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The unknown neighbour: Belarus and Belarusians in the eyes of Polish students

Nieznany sąsiad: Białoruś i Białorusini w oczach studentów polskich

Невядомы сусед: Беларусь і беларусы вачыма польскіх студэнтаў

Introduction

Belarus has often been portrayed as a „puzzle"[1], a „mass psychological marasmus"[2], a „black hole" or „the last dictatorship in Europe." Until today, Belarus and Belarusians probably remain one of the lesser known nations in Europe. In spite of being situated in the geographical centre of Europe, and having played an important part in the Second World War, currently Belarus has probably the lowest recognition and status among all European countries[3]. Even the neighbouring countries, such as Poland and Ukraine, which share a common historical heritage with the Belarusians, often don't know much about them. The reasons for that could be found in different aspects of Belarusian history, culture, identity, contemporary economic and socio-political situation in the state, national character of Belarusian people and so on. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and emergence of new independent states, Belarus was still strongly associated with the former political and social system. Moreover, Russia was seen as the „prime cultural donor" for Belarus[4]. Foreigners' ignorance of

[1] G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus: Question of Language*, „Europe-Asia Studies" 2003, vol. 55, no. 7, p. 1009–1047 (1010).

[2] S. Eke, T. Kuzio, *Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus*, „Europe-Asia Studies" 2000, vol. 52, no. 3, p. 523–547 (532).

[3] G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus: Question*…, p. 1009.

[4] G. Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus: Belarusian Identity*, „Europe-Asia Studies" 2003, vol. 55, no. 8, p. 1241–1272 (1267).

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Belarus and Belarusians could also be caused by the changes of the national symbols of the state[5]. Despite the official change of the state name in 1991 to the Republic of Belarus, or Belarus, a lot of people still use the old name Byelo*russia*, which suggests some connection to Russia[6].

National stereotypes, opinions and beliefs about different nations are often influenced by their history and politics. Polish-Russian historical relations, which are often described as „historical confrontation"[7], are negatively imprinted in the Polish collective memory. Those stereotypes from the past have overshadowed not only Polish-Russian relations and the mutual perception of each other's nations, but have also spread to Russia's other neighbours, which for a long time were seen as closely related to Russia or even as one and the same. Even though Polish-Belarusian history lacks significant confrontations, conflicts or wars, the Polish perception of Belarus and Belarusians is strongly connected with the Soviet Union and Russia. Belarusians were seen as especially similar to Russians by their culture, language, tradition and mentality. Thus, they „absorb" a lot of stereotypes and common beliefs concerning Russian culture and people. However, if the Russians and Germans have been „important others" in Polish national discourse, the Belarusian nation has never played a crucial political or cultural role for its neighbours. To compare, Russians were mostly presented in Polish literature by their political elites and/or soldiers; Ukrainians were often portrayed as rebels (Cossacks) and/or as peasants; the image of Belarusians was embodied by simple people (peasants), living their hard life in poverty. Until today Belarus and Belarusians are often associated in Poland with agricultural work and a low level of economic, social, political and cultural development.

The negative stereotypes of Russia and Russians in Poland have deep historical roots. Ukrainians obtained the majority of their negative stereotypes during the interwar period. Nevertheless, due to the recent political changes in Ukraine and the attempts to integrate it into European structures, the attitudes, opinions and beliefs about Ukrainians have already improved and has the potential for further positive changes[8]. Stereotypical images about Belarusians are the least shaped in Poland. Belarusian mentality is the result of the frequent changes in the political belonging frequent political and territorial changes (Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Russian Empire, Polish Kingdom, Soviet Union, Belarus), uses of different languages (Belarusian, Polish, Russian) and

[5] During the last decades Belarusian flag has been changed several times.

[6] The name *Byelorussia* is often used in Russian media.

[7] See, for example, A. Nowak, *The Russo-Polish historical confrontation*, January, 1997, available on the „Sarmatian Review" website at www.ruf.rice.edu/~sarmatia/197/Nowak.html (viewed 4 May 2015); E. Levintova, *Good neighbours?: dominant narratives about the "other" in contemporary Polish and Russian newspapers, „Europe-Asia Studies"* 2010, vol. 62, no. 8, 1339–1361; T. Zarycki, *Uses of Russia: The Role of Russia in the Modern Polish National Identity*, „East European Politics and Society" 2004, vol. 18, no. 4, p. 595–672.

[8] CBOS, *Stosunek do innych narodów*, research report, 2015.

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different religions[9]. Nowadays the Belarusian state is known for its political system as "the last dictatorship in Europe". However, Belarusian people still remain vague and, probably, the least known for Poles among all their neighbours.

This paper is focused on the opinions, beliefs and stereotypical images of young Poles concerning their Eastern neighbours – the Belarusians.

Polish attitudes towards the Belarusians in the light of public opinion research

The systematic research on Polish public opinion about attitudes towards other nations was initiated in 1970th. Among all the Soviet nations, only the Russians appeared on the list of the nations under investigation. It is important to mention here that during the Soviet times, and even later, the word „Russians" in Poland was often used as a synonym for „Soviets". It had a collective meaning of all the nations of the former USSR who can speak Russian. Even such culturally different peoples as the Tadjiks, Uzbeks and Kazakhs were also called „Russians". Until today, the word „Ruski" („Ruscy") in Polish doesn't mean Russian national or Russian citizen, but negatively describes someone from the East who speaks Russian. Thus, the results of the public opinion research from those times should be interpreted with some caution. Firstly, because it is not exactly clear which nationalities the Poles understood by „Russians" in the 1970s and 80s. Secondly, because in the times of strong censorship and no freedom of speech, people could just have been afraid to reveal their real opinions about Russians openly.

Belarus as a separate nation was only included in the Polish public opinion research in 1988, shortly before the fall of communism. To compare, the Czechs and Slovaks, who also belonged to the same political state at that time, were included in the research as two different nations from its beginning in 1975. Even such geographically and culturally distant nations to Poland, like China, Vietnam and Japan, were addressed in the study. However, the Belarusians, as well as the Ukrainians and Lithuanians – Poland's immediate Eastern neighbours – were included in the research more than ten years later.

Polish attitudes towards the Belarusians were initially rather negative and even worse than those regarding the Russians. However, by 1991, attitudes towards the Russians and Belarusians came to a very similar level[10]. Picture I. indicates the level of sympathy declared by Poles towards the Russians and Belarusians. It shows that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and until today, positive feelings towards these two nations are almost identical. However, the level of declared indifference towards the Belarusians was higher (64 per cent) compared to the Russians (52 per

[9] R. Radzik, Od tożsamości do wspólnoty ojczyzn, seminar of Uniwersytet Powszechny in Teremiski, available online at: http://www.teremiski.edu.pl (viewed 12 March 2015); S. Plokhy, *The origin of the Slavic nations,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[10] CBOS, *Stosunek Polaków do innych państw,* research report, 1991.

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cent). Indifference towards the Belarusians was much higher than sympathy (20 per cent) or aversion (17 per cent) towards them[11]. That shows the Belarusians were to some extent a „blank page" for the Poles and evoked much more ambivalence than positive or negative feelings. That can be explained by the fact that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the new states, like Belarus, were not known to the Poles, and the opinions about them were not well shaped. Thus, in 1988, the level of indifference declared towards the Belarusians in Poland was close to the Turks, Chinese, Spanish and Vietnamese[12]. However, this feeling was decreasing fast, as in 1998, only 25 per cent of Poles said they were indifferent to the Belarusians[13]. Gradually the information vacuum about new states was filling with some information. Despite predominantly negative attitudes towards Eastern European nations (including Belarusians) in the past, contemporary Polish attitudes towards Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians were gradually changing towards a more positive meaning (see Figure 1).

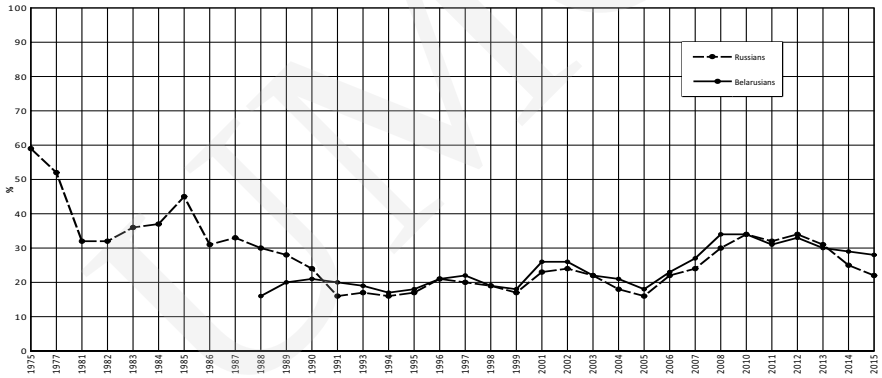


Fig. 1. The level of sympathy expressed by Poles towards Russians and Belarusians (in percentage). Source: own elaboration of data from OBOP, *Zmiany postaw Polaków wobec różnych narodów i państw,* research report 1991 and CBOS, *Stosunek Polaków do innych państw i narodów*, research report, 2015.

The other solid research showed that the stereotypical image of Belarusians in Poland has a rich content. However, it only concerns some fields of stereotypical characteristics: psycho-characterological (*messy, passive, not intelligent, sad)*: mentality (*backward)*; culture and traditions (*abusing alcohol, dirty, not educated)* and socio-economic (*poor, improvident, lazy, not enterprising)*. No associations concerning moral, socio-political and relational characteristics were mentioned. Thus, the stereotype of the Belarusians doesn't have a developed structure[14]. Similar to the results

[11] OBOP, *Zmiany postaw Polaków wobec różnych narodów i państw*, research report, 1991.
[12] OBOP, *op. cit.*
[13] CBOS, *Stosunek Polaków do innych narodowości*, reserch report, 1998.
[14] J. Błuszkowski, *Stereotypy narodowe w świadomości Polaków*, Warszawa: Elipsa, 2003, p. 134.

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of the public opinion polls presented in Picture I., the research of Błuszkowski also discovered that the stereotypes of the Russians and Belarusians were very similar in Polish society[15]. Similar to the characteristics mentioned above, today, the Belarusians are often presented as people with low national identity, people with an „Eastern" mentality, poor and indifferent to their politics and what is going on in their state[16].

The research also suggests that Polish attitudes towards the other nations are affected by the socio-demographic characteristics of the people surveyed, especially by education, financial situation, place of residence and age. The inhabitants of the Eastern region of Poland[17] less often expressed positive attitudes towards the other nations (including the Belarusians). People from villages in general expressed less positive attitudes towards the majority of nations (including the Belarusians) than the inhabitants of medium-sized towns and cities. People with a university education as well as people with a favourable financial situation more often expressed positive attitudes towards foreigners than the others[18]. Additionally, people aged 25–44 expressed positive attitudes towards the other nations most often. People aged 65 and older also did not express many negative feelings – their attitudes were neutral or not well shaped[19].

Generational differences and attitudes towards the other nations

It is a generally known fact that different age cohorts of people receive distinctive imprints from their epochs and develop a unique character of their generations. Karl Mannheim defined a generation as social rather than biological unit and saw its importance and potential in the creation of a new social order[20]. He suggested that young people are significantly influenced by the historical events of the era of their young adolescence and early adulthood. Somewhere between 17 and 25 years old, when individuals start to fully experience their life, a unique nature of each generation is creating[21]. According to Mannheim and others, the development of the distinctive consciousness of different generations is dependent on the ratio of social transformation or „tempo of changes". Fast social changes would produce more distinct generations; while in the conditions of slow changes or the lack of them generational changes may not occur[22]. Crucial polit-

[15] *Ibid.*, s. 164.

[16] A. Galus, *Źródła stereotypowego postrzegania Białorusinów w Polsce* [in:] *Актуальні проблеми міжнародних відносин: політичні, економічні, правові аспекти*, ed. І. С. Бик, М. Микіэвич, Н. Аптонюк, І. Грабинський, Lwów 2014.

[17] Podlaskie, Lublin, Subcarpathian and Świętokrzyskie Voevodeships.

[18] CBOS, *Regionalne zróżnicowanie sympatii i antypatii do innych narodów, research report,* 2015.

[19] CBOS, *Stosunek Polaków do innych państw i narodów*, research report, 2015.

[20] *K. Mannheim, The problem of generations,* [in:] *„Essays", P, Kecskemeti* ed., London: Routledge [1928] 1972, p. 276–322 (309).

[21] K. Mannheim, *op. cit*., p. 300; H. Schuman and J. Scott, *Generations and collective memories*, „American Sociological Review", 1989, vol. 54, no. 3, p. 359–381 (359).

[22] K. Mannheim, *op. cit*., p. 309.

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ical, social, economic and cultural changes in Poland occurring during the last several decades have created the likelihood for significant generational differences in Polish society. Elderly Polish adults and modern youth have grown up in two different contexts – communism and post-communism. As a result, their opinions about a variety of issues might differ significantly. The young generation of Poles is evidently less interested in history, don't have their own memories of the Soviet regime in Poland and didn't have to learn Russian at school. Today, the majority of young people receive information from the internet that interests them, while the elderly adults are more affected by their own memories and experience, or by the stories told by others. This young generation might have some experience and contact with Belarusians, especially students, as the number of different scholarships and study programmes for Belarusians is constantly growing. Elderly adults might have personal memories about their contact with „Soviets", which was not always associated with a specific nation. The factors mentioned above provide a strong likelihood that the opinions and beliefs of young Polish people towards their Eastern neighbour might be different from those of their parents and grandparents.

In my view, it is particularly important to study the opinions and beliefs of a young generation of people and especially of students. Young people are those who will decide about the future of the state. The attitudes towards the other nation might influence the life of that nation in several ways: by migration policy, economic integration with the other state, or simply by looking for, or avoiding, contact with the representatives of those nations, discrimination or even open hostility. As Belarus is an immediate neighbour of Poland, Polish opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards Belarusians might find its implementation on different levels.

Methodology of the research

The target group

The research targeted Polish university students aged 18–28[23]. In total, 150 respondents took part in the survey. They were recruited from among students of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, the University of John Paul II in Krakow, the University of Science and Technology in Krakow, the University of Warsaw and the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. The majority of them corresponded to the target age cohort – they were between 18 and 28 years old (Mean=22,5). Six of the respondents were older than 28 years old and two did not reveal their age. The answers of these respondents were excluded from further analysis. Finally, 142 surveys underwent statistical analysis.

There were 60 per cent of female and 40 per cent of male participants. The majority of respondents – 32 per cent – were originally from villages and towns with a population of up to 50,000; 26 per cent were from towns with a population of 50,000

[23] The research was conducted in May–June 2014.

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to 500,000; 15 per cent were from cities with a population of 500,000 to one million; and 27 per cent were from a city with a population of more than 1 million – Warsaw.

The majority of participants – 69 per cent said that the place of their residence is definitely populated or somewhat populated by migrants, national minorities, or other representatives of non-Polish nationality. Most of the respondents – 69 per cent – were undergraduate students studying for a Bc. degree; the other part – 23 per cent – already held a Bc. degree; the rest – 8 per cent – held a Mgr., Ing., PhD, or other degree. Participants were enrolled in different fields of study: social or human sciences (65 per cent), medicine (1 per cent), technical sciences (7 per cent), natural sciences (4 per cent), law (7 per cent) and others (16 per cent), including those respondents who did not reveal their field of study.

Research method

A survey was chosen as the research method. The questionnaire serving the needs of this research was created[24]. It included: 1) the demographic questions (age, gender, nationality, place of residence, education) which helped to determine the factors which may influence the respondents' opinions and 2) the questions aiming to disclose the general associations, opinions and beliefs about Belarus and Belarusians. The survey was conducted in Polish. The scenario of the questionnaire is available in the appendix.

Procedure of the research

The surveys were conducted in Warsaw and in Krakow at the universities where the respondents studied. All of the respondents took part in the research voluntarily. The students of the University of Warsaw agreed to participate in the survey with a special enthusiasm. The students of the other universities more often refused to fill in the questionnaire, saying that they were not interested in taking part in the research.

The majority of respondents provided answers to all or almost all of the questions. The most often avoided were open questions, where respondents were asked to provide the characteristics of Belarusians in their own words. Sometimes respondents commented on the questions writtenly or orally and spoke to their neighbours. From the verbal and non-verbal reaction of students, it was noticeable that the topic of Belarusians was not very surprising for the majority of students. Just some of them reacted with a wonder: „What strange questions". The data from the filled in questionnaires were statistically analysed.

[24] The survey data presented in this article are part of broader research. The original questionnaire contained 90 questions, aiming to disclose Polish opinions towards several Eastern European nations. However, in this study I only analysed some of the data concerning Belarus and Belarusians.

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Data analysis and interpretation

Answering the questions „*Please enter the three main words or phrases, which you associate with Belarus and/or Belarusians"* the majority of respondents wrote several words or phrases. In total, respondents provided a lot of associations – 172 different words and phrases were mentioned[25]. However, the majority of words were repeated just once and only a few of them were repeated systematically. The most frequently occurring association – *Lukashenka,* was written by 50 students, which is still quite a low number (35 per cent of the total amount of respondents). *Poverty* and *Russia/ Russian* were mentioned respectively by 32 students (13 per cent) and 22 students (15 per cent). The other main associations: *dictatorship, authoritarian, Minsk, USSR/Soviet* were repeated ten to twenty times (14 to 7 per cent). Thus, respondents provided surprisingly few associations with **Belarusians**. Moreover, all of the main associations concerned the politics or economy of the state, while the culture, people, their national characteristics and mentality were neglected. That confirms the results of the previous studies, stating that Belarusians still remain almost unknown and do not evoke many associations among Poles. The list of top associations is shown in Figure 2.



Fig. 2. The list of the top associations with Belarus and/or Belarusians provided by Polish university students. Larger fonts indicate that the association appeared more often. The numbers in brackets indicate how many respondents associated this word with Belarus and/or Belarusians

One of the main problems of the contemporary research on national stereotypes and the perception of Belarus is the fact that the Belarusian state and Belarusian people are often understood as one and the same. Thus, in present research I decided to separate the whole associations into three groups: 1) associations with the state (politics, economy, etc.), 2) associations with people (culture, customs, national character, way of looking, etc.) and 3) other associations (geography, nature, sport, etc.).

[25] Here I mean the amount of *different* words and phrases, not the *total* amount of them.

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The distribution of associations between these three groups was not equal. There were indeed a lot more associations with the Belarusian state than with Belarusian people. The overwhelming majority of respondents – 71 per cent – associated Belarus and/or Belarusians with its political, social and economic system, where negative characteristics definitely prevailed. The main political associations were the following: *Lukashenka, dictatorship, authoritarian, USSR/Soviet Union.* Associations from this group came to the respondents' mind the most easily, as they often appeared as the first answer. Thus, it can be said that the present political situation in Belarus is the „face" of the country, by which it is known to the other nations. The image of political and economic situation in Belarus hugely dominates two other groups of associations.

Associations with Belarusian people and their culture were less numerous – 32 per cent. The most frequently repeated associations were the following: *vodka/alcohol, music, Slavs, nation* and *potatoes*. No associations in this group were mentioned by more than 8 per cent of respondents, which suggested that the knowledge of the Belarusian nation and culture was very weak among the students who took part in the survey.

The other associations mostly related to nature, geography, sport or other things, mentioned by 25 per cent of respondents. Among them, the most common were *Minsk, Grodno, nature, neighbour/neighbour to Poland* and *hockey.* For the list of associations for each group see Table 1.

Tab. 1. Associations with Belarus and/or Belarusians expressed by Polish university students. Different associations of the same person may belong to more than one category

Associations with Belarus and/or Belarusians		
State and economy (71 per cent)	**People and culture (32 per cent)**	**Other (25 per cent)**
Lukashenka; Authoritarian regime, totalitarian regime, dictatorship, oppressive political system, etc.; Cheap shopping, poverty, rubble, low standards, smuggling; Russia, Russian influence, Russian language, depend on Russia, etc.; Despotism, no justice/lack of justice, no freedom, no freedom of speech, non democratic, violation of human rights, etc.; Censorship, corruption, enemy, political slogans, social system, KGB, visa; Communism, USSR/former USSR/Soviet, etc.; Fear, fight, revolution, opposition, solidarity; Exile, migrants, Polish minority; Anzhelika Borys, Trocky.	Vodka/alcohol, cigarettes; Music, festival, culture, song; Nation, Slavs, ethnicity, Orthodox church; Food, potatoes, pancakes, dumplings; Backward, friendly, hospitable, hostility, lazy, loud, tolerance, fat, poor, passive, blue-eyed, beautiful dress, fat; Babysitters, girls, Mariana, students, young women, workers.	Minsk, Grodno, Borisov, East, Europe, neighbour, neighbour of/border with Poland; Hockey, sport club, sportsmen; Forest, beautiful nature, Belovezhskaya Pushcha, bison, marshland, snow; Front line, peace, history; Cement, Chernobyl, silence, Possat, Volkswagen.

Source: own research.

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Searching for the factors which might determine the opinions and beliefs of the respondents, I looked more precisely at their demographical characteristics. It was supposed that the students of social and human sciences might be more interested and more informed about the national issues than students of the other fields of study. The comparison of the associations provided by these two groups of students indeed revealed certain differences between them. Students of non-social or non-human sciences provided more negative associations with politics and the economy (e.g. *totalitarian, backward, poverty*, etc.). The students of social and human sciences provided slightly fewer associations of that kind, and slightly more positive associations concerning the characteristics of the people. That might be explained by the different sources of information about Belarus and Belarusians. If someone studies sociology, history or other related disciplines, he/she might use more sources to find the information about different nations than just the internet or mass media (e.g. books, movies). The Polish media is often selective in information about Belarus and chooses sensational, mostly negative facts and events connected to Belarusian politics and economy. For someone who is not especially interested in this topic, the TV and internet could be the only source of knowledge and information about Belarus.

There were no significant differences between the associations of the students from cities, towns and small villages, nor between the answers of male and female respondents.

In a further question in the survey, respondents were provided with a list of characteristics and were asked to write down which of them (and to what extent) characterise Belarusians. The most common answer for all the questions was „0", which means „not sure" (Mode = 0 for all characteristics). Strictly positive or negative judgments appeared very rarely. It suggests that images of typical Belarusians are not well shaped among the Polish students. These data are rather a surprise, as usually nations which are situated close to each other and share a common history have a lot of common opinions, beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes about each other.

The most generated opinions about Belarusians concerned their economic situation (rather *poor* than *rich*), alcohol consumption (*abusing alcohol* rather than *avoiding alcohol*) and traditional versus modern characteristics (*traditional* rather than *modern)*. These results correspond to the most frequent associations provided in Table I., as both *poverty* and *alcohol/vodka* were among the most frequent associations with Belarus and/or Belarusians. Concerning the other groups of characteristics, Belarusians were seen as *passive* rather than *active*, *aggressive* rather than *peaceful*, *intolerant* rather than *tolerant*, *hard-working* rather than *lazy*, *intelligent* rather than *not intelligent*, *well-mannered* rather than *ill-mannered* and *moral* rather than *unmoral*.

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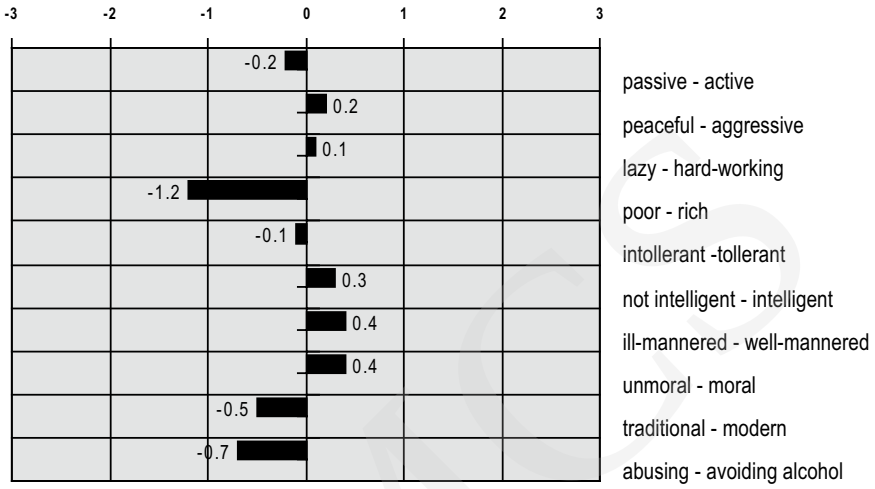


Fig 3. „To what extent in your opinion do the following characteristics describe Belarusians?" If the meaning in the first line is „–3", that means that respondent thinks that Belarusians are very passive, if it is „3" – very active.

Source: own research.

Additionally, respondents were asked to write any other characteristics of Belarusians, not listed in the previous question. Only 35 per cent of all respondents mentioned at least one additional characteristic of Belarusians. In total, 50 words and phrases were provided. However, the majority of the mentioned words were repeated just once, and no characteristics were repeated more than three times, which suggests that participants didn't have a shaped idea about the characteristics of typical Belarusian people. The following characteristics were provided: s*ecretive, shy*, *politically and economically backward, friendly, nice, religious, poor*, *afraid of war, ambitious, beautiful women, confronting their system, conservative, crafty, dangerous, emotional, fighting, grim, good friends, helpful, hospitable, humorous, inconsistent, indifferent to their own fate, involved in fighting, loud, loyal, they like a stable life, they like nature, noisy, none of them is in Krakow, obedient, obstinate, open-minded, open, oppressed by Russia, orthodox, parasites, persistent, positive attitudes to the Poles, problems with internet, ready for changes, rude, sincere, Slavic, Soviet, spontaneous, stable, stubborn, submissive, traditional, uncivilised, unnoticeable, unpleasant, war, women.*

An analysis of further questions in the survey helps to understand such a low level of associations with the Belarusians. Respondents were asked a question: „*How familiar or how unfamiliar are you with Belarus and/or Belarusians?"* Not surprisingly, for half of the respondents (50 per cent), Belarusians were *rather or very unfamiliar*; for 32 per cent they were *neither familiar nor unfamiliar*; and only for the 15 per cent of respondents, Belarusians were *rather or very familiar* (see Figure 4).

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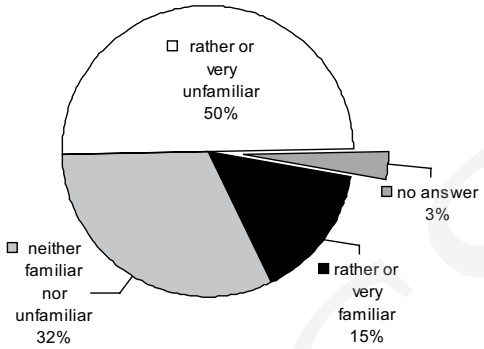


Fig. 4. „How familiar or how unfamiliar are you with Belarus and/or Belarusians?"
Source: own research.

The following question: *„How interesting or uninteresting for you are Belarusians?"* also provided very interesting answers. For the majority of Polish students, Belarusians were *neither interesting nor uninteresting* (35 per cent); for 27 per cent they were *rather or very interesting*; and only for 19 per cent they were *rather or very uninteresting* (see Figure 4). Such a low level of familiarity with and interest in Belarus and Belarusians can be explained by several factors. First of all, after the integration of Poland with the European Union structures and Schengen Area, Western Europe became a much more attractive destination for young Poles to study, work or travel. The freedom of movement within the EU and the opportunity to enjoy higher living standards and higher incomes in the West made such countries as Russia, Ukraine or Belarus even less attractive for young Poles than they were before. Apart from the complicated visa regime, Belarus is believed to be dangerous for foreigners. As it was mentioned before, a negative picture of Belarus, to a great extent, was shaped by the foreign media, presenting the news about Belarus in a very selective way and neglecting other spheres of life, focusing instead on politics.

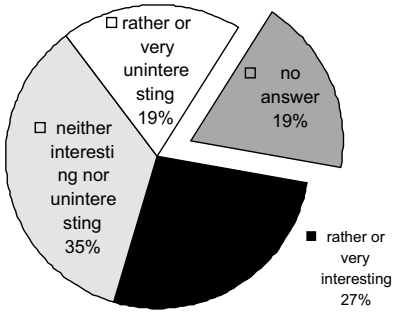


Fig. 5. „How interesting or how uninteresting for you are Belarusians?"
Source: own research.

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However, there is some contradiction between the low level of familiarity with Belarusians and relatively high number of contact with them. Almost half of the respondents – 43 per cent – had contacts with Belarusians before. Most commonly it was student contact with young Belarusian coming to Poland. 16 per cent of respondents had regular communication with Belarusians (daily or weekly). However, only 4 per cent of all respondents had visited Belarus. This number is obviously very low[26]. There was a relatively large amount of contact between the respondents (Polish students) and Belarusians; however, almost none of them had visited Belarus. Thus, surprising is the fact that respondents have a lot more opinions and associations with the Belarusian state (politics, economy) than with Belarusian people. However, there are several things which can explain this phenomenon.

Present Polish-Belarusian relations are far from being favourable, and this is relatively often discussed in the Polish media. 44 per cent of Poles define present Polish-Belarusian relations as bad. Only Polish-Russian relations are viewed even more negatively[27]. Limited knowledge and associations with Belarusian people and their culture could be explained by their low national identity[28] (the lack of bright national characteristics), their blur with the Russians (and Soviet Union) and domination of political association over all others. Polish people, mostly elderly, but also some young, are very sensitive to their national issues and, especially, to the period of Soviet domination in Poland. That's why the political system of Belarus, which is closely associated with the former Soviet regime, is one of the key elements in the perception of this state. Today, the whole post-Soviet area, probably with the exception of the countries which are openly anti-Russian, does not evoke many positive feelings in Poland. Unwanted Soviet heritage is something from which the Poles would like to separate themselves. For young Poles, which don't remember the Soviet times, a very important factor in the evaluation of other countries today is professional opportunities and financial benefits. Belarus as a country with an outdated social and political system, vulnerable economy, corruption and, in particular, an unattractive labour market is not interesting for young Poles. Moreover, the majority of Belarusian students in Poland are openly pro-democratic and pro-Western and criticise the political system of their state. A lot of them have personal stories of disobedience to the regime and oppositional movements. For a lot of young Poles, contact with Belarusian students could be the only opportunity to find out about that country from a first-„hand" source.

[26] It can be expected that in the Eastern part of Poland this number could be slightly higher.

[27] CBOS, *O stosunkach z sąsiednimi krajami – relacje polityczne a nastawienie do nacji*, research report, 2015.

[28] Here I would like to admit that the topic of the low national identity of Belarusians became one of the most popular in Polish studies of Belarus. I got the impression that the majority of the studies aim to show that the national self-identification of contemporary Belarusians is very low and that this is the only reason for all their problems. The other fields of sociological studies of Belarus and Belarusians in my opinion are neglected.

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That contributes to the predominance of the negative political image of Belarus over the other information about that state.

Nowadays, the majority of Belarusians are rather indifferent to their national issues, giving preferences to the economic and social stability of the state[29]. There is no well shaped stereotypical image of an ordinary Belarusian person or Belarusian culture and traditions. In the book *Terra incognita: Białoruś* the author compares Polish knowledge of Belarus to knowledge of Papuans in New Guinea[30]. In addition, Polish stereotypes of the other nations, including Belarusians, are connected with the self-stereotype (auto stereotype) of Poles, which for centuries was built upon the opposition to Orthodox religion and Eastern culture[31]. Thus, Belarus and Belarusians are neither well-known nor interesting for the majority of Polish university students which took part in this research.

Conclusion

The results of this research shed some light on the current opinions and beliefs of Polish university students, and what they associate with Belarus and Belarusians. The results of the survey revealed that the majority of the respondents associated Belarus with political rather than cultural or other issues. The majority of the associations concerned the negative political and economic situation of the states. The frequent associations were the following: *Lukashenka, poverty, Russia/Russian, dictatorship, authoritarian, Minsk* and *USSR/Soviet.* That can be partially explained by the way in which Belarus is presented in the Polish and foreign media. Additionally, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, taking place at the moment this research was conducted, could influence the Polish perception of Belarus, giving special importance to the political direction of the state. The Belarusian state's political connection to Russia and using Russian as one of the official languages is nowadays seen by Polish students in light of its political life. Associations with Belarusian culture, people, national identity or other issues were marginal compared to the associations with the political and economic life of the states. The most common associations with the Belarusian people were the following: *vodka/alcohol, cigarettes, Slavs, music* and *food*.

For the overwhelming majority of young Poles taking part in this research, Belarusians were neither familiar nor interesting people. The research on Polish national identity shows that young Poles nowadays often feel European rather than Polish. A lot of graduates of Polish universities migrate to the rich Western European countries in

[29] L. Titarenko, *Post-soviet national identity: Belarusian approaches and paradoxes*, „Filosofija. Sociologija" 2007, vol. 18, no. 4, p. 79–90 (80).

[30] S. Janowicz, *Terra Incognita: Białoruś*, Białystok: Druk, 1993.

[31] E. Levintova, *Good neighbours?: dominant narratives about the "other" in contemporary Polish and Russian newspapers,* „Europe-Asia Studies" 2010, vol. 62, no. 8, p. 1339–1361 (1341); A. Galus, *Źródła stereotypowego postrzegania Białorusinów…*

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order to find a good job and have a better life. Professional and financial opportunities seem to be much more important for them than culture, traditions, history and other spheres of life. Belarus is definitely not an interesting destination for young Poles as it has „nothing to propose" to them. While the number of Belarusian students coming to Poland is constantly growing, the number of young Poles who have visited Belarus is very limited.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Gender:
1) male
2) female

Nationality:
1) Polish
2) other

Year of birth:……

What is the number of inhabitants in the place of your permanent residence?

1) 1 to 5 000 inhabitants
2) 5 to 50 000 inhabitants
3) 50 to 200 000 inhabitants
4) 200 to 500 000 inhabitants
5) 500 to 1 million
6) more then 1 million

Is the place of your permanent residence populated by ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees or other foreigners?

1) definitely yes
2) rather yes
3) rather not
4) not at all
9) don't know

What is your highest completed education?

1) secondary with exam passed
2) university, bachelor (Bc.)
3) university, magister (Mgr.)
4) university, ingineer (Ing.)
5) PhD or higher
9) other

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What is the field of your highest completed education?

1) social/human sciences
2) medicine
3) exact/technical sciences
4) natural sciences
5) law
9) other

To what extent, in your opinion, can Belarusians be described as the following characteristics?

For each group of opposite characteristics choose one of the meanings from the scale (from –3 to +3). For example, if you think that Belarusians are very passive choose "–3", if you think they are very active, choose "+3", if you are indecisive choose "0".

Passive	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Active
Peaceful	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Aggressive
Lazy	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Hard-working
Poor	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Rich
Intolerant	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Tolerant
Not intelligent	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Intelligent
Ill-mannered	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Well-mannered
Immoral	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Moral
Traditional	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Modern
Abusing alcohol	–3	–2	–1	0	+1	+2	+3	Avoiding alcohol

Which other characteristics do you associate with Belarusians?

……

Please enter the three main words or phrases which you associate with Belarus and/or Belarusians:

a)…… b)…… c)……

How familiar or how unfamiliar are you with Belarus and Belarusians?

1) very familiar
2) rather familiar
3) half and half
4) rather unfamiliar
5) very unfamiliar

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Do you consider Belarusians to be interesting or uninteresting?

1) very interesting
2) rather interesting
3) half and half
4) rather uninteresting
5) very uninteresting
9) don't know

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest współczesnym obrazom i skojarzeniom polskich studentów z ich wschodnimi sąsiadami – Białorusinami. Na początku artykułu zwracam uwagę na to, iż Białorusini przez długi czas pozostawali stosunkowo nieznani jako naród nie tylko dla odległej Europy Zachodniej czy Ameryki, ale również dla państw sąsiednich. Dalej jest przytoczony przegląd polskich badań opinii publicznej dotyczących stereotypów narodowych i postaw wobec Białorusinów. Badanie własne zawiera analizę 150 ankiet przeprowadzonych ze studentami w Warszawie i Krakowie. Analiza wyników pokazuje, że zdecydowanej większości polskich studentów Białoruś i Białorusini kojarzą się ze współczesną sytuacją polityczną w tym kraju. Skojarzenia z ludźmi, ich kulturą oraz obyczajami są bardzo nieliczne. Ponadto dla większości polskich studentów Białoruś oraz Białorusini nie są ani dobrze znani, ani interesujący. W ten sposób można stwierdzić, że stereotypowy obraz Białorusinów nie jest dobrze ukształtowany w Polsce. Do dziś Białorusini pozostają raczej mało znani Polakom.

Słowa kluczowe: skojarzenia, Białoruś, Białorusini, studenci polscy

Abstract

The article focuses on the contemporary images and associations of Polish university students with their Eastern neighbours – Belarus and Belarusians. At the beginning of the article I argue that Belarusians for a long time remained a relatively unknown nation, not only for the distant Western Europeans or Americans, but also for the neighbouring states. An overview of Polish public opinion research concerning the national stereotypes and attitudes towards Belarusians is provided. 150 surveys with Polish university students in Warsaw and Krakow have been conducted. The analysis of the results shows that an overwhelming majority of university students associate Belarus and Belarusians with its contemporary political situation. Associations with people, their culture and customs are marginal. Moreover, Belarusians were neither familiar, nor interesting, to the majority of Polish students. Thus, the stereotypical image of Belarusians is not well shaped in Poland – until today they remain rather unknown and vague to Poles.

Key words: associations, Belarus, Belarusians, Polish students