Contested Identities of Ukraine and Belarus*

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Abstract

Since 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukraine and Belarus have devised and carried out a series of policies intended to build national identity for a new era. Ukraine and Belarus have shown clear differences in the way they strived to achieve such goal. There is a stark contrast between the two states in who are playing a leading role in reshaping national identity, what they demand, how the government is dealing with the issue and how the people are responding to it. This paper intends to find out the characteristics of national identity that is taking shape in Ukraine and Belarus and to identify challenges facing them.

Belarus and Ukraine have not yet fully established their national identity and there is no complete consensus on the concept or sense of national identity that the majority of their people can share. In this modern society where postmodernism is widely accepted and diverse cultural interactions occur due to globalization, neither of the two countries is effectively coping

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with plurality as far as identity concerned. In this light, heteronationalism, that seeks to integrate ethno-national identity politics within a euronationalist understanding of political community, is probably the best viable option for these two states to deal with challenges of national identity.

I . Introduction

In the post-Soviet era, one of the most controversial issues that former Soviet member states were faced with was finding the new identity of their own. Among the states that had been previously incorporated into the Soviet Union, Belarus and Ukraine are particularly noteworthy in terms of their efforts to rebuild national identity. The future steps that these two states will take can prove to be critical variables that will determine the fate of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In other words, national development strategies that Belarus and Ukraine will choose as they struggle to balance between Russia and Europe may tip the scale in the dynamics between the two contending forces. Belarus and Ukraine share a close tie with Russia and these three states were considered as the three pillars of the Soviet Union. Ironically, however, the two countries have taken two different approaches to attain the same goal of reshaping their identity, and they are currently implementing different national development strategies as well.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of identity had developed at different levels in Belarus and Ukraine. Belarus’ concept or understanding of national identity did not evolve much