Daily identity practices: Belarus and potato eaters

Anna Zadora

Strasbourg University, Strasbourg, France

Abstract

Food cultivation, preparation and consumption are important references for shaping national identity. Food is a crystallization of the history of a national or ethnic group, of its traditions, mentality, and religious adherence and of very pragmatic material elements reflecting the way of life of the group, for instance, climatic conditions and socio-economic levels. All elements of the history of a group are transmitted and experienced in daily rituals relating to food. Food has strong symbolic, quasi-sacred associations in many cultures: for Slavic peoples bread is a very important symbol, and in Belarus potatoes are known as "the second bread". The role played by banal everyday identity rituals is very important in complex political contexts, where identity building processes aimed at the transformation of a community into a nation-state with common identification denominators are not endorsed by political elite. Belarus is an extremely difficult case from the point of view of identity building: a country without a history (Zaprudnik, 1993), without a nation (Marples, 1999), without an identity (Bekus, 2010). In the Belarusian context, food - especially food which is cheap, rustic and simple to cultivate, such as potatoes - is an important identity marker.

© 2019 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The history of Belarus, which is situated at a crossroads of different countries, cultural blocs and zones of influence (the Eastern or Eurasian bloc represented by Russia, and the Central European bloc, close to Western Europe represented by Poland) is nothing if not turbulent, marked as it is by wars, invasions, divisions, and annexations (Zaprudnik, 1993). Before the 20th century, the lands of present-day Belarus belonged to a number of different state formations at different times, including the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish—Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Russian Empire. In March 1918, the first Belarusian state was created. Belarus declared independence as the Belarusian People's Republic, succeeded by the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia in January 1919. Belarus was devastated in the Second World War. The Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus declared its sovereignty on 27 July 1990, and during the period of the dissolution of the USSR, Belarus declared independence on 25 August 1991. Between 1991 and 1994 Belarus was a Parliamentary republic and since 1994 Alexander Loukashenko has been the country's president. Loukashenko pursues Soviet-era policies in economic, political, ideological and military spheres, such as state ownership of large sections of the economy, political repression of opponents, links with Russia, and Soviet-style official ideology transmitted through the media and the education system. The referendum of 1995 was an institutionalized return to the Soviet era. The majority of the electorate voted
for union with Russia and two state languages in Belarus: Russian and Belarusian. This complex historical situation was not propitious for the shaping of Belarusian identity or even of some sort of “common denominator” (Gellner, 1983), and identity shaping in this context refers more to spontaneous nation-building (Isaacs and Polese, 2016) than deliberate strategies and tools invented and performed by institutional state actors. (see Tables 1–3)

In a difficult context, when identity construction cannot be orchestrated “from the top down” through a concerted effort on the part of the state or ruling elite, nation-building is conceived, performed, and perpetuated by ordinary people through banal everyday rituals such as singing, telling fairy tales, and food cultivation and consumption. Eating has a special place among such daily rituals: it is performed several times a day, and has not only the practical physical functions of nutrition and survival, but also a very important symbolic and identity shaping function (Isaacs and Polese, 2016).

As an identity building tool, food consumption is even more effective than the education system, which is an extremely powerful and effective instrument in shaping national identity. Through recounting the events of national history, school curricula and textbooks teach schoolchildren to be and to think nationally, and provide information on the distinction between “us” and “the other.” The politics of the past is expressed through history education, which is capable of transmitting a systematic, relatively complete and consistent message on a nation’s history.

No one escapes the educational system of the countries in which they grow up. Neither do they escape food consumption. The social effectiveness of an identity message transmitted by an education system can be questioned, as it may be challenged by family education and other sources of information, but identity as experienced and embodied in everyday rituals, rather than imposed from outside, is extremely effective. Daily rituals are taken for granted as realities which define identity. This embodied reality does not require additional verification or legitimising discourse. Taking part in everyday rituals enables individuals to construct a coherent and plausible identity (Ioffe, 2003).

The history of Belarus is that of a poor land and a poor people, and the staple ingredient of Belarusian cuisine is the potato, an extremely simple rustic root vegetable. Belarusians are even nicknamed the “potato people” “Bulbiachy” Булбіча in Belarusian. Food identification affects national identification. Belarus is a nation of peasants: the inhabitants of Belarusian cities are mainly rural dwellers who moved into cities during the urbanization of the 1970s and who conserved strong links with a rural milieu and mentality. Potatoes — the peasants’ food - is still the most important food for Belarusians and an element of their everyday experience of their national identity.

2. Methodology

Empirical sources permitting an analysis of the role played by food, especially potatoes, in Belarusian identity exist in archives of ethnographic materials from the 19th century up until the present, while research published by academics analysing the daily rituals which go towards constituting an independent Belarusian identity date from the beginning of the 20th century and continue through to the present. To study the evolution of Belarusian identity use must be made of statistical data, censuses, and sociological surveys. In 2015, a major sociological survey involving 1014 Belarusian school pupils from different social groupings and parts of the country was conducted with the aim of comprehending Belarusian identity as constructed “from below” in terms of the daily rituals which most members of the community perform, and thus “measuring” the degree of their identification with the nation.

3. History of Belarus —a history of peasants and potato eaters

Even though the institutional history of the Belarusian nation-state began only after the Russian Revolution of 1917, a situational analysis of the Belarusian lands within the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century is necessary to explain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population (thousand)</th>
<th>Percentage of population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>6673.0</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>6899.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>9046.1</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>7781.1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>8055.7</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>8992.2</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>9532.5</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>9591.8</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>9929.0</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>10151.8</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>10188.9</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10210.4</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>10019.5</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>9800</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the importance of the peasant stratum for Belarusian identity. In contrast to the areas which have become the modern-day Baltic states Latvia and Estonia, where serfdom was abolished in 1816, like the rest of the Russian Empire Belarus had to wait until 1861 for this event to happen (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1993). In the Baltic regions, the emancipation of the peasants gave rise to socio-economic conditions favourable to the crystallization of national sentiment (Sosna, 1995). The low-level of urbanization in the Belarusian lands, on the other hand, prevented the consolidation of a clear national identity. Thus, in the early twentieth century, the majority of Belarusians were peasants, as the following table demonstrates.

Table 2
The evolution of the GDP of Soviet Belarus compared to the year 1913.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1913</th>
<th>1928</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1960</th>
<th>1965</th>
<th>1966</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3
Questions relating to identity markers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question № 1.</th>
<th>What associations occur to you when you hear the words the &quot;history of Belarus&quot;?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37% associations relating to national (or nationalist) history</td>
<td>28% association relating to the Soviet past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question № 6.</th>
<th>Do your parents contribute to your historical education?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63.5 % Yes</td>
<td>36.5 % No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question № 7.</th>
<th>What is the language of your everyday life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>81% Russian</td>
<td>3% Belarusian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3% other languages (Armenian, Georgian, Chechen...)</td>
<td>5% No answer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question № 9.</th>
<th>Do you feel yourself to be Belarusian?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>73% Yes</td>
<td>27% No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question № 10.</th>
<th>“What does being Belarusian mean to you?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44.5% Answers referring to objective (ethnic) characteristics of the nation (food, language, traditions, folklore)</td>
<td>43.1% Answers referring to a subjective sentiment of belonging to a nation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the early twentieth century, the majority of Belarusians were peasants, as the following table demonstrates.

In the nineteenth century, fearing the expansion of the large Polish minority present in their North-West Region, the Russian imperial authorities conducted an economic policy of weakening the region in order to control it better. The absence of a university on Belarusian soil until the year 1921 is proof of this deliberate enfeeblement of the region. The Russian political authorities of the time would not allow the construction of a university in an area close to Poland in order to avoid the infiltration of Western political ideas. Educational policy was considered by the tsarist government as a means to promote the Russian language and to erect a barrier against the Polish language and political ideas. After insurrections in 1830 and 1863, the policy of the Tsarist government towards the North-Western region considerably hardened. In 1832 Vilnius University was closed. Even the Agricultural institute in Gorki created in 1836 by an Ukaz (decree) of Tsar Nicolas I, which was highly
important for the whole Empire and had a dynamic research department (one of the first in Europe), and which introduced and studied 28 varieties of potatoes to Russia, was closed in 1863 (Krachkovski, 1874). The region was "punished" after the insurrections of 1863 led by Kastus Kalinouski with the aim to liberate Belarusian and Lithuanian lands from Russian influence, and the sanctions extended to educational policy.

The Russian Governor Mikhail Mouraviev, "the executioner", who greatly contributed to the virulent russification of the north-west region (which corresponds to the present territory of Belarus together with sections of modern-day Lithuania and Poland), observed that "the Poles are docile when their material resources are weak. To manage Poles, you must "hit" their pockets" (Svib, 2005). It is important to emphasize that the level of economic development in the north–west region in this period was five times lower than the average for the rest of the Russian Empire (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 2001). "Hunger and extreme poverty" are the most common characteristics identified in the region at this time by historians of all tendencies: Soviet, pro-Soviet, pro-Russian, nationalists ... (Nikolski, 1948; Trechtcnenok, 2005). An administrative report of 1850 pointed to a demographic crisis in the region. Mortality exceeded the nativity rate. Russian landowners, who were "greedy, rude and cruel" (Nikolski, 1948), were concerned exclusively with economic profit from the peasants' work and contributed to devastating the region (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1995, 2001). Eighty percent of the population of the Belarusian lands was illiterate (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 2001; Sosna, 1995).

According to the census of the Russian Empire of 1897, 86.5% of Belarusians were peasants (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1993). The preponderance of the peasant stratum can be considered as an obstacle in the way of the national development of Belarus. Being mostly peasants living in the countryside, as a group Belarusians were socially and economically weak, disunited and difficult to mobilize. Added to this is the fact that the key positions in the economic, political and social structure of the region were often occupied by people from other ethnic groups — Poles, Russians or Jews (Eberhardt, 1997).

The Russians were senior officials sent by the Tsarist government to strengthen the Russian presence and to control the Russian north-west region. The Jews were an economically active community. The Poles were landowners historically present in the Russian western provinces. A strong role in defining these communities was played by religious denomination: Poles identified with Catholicism and Russians with Orthodoxy. The linguistic element was also an important factor in identification, given that the codification of the Belarusian language began only in the mid-nineteenth century in extremely difficult conditions. Not only was public use of the Belarusian language banned, but also the very term "Belarus" was replaced by a decree (Ukaz) of Tsar Nicolas I of 17 July 1840 by the term “North-West region” (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1995).

According to a history textbook published in 2002, "The main problem with identifying ethnic Belarusians and identity building consists in the fact that the weak and disintegrated peasantry, rather than the nobility, the merchants or other socially dynamic classes, were the bearers of ethnic roots and national culture at the beginning of the twentieth century" (Chtykhau, 2002). This is a very important point to take into consideration if we want to understand the difficulties involved in the formation of the Belarusian nation. The peasantry was the largest group in the social structure, but its poor education, weak social organization and undeveloped social consciousness meant that it could not be a force in the movement for national identification. The educated social classes in pre-revolutionary Belarus, before 1917 - the intelligentsia, merchants, and bourgeoisie - who in other European countries had had the necessary political, cultural and financial clout to lead a nationalist movement, were weak and themselves divided on the issue of national identity. Representatives of the upper classes identified either with Russians or with Poles.

Where the necessity arose to discuss ethnic groups who could have been identified as Belarusians, they were referred to as "local people", "people from here" — toutiechyva’. "Toutiechyva" refers to the question of the identity of Belarusians, sandwiched as they were between Russians on one side and Poles on the other, and considered by these peoples as either Polonized Russians or Russified Poles (Kravtchevitch, 2011). "Toutiechyva" was also a refuge from the conflict between Russian and Polish identities in situations where to choose between one of the two would have been politically unsafe (Radzik, 2012). Thus, the "toutiechyva" identity is a pragmatic solution for avoiding choice rather than an identity choice in itself. This fact explains why the first attempts to conceptualize Belarusian identity were expressed in negative terms. It was important to say what a Belarusian was not: he or she was neither Polish nor Russian. The identity building process requires a frontier between "us" and "the other," but for Belarusians, who is "the other" is easier to define than who "we" are.

The prevalence of pre-industrial local ties over large national links in Belarus is underlined by Ryszard Radzik (2012). To embody identity through straightforward everyday practices as eating national food - potatoes for people living on Belarusian lands is a very old component of belong to Belarusian lands, historically a very poor region, regularly ravaged by wars, invasions, and internal divisions (Avagrodski, 2009). Potato consumption is an element of an inclusive Belarusian identity common to different communities living in the Belarusian lands and transcending ethnic and religious differences. Thus, potato eating constitutes an inclusive identity marker for all the inhabitants of Belarus. Potatoes have historically been a staple food for Belarusians, Poles, Russian, Baltic ethnic groups, Ukrainians, Muslim Tatars and Jews living in Belarus (Isotova, 2012). Practical identity stemming from the “bottom-up” can be more successful than political identity imposed from the “top-down” in terms of its ability to overcome the tensions inherent in political identity. In addition, the mentioned above Agricultural School in Gorki created in 1836 by an Ukaz (decreed) of Tsar Nicolas I, became a university in 1925. This demonstrates the importance of agriculture for Belarus in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. The first exhibition organized by the school in 1853 was devoted to the most important vegetable in Belarus - the potato.

European researchers who studied Belarus at the beginning of the 20th century noticed that "potatoes and rye are cultivated everywhere". The budget expenditure in terms of the whole national economy in 1926–1927 was twice as great for
agriculture as for industry: 45%–23%. In the 1920s potatoes occupied 21 of the agricultural area with the best output per hectare – 8700 kg (Martel, 1929). Easy to cultivate in the Belarusian climate and nutritious, potatoes became an alternative to bread for Belarusians.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century saw a period of expansion, formalization and codification of the Belarusian language, Belarusian history and the formation of Belarusian state institutions. Before this period, no research had considered Belarus as an independent national entity, but rather as either part of Russia or of Poland. At the same time an aspiration on the part of the Russian imperial authorities to demonstrate the Russian origins of the Belarusian people after a series of insurrections in the 19th century in the North-Western periphery stimulated research in this area, thus indirectly promoting studies in history, as well as ethnography, archaeology and literature. Thus, the imperial government involuntarily contributed to the creation of infrastructures for the institutionalization of Belarusian historiography, which in turn formed a basis for the consolidation of the nation.

Ethnographical expeditions beginning from the second half of the 19th century noted that Belarusian folklore has a long list of proverbs and songs relating to potatoes (Archives): “Not to eat potatoes is to go hungry”, “A potato and a slice of bread – that’s enough”, “All Belarusians prepare a party with potatoes”, “Potatoes are consumed both fried and cooked. When we eat potatoes, we praise this food. Potato dumplings, potato porridge … Here’s to our potatoes!” (Kirkor, 1858).

Conceptualization of the political idea of an independent Belarusian nation and identity began in the Russian Empire and was related primarily to the peasantry - the most important social stratum. The first clandestine Belarusian political organization was created in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the 20th century and was given the name the “Belarusian village house”. The most important review for the consolidation of Belarusian national identity, published between 1906 and 1915, was Our Field - a direct reference to the village and peasant way of life. Peasant Destiny, Peasant Field, Peasant Truth were the first Belarusian journals published at the beginning of the 20th century (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1997). Even the revolutionary movement in Belarus started in 1905 with “Potato strikes”, when peasants demonstrated against the poor remuneration for potato cultivation (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1997).

4. Spontaneous immediate identification = a compensatory mechanism?

If we assume that the construction of identity is effected primarily through interaction with one’s immediate environment, it should be emphasized that for Belarusians this has always been multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-confessional (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1995). Belarusians have always been aware of linguistic, religious and ethn-cultural differences between themselves and other groups, but these differences have never become a source of major conflict. Belarusian folklore, proverbs, and folk tales reflect animosity towards the Russian nobility, towards Jews and Polish magnates, all of whom are perceived as being rich and exploitative (Belarusian folk tales, 1983). Belarusians, most of whom were poor peasants, felt different from, but held no hostility towards representatives of different ethnicities or nations where these different groups were also deprived of economic resources and were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as they were. Belarusian folk tales often describe a conflict between a poor, but hardworking and clever peasant, and a greedy merchant who is stubborn and cruel. If Belarusians are deemed to be “tolerant”, it is also because they have accommodated themselves to the ethnic multitude that populated Belarus.

Russian academics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries observed that “in the North-West region (the area corresponding to modern day Belarus), the local population lives together peacefully with the Jewish community,” (Bobrowski, 1863) and that “nowhere more so than in the North-West region do Jews have close links with the local population” (Encyclopedia of History of Belarus, 1997).

This peaceful coexistence was owing to practical and material considerations, rather than to ideals of tolerance. As reflected in popular sayings, Belarusians were aware of the resources available to Russian landowners, and Jewish craftsmen and traders and were aware of the necessity of maintaining good relations with the owners of these resources: “як бядя - то да Жыды ізді, як Піа бядя - то ізд іхон, Жыды” (when there is a problem - go to a Jew, when the problem is resolved - get lost, Jew).

Ethnographic research into Belarusian sayings reflecting attitudes towards other ethnic groups shows that the most negative picture is assigned to Russians, who are represented as cruel, greedy, lazy and stubborn in the popular imagination (Tserachkovitch, 2003). This revelation contrasts with the stereotypes mobilized by the political authorities, which stress the identity links between Russians and Belarusians. The negative image of Russians in Belarus is and was carefully hidden by both the present authorities and the Soviet authorities, who insisted on the eternal brotherhood of Slavic peoples. The current Belarusian authorities claim that “we and the Russians – we are the same” (Loukashenko, 2003). Spontaneous identification with their immediate environment can be considered as a compensatory mechanism in the absence of a clear identity matrix imposed “from above”.

5. Material conditions and identity shaping

In the Soviet era, Belarus underwent a transformation from a poor, peasant community, deprived of urban centres and universities, into an industrial and economically developed country, where the general level of education was one of the highest of the USSR, as indicated by the following table.

After the Second World War, Belarus found itself at the forefront of advanced technology in the Soviet Union, becoming home to 30% of electronics production and 23 of radio-electronics production for the whole of the USSR. Agricultural
development not only allowed it to meet the needs of Belarusian consumers, but also to export a surplus of agricultural production to other Soviet republics (Statistical Data Book, 1967).

Although the progress made by Belarus in the Soviet era may not have placed it economically on a par with Western developed nations with an elaborated identity matrix, these advances were nonetheless significantly greater than any which Belarusians had known during the period preceding its entry into the USSR (Chybeka, 2002). Relative economic stability and enjoyment of basic social rights were particularly appreciated by a people which had lived in dire economic conditions for centuries. The current attachment to the Soviet legacy in Belarus is not related to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, but to the relative economic prosperity it enjoyed during the Soviet era. The importance of the Soviet era, when Belarus was “the most Soviet of the Soviet Republics” (Karbalevich, 1999), for Belarusian national consciousness has made modern-day Belarus into a “denationalized nation” according to David Marples (1999).

The current political authorities have made significant efforts to enhance certain aspects of the Soviet past. The reference to the peasant model is widely supported by the political establishment through an extensive program entitled “Rural Renaissance”, which was launched in 2003. The annual funding of the program varies between 10 and 15 per cent of GDP. The program’s objective is to defend the rural environment and secure food supplies, but also to protect peasant traditions, folklore and crafts. Since 1996 the revival of villages and agriculture has been a priority of state policy. Harvest Festival is organized in late October (Fedouta, 2005). Each year, a small provincial town hosts this festival. For Belarus, which has always been a predominantly peasant country, the harvest was vitally important, which is why harvest festivals have been known for centuries. The current Belarusian regime promotes a peasant identity model which does not require a complex process of assimilation or critical reflection, but acts as a source of legitimacy for the current regime, which cannot find legitimacy through classic democratic mechanisms, such as transparent elections or a developed civil society. The political elite in Belarus tries to “graft” itself onto the existing but artificially maintained peasant tradition.

After perestroika, at the beginning of its existence as an independent country, attachment to material living conditions provided by the Soviet government played a decisive role in the definition of Belarusian political orientation. In Belarus, economic imperatives and the question of “daily bread” have always prevailed over subtle immaterial considerations, such as national identity (Joffe, 2004). The current president of the Belarusian state is aware of the importance of economic factors in “historical choice”: “The defence of national sovereignty should not undermine our simple basic needs: to live in warm houses, dress and feed normally. Aspiring for independence places these basic goods at risk. Without them, it is difficult to defend our sovereignty and our culture.” (Loukashenko, 2003).

Among all the sources of community building distinguished by Max Weber, nowadays economic considerations are the main force responsible for generating a sense of belonging to the community, in contrast to previous centuries when politico-cultural forces were the main shapers of identity. According to different researchers, nations have become nothing more than trade brands. One element “branding” the nation (Aronczyk, 2013) in Belarus are food trademarks like “Boulbach” (‘Potato eater’, that is, a Belarusian) – a brand of vodka.

Different researchers maintain that national-belonging in the former republics of the Soviet Union tended to be rooted in notions of ‘primordial ethnicity’ rather than in civic identity models (Tishkov, 1997).

Spontaneous identity building demonstrates the duality of identity both as a dynamic creative force and a source of stability. National identity refers to a set of relatively enduring, persistent characteristics, cultural attributes or institutional structures, sufficiently distinct to differentiate one society or nation from another. Identity can be considered as the consciousness of continuity through change, rooted in a process of historical identity building. Stability and regularity are very important concepts for identity because, despite its dynamic and contextualized character, identity is a stabilizing framework that allows individuals to recognize who they are, gives meaning to their existence, and ensures its permanence and security (Bekus, 2010).

We accept that, “The peasantry is the most authentic expression of the relationship between a nation and its land; peasant customs become ethnic symbols and referents” – (Thiesse, 1999, 159). By studying the origin of the sense of belief in a community, Max Weber (1995, 56) notes that it may originate from similarities of exterior habitus (Bourdieu, 1964), adaptation to external conditions, and imitation of a neighbouring group. These assumptions are of considerable significance for the study of Belarusian identity, an understanding of which cannot be reached without taking into account the fundamental role played by the peasantry in the history of Belarus.

6. Identity building based on everyday rituals?

Belarus is a peasant nation. The result of the massive urbanization of the 1970s is that Belarusian cities are populated mainly by citizens with a rural background. Belarusian peasants who moved into the big cities brought with them identification models which emphasize family ties and relationships with the environment. The identity link between land and community is significant in the context of a peasant nation. A link with the land is likely to create a sense of belonging to a community; it can become a bearer of symbols and an identity mobilizer. It is difficult for people from a peasant background to identify with a broader and more abstract community such as a city or a nation, because the scale change requires different identification methods. The loss of the Belarusian language caused by peasants arriving in cities being ashamed to speak Belarusian is proof of this fact. At the same time, the phenomenon of “zemliatchestvo” – favouritism towards people from the same village and the same region – remains prevalent in social relations in Belarus to this day. The entourage of the current president is mostly made up of people from his native region and native village. Belarusian president was born in a village and...
before his election as the first president of Belarus, he was a director of a kolkhoz (State farm). The delicate transposition of identification models, and the destruction of the primordial and primary relationships of small peasant communities is responsible for the weakness of Belarusian national identity. If we add to this the uncertain and fluctuating policies adopted by the state with regard to national identity, which are based on economic imperatives and political ambitions such as links with Russia, it is not difficult to understand the weak identity links among Belarusians.

Emotional and psychological components in building links to a nation should also be highlighted. It is in the nature of human behaviour for individuals to aspire to a valorising collective identity within a group, belonging to which confers on them certain characteristics favoured by the group in question (Erikson, 1950). Thus, the affective component plays a very important role in the mobilization and appropriation of discourse on identity. Food and food consumption have a sacred dimension in different cultures. The act of sharing a meal possesses significant symbolic value within the post-Soviet space in different cultural traditions from the Caucasus to the Baltic States, and these symbols are extremely powerful identity markers (Kubik, 1994). For Belarusians, according to a proverb and popular song: ‘Bread is the basis of everything’. Illustrations of this proverb can be seen in cafeterias, shops, and on postage stamps.

The importance of bread for Slavic peoples can be linked to Christian tradition, where bread is a sacred aliment used in the Liturgy or Mass. Potatoes are clearly qualified as the second bread, and are a very important foodstuff from an economic and symbolic point of view. Eating “sacred” peasant food contributes to legitimizing and sacralising the Belarusian social order and its identity. According to a thesis defended by various authors, including Gellner (1983) and Thiesse (1999), a sense of national belonging is strong when “perfectly internalized”. Food consumption is the embodiment of the internalization of a group identity and way of life. Potato consumption is important for various Slavic peoples - Belarusians, Russians, Ukrainians (Ries, 2009). The nutritional yield of the potato is unsurpassed by any other vegetable; it is rich in vitamins, minerals, protein, and complex carbohydrates (Salaman, 1949). For Belarusians, who nickname themselves “Potato eaters”, the potato is an identity marker and not simply a staple food necessary for survival in difficult economic conditions.

The present severe economic crisis obliges Belarusians to guarantee the security of their own food supply by producing food themselves, but domestic food cultivation is also a means of acquiring individual space. A decision to cultivate potatoes is influenced by a number of factors other than those of economy (Ciocanel, 2016). Non-economic values are also important. From a psychological point of view, to cultivate a “historical” food, a food cultivated for centuries, leads to a sense of perpetuated tradition. From a social point of view, cultivating and sharing traditional food contributes towards good relations with relatives and neighbours. To cultivate healthy and simple food can be a source of self-esteem (Ries, 2009). A very specific element of potato cultivation relates to the fact that urban Belarusian citizens, the majority of the country’s population, cultivate potatoes at their dachas, which, as a rule, also possesses a small parcel of land. The culture of having a dacha dates from the Soviet era and can be considered as a means of safeguarding a sphere of liberty and privacy. Both in the context of Soviet totalitarianism and in that of the present authoritarian regime in Belarus, dachas helped and continue to help citizens to escape from economic and political pressure (Hervouet, 2009).

7. Is eating potatoes enough to make you Belarusian?

Folklore proves the importance of potatoes for Belarusians in a historical perspective, but even present day Belarusian songs contain many references to the nation’s most important food. Young Belarusian singer Aliaxei Zhugalkovitch, who won the Junior Eurovision — a very important cultural event in the post-Soviet space— in 2007 (Isaacs and Polese, 2016) has a very popular song “Potatoes”.

Potatoes are super - class!
Potatoes will protect us.
From all epidemics.
Potatoes — they are a way of life!
There is no better feeling.
Than to eat a delicious potato.
Fried potatoes are only cooked by foreigners,
If you eat them — your stomach turns.
To always be healthy - eat a simple boiled potato,
And once you grow up you will be strong as a mountain (http://www.jooov.net).

This song clearly underlines that eating potatoes is a very simple Belarusian tradition that promotes a happy, simple and authentic way of life. It is tried and tested by centuries of tradition, and works as an inoculation against unhealthy foreign food and a dissolute way of life.

Research focused on identity, history and language issues conducted in April—May 2015 with the participation of 1014 Belarusian pupils from 11 secondary schools in different regions of the country, including areas with different social statuses. It has shown some interesting findings.

The results of the survey demonstrate a well-known paradox of Belarusian identity. Seventy three percent of respondents identify themselves as Belarusians, but only 3% use Belarusian in their everyday lives. The Soviet rhetoric promoted by the present political authorities has a relatively large influence (27%) on the historical perceptions of children who were born in the decades after the breakdown of the USSR. This can be explained by the fact that 63.5 % of pupils declared that their parents
contribute to their knowledge of history and thus of national identity. Families can perpetuate a Soviet-orientated narrative of history and identity.

The most interesting result in the survey is the answer to the question: “What does being Belarusian mean to you?” Two major tendencies were identified: firstly elements relating to ethnicity, and secondly subjective feelings of belonging to a nation. The case of Belarus confirms the idea that the construction of identity is a slow and gradual process and requires specific conditions. It illustrates how primary identification groupings and rearranges identity structure to ensure the supremacy of the national link. These identified tendencies start from everyday rituals: “I'm Belarusian because I live here and I eat Belarusian food” (Minsk, schoolboy 14 years old). The consciousness of belonging to a particular nation presupposes a considerable degree of personal reflection, and the acquisition of ethnic traits and everyday national rituals. Below is a sample of responses from pupils of the Grammar School of the National University Lycée, the country’s most elite secondary school, written in perfect Belarusian (here is the author’s translation). “For the moment, I do not have the right to say that I am Belarusian. I must do something for my country to be Belarusian” (schoolboy, 15 year old). “Knowledge of the complex history of my people has helped me to understand my people better and to understand myself as well (schoolgirl, 16 years old); “I'm ashamed to admit it, but it was only after becoming a pupil at the Lycée that my national consciousness was awoken and I understood: I AM BELARUSIANP$^d - q_0$ 1” (Minsk, schoolgirl, 16 years old).

Some pupils from both rural and urban schools indicated a conscious refusal to belong to a nation without any prestige: “It's not prestigious to be Belarusian” (rural school of Gomel region, schoolboy 15 years old); “To be Belarusian is to say “thank you” instead of defending yourself when you are attacked. Can I belong to this nation?” (Minsk, schoolboy, 15 years old). “To be Belarusian is to let other people trample on your rights and never claim what you deserve” (Minsk, schoolgirl, 16 years old).

8. Conclusion

Everyday rituals are an indispensable part of national identity. Potato eating is certainly a Belarusian way of life, but if day-to-day rituals are not considered as an element of national belonging, it is difficult to perpetuate a nation and its identity matrix. The refusal of the younger generation to identify itself with a peasant nation without any prestige is revealing. Some young people aspire to more sophisticated food as a marker of a prestigious identity, rather than to identify with a peasant food such as potatoes in a globalized context.

Globalization has brought about a discussion of the disappearance of nation-states, as global trade and the rise of the concepts of a “global citizen” and a common identity have helped to reduce differences and distances between individual nation-states, especially with regards to modern modes of consumption and means of communication, in particular the Internet.

Yet in some cases, globalization promotes and strengthens traditional identities, such as national identities, rather than proposing new global identities, thus producing not an opportunity, but a tension between identities. The emergence of unknown globalized references causes people to feel disoriented. In this context old, tried and tested references such as nation-states, especially with regards to modern modes of consumption and means of communication, in particular the Internet.

Archives of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, 6-13-67.
Ciocană, A., 2016. “What’s so great about being Romanian if you don’t have anything to eat”: food practices in “transition”. Int. Rev. Soc. Res. 6 (1), 40–48, 2016.

1 The pupil used capital letters in his answer.