



B-larus
RESEARCH CENTER

Office of Sviatlana
Tsikhanouskaya



UK Research
and Innovation



GLOBSEC
IDEAS SHAPING THE WORLD

Policy Brief

FREEDOM DAY IN BELARUS (MARCH 25): COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE FUTURE, IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

MAY 8, 2022



Freedom Day in Belarus (March 25): Collective memory and the future, in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine

Contributors:

[OST Research Centre](#): OST Research Centre is a department of the [Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya \(OST\)](#). The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

[Oxford Belarus Observatory](#): The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

[GCRF COMPASS Project](#) (ES/P010849/1, 2017-21) is an ambitious UK government capacity-building funding initiative, aiming to extend UK research globally and to address the challenges of growth and sustainability in developing countries. Notably, the COMPASS project, led by the University of Kent, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, seeks to establish the 'hubs of excellence' at the top-level Higher Education Institutions in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to enable them to become the centres for knowledge-sharing and transfer for *research integration, impact governance, and sustainable communities*. In 2021, the COMPASS project was HIGHLY COMMENDED under the category of the best international collaboration of the year, by the Times Higher Education, widely known to be '[The OSCARS of Higher Education in the UK](#)'.

Visit us / Contact us:

W: <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/>

E: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org

T: @Tsikhanouskaya

W: <https://obo.web.ox.ac.uk/>

E: obo@area.ox.ac.uk

T: @OxfordBelarus

W: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/gcrf-compass/>

E: gcrf-compass@kent.ac.uk

T: @GCRF-COMPASS

Freedom Day in Belarus (March 25): Collective memory and the future, in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine

Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 24 March 2022, at the webinar jointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST), with the support of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) COMPASS project. The discussion focused on the historical importance and contemporary reflections of March 25th - Belarus's Freedom Day - a historical date to commemorate the declaration of independence by Belarus Independent Republic (BNR) in 1918 – one of the key events in the history of Belarus. The participants shared their perspectives on collective memory in Belarus, the role of identity in state- and nation-building in the country. The policy brief highlights **civic identity** as the most comprehensive marker for re-building and embedding democracy in Belarus.

Background

March 25th, one of the main national holidays (*Freedom Day* or *Dzen' Voli*) in Belarus, represents a special date for all democratically-minded Belarusians – a day to celebrate independence. In contrast, for Alexander Lukashenka, this celebration has always been problematic both because of its ability to mobilise people to protest against the country's growing dependency on Russia, but also because of the special place that this holiday has in public opinion and the collective memory of Belarusians. Indeed, whenever there has been an opportunity or a need, there have been protests on this day in Belarus, met with varying degrees of brutality and repression by Lukashenka's regime. In 2021, 25 March was associated with the moment of acute political tension witnessing the streets of Belarus teeming with special troops and the police, with the authorities fearing mass protest and uprising in the name of freedom. This year, with Lukashenka's support of Russia's war against Ukraine and his permission for the Russian military forces to stay in Belarus, the situation is even further complicated as Freedom Day grapples with the real threats to Belarus's independence - of occupation by Russia and its absorption into Russia's geo-political games. Indeed, there are even concerns that threats to Belarus' independence are so great that it may lose its sovereignty altogether.

In this context, this policy brief explores the special significance of this holiday for Belarusian politics, identity and collective memory. We reflected on what this year's Freedom Day would look like in Belarus, and how its meaning is transformed in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine? What ideas about the independence and sovereignty of the country are there in the collective memory and public opinions of Belarusians? How enduring are these ideas, and how can they help sustain Belarus' independence through this difficult period?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office](#) (OST Research Centre) and the [Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) (OBO), with the support of the [GCRF COMPASS project](#). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Prof. **Elena Korosteleva** and the speakers of the event included **Aliaksandr Shlyk**, Special Representative on Elections, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; **Prof. David Marples**, Distinguished Professor of History, University of Alberta; **Veranika Laputska**, Research Fellow at The Eurasian States in Transition Research Center; **Dr Olga Onuch**, Associate Professor in Politics, University of Manchester.

Analysis of the issue

Contemporary situation from a historical perspective

In order to understand and contextualise the importance of Freedom Day, one should start the analysis from a historical perspective. The March 25th Freedom Day is one of the key events in the Belarusian past. It has been an identity marker that delineated national Belarus from the Belarus that Lukashenka has tried to conceive. In the latter, Lukashenka himself is at the top of the hierarchy but the Belarusian identity is primarily linked to the Second World War. The fact that the Belarusian National Republic, established in 1918, was short-lived – lasted about six months and then a little bit longer in exile in Lithuania – means that there was no real time to establish the foundations of a longer term state.¹ In fact, in many ways the Belarusian National Republic and the Belarusian SSR that followed (although it went through several stages) have sometimes been linked together. In other words, the fact that there was a state founded on March 25th 1918 was one of the reasons for the establishment of the Belarusian Republic by Lenin's government in Moscow.

In the 1920s, there were some foundations built for a genuine Belarusian national state with the development of culture and the development of language on an unprecedented scale. This is the key period of cultural building of the Belarusian state, albeit under Communist control, and despite the fact that - once Stalin came into power - he set out to completely destroy the Belarusian national elite through the 1930s – but particularly in 1937-1938, when he focused on the literary figures and the execution of over one hundred writers, which is another date commemorated in Belarus today. In Soviet times this date was almost neglected and had a peripheral meaning. However, from 1991 - 1994, together with a brief period of democratisation in Belarus, March 25th became an important holiday marking independence of the country. When Lukashenka came to power and started an authoritarian consolidation process this date was diminished again and moreover became a reason for the symbolic struggle between pro-democratic Belarusian and non-democratic authorities.

¹ Although up till now BNR has its one government in exile established in December 1917. For more info see <https://www.radabnr.org/english/>

Sviatlana Tikhonovskaya's electoral campaign during the summer of 2020 mobilised hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to stand up for freedom against Lukashenka's regime. It marked a watershed in the national revival, and the rise of peoplehood to celebrate freedom and independence. After the disputed presidential election in August 2020, people took to the streets to protest against the fraud and violence exercised by the regime, at the same time defending their freedom and their future as a sovereign country. Eight months on, the protests were severely thwarted by the regime, resulting in over one thousand political prisoners, and more than fifty thousand incarcerated, beaten up, tortured and disappeared or murdered. This however changed the meaning of the Day of Freedom, augmenting it with a spirit of resistance and resilience against the brutality of Lukashenka's dictatorship and holding out the promise of nurturing the fledgling Belarusian nation.²

The role of collective memory

The discussion so far suggests that one should not overlook the role of collective memory and the need to recall that memory from the past. On the other hand, the 2020 protests demonstrated that identity should be based on the Constitution and the recognition of civil rights. This requires proper self-reflection and reconciliation on certain issues, such as who the Belarusians are as a nation, as people, what their common history is and what it should lead to. As a matter of fact, Belarus, unlike the Baltic states or Ukraine, is the only country where archives of the secret services have never been opened. The country, extremely traumatised not only by the NKVD and KGB repressions during Stalinist times but also by the Second World War, never really contemplated what had happened. In reality, the population of Belarus remains scarred and tormented by the memories of atrocities carried out by both the Nazis *and* the Soviets.

Perhaps the real problem that Belarus has faced after its independence in 1991 is that, unlike the Baltic states and Ukraine, there has never been any interest from the state in exploring the realities, nature and effects of these contested memories and experiences to see what they brought, what they should lead to, and how they can be incorporated and internalised into the Belarusian identity.

Comparative perspective with Ukraine

It would be useful at this point to bring a comparative perspective with Ukraine, as identity-related issues were also discussed in Ukraine for a long period of time. Several academics in the 1990s suggested the need to reflect on what Ukrainian identity is, how much of it is civic, ethnic and/or linguistic, which symbols are the most important etc.³ Important though these scholarly and activist-oriented discussions were and are, they were not ever as significant at the level of the ordinary citizen. Recent survey findings in Belarus are also informative in this regard. According to a large online survey conducted in August 2020,

² See Korosteleva, E. and Petrova I. (2021) '[Community Resilience in Belarus and the EU response](#)', *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review*, 59 (4), advanced online publication

³ Onuch, O., H.E. Hale and G. Sasse (2018) Studying identity in Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34(2-3). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1451241>

44% of participants said that Russian was their mother tongue and 35% said that Belarusian is their mother tongue.⁴ However, 93% of the participants responded to the survey in Russian, while 76% of them considered themselves as Belarusian. The interesting point here is that these markers were not that different across protesters and non-protesters. These data suggest that it is not so different from what has been seen in Ukraine for so many years, indicating the central importance of *civic identity* in state-building or nation-building processes.

Conclusions

This policy briefing focused on the importance of the March 25th Freedom Day in Belarusian society and politics. In particular, the discussion focused on its historical contemporary importance, marking a key event in the history of Belarus. In relation to this, the policy briefing highlighted the nature of and challenges to collective memory in Belarus, and the role of identity in state-building and nation-building processes in the country. The Belarusian citizens, who took to the streets in 2020, protested for their state, which they wanted to be democratic and free. In this context, **civic identity** is highlighted as the most comprehensive marker to build and consolidate democracy in Belarus.

Policy recommendations

1. It is important to **organise public discussions**, as well as conversations involving historians and social scientists, on the collective memory and identity of Belarus.
2. It is crucial to **promote civic identity** in Belarus along Constitutional lines to build and consolidate democracy and freedoms, rather than nation-building along ethnic or linguistic lines.
3. The current Kurapaty memorial site⁵ and other places of Soviet repression should become **markers of national identity and proud symbols of national independence**. Information about them should be conveyed via school text books and wider mass media so that these symbols become imbued in the public memory as reflections on places and times of crime and the struggle for freedom, so that future generations can internalise and draw strength from this collective memory to build a better future.

⁴ HURI (Ukrainian Research Institute Harvard) From 'Glory to Ukraine' to 'Long Live Belarus': A Comparison of Mass Mobilization in Ukraine (2013-2014) and Belarus (2020)
<https://huri.harvard.edu/event/onuch-mateo>

⁵ Kurapaty is the name of a place in the outskirts of Minsk (capital of Belarus) where NKVD officers killed, between 1937 and 1941, several thousand of Belarusian and other civilians. For more read:
<https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/kurapaty-1937-1941-nkvd-mass-killings-soviet-belarus.html>

Contacts

Oxford Belarus Observatory, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies:

Email: obo@area.ox.ac.uk

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/OxfordBelarus>

GCRF COMPASS

Email: gcrfcompass@kent.ac.uk

FB: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/571587456540963/>

@GCRF-COMPASS

Research Center of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST RESEARCH CENTER)

Email: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyEEXOn_QtIrmPfCHaajsdQ/videos

COMPASS

