Australian National University Centre for European Studies

Working Paper Series
August 2024

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The Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Poland as a Creative Form of Expressing the Cultural Values and a Way to Strengthen an Alternative National Identity.

I. Identity, Creativity and Values of Alternative Belarusians

Background of the Belarusian socio-political crisis

The Republic of Belarus is an authoritarian post-Soviet state in Eastern Europe. After the dissolution of the USSR and the obtaining of independence in 1991, Belarusians chose a new Western-oriented path of development with its inherent democratic values, Belarusian as the official language and the pre-Soviet state symbols, such as white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms.

However, already in 1995, the new Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko in nine months of his presidency turned the country back to the "Soviet" past. He returned the Soviet red-green flag and coat of arms, gave the Russian language the equal state status with the Belarusian language, declared integration with Russia and expanded the President's power. Thereafter, owing to manipulations with the Constitution Lukashenko "won" the presidential elections five more times in a row. Each subsequent election has become less and less democratic, which intensified the restrictive reaction of Western politicians and raised more and more waves of protest movements of alternative-minded Belarusians. Each time, the Belarusian regime responded to its people by tightening repression against dissidents.

Meanwhile, if for two decades the "last dictator of Europe" was opposed mainly by the country's political elite, then in 2020 a new creative class of Belarussians, which had already formed by that time, joined the politicians. The main reason for the awakening of civil society was the COVID-19 epidemic which clearly demonstrated the complete functional impotence of the Lukashenko's government. Therefore, the confrontation between the dictatorial regime and citizens seeking to live in a state with responsible leadership turned into a political battlefield and reached its culmination in 2020.

The presidential elections of the Republic of Belarus in August 2020 were not recognized by most democratic countries, and Alexander Lukashenko became considered as a persona non grata and an illegitimate president. The apparent large-scale falsification of election results led to unprecedented protests by Belarusians demanding the resignation of the longest-serving European president [BBC, 2020]. The 2020-2021 Belarussian protests went down in history as the largest anti-government national movement on the territory of modern Belarus. They amazed the world with their principled peacefulness, mass character and creativity. The white-red-white symbols of independent Belarus, which united the idea of an alternative vision for the development of Belarus, once again entered the arena of political struggle and became markers of the national political protest. Thus, by August 2020, a significant part of the Belarusian civil society had come to see themselves as a real alternative political force that had entered the fight against the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko.

Alternative Belarusians, identifying themselves with other values, symbols, and a different view of the historical past and prospects of their country, aimed to change the political leader. Nevertheless, Belarusian dictator Lukashenko, thanks to strong military support from Russia, was able to suppress the people's protest with incredible brutality. The natural consequences of harsh and bloody Lukashenko's repression, political and economic persecution and punishment of all forms of dissent resulted in the largest wave of Belarusian immigration in the last hundred years.

Creative Belarusians in Poland

The Belarusian political crisis of 2020, followed by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, triggered a powerful flow of immigration of Belarusian citizens to Europe. According to statistical data, the immigration from Belarus to Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2020-2022 reached its historical peak, and the probable number of Belarusians living in the five listed countries ranges from 260 to 305 thousand people. Lithuania and Poland have become the dominant destination countries for both labor and political immigration, but if Lithuania is the leader in relative terms, then Poland leads in absolute numbers. Analyzing various data, experts came to the conclusion that the total number of Belarusians in Poland may be about 180-220 thousand people. Accurate statistical information on the age and sex structure of "new" Belarusian immigrants in Poland is available only for the labor market. The majority of Belarusian citizens who moved to Poland after

August 2020 are quite young people aged 25 to 44, predominantly men, up to 70 percent of whom have higher education, residence permits and work invitations [Kazakevich, 2023].

The peculiarity of the "new Belarusian immigration" is the fact that entire sectors of civil society, including journalists, NGO workers, political activists, scientists, doctors, IT specialists, artists, engineers and other highly qualified professionals were forced out of their country. In other words, a large part of the Belarusian business and cultural elite, belonging to the creative class of society and identifying themselves with the alternative development of their country, has left Belarus.

In Poland, the alternative Belarusian identity has blossomed in bright colors. Facilitated by the help of the Polish authorities and the interest of the local population, the national and cultural identity of alternative Belarusians breathed in the air of freedom and began to take various forms of self-expression. There, festivals of national culture have become the quintessence of creative self-expression for the Belarusian alternative identity. One of the most striking examples of them is the Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw.

State of the Art

A festival of national culture is a specific form of social practices that simultaneously demonstrates, maintains, strengthens and develops the community's identity [Hall, 1992], and their social function is closely linked to community cultural values [Falassi, 1987].

Community festivals, the number of which is approaching four hundred in Europe alone [Maurin, 2003], have long been recognized as a "worldwide phenomenon" [Chacko and Schaffer, 1993; Getz, 1997; Gabr, 2004]. They are "a sacred or profane time of celebration marked by special observances" that forms a particular "sense of place" [Derrett, 2003, Szymkiewicz, 2021], enhancing a sense of pride, prestige and image of community [Wood, 2002]. Holding festivals is considered especially important for small communities, as it can not only increase the significance of their cultural values, but also help to share them with other communities [Jepson and Clarke, 2012]. One of the reasons for the increase in the number of cultural events and the revival of old festivals may be a threat to the existence of identity [Ekman, 1999]. An excellent illustration of the threat to identity is the story of alternative Belarusian symbols.

Being a visible expression of culture, its authentic identity and social behaviour [Womack 2005], symbols are often used as a source of information about other people's views, including ideological attitudes [Mac Ginty, 2003]. Thanks to thousands of photos on social

networks and journalistic materials, the white and red colours of the flag of independent Belarusians have become a visually recognizable marker of the Belarusian protest all over the world. The mass demonstration of political symbols signaling the number of those who disagree with the existing norm in the reference network is the most important mechanism for changing the norm [Tankard et al., 2016]. For this reason, all alternative state symbols have been officially banned in Belarus [1], and any demonstration of them can entail criminal punishment.

Generally, for many years the Belarusians' identity studies have been subjected to stereotyping and dogmatization. It was often due to Russia's policy towards Belarus, and some researchers even predicted the displacement of the Belarusian national identity by the Russian one, arguing that "Belarusian identity would eventually fall into near obscurity" [Ioffe, 2003]. At the same time, the split nature of the Belarusian identity and the existence of two constantly competing sets of national symbols supporting them were noted.

The sociologist Nelly Bekus, in her monograph rejects the previously widespread cliche in the scientific community about the "weak identity and undeveloped nationalism" of Belarusians and confirmed the simultaneous coexistence of two parallel concepts of Belarusianness – official and alternative. The officially declared version of the Belarusian identity is linked based on its continuity with the USSR past, while the alternative idea of Belarusian identity is formulated in contrast to the Soviet way of nation's development. Moreover, the sociologist has seen a chance for alternative Belarusianness to defeat the state's version of the idea of the national identity [Bekus, 2010].

Nowadays, consideration of a historically justified dichotomous model of Belarusian identity remains in demand [Lewis, 2019] along with studying of the problems of Belarusians' immigration [Petrakova, 2021] and their European integration [Ivanov, 2019]; but the link of alternative identity to creativity and creative self-expression of Belarusians is a fairly fresh and fascinating area of social research. This applies to works devoted to the study of the growth of creativity in Belarus before the protests [Dinerstein, 2021] and the multivariate creative use of symbols and ideas of alternative Belarusian identity in the political struggle both at home and abroad [Getka and Darczewska, 2021].

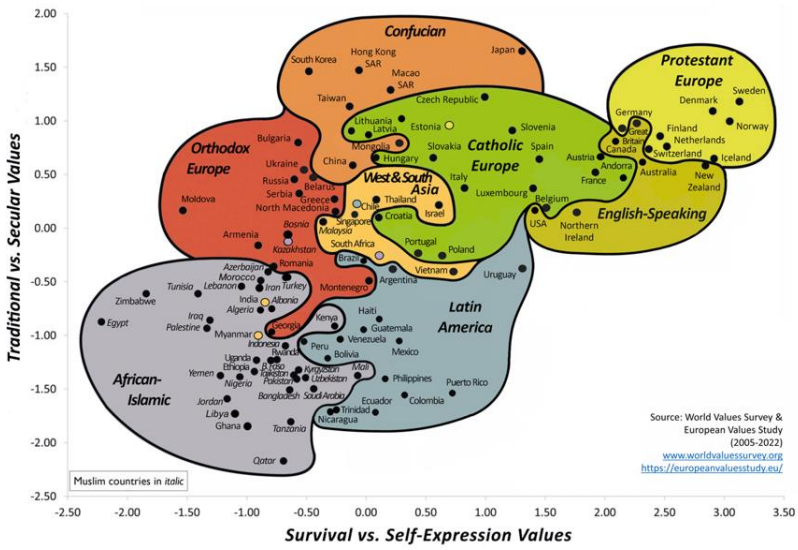
Studies conducted after the 2020-2021 Belarussian protests demonstrate that alternative identity is supported by the "conscious segment" of urban society, typical representatives of which belong to the higher-educated class of professionals and entrepreneurs with high income, paying great attention to the development of the Belarusian language and culture. They define themselves as a separate nation, do not accept the idea of the "trinity" of Belarus, Russia and

Ukraine and are generally oriented towards Europe. Unlike them, the "Soviet project" of Belarusian identity mainly consists of representatives of the working class with secondary education, who are nostalgic for the USSR and have a "pronounced attachment to the Russian-Soviet component" [Bikanau, 2022]. Thus, the positive or negative attitude towards the Soviet-Russian vector of the country's development and the level of education are the defining categories for the bearers of two ideas of Belarusian identity.

Higher education can also essentially influence the formation and change of values [Jovkovska, Barakoska, 2014], the practical importance of which has been pointed out by many sociologists, from the classics of sociology Emile Durkheim and Max Weber to the creators of the World Map Values Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (Fig.1).

The longitudinal study of world values shows that, on the one hand, the fundamental positions of cultures in different countries remain stable [EVS/WVS, 2022]. On the other hand, "as populations become more prosperous, educated, live longer and give birth to fewer children, their descendants become more secular and self-expressive in their moral values" [2].

Fig.1 The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2023



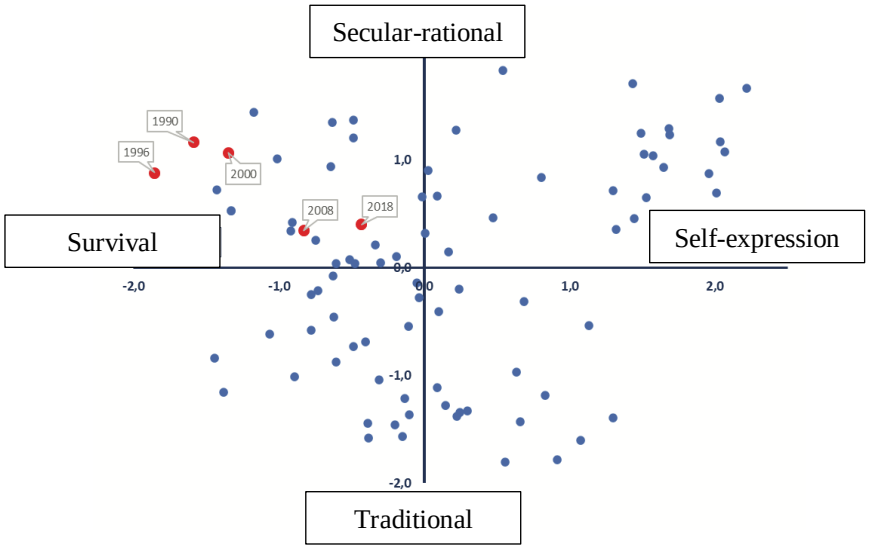
It is important to note that people who survival values focusing on economic and physical security do not feel happy, while individuals who support the values of self-expression, prioritize subjective well-being, self-expression, life quality, feel happy and actively participate in the political and economic life of their country [Inglehart, 2018].

According to the data of the EVS and WVS, from 1990 to 2018, Belarus has rapidly advanced towards liberation from the values of survival to the values of self-expression (Fig.2).

Notably, an analysis of the demographic structure of Belarus's population, viewed through the lens of value priorities, revealed that the demographic base for secular-individualistic and self-expression values consists primarily of urban residents under the age of 49 with higher education [Belov et al., 2022].

The pursuit of higher education, along with the aspiration "to be college graduates", is a characteristic of the creative class, a term coined by the American urbanist Richard L. Florida to refer to individuals professionally engaged in "the creation of new meaningful forms" [Moss, 2017]. He refers to the creative class as both the "super-creative core", which includes both people, who directly carry out creative activities and those whose work contains a significant creative component. According to the Florida's concept, the creative class has an essential impact on an open, dynamic urban environment, which, in turn, attracts a large number of extraordinary people – artists, musicians, actors, representatives of sexual minorities, all kinds of "bohemians" – as well as business and capital, which, in his opinion, contributes to the long-term prosperity of cities. Therefore, thriving cities with a large stratum of the creative class become a natural venue for various mass events, holidays and festivals of culture.

Fig.2 The dynamics of the values of Belarusians in the period from 1990-2018



Often in history, the creators of festivals pursued also political goals, including the use of mass celebrations as a mechanism of social control [Burke, 1978; Jarvis, 1994]. In a positive way, "it could help to provide a voice platform for those in marginalised or minority groups to speak out on issues and challenge the views of the established order" [Jepson and Clarke, 2012].

Communities' festivals can also be seen as a demonstration of the power and the well-being of the community. Also, people often turn to their culture because of the desire to self-identify and mobilize, assert their local values and share them with festivals' visitors [Adams and Goldbard, 2001]. Whereas it is believed that a positive exchange of cultural values can be achieved only due to great festival organization, communication and management. If it succeeds, the participants, organizers and spectators of the festival strengthen their positive identity.

Achieving and maintenance of a positive identity, according to the author of social identity theory Henri Tajfel, is, in fact, the natural desire of every member of any social group, which is carried out as a result of a favorable assessment of the group in comparison with relevant social groups [Tajfel and Turner, 1979]. Consequently, the festival of national Belarusian culture in Poland and its beneficial impact on the Polish and the Belarusian communities can become the creative way for alternative Belarusians to achieve the positive identity. Whether this is true or not, it will be possible to find out from the results of the current study.

II. Purpose, Objects, Methods and Research Questions

The main aim of the article is to explore The XI Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw as a phenomenon of modern social reality, in which the expression of values of Alternative National Identity is revealed in the creative form of statements on the indicated topics.

The objects of the analysis are the place, the event and the people. The city of Wroclaw, as the special place of concentration of the creative class of Belarusians. The XI Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture (farther shortened – The Festival), as a special form of expression of Alternative Belarusian Identity. Finally, the organisers of The Festival, as the special people who make up its «super-creative core».

To achieve the set goal, the method of observation and in-depth interview were used. The observation took place online, which included a study of The Festival's live broadcasts and announcements of its events in the online newspapers and on the social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook. The in-depth interviews were recorded with four experts-organisers of The Festival in the period from December 2023 to February 2024.

Given that the field of this investigation is a completely new scientific area combining creativity, identity, values, immigration, political, urban and cultural studies, the current work was conceived as an explorative and introductory research on the basics of The Festival's phenomenon. So, based on the results of this study a more extensive international research can be developed.

Therefore, in the course of this work, several research questions were raised. From the classic line of six questions used in the content analysis of communication studies [Babbie, 2011] – five were selected: who, what, to whom, why and how says? In a broader sense, they sound like this:

1. WHO are these people producing The Festival's content? What class of society do they belong to? How do they identify themselves and what values do they share?
2. WHAT is the key idea of The Festival? What are its goals? What type of topics were discussed during The Festival's event?
3. TO WHOM were the messages of creators of The Festival addressed?
4. HOW do they do it or what kind of modalities do they use?
5. WHY do they do it?

In addition to the above, the question of the place was analysed: "Why has the Polish city of Wroclaw become a suitable place for The Festival of Belarusian Independent Culture?"

In order to get a more complete picture of The Festival and its organizers, together with public sources, excerpts from expert interviews of The Festival's organizers will be provided below.

III. Special People, Special Place and Special Event

The people

The key factor contributing to the creation of the XI Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw is, of course, a strong «super-creative core» of Belarusian diaspora. Its activists from "The Belarusian Solidarity Union" in Wroclaw (pl. Stowarzyszenie Białoruski Związek Solidarności) are the main driving force, under the pressure of which The Festival's mill has rotated.

Four The Festival's organizers – Director, co-Director, organizer working with media, author of one of exhibitions – were interviewed as anonymous experts in this study for security reasons. Their reflections helped to make the social portrait and analyse the group and individual idea and values of the organizer of The Festival.

These people are of the average age group from 36 to 49 years old, belonging to the creative class of Belarusians. All of them have the higher education and two of them have received doctoral degrees. Two interviewees have been living in Poland for more than 2 years and the others – for more than 18 years. The language of the interview in 2 cases was Belarusian and in 2 cases Russian. They have the active civic stand: constantly involved in various civil and public initiatives, and often worked as volunteers. Three identify themselves as Belarusians in Poland and one equally as a Belarusian and a Pole. Festival's activities for them are both a job and a hobby. The job – because it takes a lot of time and effort. However, this job is low-paid or unpaid. The hobby – because they really like it, and they see these activities as an opportunity for creative self-expression. They consider their activities as a mission, a value or a moral obligation.

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Definitely, this is a job, a responsible job… and a hobby that brings great satisfaction.

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The festival is a part of my life. I consider this a job only in the sense that I try to make sure that all events are done professionally.

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It takes time and effort,

but it is a form of fighting; the guilt that we weren't there, we didn't participate in the protests. The method of compensation. Moral duty. My desire is to contribute to the fight.

Along with a sense of personal moral responsibility, the organizers associate a lot of positive feelings with the festival, such as celebration, delight, fun, joy and at the same time feelings of proud, dignity, freedom and belonging.

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Holiday. Something with a different chronotype.

The festival is about creating a space where people can carry out the ludens, the game. On the other hand, there is a sense of belonging. To be with someone, with your loved ones. To talk.

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We have something to be proud of. We have our own historical heritage, many achievements.

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Honor. We are proud of the level of the artists, for their professional approach to fulfilling their duties, for the culture, which is actually of the European level…
We are proud that our culture is a part of European culture.

When asked about values lost at home but preserved in Poland, one respondent named self-awareness, two – self-expression, and two mentioned freedoms for themselves and their children. One indicates the importance of security. Everyone, in one form or another, talked about freedom of creative and political expression and hoped for a better future in Poland.

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Freedom…
I am not afraid of the police (in Poland). I can express my ideas freely. I feel free here. We constantly organize meetings in the square, with flags, we gather…
I went to the protests, and I am not hiding my face.

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Perhaps,
I may not achieve any career heights, but I pulled my children out of these metal pincers.

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Children have much more opportunities to realize themselves here.
They can take part in a social political movement.

Last, but not least, each organizer assured that they evaluate themselves as happy or very happy individuals.

All things considered, including factors such as a higher level of education, active civic engagement, volunteer work, moral responsibility, creativity, and the overall sense of happiness among all respondents, it can be concluded that they align with individuals who share the values of self-expression, according to the Inglehart-Welzel terms.

The Place

Wroclaw is a beautiful, old, and at the same time highly technological and well-advanced city, with a metropolitan area that has a population of some seven hundred thousand inhabitants (plus 150-180 thousand Ukrainians who have immigrated to the city since 2014). It is located on the banks of the Order in the Silesian Lowlands of Central Europe. Thanks to the such location, its thousand-year history includes belonging to four kingdoms: Poland, Bohemia, Austria, and Prussia/Germany. Since 1945, it has been a part of Poland again.

As a modern global city [3] and European work hub, Wroclaw attracts the creative class of highly qualified Belarusians. So, already in 2021, more than six thousand Belarusians officially worked in Wroclaw. Also, according to one of The Festival organizers, it is

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> *…a multicultural city, an open city, with a very good atmosphere of welcoming different nationalities. And this is a great privilege of this city because it is so sincere and friendly.*

In general, Wroclaw has always been a special cultural place and today it continues to play a significant role in shaping modern European and World Culture. Besides, Wroclaw is a university city, that has preserved a long tradition of a high level of science, which, for instance, in German period of its history gave the world thirteen Nobel Prize winners.

Nonetheless, the favorable university environment can stimulate both cutting-edge scientific discoveries and powerful political movements. The successful protest Wroclaw's history, associated with the founding of "Fighting Solidarity" – the first anti-communist organization in Eastern Europe – was initiated by local university intellectuals. Therefore, the inhabitants and the City Council of Wroclaw who are aware of the importance of fighting for the civil rights and independence from the Soviet past, support for Belarusians rebelling against the Lukashenko's dictatorship.

Non-governmental organizations also play an important role in supporting the Belarusian diaspora. In 2021, at least 11 out of 24 Polish NGOs had their headquarters or offices in Wroclaw or Lower Silesia [Ivanov, 2021]. One of them, the Foundation "For your and our freedom" (pl. Fundacja "Za Wolność Waszą i Naszą"), is the founder of The Festival of Belarusian culture in Wroclaw.

The event

The Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture is a major multidimensional event, which has been constantly organized in Wroclaw since 2011 by the efforts of the local Belarusian diaspora. From 1 to 8 October 2023, the cultural oriented capital of Lower Silesia hosted the XI Festival of Belarusian culture in exile, becoming the greatest event in its history at that moment. The large-scale cultural feast was held in offline and online formats, which helped to attract an impressive number of spectators: more than 2,000 people took part in it directly, and more than 10,000 viewers followed its broadcast over the Internet [4].

Idea, aims, message and topics

The initial idea of the festival was to support persecuted Belarusian cultural figures by Lukashenko, emphasizing an independent view on national cultural identity, separate from official state policy.

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The Festival chooses an author based on the principle of compliance with the framework of the festival… and creativity and freedom are in it. There is no screening system based on criteria that are not related to culture.

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We want to feel independent of the dictatorship…, choose the president, choose which language to speak, which history to teach and read, to determine who is a hero in Belarus and who is not.

The goals of the Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw are as follows:
- presentation and divulgation of the Belarusian culture and art;
- unification of the Belarusian diaspora;
- strengthening the ties of the Belarusian community and the Polish society (integration of Belarusians in Poland);
- discovery and support of new Belarusian talents.

The new slogan of The Festival in 2023 is “better together” (the hashtag #razemlepei). It reflects the key message of The Festival calling for the unification of Belarusians at the internal and external levels, with representatives of their diaspora and Polish society.

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We invite you to see and feel the unity or difference of our cultures.

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Look, we lived part of our lives and were formed in that period in an environment similar to yours, which means we have a common cultural background.

Within the framework of the eleventh version of The Festival, three clear thematic lines can be distinguished: the Belarusian political issue, the topic of non-Soviet authentic Belarusianness and the topic of Polish-Belarusian intercultural communication.

The political topic touched the unhealed wounds of the suppression of the Belarusian protest, anxiety about the fate of Belarusian political prisoners, the pain of severing ties with the Motherland (the play *August,* discussion of the book *Cell#18,* Ala Savashevich's exhibition *If you can't see the body, it doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt).* In parallel, at the Wroclaw Festival, Belarusians express support for Ukraine in the war with Russia, show solidarity with those opposing Lukashenko's regime, and contemplate a better democratic future for their own country (*Alexandra Konofalskaya's Exhibition*, performative reading *Step after*).

The events with the theme of Belarusianness, portraying authentic European rather than Soviet culture, served an educational and unifying function, intended for a wide audience ranging from young children to the elderly (a poetic evening with Uladzimir Nyaklyayew, the play *My bread*, creative master classes, presentations of various Belarusians' activities, guided tours of Wroclaw, folklore lecture, concert of group "Kraj" and together songs and dances with group *Letapis*).

The Polish-Belarusian communication aimed to foster dialogue between the two nations and to explore common ground in history, culture, and values, as well as to demonstrate Polish support and solidarity with Belarusians (Photo exhibition *The Train Minsk-Wroclaw,* Film *Live,* discussion *Poles about Belarusians, Belarusians about Poles*).

Audience, genres and symbols

The two principal target groups of The Festival have always been Belarusian and Poles of the Wroclaw's agglomeration, and the appeals of the Belarusian creators were addressed to them.

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I appeal to two nationalities: Belarusian and Polish people.
Look, there are 900 km between us, and the post-war socialist past has left its mark,
which is very well read in the architecture of buildings.
Belarusians, who came to Wroclaw see this similarity, but Poles are very surprised at this,
who begin to think about it by comparing photos.

In October 2023, the events of Belarusian culture in Wroclaw could be followed online. It was extremely important for the web audience located on the territory of the Republic of Belarus, who could see that the protest movement and free expression did not die, it lives and develops abroad. Belarusian creators continue to create high-quality cultural products – performances, plays, films, exhibitions, books, music – and then present them both online and offline to the public.

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Online broadcasts for Belarusians in Belarus are like a fresh breath of freedom.

As noted above, the various Festival's events covered three main age groups, such as kids, adolescents, and adults. So, the entire audience of The Festival can be classified by three communication vectors:

- by the method of viewing or participating – online and offline viewers,
- by age – children, teenagers and adults,
- by nationality – Poles and Belarusians.

Against the background of other manifestations of Belarusian culture in Poland, the XI Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw rightfully took a leading position in terms of variety genres and events' forms. Some events – the action of solidarity with Ukraine, with political prisoners in Belarus and guided walks in the Belarusian places – took place on the streets and squares of the city. For others – theatrical performances, exhibitions, master classes, meetings with famous people, debates, writing letters to Belarusian political prisoners, concerts, lectures, literary and film evenings, concerts and dances – the cultural and university Wroclaw's venues hospitably opened their doors. A special case that increased the rating and recognition of The Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture, as well as brought it to the serious level of a socio-political public event, was a meeting with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who defeated Alexander Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, and then became the leader of the Belarusian opposition in exile.

In 2020, the Belarusian language became one of the symbols of protests, although most Belarusians do not use the Belarusian language in everyday life [5]. The use of the national language emphasized the desire of the protesters to separate themselves from the Russian heritage, to distinguish themselves as a separate nation and to return their native language to the lost status. Therefore, the XI Festival of independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw, held in Belarusian and Polish, served both a symbolic and educational function.

Another group of symbols of Alternative Belarus – combination of white and red colours (in Belarusian, it is abbreviated as "bchb"), the white-red-white flag, the Pahonia coat of arms and other types of Belarus symbols – were present in all information materials, on stage, as well as in the auditorium. They are attributes of socialization as well as marking of "their" compatriots.

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This is an attribute of socialization and… silent sign of the tribe.
It is so nice to meet girls with medallions in the form of a map of Belarus.
You don't have to know each other, but you understand "friend".

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I have a lot of different gadgets with a "bchb", pins.
When we are going to meetings, I wanted to be seen as who I belong to.
I attach different badges with Belarusian symbols. This is very important to me.

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In the year 2020, I painted a "bchb" on an ordinary canvas
and cut out a heart from it, and it has been still with me…
We should return to the bchb flag because it has more historical justification.

To summarize the empirical part of this investigation, it should be noted that the emergence of the important social phenomenon known as the XI Festival of Independent Belarusian Culture in Wroclaw – a manifestation of alternative Belarusian identity in Poland – was made possible by the efforts of the creative organizers of the festival and the culturally advanced city of Wroclaw.

Conclusion

Modern Belarusian society is characterized by a split national identity, with the parallel existence of two opposing projects of the Belarusian national identity.

One of its ideas is the official version of the Belarusian identity imposed by the illegitimate president Alexander Lukashenko. It connects with the idea of the "Soviet project" of Belarus as a small integral part of the great Russian state. This project is mainly supported by representatives of the working class with secondary education, who speak Russian, are nostalgic for the USSR and associate the future development of their homeland with Russia. The visual symbols of this identity are the Soviet-Belarusian state coat of arms and the red-green flag.

The bearers of the alternative idea of Belarusian identity have a contrary view on the historical past and the future of the country. They define themselves as a separate nation, do not accept of the "trinity" of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine and consider the Republic of Belarus as one of European states. Typical representatives of alternative Belarussians belong to the creative class of Belarusian society, have higher education and pay great attention to the development of the national language and culture. The main visual symbols of alternative Belarusian identity are the pre-Soviet red-white-red flag and the Pahonia coat of arms.

Two polar projects of Belarusian identity compete in the field of the origin of national ideas, Soviet and pre-Soviet symbols, pro-Russian or pro-European path of country's movement. At the global value-cultural level of social development, this struggle highlights the rapid progress of the Belarusian society from the values of survival to the values of self-expression.

Since 2020, after the failure of the state policy to combat COVID-19 and the consequences rigged and violent presidential elections in the Republic of Belarus, two ideas of Belarusian national identity have entered into a fierce political confrontation. The peaceful anti-government protests, the largest in the history of modern Belarus, organized by alternative Belarusians in 2020-2021, were brutally suppressed by the Lukashenko regime. Any form of expression of alternative identity became the target of criminal prosecution. However, the alternative Belarusians' identity has not been eradicated. It rather reformatted and found new modalities for creative self-expression outside its homeland.

The harsh political and economic persecution of alternative Belarusians, which intensified after the 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, forced hundreds of thousands of Belarusian citizens to immigrate to Europe. A significant part of the Belarusian business and cultural elite – journalists, NGO workers, political activists, scientists, doctors, IT specialists, artists, engineers and also different small and large companies – have chosen Poland as an attractive destination, where the demonstration of the alternative Belarusian identity has acquired a free creative form of self-expression. The advanced Polish cities were preferred by Belarusian immigrants for resettlement thanks to geographical and cultural proximity, job prospects, as well as due to the serious support of democratically minded Belarusians by local NGOs, administrations and the Polish democratic society. One of these global cities was the Polish city of Wroclaw, which thanks to its open, dynamic urban environment, attracts many extraordinary people, including the creative class of the Belarusians. Its historical and political background, the large number of universities and the rich tradition of the holding of multicultural events formed the capital of Lower Silesian Voivodeship as a special place, suitable for the holding of the Festival of Belarusian Independent Culture.

The XI Festival of Belarusian Independent Culture in Wroclaw has become a vivid example of the flourishing of the alternative Belarusian national identity abroad. Being a specific form of social practices, it demonstrates, maintains, strengthens and develops the community's identity of Belarusians in Poland.

In the context of The Festival, the Belarusian culture independent from the regime of Lukashenko was presented in various formats, genres and forms. From 1 to 8 October 2023 plays, discussions, art and photo exhibitions, meetings, performative reading and theatre shows, master classes and presentations, guided tours, folklore lecture and concerts, together songs and dances filled the cultural venues of Wroclaw and attracted over 2,000 offline and over 10,000 online viewers. Speaking in Polish and Belarusian, freely demonstrating symbols of an alternative Belarusian identity, The Festival's participants touched concerning topics about the preservation of national traditions and language, about the past and future of Belarus, about heroes of history and protests, about the difficulties of immigration and integration into European society. They communicated with wide aged audience consisting of Poles, Belarusians abroud and Belarusians in Belarus. Belarusian independent creators addressed to the Poles to jointly assess their common cultural and historical heritage; to Belarusians in their homeland – to show that alternative Belarusian culture in Poland is alive and thriving; to

Belarusian immigrants – to get to know, support each other and unite. In the frames of The Festival, they create a cultural space for reflection and dialogue, as well as for their own socialization and integration into Polish society. So, initially aimed at supporting Belarusian creative figures and presenting Belarusian culture to the Polish public, over the years The Festival has gone beyond its representative function and assumed the role of a project uniting and integrating the Belarusian diaspora in Poland.

Like many similar communities' festivals, the Wroclaw Festival of Belarusian Culture can be seen both as a demonstration of the power and the well-being of a national minority, and as the desire of Belarusians to self-identify and mobilize, assert their local values and share them with The Festivals' visitors. This positive exchange of cultural values became possible thank to selfless work of organizers of The Festival.

As part of this qualitative research, in-depth interviews were conducted with four organisers of The Festival, that allow us to value both the personalities of experts and their opinion about their activities. These special people complete the «super-creative core» not only of The Festival Independent Belarusian Culture, but also all Belarusian diaspora in the capital of Lower Silesia. They are higher educated, responsible, middle aged people with active civic stand, belonging to the creative class of Belarusians. They put the values of self-expression above the values of self-survival because they spend a lot of personal time and efforts on organising The Festival. Often, they work as volunteers and consider this activity as a job, a hobby, a mission, a moral duty and, moreover, as a way of creative self-expression. For each of them, the value of The Festival lies in the fact that during its preparation and holding, the organisers experience a lot of positive feelings, such as joy, proud, dignity, freedom and belonging to Belarusian culture. Like people who share the values of self-expression, The Festival organizers self-identify as happy people. All these statements suggest that The Festival activities serve as a means for its organizers to attain a positive identity. This achievement may serve as the motivation for their activities and, simultaneously, answer the question "Why do they do it?"

Consequently, the previously suggested assumption that the Festival of national Belarusian culture in Poland and its beneficial impact on Belarusian communities can become a creative way for alternative Belarusians to achieve a positive identity may be true. However, this hypothesis can be confirmed or refuted within the framework of a future full-scale international study.

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