De-nationalised nation and divided nation – these and other terms are used to describe different nation project(s) in Belarus. The myth of the Victory and the WWII discourses are named as the main issues of national consolidation provided by the Belarusian ruling elite. Meanwhile, the official “brother Russia” is also using this “historic stone” as the basis of its identity.

In recent years the clash of discourses and building of its own discourse of war is becoming more visible in Belarus. This paper describes the main communicative strategies used by the Belarusian ruling elite.

Key words: Belarus, the Second World War (WWII), war discourse, national identity

Introduction

Nowadays collective memory is a popular research area not only for historians and sociologists, but also for political scientists and researchers of communication processes. Some representatives of the later believe that collective memory is a crucial element in any nation’s construction.

Referring to one of founders B. Anderson, “nation as imagined society” 1 is still the flag that is carried by constructivists. As stated by researcher of communication processes R. Wodak, who developed this idea from the perspective of critical analysis discourse, national identity is discursively constructed. 2

The main channels through which this construction is made are education and the media. 3 In Belarus both of these channels are under influence of Belorusian elite. What ever the regime in Belarus is called – non-democratic, sultanic or neo-authoritarian - there is a sound basis to claim that the ruling elite control both the media and education system. 4

Referring to A. Gujon, a French researcher, there is not only a lack of consensus on historic memory in Belarus, but also no possibility of public discussions on this theme. 5 In perceptions of the ruling elite in Belarus the revision of those events of war is simply unthinkable. This memory does not consist of halftones, there are only polar divisions: “It is a symbol of celebration of life over death, freedom over slavery and good over evil”. 6

War discourse is one of the bases of not only Belorusian and Russian identity, but it also was a key element of so called Soviet identity. 7 “Brother Nations”, this term is particularly used by Presidents of both Belarus and Russia, publicly do not divide the victory. However, in this research the slogan “there is one victory for all” obtains national characteristics.

The official reading of history permanently changes the identification of nations – Soviet, Slavic or Byelorussian, therefore constructing specific victory and specific war exactly of Belarusian nation.

War plays the key role in academic discourse. As said by a belorusionist, professor G. Joffe, war is also the main component of ideology elaborated by the ruling elite: “The major component of this ideology is the historic attachment of Belarus to Russia; the role of the Great Patriotic War (official name of WWII in Belarus, inherited from Soviet histology) of 1941 to 1945 that cemented this bond; communal and

7 Gudkov, L. (2005: 2(41)). „Pamijaj” o vojne i massovaja identichnostj rossijan. Neprikosnojennoj zapas. 

entrepreneurial ethos; and, however ironic it sounds in conjunction with national ideology, antinationalist sentiment directed squarely against the natives.**

In textbooks on the basis of ideology of the State of Belarus, which was introduced in 2003, the war is used as a symbol of positive self-identification in order to describe the uniqueness of patriotism and manhood of the nation.9

In recent years researchers pay increasing attention to the projection of a political element of the past to the present and to the discourse used by the ruling elite. In particular, major analysis is done by A. Gujon. In the paper she establishes concrete communication strategies. In an article published only recently she focuses on two main narratives which are popular in official Byelorussian discourse – partisans and genocide.10

In this paper the topicality of the Great Fatherland War is looked at from the perspective of discursive construction of identity through construction of self and other. This approach widens the spectrum of communication strategies implemented by the ruling elite.

Some schemes emerge by applying particular body of discursive techniques. Within these schemes the war previous century becomes a political weapon of today, which are directed at discrediting the internal enemy and delegitimizing of the position of external enemy.

The fabric of information continues to actualise this war as a cultural, social, spiritual and moral symbol. This trend is illustrated not only by news stories, the concentration of which increases as important dates come closer, but also by such less frequent products of mass culture as movies produced, for instance, at film studio “Belarusfilm” which belongs to the state. The main focus of this studio is to produce films about war. Hence, this union, in Soviet times called “Partisanfilm” has not changed its “discursive” decoration and thematic focus also in 21st century.11

Nevertheless, the main source of analysis is the public speeches of A. Lukashenka dedicated to the Independence Day of the Republic of Belarus.12 In addition, this paper also focuses on reflection of speeches in the mediated reflection of speeches.

How the “nationalisation” of war takes place

The ruling elite create the basis for highlighting the usurpation and particularities of war for Belarusians. The war is called the moral basis of the nation. Attempts are carried out to distinguish those aspects that can make the war particularly special for Belarusian nation. Some dominant strategies become very clear here.

Belorussian nation was the first who repulsed the enemy

The uniqueness of the first repulsion is legitimised in official ideology through such characteristics of nation as manhood, patriotism, love to freedom, etc.13 Moreover Belarus is compared to Western Europe, which was shamefully concurred. It is crucial to note that Belorusians do not compare themselves with nations of the Soviet Union, but with nations of Western Europe as a declared marker of the Other.

Lukashenka describes the first days of Belorusian resistance as very special:

*The fascist forces could not be stopped either by the French “Maginot Line” or by deep Dutch channels or high Greek mountains. The death to aggressors was brought by Byelorussian forests, swamps and fields.*14

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12 Entire Belarus was not yet liberated in July 3 of 1944. Minsk was. Nevertheless, sometimes in official expressions there are references to liberation of entire Belarus.
This repulsion further develops in new “discursive energy”, i.e. in construction of the meaning of unique patriotism, where the nature was on the side of the people. The victory becomes sacral. It is like a wish of higher destiny.

Unique patriotism (partisanship)

Two trends can be observed in official discourse. On one hand the focus is on Belorusian nation, on the other – there are attempts to avoid discrediting the meaning of Soviet nation, which is not only topical, but is also maintained. There is a clear link between the Soviet nation as a winner and Belorusian nation as a winner. The Victory unites them.

References to war were usually used in order to unite the Soviet nations, but Lukashenka recognises that no single nation goes under this heading and tries to distinguish a special war of Belarusian nation. Simultaneously, by determining the “Soviet” nation Lukashenka perceives it as “our”. By recounting nations he is not mentioning all 15 Republics. Some are distinguished as having a special role. For example, Kazakhs or Azeri are mentioned. Several post-Soviet nations are not treated in a positive way, for example, Latvia. Mostly grateful for winning the war we have to be to the “Slavic troika”. This, at the same time, coincides with ideological direction of Eastern Slavism that is underlined in official ideology. All these trends can be found in Lukashenko’s Independence Day speeches.

Unification and the construction of “unity” are done with the help of topologic mapping, i.e. spotting Belorussian cities that fought against the enemy. People in all corners of the state were fighting against the enemy. Belorussian towns and villages turned into the defence border. The miracle of manhood and heroism was showed by Brest fortress garrison and fighters of border guard units near Grodno. The Soviet troops with the support of local people were resisting until the end at Bobruisk, Zlobin, Rogachev, Gomel, Vitiebsk and Orshey.

Liberation of Belarus coincides with the notion of “liberating the world”

The unique patriotism constructed by Lukashenka becomes “legal” through fighting against European countries. This is another way how Belarusian identity is maintained. Everybody – from small to big, regardless of gender, nationality or religion - stood up to fight against the enemy. According to respected foreign military sources, during WWII Belorussian partisans and underground fighters caused great losses to Nazis, greater than done by European troops. Such an outburst of patriotism could not be found in any country occupied by fascists.

In the past patriotism as such was related not only to partisan movement, but also to restoration work done after the war. This is the way how the possibility of patriotism as simple love to fatherland is deligitimised, since patriotism should be linked to Soviet rule.

Genocide of Belarussian nation

Specific characteristics of war in official discourse are also constructed on the basis of genocide and/or total or partial destruction. All three nations should be regarded as victims and Belorussians, Slavs or the Soviet nation are frequently interchanged. However, within this widening and narrowing of frames “Belorussian nation” is legitimised as the main victim: Occupants established a terrible production line of death on Belorussian soil by setting up 260 concentration camps and 110 ghettos. They carried out more than 140 punishment operations against partisans and peace loving people.

Analysing other Lukshenka Independence Day Speeches it becomes clear that numbers play important role in his communication strategy. Statistics illustrate the magnitude of past events.

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This trend turns up also in media discourse, which is noticed also by researchers.\(^ {19} \) The exact name “genocide” is widely used, making clear and open parallels with Jews holocaust. This is legitimised through pointing at plans of Nazi Germany. Statistis is also used to legitimise this trend: The Nazi occupation was very special: german fascists had put forward a goal to eliminate Belorusian nation. Berlin planned to keep only one quarter of us, Belorusians in this life space “cleaned up” in the above mentioned way, and to keep us as slaves.\(^ {20} \)

If during the Soviet times the official number of Belorusians died in WWI was “every fourth”\(^ {21} \), then since Lukashenka became to power the magnitude of catastrophe has gradually grown to “every third”. This is mentioned in Lukashenka’s Independence Day speech of 2009:

*This is a reason to remember about those enormous and irreversible losses which Belorusian nation had to bear during the time of war. Yet, the impact of the tragedy is felt even now since it had an impact on every family. Every third life of our fellow country-man burned in this fire of war.*\(^ {22} \)

**War as one of three tragedies of Belarusian nation**

All the aspects mentioned above illustrate the construction of WWII as one of the main tragedies of Belarusian nation. Destruction and catastrophe metaphors linked to WWII, Chernobyl (technogenic catastrophe) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (as the main geopolitical catastrophe) are put in the same box. These three lines legitimise the so called “our own way”. This process of legitimising is used in construction of both internal and external enemies.

**How the enemy is constructed?**

The main communication strategy used in enemy construction is projection of the past on the present. The victory is not a constant entity. According to Lukashenka it can be stealled and such attempts are observable. This is how the enemy who tries to review the history is constructed.

**Robbers of the Victory**

The first myth Lukashenka tries to demythologise in his 2009 speech is even a possibility of having ambiguous attitude towards events in Belarus. A taboo is to try to doubt the unity of society in the times of WWII. It is like a protection of the myth established within official ideology:

*By cutting us off from our historic roots they want to deprive us from our heroic past and confidence in future. They want to take away our Great victory.*\(^ {23} \)

*The most detestable sacrilege is the thesis that it was not an all-nation fight taking place on all territory of Belarus, but a civil war between defenders of the Soviet rule and fighters for “new European order”.*\(^ {24} \)

Educating the youth and children becomes a peculiar defence wall constructed by Lukashenka. For him it is a total taboo to „celebrate fascist assistants” (their legitimating) in Belarus and he criticise those countries that have allowed revision of history.

**Protection of memory – protection of the future**

The attitude towards the Republic Day (the Independence Day) is not unanimous in Belarus. The 3\(^ {rd} \) of July emerged when Lukashenka came to power in 1994. He put this question on moving the Independence Day to the 3rd of July to referendum (26\(^ {th} \) November, 1996). The political and social context of that time is linked to the consolidation process of the regime of Lukashenka. The change of the date of the Independence Day
Day meant also a revision of the meaning of independence. The key was the change from gaining independence from the Soviet rule to independence from “fascist aggressors”.

From the President’s speech in 2004 it can be concluded that to legitimate this date as a celebration is still topical:

*And this day, the 3rd of July we commemorate as the Independence Day. Not everybody knows that during the dominance of nationalists the main state celebration for Byelorussians was another date, linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was the way how inheritors of fascist helpers put Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in one row.*

On one hand this phrase shows an attempt to mythologise how natural this celebration is, which corrected the mistake of the 1990s. This mistake constructs total deligitimising of the oposition. This is not only a comparison - it is a constructed threat that has returned, which is showed with the help of the metaphor of “relatives”.

This is how the unification of the enemy is taking place. The enemy is all the time the same, consequently the goal of the enemy is inherited, i.e. destruction of Belarus.

**Fascism was established through democracy**

The term “democratisation” has a twofold meaning in official discourse in Belarus. On one hand according to Constitution democracy is a value. However, there is another notion that democracy is something imported (as some kind of infection).

This other democracy is something negative. One of prime examples is that fascists came to power through democracy. The link between this example and the current situation threatens the modern world order.

In order to activate this discourse Lukashenka refers to neighbouring countries. He mentions democracy and attempts to influence Belarus:

*But we cannot forget that our people were killed not only by german-fascist aggressors, but also by their helpers of different nationalities, including members of the Baltic SS who burned down Byelorussian vilages and towns. But today being members of the EU, the most democratic group of states, they – veterans of SS – organise their parades and remember their “fighting past”. But their children and grandchildren are not against dictating what kind of order we should have in Belarus.*

Here we can see how the events of the past are connected to the present situation and relations with other countries. This is one way to show that democracy has its own flaws and Belarus should not accept everythin Europe can offer.

**Conclusion**

War discourse is crucial for Belarusian ruling elite. This can be illustrated by analysing Lukashenka Independence Day speeches, movies and text-books. By researching these sources it was possible to establish and characterise the main communication strategies through which collective memories take place and therefore play role in nation’s construction.

WWII puts Belarus on the winner’s side, which fits into legacy from the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the ruling elite of Belarus tries to attribute special characteristics to Belarussians in order to give special credit to Belarus. These communication strategies very well serve to develope positive self-identification and identity construction.

The following communication strategies are used in Belarusian war discourse: 1) Belorusians were the first repulsers of the enemy; 2) Belorusians were uniquely patriotic (everybody fought for Belarus); 3) Belarusians played crucial role in liberating the world; 4) the aim of the enemy was to destroy Belarus and Belarussians (it should be called genocide and is similar to Holocaust); 5) nowadays the enemy tries to robe the Victory from „us”; 6) if we protect the past we have the future; 7) Belarusians should not blindly accept everything European, including democracy, because the Nazis came to power throught democracy.

War discourse and these communication strategies are used to maintain the ruling elite. Collective memories of this war makes special not only Belorusians, but also the ruling elite. The war consolidates the people and their link to the ruling elite. Being on the winners side helps to maintain power.

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