



Belarusian Institute
for Strategic Studies

THE IDENTITY INDEX

Issue 2



**Monitoring period:
November 2020 — January 2021**

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 are 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 second 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 public actors in identity strengthening made up 65%;
- Ethnography and regionalism prevail in the most notable actions of the state in favour of identity, the narrative of civic passivity is promoted. By promoting the narrative of the “fascist” nature of the white-red-white flag, the state newspaper actually repeats the narratives of National Socialist propaganda in its own way;
- The society continues to reflect on the events of the summer of 2020, including national affirmative statements of celebrities and artistic reflection. Among the public figures there are those who support the state narrative of the “fascist” nature of the white-red-white flag;
- In the current political environment, businesses are wary of identity initiatives and in fact avoid such activity.



Photo by timesofisrael.com

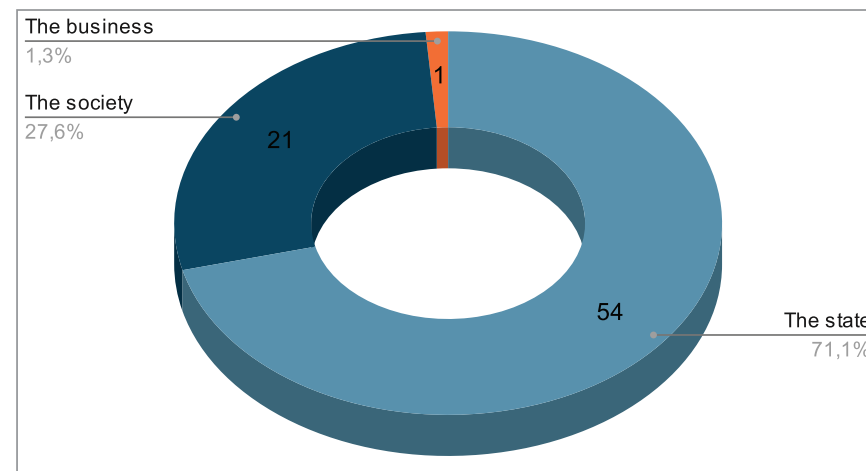
The contribution to the identity of all actors has declined

According to the results of monitoring for November 2020 — January 2021, the overall Identity Index was 245 points. The state contribution was 75 points, the business contribution was 11 points, and the public contribution was 159 points. Thus, the share of society was 65% — see graphs 1 and 2.

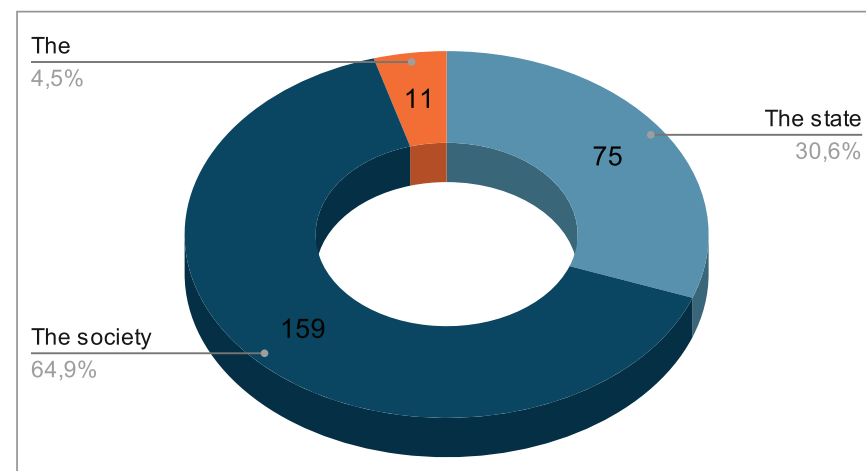
The contribution to identity of all actors has decreased compared to the previous period of the Index (August — October 2020). State contributions decreased by two-thirds (from 183 points to 75), public — by eight times (from 1259 points to 159), business — by five times (from 51 points to 11). The overall index decreased by 6 times (from 1493 points to 245).

The decline in the indices of individual actors is due to specific factors (for example, the intensification of propaganda against national symbols reduces the state index). However, the overall decline is primarily due to the extremely high base for comparison. The rise in activity in August 2020 is an unusual situation for Belarus (as well as for any country), and therefore we can actually talk not about a decrease in activity, but about its return to the rut, closer to normal times.

Proportions of phenomena relevant for national identity in each sector in November 2020 — January 2021



Proportions of points for each sector in November 2020 — January 2021



State: from ethnography to fascism

During this period, 54 actions of state representatives relevant to the national identity were recorded. 36 of them received a positive assessment, 18 - a negative one. The final score is “75”. The highest score (“18”) was received by the official translation of the Labor Code into Belarusian. The lowest score (“-14”) was given to the propaganda article “Creeping Heroization of Nazism: White-red white Activists III with Brown Plague”, published in the SB. Belarus today.

Ethnography prevails in the most notable actions of the state in favour of identity. The biggest positive points were given to events where Belarusianness is viewed from afar — either geographically (days of Belarusian culture in Estonia) or temporarily (reburial of Zmitrok Byadula, memories of the 90th anniversary of Uladzimir Karatkevich, 120th anniversary of composer Pukst and 115th anniversary of writer Yan Skryhan).

As in the previous period, there is a noticeable regionalism, when the state media willingly cover official events in the regions (Chashniki, Lyakhavichy, Drahichyn), ignoring the national context. This narrative is combined with the narrative of civic passivity, which is promoted even through those materials that generally receive positive marks as to identity. For example, in the memoirs about Zmitrok Byadula it is noted that he “loved his native land very much. Many times he visited the village of Pasadzets, where he was born and raised” — as if the love of a public figure, writer and translator for the homeland is most evident in the fact that he



comes to the village many times. At the same time, the fact that he took part in the First All-Belarusian Congress is excluded from the biography of Zmitrok Byadula in the same article. The same applies to other cultural figures, whose mentions in the state press actually show that “art is out of politics.”

The narrative that the white-red-white flag is “fascist” that was noticed in the earlier period has now been continued and developed. Numerous publications about collaborators during the war (primarily in the SB. Belarus Today) emphasize the need to demonstrate their connection with the white-red-white symbols and the current opponents of the government as much as possible. The same narrative is promoted through different formats: inter-

views with historians and expert roundtables, illustrations from archives, and “letters from readers.” There are caricatures where the white-red-white flag literally unites Adolf Hitler and Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In the article about the Union of Belarusian Youth, the date of the proclamation of the Belarusian People’s Republic is likened to Hitler’s birthday, and the shout “Long live Belarus!” — to the German “Heil Hitler!”. The material of the state newspaper does not try to expose the National Socialist propaganda, but in fact repeats the same narrative in its own way. If the occupation authorities in the 1940s tried to combine the Belarusian national symbolism with Hitler’s to attract locals, then 80 years later the propaganda used the same combination to denigrate its opponents. Although it is the same manipulation, and the white-red-white flag was not associated with fascism then or now.

Society: reflection on the events of the past months

During the monitoring period, 21 content units relevant to the national identity were recorded in the public sphere. Of these, 20 were rated as positive, 1 as negative. The final score is “159”. The highest score (“18”) was given to the news that Svyatlana Aleksievich collects materials - stories of heroes — for a book about current events in Belarus. The only negative score (“-7”) was the appeal of citizens to the Prosecutor General’s Office with a statement about the need to ban white-red-white symbols and recognize it as extremist.

The main place was taken by the reflection on the events of the past months. Thus, public expressions of a nation-affirming character by celebrities continue: “Belarusian people are brave, determined, desperate, with a sense of dignity”, “A nation has already been formed - look at how people help each other like a big family”, “an expression ‘Belarusian is a Belarusian to Belarusian’ began to get a positive connotation”, “Belarus has changed. Already. It has come a long way in forming a nation and realizing the value of independence.”

Artistic events were also connected with the identity, such as the presentation of the new album of the Free Choir or the exhibition of the artist Valyantsina Shoba “Long Live Belarus!” in white and red colors in the Center of city life of Hrodna.

The only public event that received a negative score in terms of identity was the appeal of citizens to the Prosecutor General’s Office with a statement about the need to ban white-red-white symbols and recognize them as extremist. This is fully in line with the “letters of readers”, when under the guise of the position of society the narrative of state propaganda is being promoted. However, the “letters of readers” are signed with unknown names, and it is impossible to say for sure whether such people exist or not. In the same case, the initiative group is represented by the head of the organization “Cossack Salvation” Petr Shapko, who in addition to fighting the white-red-white flag supports the Russian world, fights against homosexuality and the adoption of a law on domestic violence.

Business: caution as to new initiatives

In the area of business, one identity-relevant content unit was recorded, which received a positive score of “11”: “A mural of Uladzimir Karatkevich is being painted in Orsha on the initiative of patron Andrei Balabin.”

Balabin is the chairman of the board of shareholders of CJSC “PATIO” (chain of stores “5 element”), №68 in the top of successful and influential businessmen of Belarus in 2019. Balabin comes from Orsha, and has been investing in the memory of his compatriot Karatkevich for a long time. Back in 2018, he bought a house where Karatkevich lived and wrote to create a museum there. Thus, the initiative with the mural is a logical continuation of the systemic work that began a long time ago, and not a new initiative in the conditions of 2020-2021.

As stated in the first issue of the Identity Index, in the current political environment, businesses are wary of identity-related initiatives and in fact avoid such activity.

Appendix: Index's Methodology

Developed by Vadzim Mažejka

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 organisations, 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, “*Marzhluk: 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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