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MIDDLE CLASS VALUES, PSYCHOANALYSIS, RELIGION, AND THE DEBATES ON BELARUSIAN NATIONAL ESSENCE IN INTERWAR POLAND

Paharely A. – PhD, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, Warszawa, Republic of Poland.*

This article examines debates on Belarusian national character among Belarusian intellectuals and political activists in interwar Poland (1921-1939), with particular attention to the role of the Belarusian Christian Democratic movement. The study explores how discussions of national character became a tool for addressing broader questions of national identity, social modernization, and cultural transformation in a society marked by political fragmentation, confessional diversity, and the absence of a developed middle class. Drawing on periodicals, political writings, memoirs, and scholarly literature, the article analyzes the intellectual origins of these debates and situates them within wider European discussions on national character, psychology, and nation-building. Special attention is paid to the influence of secular concepts of psychology and psychoanalysis, which Belarusian Christian Democrats combined with religious and moral principles in order to formulate a program of national renewal. The article demonstrates that their vision of social change was closely connected with the adoption of West European and North American middle-class values, including civic responsibility, self-discipline, education, and active participation in public life. It is concluded that the concept of national character served as an important ideological instrument for mobilizing Belarusian society, promoting modernization, and strengthening national identity.

Keywords: national character, Belarusian Christian democracy, interwar Poland, middle class values, psychoanalysis, national identity, modernization.

СОҒЫС АРАЛЫҚ ПОЛЬШАДАҒЫ ОРТА ТАП ҚҰНДЫЛЫҚТАРЫ, ПСИХОАНАЛИЗ, ДІН ЖӘНЕ БЕЛАРУСЬ ҰЛТТЫҚ МӘНІ ТУРАЛЫ ПІКІРТАЛАСТАР

Пагарельый А. – PhD, Витольд Пилецкий атындағы Ынтымақтастық және ерлік институты, Варшава қ., Польша Республикасы.*

Мақалада 1921-1939 жылдардағы соғыс аралық Польшадағы беларусь зиялылары мен саяси қайраткерлері жүргізген беларусь ұлттық мінез-құлқы туралы пікірталастар зерттеледі. Зерттеуде Беларусь христиандық демократиясы қозғалысының қызметіне ерекше назар аударылады. Ұлттық мінез-құлық туралы түсініктердің ұлттық бірегейлікті қалыптастыру, қоғамдық жаңғырту және мәдени трансформация мәселелерін түсіндірудегі рөлі қарастырылады. Автор мерзімді басылымдар, публицистикалық еңбектер, естеліктер мен ғылыми әдебиеттер негізінде бұл пікірталастардың интеллектуалдық бастауларын және олардың ұлттық мінез-құлық, психология және ұлт қалыптастыру жөніндегі жалпыеуропалық ғылыми пікірталастармен байланысын талдайды. Сонымен қатар беларусь христиандық демократтарының психология мен психоанализ идеяларын діни-адамгершілік қағидалармен ұштастыра отырып, ұлттық жаңғыру тұжырымдамасын қалыптастыруы көрсетіледі. Зерттеу нәтижелері олардың қоғамдық өзгерістер туралы көзқарастары Батыс Еуропа мен Солтүстік Американың орта тап құндылықтарын, атап айтқанда азаматтық жауапкершілік, өзін-өзі тәртіпке келтіру, білім беру және қоғамдық өмірге белсенді қатысу сияқты ұстанымдарды қабылдаумен тығыз байланысты болғанын дәлелдейді. Қорытындысында ұлттық мінез-құлық ұғымы беларусь қоғамын жұмылдырудың, жаңғыртудың және ұлттық сананы нығайтудың маңызды идеологиялық құралы болғаны тұжырымдалады.

Түйінді сөздер: ұлттық мінез-құлық, беларусь христиан-демократиясы, соғыстар аралық Польша, орта тап құндылықтары, психоанализ, ұлттық бірегейлік, жаңғырту.

ЦЕННОСТИ СРЕДНЕГО КЛАССА, ПСИХОАНАЛИЗ, РЕЛИГИЯ И ДИСКУССИИ О БЕЛОРУССКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ СУЩНОСТИ В МЕЖВОЕННОЙ ПОЛЬШЕ

Пагарельый А. – PhD, Институт солидарности и мужества имени Витольда Пилецкого, г. Варшава, Республика Польша.*

В статье исследуются дискуссии о белорусском национальном характере, которые вели белорусские интеллектуалы и политические деятели в межвоенной Польше (1921-1939 гг.), с особым вниманием к деятельности Белорусской христианской демократии. Рассматривается, каким образом представления о национальном характере использовались для осмысления вопросов национальной идентичности, общественной модернизации и культурной трансформации в условиях политической раздробленности, конфессионального разнообразия и отсутствия развитого сред-

него класса. На основе анализа периодической печати, публицистики, мемуаров и научной литературы автор показывает интеллектуальные истоки данных дискуссий и их связь с общеевропейскими дебатами о национальном характере, психологии и нациестроительстве. Особое внимание уделяется использованию идей психологии и психоанализа, которые белорусские христианские демократы сочетали с религиозно-нравственными принципами при разработке концепции национального обновления. Показано, что их представления о преобразовании общества были тесно связаны с усвоением ценностей западноевропейского и североамериканского среднего класса, включая гражданскую ответственность, самодисциплину, образование и активное участие в общественной жизни. Делается вывод, что концепция национального характера выступала важным идеологическим инструментом мобилизации белорусского общества, модернизации и укрепления национального самосознания.

Ключевые слова: национальный характер, белорусская христианская демократия, межвоенная Польша, ценности среднего класса, психоанализ, национальная идентичность, модернизация.

Introduction. After the Polish–Soviet War of 1919–21, the territory that roughly corresponds to what today constitutes the Republic of Belarus was divided between Bolshevik Russia and the Second Republic of Poland as a result of the peace treaty signed in Riga on March 18, 1921 [1]. Roughly speaking, the western part, with a substantial ethnic Belarusian population, was ceded to Poland. These territories were later divided into four voivodeships: Białystok, Polesie, Nowogródek, and Wilno. The actual number of Belarusians living in Poland is contested. According to some estimates, it reached up to 3,460,900 people [2].

Belarusians were a minority who lived within the borders of the Second Polish Republic. The democratic regime established in the early years of the Second Polish Republic gave Belarusians the opportunity to take part in relatively free and fair parliamentary elections in the early 1920s. The first parliamentary elections of 1922 were relatively successful for Belarusians [3].

However, Belarusian intellectuals and political leaders in Poland faced many serious challenges. They struggled to come to terms with the division of Belarusian lands into several parts. Belarusians were divided not only territorially among Latvia, Poland, and Bolshevik Russia (the USSR since December 1922), but also along confessional lines, into major Christian denominations: Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and smaller but growing Protestant groups. In social terms, there still remained members of the former petty gentry (*szlachta zagrodowa*) [4] and the so-called "local-minded" [5], the latter being more prevalent and more firmly entrenched than any national identity. Belarusians lacked their own middle classes [6]. Most Belarusians were still employed in agriculture. Only around 19% of the population in Polesie Voivodeship were employed outside agriculture. White-collar workers accounted for just 2.5% [7]. The Belarusian urban community was very small – in the late 19th century just 5.72% belonged to burghers in territories where ethnic Belarusians constituted a majority [8]. Many petty burghers were in fact engaged in agriculture [9]. In interwar years, the level of urbanization in the Wilno and Nowogródek voivodeships was minimal [10].

This situation was further complicated by the problem of refugees and displaced persons. According to some estimates, 1.5 million Belarusian villagers – most of whom were Russian Orthodox – had to leave their homes after 1915, pressured by the tsarist military authorities [11]. Continuous military operations from 1914 to 1921, as well as episodes of armed conflict that lasted until 1925 [12], left behind destroyed settlements, industry, and agriculture. Entire small towns ceased to exist [13].

The aim of the study. In view of all these problems, Belarusian intellectuals and political leaders wrestled with the problem of national identity. Their discussions during the interwar years took the form of debates over the national character. The idea of the nation as an entity possessing a set of qualities that represent its uniqueness – overriding all class and group loyalties and differing from its neighbors – was a highly convenient discursive tool, as national character is never clearly defined or permanently settled [14; 15]. The concept of national character reflected the desire of leaders of national movements to reshape the national character, assert its uniqueness, and simultaneously preserve its essence unchanged. Nevertheless, this does not render national character merely an abstract category – it can become real when a sufficient number of people internalize it [16].

The objectives of the study are as follows: to trace the intellectual origins of debates on Belarusian national character in interwar Poland and situate them within wider European discussions on national character and psychology; to examine the role of Belarusian Christian Democracy in shaping and disseminating concepts of national character through periodical press and public organizations; to analyze how secular concepts of psychology and psychoanalysis were combined with religious and moral frameworks in the discourse of Belarusian Christian Democrats; to identify the specific West European and North American middle class values promoted as models for the transformation of Belarusian society; to assess the function of the concept of national character as an ideological instrument for social mobilization and national modernization.

The theme of national character has been recurrent in European thought and assumed even greater importance from the eighteenth century onward [18]. One can easily find treatises on the peculiarities of the psychology of various European nations published during the period around World War I [19; 20]. So-called "national characterology" assumed a prominent role due to World War I, and the intellectual output it

produced had powerful repercussions across Europe [21]. In the 1930s, European ethnologists were preoccupied with topics of national character, popular mentalities, and folk psychology [22]. It was later observed that east European character lacked form, and Belarusian character was seen as equally formless [23].

There are various approaches to the study of national character. Social and cultural anthropologists either take an essentialist view of it [24] or combine its study with the problem of religion in the case of ethos [25]. Historical sociology dismisses it as just an effect of the functioning of institutions [26]. However, it is important to combine both these approaches in order to better understand the changing notions and views of national character [27].

This paper argues that Belarusian Christian Democrats embraced a very specific view of national character which was relevant to their moral and religious views but also was related to secular concepts of psychology and self-improvement. This had practical significance for them as it allowed them to couch their discourse in secular terms for those who did not belong to the Roman Catholic community [28]. It was also directly related to encouraging civic participation, development of national consciousness, and uplifting the cultural and social conditions of Belarusian villagers. Thus, it was about ideas and beliefs [29], not material factors or violence, that were deemed crucial for changing the attitudes and values of Belarusians. Just as European middle classes [30], Belarusian Christian Democrats believed that social change was about morals, not economics.

Methodology. The term 'middle class' is no less problematic and fuzzy than 'national character'. Generally, it is assumed that this stratum sits somewhere in the middle between upper strata and the lower strata [31]. Its representatives defined themselves by viewing both aristocratic and urban proletarian and peasant cultures as amoral and irrational [32]. West European and North American middle class culture itself was changing and the category was far from being monolithic and socially homogenous [33]. Nevertheless, in the context of East-Central Europe, just as Western scientific theories were seen as dogma, European ideas of Enlightenment and modernity provided criteria by which intellectuals and leaders of the peripheral European societies judged themselves [34; 35].

One very important aspect must be taken into consideration while analyzing how Belarusian Christian Democrats viewed and represented new values. Patterns of behavior and new values were represented as something that made a given European country what it was and that was necessary for Belarusians to adapt in order to be as prosperous and developed as other European nations. The reason was that Belarusians could have perceived all these new values and habits as simply 'aping the lords'. The 'lords' – initially representatives of landowning elites – were socially and culturally alien to Belarusian villagers [36]. Invoking authoritative examples of other countries, like England, also could serve the purpose of bolstering the appeal of a given political movement or party [37].

It is necessary to stress that analyzing the influence of the elements of West European and North American middle class culture on Belarusian intellectuals and politicians from the Christian Democratic camp does not at all mean one should accept the approach of Soviet Belarusian historiography that dismissed Belarusian Christian Democracy as just a 'bourgeois' party [38]. Soviet Belarusian historiography was rather an instrument of propaganda and a means of erasing Belarusian memory. It is interesting, however, that Belarusian Christian Democrats themselves rejected in words the lifestyle of 'burghers' (bourgeoisie) and nobility [39]. The lifestyle of the poorest peasants, the habits, ways, and worldview of the older generation were also incompatible with the idealized image of what hard-working, nationally conscious Belarusian villagers had to become [40]. This interaction of 'national character' and borrowed middle class values was meant to produce a new type of culture and values, which in its turn could allow the integration of Belarusian villagers into modern society [41].

Before analyzing various views and ideas about Belarusian national character in interwar Poland, it is important to stress that 'national character' for Belarusians in interwar Poland was primarily viewed as a variable dependent on various political and social agendas, scientific approaches, and aesthetic theories. The theme of national character, psychoanalysis, and new values articulated in the Belarusian public sphere [42] – especially by newspapers and magazines affiliated with Belarusian Christian Democracy – were part of the larger debate about the social transformation of Belarusian society in Poland, uplifting Belarusian villagers' standards of living, and creating a modern society organized as a nation.

Results. Belarusian Christian Democracy was founded by a group of Belarusian Roman Catholic priests and lay Catholic activists in May 1917 in Petrograd as the Christian Democratic Association [43]. Later, in 1926, it was renamed Belarusian Christian Democracy (*Bielaruskaja chryscijanskaja demakratyja*). After January 1918, facing persecution from the newly established Bolshevik regime, Belarusian Catholic activists moved their activities to Minsk [43]. After a break following February 1918, when the key Christian Democratic newspaper *Krynica* ceased publication in Minsk, it resumed publication in Wilno on August 24, 1919 [44].

Key Belarusian Christian Democratic periodicals were *Krynica* ('The Wellspring', launched October 1917 in Petrograd; from September 1925 – *Bielaruskaja Krynica*, 'The Belarusian Wellspring'). Other publications were launched in Wilno. They included *Chryścijanskaja Dumka* ('Christian Thought', 1928–39), *Samapomač* ('Self-Help', 1932–39), *Šlach Moładzi* ('Path of Youth', 1929–39) and others [45]. Belarusian

Christian Democratic periodicals were initially published in the Latin alphabet; beginning in 1929, they also appeared in Cyrillic [45].

A very important role in spreading Christian Democratic ideology, stimulating Belarusian villagers' participation in politics and processes of modernization was played by the Belarusian Institute of Economy and Culture (*Biełaruski Instytut Haspadarki i Kultury*). It was founded on May 26, 1926 in Wilno. The membership of the Institute reached its peak of up to 1,000 people in 1934–1935 [46].

Another important aspect to take into consideration while analyzing interwar Belarusian publications is the pervasive use of a black-and-white imagery in representing social reality. Various phenomena, ideas, and traits were classified as belonging either to the sphere of good or bad, depending on the extent to which they could contribute to the development of Belarusian national self-consciousness and the raising of civic self-awareness [47].

Thus, certain traits of the Belarusian national character that were deemed harmful – standing in the way of Belarusians' progress toward forming a modern European nation – were stigmatized and dismissed as ones that should be either overcome or completely eradicated. In this respect, the opinion of Maksim Tank (Jaŭhien Skurko) (1912–1995), a Belarusian poet whose literary career began in interwar Poland, is very characteristic. He confided in his diary in an entry from June 23, 1939 that a nation's character includes not only positive but also negative features, and that Belarusians had a unique negative feature shaped by their history – namely, indifference to their own language and culture [48].

Although the theme of 'national character' was not addressed as a distinct, coherent subject, certain elements of it were nevertheless articulated in ethnographic research in the second half of the 19th century, such as the individualism, forgiveness, and non-vindictiveness of Belarusian villagers [49]. Belarusian national ideology was developing in the early 20th century [50; 51]. The time before the outbreak of World War I and its first months brought the question of the national character to the center of public debate. In December 1914 the Belarusian conservative Catholic weekly *Biełarus* noted that nationality is a community of people who share a common language, character, customs, and territory [52; 53]. Several years later, in October 1917, Ryhor Klonowič (Rev. Adam Stankievič) stated that people of other nationalities differ from Belarusians in their language, way of life, and character [54]. Later, Belarusians were described simultaneously as 'calm', 'gentle', 'savage', 'semi-savage', and 'pugnacious' [55].

Discussion. The first essay on the topic of Belarusian national essence with a philosophical depth, providing historical examples and making sweeping generalizations was 'The Eternal Way' (*Adviečnym Ślacham*) by Ihnat Abdziralovič (Ihnat Kančeŭski) (1896–1923), published in 1921. After examining Belarusian historical development since the 10th century and drawing a comparison between the 'East' (represented by Russia) and the 'West' (represented by Poland), he concluded that both had failed to formulate a conception of a unique and authentic Belarusian national self. This mindset, in Abdziralovič's view, was characterized by a perennial wavering between the 'East' and the 'West'. For him, only national independence could ensure for Belarusians their existence as a nationally distinct entity [56]. The debate over the issue of national character tended to be focused on the ability of nations to create their own institutions and to make them efficient [57].

A different approach is demonstrated by the polemics sparked by an essay by Prof. Marian Zdziechowski (1861–1938). Zdziechowski, a Pole of Lithuanian-Belarusian ancestry, was born in the Minsk Governorate and wrote extensively on the Russian Slavophile tradition. His essay focused on the poet Ludwik Kondratowicz (1824–1862) and compared the position of historic Lithuania to that of Brittany and Provence in France, drawing on the idea of regionalism gaining popularity in Poland in the first half of the 1920s [58; 59].

A Belarusian response was published in 1924 by Uladzimir Samojła (pen name Sulima) (1878–1941). Both Samojła and Zdziechowski drew on the concepts of Hegel and Fichte. Nevertheless, Samojła criticized Zdziechowski for downplaying the negative effect of Polish-Lithuanian unions and the polonization of Belarusian and Lithuanian nobility. He preferred to use the concept of 'soul' rather than 'national character', in which melancholy constituted a defining feature of the 'Belarusian soul'. While Samojła hoped that Soviet Belarusization policy would ultimately bring positive change for Belarusians, Zdziechowski saw death of civilization in the newly established Bolshevik system [60].

The significance of the Belarusian language in the context of national character was again addressed by Anton Łuckievič (pen name Navina) (1884–1942). His article dealt specifically with the role of the Belarusian language in the 19th century. Łuckievič introduced psychoanalytical concepts employing the distinction between the subconscious and conscious in Kondratowicz's poetry – the former constituting his experience of daily life and contact with Belarusian land and people, and the latter being his attitude to Belarusian language and culture [61].

The aspect of physical strength as a characteristic trait of Belarusians was raised in the second half of the 1920s [62]. Just as psychoanalysis appealed to some, anthropology was appealing to young Belarusian intellectuals like Mikoła Iljaševič (1903–1934). In 1928, he published an article titled 'The origins, ancient historical evidence and anthropological traits of Belarusians,' arguing that natural barriers such as forests and swamps not only isolated Belarusian lands but also allegedly repelled various barbarian and nomadic groups. He maintained that geographical conditions, alongside historical and political factors, shaped the

traits characteristic of each people, describing Belarusians as strong, robust, and resilient – qualities he believed were shaped by the hard agricultural labor of Belarusian villagers [63].

The idea of alleged ethnic or racial 'purity' occasionally appeared in the Belarusian press in interwar Poland. It was claimed that Belarusians were supposedly representatives of the purest Slavic type. This idea originated in the research of physical anthropologists of the late imperial period and carried over into the works of Belarusian historians such as Mitrafan Doŭnar-Zapolski (1867–1934) and Usievaŭad Ihnatoŭski (1881–1931) [64; 65]. This concept also found its way to the Christian Democratic press [67], however its general influence on the ideology of Belarusian Christian Democracy was marginal. There was also another source of the idea of 'pure Slavic type': 19th-century ethnographic research linked with the widespread idea of the need to have a 'nationally pure' history [68].

Conclusion. The debates on Belarusian national character in interwar Poland were neither academically isolated nor politically neutral. Belarusian Christian Democrats used the concept of national character as a practical tool for social mobilization, employing it to advocate for the adoption of West European and North American middle class values – including civic responsibility, self-improvement, and moral discipline – among the Belarusian peasantry. Their discourse combined religious and moral frameworks with the secular appeal of psychology and psychoanalysis, allowing them to address audiences beyond the Roman Catholic community. The analysis of key intellectual contributions – from Abdziralovič's philosophical essay to the engagements with psychoanalytic and anthropological concepts – reveals that the concept of 'national character' in interwar Belarusian intellectual life was above all a variable and politically loaded instrument for articulating the goals of national modernization. The interaction between 'national character' and borrowed middle class values was intended to produce a new type of culture that would facilitate the integration of Belarusian villagers into modern European society.

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Information about the author:

Paharely Aliaksandr – PhD, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, Republic of Poland, 00-815 Warszawa, 82 Sienna Str., tel.: +48 532 827 474, e-mail: a.paharely@instytutpileckiego.pl.*

Пагарельі Александр – PhD, Витольд Пилецкий атындағы Ынтымақтастық және ерлік институты, Польша Республикасы, 00-815 Варшава қ., Сиенна көш. 82, +48 532 827 474 e-mail: a.paharely@instytutpileckiego.pl.*

Пагарельі Александр – PhD, Институт солидарности и мужества имени Витольда Пилецкого, Республика Польша, 00-815 г. Варшава, ул. Сиенна 82, тел.: +48 532 827 474, e-mail: a.paharely@instytutpileckiego.pl.*