

Milosz J.Cordes¹

¹Lund University

A disturbed past. Legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in identity policies of post-1991 Belarusian authorities

Bakgrund/Frågeställning

In Soviet Belarus, the discourse about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania never exceeded a narrow circle of intellectuals and was perhaps more present in Belarusian émigré circles. It was result of systemic weaknesses of Belarusian identity building processes in 19th and 20th century. Deprived of their own nation-state and subject to forceful Sovietisation, most inhabitants of Belarus became oblivious of alternative identity narratives.

The attempt to change this state did not gain sufficient momentum for after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the democratic period in independent Belarus lasted for less than three years. When Alaksandr Lukashenka ran for president in 1994, he built his campaign on post-Soviet nostalgia. On numerous occasions, Lukashenka underlined the importance of the Great Patriotic War, the brotherhood between Russians and Belarusians, as well as welfare that was brought by collectivisation, industrialisation and urbanisation of the country.

At the same time, he downplayed the heritage of the earlier past, in particular the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, considering it an entity in which the ancestors of Belarussians were oppressed by Polish nobility economically, confessionally and culturally. Such statements were predominant throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, especially when curbing down civil society and introducing authoritarian rule brought criticism from the collective West.

Lukashenka's fierce stance did not prevent the Belarusian authorities to pursue a more nuanced stance in selected areas of identity-building narratives. Belarusian history school coursebooks paint a fairly positive image of Lithuanian expansion into Ruthenia and peaceful coexistence it brought. They also underline the domination of proto-Belarusian culture and language together with the influence of Ruthenian legal thought on the everyday life in the Grand Duchy.

Narratives expressed in the coursebooks became increasingly present in Belarusian political life as the regime's dependency on Russia grew. Lukashenka, whose main aim has always been to maintain his unrestricted power, started treating the pre-Soviet legacy of Belarusian lands as a leverage against increasingly imperialist policy of the Kremlin towards its western neighbour. It all changed again after the August 2020 presidential elections and massive peaceful protests.

This paper seeks to trace the meanders of identity play in the policies of Belarusian authorities and put in the in broader context of cultural and geopolitical identity of contemporary Belarus.

Metod och Resultat

Konklusion