

**biss**

Belarusian Institute  
for Strategic Studies



# THE IDENTITY INDEX

## Issue 1

**Monitoring period:  
August-October 2020**

**Minsk 2021**

# On the idea of the index

Following the recommendations of the BISS Council and after negotiations with our partners, in the spring of 2020, our team decided to initiate a six-month monitoring of processes in the field of national identity. As a result, there should be two issues of the “Identity Index”: the first, covering August-September-October 2020, the second — November-December 2020 and January 2021.

The purpose of the Index is to contribute to an objectified understanding of changes in the Belarusian national identity, identify trends and formulate forecasts for their further development. It is not difficult to guess that this type of undertaking is a serious methodological challenge. First, it is difficult to distinguish events and statements that are relevant to the national identity from the irrelevant ones. Second, even if this area is delineated, there is a risk that some phenomena may be ignored due to the *accessibility effect* (a situation where a resounding statement or event catches researcher’s attention, but and what has not got media coverage may go unnoticed). Another challenge, third, is the quantification of processes, that is, the translation of events or statements into the language of quantitative indicators.

So, we treat the Index’s first two issues as pilot ones. We are convinced that even at this stage they will have cognitive value, but at the same time we are aware of some possible methodological flaws. During the implementation of the study, as a rule, there is an opportunity to see how the analytical tools work and in which direction it needs to be improved. This is what we hope to do in the next stages of monitoring processes in the identity field.

The full Index’s methodology can be found in Appendix. A [table](#) with the content units of the first Index’s issue and the quantitative values attributed to them is also available.

**Vadzim Mažejka** is the Index’s concept author and coordinator. Expert assessments of the phenomena related to identity were made by Vadzim Mažejka and **Andrej Rasinski**. The primary data were collected by **Anastasia Yurieva** and **Jakub Dyńko**.

*Piotr Rudkouski,  
BISS Director*



# Summary

- In total, the contribution of non-state actors to the strengthening of identity was more than 80%
- A significant part of the state activities relevant to the identity is characterized by regionality, routine and adherence to the narrative of the local-mindedness (*tutejšaść*). The reaction of the state bodies to the socio-political protests was the restoration of the message that the white-red-white flag is ‘fascist’ and ‘artificial’, as well as the emphasis on the ‘non-Polishness’ of Belarusians as a negative identity
- The street protests of the post-election period were accompanied by the popularization of identity relevant symbols and the strengthening of the national unity sense. Expressions of honour to belong to an “outstanding people” on the part of famous personalities have been an additional factor in strengthening this feeling
- Many domestic businesses showed solidarity with the protest movement, and they put civic values above short-term profit, the latter being indirectly important for strengthening standing above classes solidarity, which is very important from the point of view of asserting national identity

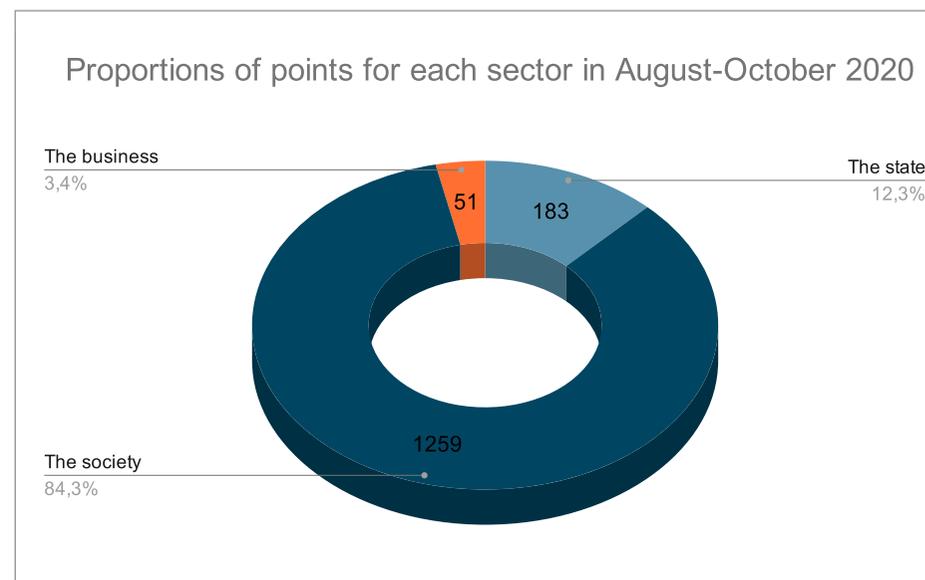
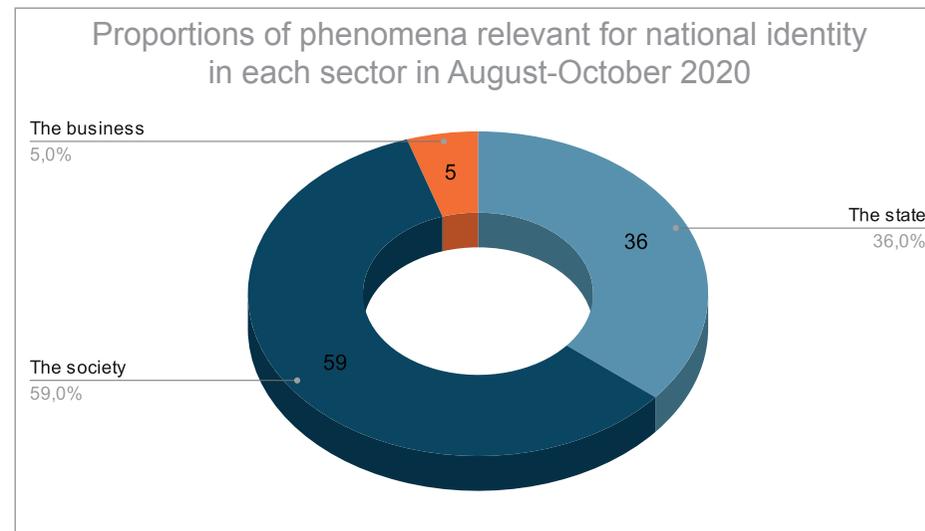
## The society's contribution to the identity strengthening is more than 80%

According to the monitoring results for August-October 2020, the overall identity index was **1493** points. The state contribution is **183** points, the business contribution is **51** points, and the civil society contribution is **1259** points. Thus, the society's share was more than **80%** - see charts 1 and 2.

## The state: propaganda and local-mindedness

During the specified period, **37** state representatives acts relevant to the national identity were recorded. 27 of them received a positive rating, while 10 getting a negative one. The final score is "**183**". The highest score ("50") was given to the celebration of the Belarusian Writing Day. The lowest points ("-11" each) were received by propaganda articles "Where does the white-red-white flag lead us?" and "The symbolism of 'peaceful' protests: have you forgotten history?", published by the *SB. Belarus today*.

A significant part of the state activities relevant to the identity were characterized by **regionality**, while their statements were marked by **routine**. Ethnographic exhibitions and folk festivals took place in towns and villages according to the established canon, traditional activities were organized (such as the artisans fair "City



of Masters”). Within the framework of the “Year of the Lesser Motherland”, many identity relevant phenomena fit into the narrative of the **local-mindedness**. Although increasing regional patriotism can be an important element of (common) national identity, but if there are few or insignificant actions of a national scope, its positive effect is low.

The state’s reaction to the socio-political protests was to promote the narratives that the white-red-white flag is ‘fascist’ and ‘artificial’. One of the eloquent headlines in this regard: *“Belarusians have a great historical account to the inhumans who, under the white-red-white flag, the Pahonia (Pursuit) and the swastika, were killing us with particular zeal during the Great Patriotic War”*. Fighting against political opponents, the state representatives revived the attack on those symbols that were at bottom of the modern Belarusian statehood birth, were embedded in a long history and emphasize the peculiarity of Belarusians as a nation. As a negative identity, the state representatives primarily emphasized the non-Polish or even anti-Polish features of the Belarusians. The interwar period of Western Belarus is often referred to as “national oppression”.

## The society: Solidarity as a prerequisite for identity

Over the monitored period, **59** content units relevant to national identity were recorded in the civil society sector. 58 of them were rated as positive with only 1 being negative. The final score is “1259”. The highest scores were given to the August street



Photo by Andrew Keymaster on Unsplash

protests (“342”) and, separately, to the post-election events in Hrodna (“288”). The only negative score (“-5”) was attributed to the statement of the pro-government multidisciplinary public figure, Julia Arciuch: “I will go out on my shield, but the white-red-white flag will never rise over our country.”

Besides the direct political impact, the street protest of the post-election period demonstrated the strengthening of the Belarusian identity. Symbolically, this was reflected in a huge number of white-red-white flags.

The solidarity of society and the support of each other were primarily a manifestation of civic maturity. But they also had an indirect meaning for national identity, as they made it possible to feel the commonality of fate and experience on a national scale.

An important element of strengthening the identity became the public expressions of a nation-affirming nature on the part of famous personalities: *“Belarusians are a great and strong people”, “The most peaceful, sincerest, most honest people are Belarusians”*.

## The business: a demonstration of standing above classes solidarity

In the business sector, **six** content units relevant to the identity were recorded. The final score is “51”. The highest score (“18”) was received by the statements of companies that joined the strike on October 26 and motivated it by national interests.

In the context of the socio-political protests, many Belarusian businesses demonstrated solidarity with the protest movement, and civic values were put above short-term profit. Eloquent are the statements that entrepreneurs used to explain their participation in the nationwide strike: *“This decision is our small contribution to making life in the country more honest and fair, and instead of violence, we want to be surrounded by an atmosphere of respect for each other”, “We will meet in the new Belarus”*.

# Appendix: Index’s Methodology

## Basic concepts and background

National identity is a set of ideas about one’s own community, which fulfils at least one of two conditions:

- (a) it is united by territorial borders of a state;
- (b) it is united by linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Belarus is a community that at least fulfils the condition (a), that is, there is a group of people in the world who are united by living on the territory of the Republic of Belarus (RB) or/and being a citizen of the Republic of Belarus.

Communities that fulfil at least one of the above conditions will be called «national communities».

Ideas about one's own national community can be strong or ephemeral, coherent or contradictory, isolated or sociable, closed or open to revision (development). Symbols, narratives, ceremonies, and events contribute to the strength, coherence, sociability and openness of representations.

The expressions « strong national identity» vs «weak national identity» are often used intuitively and situationally, but they can be operationalized as follows:

*A strong national identity* is a set of widely held ideas about one's own community within a national community to the extent that they are strong, coherent, sociable and open.

*A weak national identity* is characterized by the fact that ephemeral, contradictory, isolated and closed ideas about one's community prevail within the national community.

These statements allow us to formulate a «Belarusian identity normative model», which formed the basis for assessing the phenomena in terms of promoting/hindering the strengthening of national identity.

## The Belarusian identity normative model

From the point of view of strength, coherence, sociability and openness of ideas about the national community, such a model of the Belarusian national identity is optimal, which contains the following elements:

- (a) perception of the Belarusian language as a distinctive factor;
- (b) the emphasis on the cultural identity and political potential of the Belarusian people and the related imperative of the defence and development of the national, cultural and political sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belarus;
- (c) acceptance of the white-red-white flag and the *Pahonia* coat of arms as nation-affirming elements;
- (d) maintaining such a historical narrative about the formation and development of the Belarusian nation, that makes it possible to take into account the established historical facts as much as possible;
- (e) commitment to local identity as an element of national identity.

## Three sectors of monitoring

We covered the following three areas with monitoring:

The **state** sector covering the activities of state bodies and their representatives;

The **society** including the activities of non-governmental organisations and individual citizens (registered and unregistered organizations, churches, socio-political activists, parties and movements, etc.);

The **business** covering the activities of commercial institutions (from large holdings to individual entrepreneurs).

The totality of the scores for each of the three sectors makes up the overall Identity Index.

## Media coverage

For practical reasons, we limit ourselves to events and statements that are reported in the media. We have selected the following five media as sources:

- BelTA (<https://www.belta.by/>);
- TUT.by (<https://www.tut.by/>);
- Radio Liberty (<https://www.svaboda.org/>);
- Naša Niva (<https://nashaniva.by/>);
- SB. Belarus today (<https://www.sb.by/>).

## Monitoring technology

Based on the media monitoring results, events or statements related to identity are entered in the general table. This can be a copy of the title or a short explanatory comment. A hyperlink to the material in the media is added to each event or statement. Depending on who the actor is, the corresponding sheet of the table is used – «state», «society», «business».

Each phenomenon receives an initial score (from «1» to «10»), reflecting its significance for the identity. The score can be positive or negative, according to the normative model. Two experts participate in producing the quantified score: each of them, regardless of the other, sets a score. When the scores differ significantly, the experts discuss the situation and try to formulate a common position. If this is not possible, a third expert is invited to make the best possible assessment.

Other quantitative values are added to the initial score, depending on whether it is a statement or an event; in the case of statements, there is a mention who was the addressee and what was the audience; in both cases, the size and strength of the phenomenon is assessed. So, the following coefficients are introduced:

- 1x — statements;
- 2x — events;
- 3x (in exceptional cases) — phenomena that have a colossal effect and/or are unprecedented in history.

Depending on who is the event's initiator or the statement's author:

- 2x — top official of an institution within a sector;
- 1.5 x — a representative of the highest echelon of institutions within a sector;
- 1x — a middle-range representative of an institution within a sector.

In terms of the audience, additional quantitative values are attributed according to the following order:

- 2x — if the information about a phenomenon is gaining an atypically high number of views or a statement becomes the main topic of a day or a week;
- 1.5x — when the number of views is clearly higher than the expected average, and the information is actively discussed by actors outside of the reporting media;
- 1x — a typical number of views for this type of content.

In terms of the size of the phenomenon, additional values are attributed according to the following principles:

- 1x — events are local or have limited impact (for example, an exhibition in a local museum), as well as statements en passant among other theses (for example, to stress the importance of the Belarusian language «among other things»);
- 2x — significant, national events (for example, the celebration of the BNR-100), or statements where the

theme of identity is central (for example, «*Marzaluk: the Belarusian language, as well as statehood, will exist until the Advent*»);

- 3x — when the trend is reversed.

In terms of the sustainability, additional quantitative values are attributed according to the following order:

- 1x — when a single event occurs, without a noticeable follow-up;
- 2x — if a phenomenon has a replicative character or is likely to have a delayed effect, for example, changes in a new edition of a textbook, or a statement with a promise of specific intentions for future actions);
- 3x — if a phenomenon has a performative character (changes in legislation or in corporate policy).

The final score is determined automatically by multiplying the average main score by all the coefficients.

# The Index's Team



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# About the BISS

Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) is an independent Belarusian think tank, founded in 2007 by a group of prominent scientists and public figures. Its main mission is to assess socio-political processes in a long-term (strategic) perspective as well as to promote the values of open society in Belarus.

Currently, besides the *Identity Index*, the BISS does research on scenarios of political transformation in the post-electoral period and values transformation; it regularly holds discussions in the expert and analytical club, conducts trainings on critical thinking and analyses current political events.

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