone would be able to perform modern art without fear of being punished by the state power. I believe, however, that in during 2005-2015, they went far beyond that – BFT has helped to articulate a vision of Belarus which competes with the official national ideology. It has a prominent position to spread novel thoughts within the alternative community in Belarus, and their use of theatrical language is positively accepted abroad, drawing attention to the Belarusian state and society.

The troupe's contribution through alternative culture has several layers. First of all, my content analysis of the four authorial plays and BFT's take on King Lear has confirmed that they frequently reproduce alternative symbols of national identity²⁰⁰ on stage, connecting them directly to the democratic values as well to those who promote these values, and who become victims of the state violence. They articulate a vision of democratic, European, and socially inclusive Belarus.

Just like Kupala's *The Locals* made a statement on national identity at his time, performances by Belarus Free Theatre enter the dialogue between stage and auditorium with a political stance, which is clearly articulated in their verbatim pieces. Through metaphorically rejecting the discourse of strictly nationalist self-identification and integrating stories of people from various groups within the Belarusian society, they endorse the civic form of nationalism as expressed by Abushenka and other independent scholars. Alternative society should not be split on basis of language and ethnicity and, in the company's terminology, everyone "*fighting for freedom*" should stand together.

Although there are no statistics on that account, Robertson estimates that majority of the theatre comers in Belarus and in the UK are from 20 to 30 years old.²⁰¹ The BFT's art is young and young people attend the shows. When *hatka* was in operation, approximately 50 people could fit in at each show, performing three or four times a week, almost always having a full house. The scale nowadays can be expected

²⁰⁰ E.g. white-red-white flag, Belarusian language, allusions to national history.

²⁰¹ Clare Robertson, interview by the author, London, November 15, 2015.

to be similar. Especially with the limited reach of alternative culture in the divided Belarusian society, BFT's productions of course do not represent majority of young people in the country. I can be roughly concluded, however, that the BFT's notion of national identity is shared among younger members of the alternative community. Those are oppositional-minded people who do not have a problem to attend a show in Russian if the content appeals to them.

By means of the research, I have made another revelation. It is not only the content of performances with which BFT can influence and unite the alternative community. Considering the Paget's account on mission of the verbatim theatre, that is that it "*feeds back*" to the communities, and combining it with Beck's findings on the authorial theatre, one can conclude that BFT does not only represent the alternative community. It also creates, as Beck puts it, "*lived sense of civil society.*" Theatre has a therapeutic role – with talking and about the controversial issues raised by the company which "*gives voice to the voiceless*" Belarusians, the theatre goesers know that they are not on their own. It is the shared experience that strengthens and unifies the alternative community.

Coming back to the Smith's nationalism theories, it should be reminded that the state does not have a monopoly on manifesting a certain national identity. Belarus Free Theatre has showed that alternative culture can bear a different set of symbols and arguments relating to national identity than those promoted by the Belarusian state. Since there are other BFT's plays that were not deeply elaborated in my work and there are many other alternative artistic groups in Belarus, I would gladly encourage any further research on the role of culture within the Belarusian national identity debate.

Shrnutí

Diplomová práce prostřednictvím tvorby (Běloruského) Svobodného divadla (BFT, *Belarus Free Theatre, Svobodny Teatr*) sleduje aktuální vývoj v diskuzi o národní identitě Bělorusů. Výchozí hypotéza, že Svobodné divadlo coby představitel alternativní kultury artikuluje myšlenky spojené s proevropskou orientací v kombinaci s občanským pojetím nacionalismu, se na základě obsahové analýzy pěti her potvrdila.

Součástí práce je základní zmapování samotných diskurzů věnujících se národní identitě. Dochází zde k rozdělení běloruské společnosti na dva tábory. Jako první je představen oficiální proud reprezentovaný výkladem dějin, národních symbolů a běloruské role ve světě známým pod hlavičkou „národní ideologie.“ Intelektuální debata té části společnosti označované jako „alternativní“ je naopak pestřejší a rozdělenější – s využitím teorií nacionalismu (zejm. Anthony D. Smithe) jsem se v rámci ní zaměřil na význam debaty o jazyku a vymezují projevy etnického a občanského nacionalismu.

Výzkum přinesl doplňující závěr, že aktivity divadla v Bělorusku i v zahraničí nefungují pouze jako artikulace názorů části alternativní společnosti. Oproti mnoha jiným význačným společensky angažovaným souborům (za všechny jmenujme uzbecký *Ilkhom*, běloruský *Kryly Khalopa* či český *Teritoriální tyjáter*) totiž BFT uplatňuje techniku *verbatim theatre*, která vyžaduje úzký kontakt s věcnými fakty a každodenní realitou ve sledované komunitě. S přihlédnutím k poznatkům Dennise C. Becka ohledně společenského významu divadla v nedemokratickém Československu pak tvrdím, že BFT plní terapeutickou funkci. Má tak jedinečnou roli ve sjednocování rozličných segmentů alternativní společnosti a potenciál v budoucnu diskuzi o národní identitě nejen reprezentovat, ale i coby kulturní platforma zprostředkovávat.

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