

The Scapegoat behind the river Bug

*Belarus is a border
between the normal world
and some dreadful barbarity;
the character of this division
is (...) transcendent.*
(Czarnyszewicz 3)

The Present, post-soviet Belarus is a country, whose system is based on the inelastic and inefficient planned economy, which represents antinomy of the market. It also provokes economic depressions on a regular basis.

This inefficient system is being sustained by Alexander Lukashenko, who is able to do so through Russian subsidies, even though they have been limited since 2007. But it is impossible for such system to last for a longer period of time. It needs to be reformed through introducing market, with prices formed by individuals, who freely participate in it.

Ceasing the sustainment of the current economic system, combined with the depth of reforms, - or speaking euphemistically - with the level of pain they will cause within society, will result in an outbreak of temporal social crisis.

Currently Belarus is going through some less serious crises. But as is the case with the majority of crises around the world, that one also has some common features: an irrational explanation of causes and a solution through finding scapegoat.

Likewise other countries, Belarus is bound by the same social mechanisms. Because decision-makers fear outbreaks of an uncontrollable social unrests and have a desire to keep their power, they start looking for patsy. They find somebody who is "guilty of" current situation: another difficulties, diplomatic conflicts and economic crises.

Who is a convenient scapegoat for the Belarusian authorities? How is he chosen? When Lukashenka's rule finishes, will there be a new "scapegoat"? To answer those questions we will use the mimetic theory, which was introduced for the first time by René Girard. Using anthropological philosophy will allow us to bring back the best traditions of modern political sciences, which demanded asking "what is human beings nature like?" before beginning research. This move will allow us to look on Belarus from a different perspective.

Mimethic theory in a nutshell

Mimetic theory is a dualistic one and consists of two spheres. The process of mimesis is essential for both of them. In the first sphere it destroys order in polis, but in the second one mimesis provides some peace and stabilization.

Every man was endowed by nature with a tendency to mimesis, irrespective of their background, nationality or other differences. This tendency is characteristic of the human desire. There is no denying that we wish to have, what other people desire. However imitation of other's desires leads to rivalry and, in the end, to violence. After some time competing individuals forget what was the subject of their desire. Hatred for one another becomes the most important goal. Very often that leads to idolatry and the imitated model becomes an idol (Romejko 58).

René Girard writes: “Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats”(52). Accumulation of many minor conflicts between individuals causes crisis inside the whole community. During its culmination, situation can become similar to the one described in Hobbes *Leviathan*. Violence gets out of control and becomes a threat for the lives of all individuals.

Ironically mimesis – which caused this chaos, also helps to restore order. Such development is possible through the scapegoat mechanism. At this moment mimesis shows its other face and directs violence towards chosen victim – a scapegoat¹. As a result he becomes a personification of crisis inside the community and is accused of crimes he had not committed. Epidemic, hunger or plague are said to be only some of the results of his evil doings. An imitation creates a mob, which is united in hatred of the victim because the group believes in the scapegoat's guilt. Consequently members of the community kill him or banish him from polis. Community experiences catharsis and desired order is restored.

Many concepts are linked with this mechanism, which is the founder of culture. It is the base of primitive religions, myths, rites or different institutions such as theatre.

Girard proves, that primitively, this mechanism is activated spontaneously. As time goes by some individuals gain control over it. They also gain some esoteric knowledge, which they find useful. Especially whenever they want to achieve some personal goals. The institution of pharmākos in the ancient Athens is an example of such manipulation.

Anybody, who acts differently can become a scapegoat. For example members of some ethnic or religious minorities are perfect candidates for the role of patsy. Distinctive qualities, not accusations decide who is going to become a scapegoat.

The case of the presidential election in 2010

Who is considered to act differently in Belarusian reality? Which minority? Who “causes” all crises? Let’s take a look at the presidential election in 2010. Elections in Belarus cause strong emotions in Europe, especially the presidential ones. Because of the existence of attributes typical for the democratic-liberal system, crisis associated with election repeats itself regularly. This crisis is caused mainly by some strong international pressure and accusations of doctoring election’s results. It is intensified by those strong emotions and also opposition’s protests, whose transitional goal is to mobilize the crowd.

The Election took place on December 19th. On the next day the Belarusian authority found itself in a difficult position. OSCE’s mission, lead by Tony Lloyd criticized the election. Soon, the ministers of foreign affairs from Germany, Poland, Sweden and Czech Republic, said that “basic principles of European Union are human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Because of that “UE will not be indifferent to flagrant violation of such principles on her continent”(“Unijni ministrowie o Białorusi”). This resulted in banning some of Belarusian civil servants from entering UE’s territories.

First signs, that Poles living in Belarus can become the main victims of this crisis appeared in the middle of January 2011. *Sowietskaja Bielorusija* accused Warsaw and Berlin of preparing a plot, which goal is to bring down authorities in Minsk. But during that time Poles had not been scapegoats yet, because some of the news in the newspaper were true, like the financial support for the opposition from Western countries. Poles were turned into scapegoats at the end of the month.

¹ Concept of “scapegoat” refers to ritual of beseeching, during which scapegoat was exiled to a desert. The purpose of such action was freeing people from problems that were tormenting them. This ritual was described in the Book of Leviticus in Bible.

At that moment A. Lukashenko said: “they may kill us, they may break our neck but we will not surrender!”(Kościński, Pisalnik A:11) Such violent words referred to the ostensible Polish plans of taking back territories, which belonged to Poland before the Second World War. Newspaper from Brest, *Zaria* wrote: “Until today Poland has been interested in lands lying on the east side of the border. Poles call them Eastern Borderlands (Kresy Wschodnie). (...) On that territories independent countries were created (...). There is no secret that a lot of politics in Warsaw cannot come to terms with this fact (...). They want residents of those lands to pronounce themselves Poles, and demand later uniting with their historical homeland.” Nonsensical picture of Polish politicians trying to reclaim Eastern Borderlands have been appearing since the year 2000. In Girard’s terminology such accusations are called accusatory stereotype. They began the persecution of Polish scapegoat. In this case they were strengthened with stigmatization. For example the Polish minority was called the fifth column. Journalists accused Poles of a desire to interfere in internal matters of Belarus under the pretext of defending human rights (what is true but only in case of few activists and authorities in Warsaw). They were supposed to long for „reviewing borders” and „reclaiming territories called Eastern Borderline” (that is not true). How was Poland described in this situation? As a country being “in the center of anti-belarusian activity”(Kościński, Pisalnik A:11). In addition to newspapers there were also some attacks on Poles on television (“Nowa skierowana przeciwko Polsce”).

Persecutors presented the victim, as they were perceiving it – as the culprit of crisis, which was created to take back Eastern Borderline. They did not even bother to hide the signs of persecution. Some of them really thought that the crime (reviewing borders) is what decides about choice of the victim. In reality there were some sacrificial signs. Donald Tusk’s government did not use the Polish minority for provoking this crisis. Poles were innocent. Some blame or display of hostility against the authorities was shown by few activists, but not by whole minority. But this guilt had nothing to do with the “crime”. Possessing Polish Card was enough to become a member of the group which was destabilizing the whole country.

Until the presidential election in 2010 none institution had ever had formal questions about the Polish Card. It would have been weird, because this card is compliant with European law. Of course A. Lukashenka criticized the Card, when he said that “Polish Card is something that should not exist in civilized countries” (Pisalnik A: 8). However his problem with this Card and black PR around it, combined with the use of formal procedures, started after three years since the Card was instituted. Just in the very same moment when the need for the scapegoat arised.²

In April the Constitutional Court of Belarus declared some of regulations regarding the Polish Card to contradict both the international law and the bilateral agreements between Poland and Belarus. This meant that Polish Card could not be legally issued any more. However court’s decision did not cause the Polish consulates to stop issuing this document. Main purpose of this declaration was to spread propaganda in the country. Authorities did not need anything else besides propaganda, which would unite the society around the newly chosen president. (“Białoruscy parlamentarzyści”) The owners of the Card were called by the media “Polish volksdeuschers” (Poczobut).

Why did not Belarusian authorities attack Polish Card sooner? Was it because they realized that the use of this attack would be more proper during such difficult time, as the election time? We can not know for sure.

In the middle of April the anti-Polish campaign was strengthened. Attacks on Poles did not stop even after the terrorist attack in Minsk – event that holds great power in uniting societies and distracting them from the usual social-economic and political problems

² To make accusations more believable authorities were trying to use example of Lithuania, which also tried to discredit Polish Card

(Żochowski). The authorities took actions against the most active members of the Polish minority. They closed “The Polish House” in Baranovichi, which belonged to the Union of Poles in Belarus and arrested some activists (“Władze białoruskie kontynuują działania”).

As a result a crisis (acceptance of the new authority), crime (secession of the Eastern Borderlands by Polish volksdeutsche) and some sacrificial signs (Polishness confirmed by the possession of Polish Card) followed. But was there also violence? Yes, and it can be understood in two ways. Firstly there had already been some occurrences of violence during the process of accusation, degradation and anti-polish campaign in the media. It was a symbolic way of spreading violence. But there was also another form of violence, a material one.

It manifested itself mainly in liquidation of the Polish cultural and educational center. But Polish activists also suffered from persecutions. Their homes were searched and goods commandeered. Activists themselves were arrested or beaten.

Persecutions against Poles were carried out only by authorities. Ethnical conflicts within society did not happen. Crowd was not galvanized to take actions against the scapegoat. Because of that, the range of violence was not of a big scale. It was limited mainly to the rhetorical sphere. However some administrative actions also took place.

In the second part of April the situation in the country had slowly been normalized and emotions had been damped down. The creation of scapegoat was for authority a successful way to reduce negative effects of accusations regarding presidential election.

In comparison to other countries from the Eastern Borderlands, e.g. Lithuania and Ukraine, Belarus is a specific one. Nationalistic “revolution” against national minorities never happened there. That means Lukashenka’s country has a chance for development of polis in the spirit of classical model of Christianity. Such state would be a strong foundation for a peaceful coexistence of various religious and ethnic minorities, which are a very important part of the rich cultural mosaic in Belarus. Mosaic, which was inherited mainly after Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Prediction of the Polish minority’s situation under the new administration

How can persecutions of Poles be softened? Considering the political activity of democratic opposition, so called Lithuanian variant can become an effective resolution. It would mean creation of separate political and social structures of the Polish minority. The Union of Poles would become responsible only for spreading the Polish culture and language, whereas new structures would participate in a democratic fight for power. This is the way in which two Polish minority’s structures coexists in Lithuania. Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania is a typical political organization when Union of Poles in Lithuania is a cultural one. However the most effective way of defense during the rule of Lukashenka’s regime would be a complete withdrawal from political activity. It probably would not save Poles from becoming scapegoats but for sure would soften persecutions (a change in a strain of violence’s stereotype). However such situation is impossible without the withdrawal of some leaders of minority, who play a pivotal role in the international rivalry for control over Belarus.

Anyway, questions about methods and means to soften persecutions of Poles in Belarus will still be appearing even after overthrowing of Alexander Lukashenko. There is a huge possibility that democratization will not result in improving situation of Poles. Assuming that problems of Poles or even the whole Belarusian society will finish after introducing a democratic system in the country is very naïve. Such way of thinking also opens a gate to the victory of national chauvinism, which never resolves problems, only deepens

them. We should not ask how to help passive Belarusian nation in democratization. Instead we should wonder how the situation of Poles can change after introducing democracy in Belarus.

After overthrowing of Lukashenko, the Polish minority will change radically. There are a lot of signs that this transformation will not be a good one. Influence on *morfe's* (form's) change can be caused by revolutionary metamorphosis of new authorities' perspective. Poles no longer will be chosen for the role of scapegoat by the pragmatic head of the state who wants to keep his control over country and for whom the scapegoat is the only instrument. This time Poles will be turned into scapegoats by a group of people, who want to create a "new human" or a "true Belarus citizen" without considering needs of multicultural society. Their actions will be taken in the spirit of national chauvinism, similar to Lithuanian policy of top-down assimilation. Polish scapegoat will be treated by them in an ideological way.

We have to remember that the opposition's strategic goal is the national resurgence (Sadowski 235). According to the ancient rule *divide et impera* the Polish-Belarusian conflict can be useful to everybody who will be interested in strengthening influences in Belarus and taking over key economic sectors, especially banking and media (USA, Germany, Russia). The conflict management is extremely important to every social and political player, who wants to achieve his strategic goals. Russia can stimulate development of Russian-Belarusian bonds, through the use of fear of Polishness and inspiring chauvinism in political circles. However a different scenario is possible. In this one, western countries become *spiritus nove*, a driving form of chauvinism, which will be directed against Russia, just like in Ukraine. In this case the enemy would be the Russian culture. Either way Belarus will find itself caught in a tug of war between more important international players. Propitious for forming scapegoat mechanism will become difficult conditions related to the economic transformation. These conditions were influenced by results of the social crisis caused by some cultural changes in 1989 (the conventional transformation in Central Europe). The question remains who will use this scapegoat and against whom will it be directed?

Of course the new authorities will find some obstacles on their way to change the character of Poles. Polish Card is a very prestigious privilege, which gives Poles in Belarus many benefits. Owners of this Card have a right to legal employment in Poland and complimentary visas. They are also entitled to run their own business and use Polish education and health care system. Besides the Card is an important factor in spreading interest in learning Polish language. The vice-chairman of the *Belarusian Society* Aleksy Shota confirms that (Rojek).³ Especially young people are interested in obtaining Polish Card. The key to such strength of this Card is prestige.

Another obstacle standing in the way of the new authorities can be the Catholic church. This religious institution is believed to play a very important role in Polonization by the Belarusian nationalists. Religion is one of these factors that consolidate community very strongly, and in Belarus parts of country which were atheized very poorly, are those once belonging to the Second Commonwealth of Poland (Brest, Grodno Region). They are inhabited mainly by the Polish minority, so it would not be a surprise if new authorities started trying to manipulate the Catholic church (Sadowski 233).⁴

³ In an interview with "Portal ARCANA" Shota informed about growth of interest in Polishness. He also said that there are more and more people wanting to learn Polish language. That growth can be seen in number of students attending Social High School in Grodno or schools connected with illegal Union of Poles

⁴It is possible that future authorities will try to create orthodox autocephalic structure, independent from strongly russified Orthodox Church. However success of this plan is quite impossible.

A low level of national consciousness is characteristic for Belarusian society (Sadowski 226) because Belarus is very strongly russified (Mironowicz 211; Darski 64).⁵ Moreover within the society occurs a feeling of discomfort, which is caused by a complex of weak national value. This complex is strengthened by prestige of occidental Polishness. In such situation authorities may try to take drastic actions, which purpose would be assimilation of Poles.

“A lack of a strong national consciousness in the past, is the reason why russification is so developed within the Belarusian society today” (Sadowski 228). If nationalists want to reverse consequences of this process and unite the country under Belarusian culture, they will be taking some radical actions. For sure they will start creating a false identity, based on new interpretation of past. Such action will be aimed mainly against Poles.

“Being Belarusian usually does not mean strong, emotional connection with the past and desire to cultivate traditions or values created by ancestors. Belarusian community focuses only on one dimension – the present (Sadowski 231).” Past dimension means the so called Lachs⁶ (Poles) ruling. They can be the ones deprived of their heritage. The axiological alternative here is the communistic ideology.

Questions about cultural direction of new authorities remain open. However answers to questions about economical actions are clear. The new government will have to introduce necessary economical reforms. This will not be an easy task because such changes will be hard for society. The outbreak of a crisis is just a matter of time.

“Who is destabilizing the system?” A possible answer to that question can be: “the crisis outbreak because they spy, divide, polonize and desire secession”. It is a classic example of an accusing stereotype. But why would Belarusians blame Poles for the outbreak of crisis? Why would fingers be pointed at them? According to sacrificial stereotype persecutions are applied to minorities, and only to those unable to fight back. So it is easier to attack the Poles instead of the Russians, because the Russians remain under the strong protection of Moscow. Countries such as Poland and in the future – Belarus, are called captive states and do not participate in an international game for the influence. So even if Warsaw expresses a political will to defend the Belarusian verges, consequently it will not be a strong voice in favour of this land.

In this puzzle of mimetic stereotypes there is only one element missing – stereotype of violence. Apart from the present persecutions, discrimination, aversion and attacks in the media it will mean assimilation. As is the case in Lithuania, fanciful faults would be a perfect justification for violence. However the Belarusian society will not be found guilty of prosecutions. The responsibility will lie only with people who point at the scapegoat. People who represent ideology based on violence. The Ukrainian professor Victor Poliszczuk once wrote: "There is not such a thing as a criminal nation but a criminal ideology and organisation" (Poliszczuk 3).

It would be natural for Polishness to try resurgence in democratic society. However the pro-western nationalists will not let that happen. It seems Poles will be regarded as Belarusians without their own nation. All signs of sympathy towards Poles will be compared to smierdiakowszczina, which is the synthesis of both moral and physical degeneration, as well as cowardice and wildness (Sadowski 233; Kopaliński 204). There is a chance for friendly cooperation between this two nations but in a completely different situation.

As motto of this article I used part of introduction to a novel *Nadberezyńcy*. Andrzej Kowalczyk outlines that a border runs through Belarus. It is not a border, which separates this

⁵ In 1980 only 12,3% of Publisher books were in Belarusian language. In 1985 about 23% of primary school taught this language. In 1988 only 14% of pupils attended schools which taught bilingually mother tongue of Belarusian society.

country from some group of “normal” states. This border exists alongside many countries and separates cultures of “new barbarians” from a traditional one, cosmopolitanism and chauvinism from the culture based on some traditional principles, the culture of violence from the culture of dialogue. But it absolutely does not separate countries and nations from each other. It is a sign for Europe not to look down on Belarus. But it is also a signal for Belarusian nation not to believe that they are worse and to not allow imposition of outer integration models.

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WWW: <http://geopolityka.org/analizy/1962-koziol-ofiarny-za-bugiem>

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