




## THE CREATIVITY OF MONUMENTS: THE CASE OF BISTABLE BELARUSIAN IDENTITY

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**Abstract.** During the last decades, Belarus has experienced a wave of monument construction, *i.e.*, the monuments as creative practices through which certain historical, cultural and political meanings are constructed and articulated. The process confirms some scientists' insights that the Belarusian identity is actively created today. However, the scientists who are interested in its construction on a practical level have not paid attention to the process of monument creation in Belarus as it also creates and articulates state identity. The analysis of the monument-making process has revealed that three identity narratives co-exist in Belarus: national-cultural and two political-historical ones, *i.e.*, commonality with Russia and political independence from Russia. The potential contradiction of these political-historical narratives shows that the Belarusian identity is in a dichotomous and uncertain state. Although the spread of the political independence from Russia narrative allows us to talk about the existence of an independent national identity of Belarus (one of the most prominent manifestations was the mass protests in 2020, unpredicted by many scientists) in parallel with the existence of a strong historical-political narrative of commonality with Russia, the identity of Belarus remains in a bistable condition. For this reason, the further development of the Belarusian identity remains uncertain in the long-term perspective.

**Keywords:** Belarus, Belarusian identity, monumental practices, narratives, social constructivism, state identity.

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## 1. Introduction

The unpredicted massive protests of 2020 against the authoritarian president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko have intensified debates about the country's collective identity. Over the past three decades, the issue of the Belarusian identity has been extensively discussed. Many researchers have emphasized that Lukashenko's regime constructed and articulated a historical-political narrative of commonality with Russia in the public discourse while at the same time suppressing or avoiding topics that would contradict the mentioned version of the state identity. One of them is the narrative of the political independence from Russia based on the historical experiences of Polotsk, Belarus, and Turov, Belarus, principalities and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Marples, 1999; Pranevičiūtė, 2007; Bekus, 2010; Smok, 2013; Marková, 2018).

The latest analyses carried out after the 2014 events in Ukraine emphasize the change in the identity policy implemented by the Belarusian regime. The studies of the so-called "soft Belarusianization" (Posokhin, 2019; Jachovič, 2022) focus on how the events in Ukraine led the Belarusian authorities pay more attention to the Belarusian history and language

to maintain independence from Russia. However, such an approach does not allow a comprehensive picture to be formed. The dominant “from above” studies, *i.e.*, the narrative brought down from the government, do not reveal a holistic picture. It is not clear what practices of the created narratives are adopted and replicated by various groups of society, how different identity narratives co-exist or not in the self-concept of Belarus of various groups of society, and what identity meanings come “from below”, *i.e.*, from the ordinary citizens of Belarus.

A methodological question may arise at this point: how to reveal alternative concepts of identity if they are not communicated directly? Having in mind the fact that most people in Belarus do not directly express their political views and the fact that the research aims to reveal as many discourses as possible that exist in the Belarusian society rather than the official identity narrative, this article proposes to take an alternative and unconventional approach based on the trends in the field of monument design research popularized in scientific literature (Atkinson & Cosgrove, 1998; Forest & Johnson, 2002; Nientied & Janku, 2019) with the aim to reveal the kind of monuments as creative practices representing Belarus in the country and the world around it as well as creating, maintaining or recreating the state identity.

It is important that today the scientists engaged in monument design research unanimously agree that various groups of society are exclusively involved in monument initiatives, financing, and project ideas (Rimaitė-Beržiūnienė, 2022, p. 20). Although it is recognized that the emergence/non-emergence of monuments is impossible without the approval/disapproval of politicians at the local or national level, nevertheless, the practical examples from Belarus allow us to assert *a priori* that today the Belarusian regime does not constrain the most diverse monument-making initiatives in the country, starting with the perpetuation of the heritage of Kievan Rus’ and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and leading to the memory of the Polish-Lithuanian poet Adam Mickiewicz, who was born on the territory of Belarus.

In addition, it is important to pay attention to the nature of monuments as creative practices when the expression of monuments and the use of the Aesopian language enable the representation of meanings that do not match or possibly deviate from the dominant narrative through monuments (Rimaitė, 2019b, p. 79).

The analysis of the monuments in Belarus is guided by social constructivism. Its basic premise asserts that social reality is not objectively given but is created, maintained, or recreated and articulated through intersubjective meanings during social interactions. Meanwhile, the creation and maintenance or reconstruction of intersubjective meanings take place through social practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1999), such as monuments.

The article focuses on the post-1991 erected monuments marking a specific historical event or person(s). Publicly available information on monuments becomes the main documentation for the analysis. This kind of information is not only available but also created by Belarusian society itself. It should be emphasized that the sample of monuments considered in the article also includes some of the monuments or monumental ensembles built in Belarus during the Soviet era, which receives exceptional attention from the public and the authorities nowadays. In other words, the monuments are characterized by a strong commemorative character manifested through the management of monuments, renovation, and the use for commemorations and public holidays.

Both newly built and older but actively used monuments commemorate the events and/or personalities that are still significant to the Belarusian people today, that is, certain historical statements fostering Belarusian identity. Therefore, without the inclusion of these groups of monuments the analysis of the development of the Belarusian identity would not be accurate and complete.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the monuments that are used to form the identity of Belarus and to identify their meanings by revealing dominant identity narratives.

The first part of the article defines the theoretical and methodological principles of the analysis of monumental practices and state identity. The second part presents a concise empirical overview of dominant monumental practices, whereas the last part uses the overview to construct an analytical model of the Belarusian identity. The model defining bistable identity consists of three partially overlapping identity narratives: cultural and two historical-political ones emphasizing commonality with Russia and political independence from Russia. With the help of the analytical bistable identity model, the article shows how two different lines of identity co-exist in the creation of the Belarusian identity narrative through monuments actualized through domestic and foreign policy factors.

## 2. State identity and monumental practices

Identity consists of two dimensions: self and others, where others are different from self. The elements of identification/differentiation are the main features of the identity construction associated with I/other or self/other distinctions. Understanding who I am/who we are is impossible without understanding who other is/others are. Thus, identity is a practice allowing us to grasp the intersubjective meanings of the self/other distinction (Campbell, 1998, p. 9; Neumann, 1999, pp. 26–27).

State identity is an example of a collective identity creating a narrative about the state through certain practices: who is a friend, an ally, an enemy, a rival; who to cooperate with, identify with, and who to compete or go to war with. State identity is complex and heterogeneous. Different systems of meanings interact in the state and talk about the state and the world surrounding it. Not all identity representations are audible. Some are silenced, some are marginalized reinforcing the dominant version of identity. However, even if a certain version of the identity narrative is not heard or publicly expressed, it does not mean that the latter does not exist or is unimportant.

There are different ways, or rather different practices, to communicate the state identity. However, an analysis focusing only on the practices of the political elite, official institutions or decision-makers will not reflect the collective perceptions of some part of society.

Identities cannot be felt, only practices can. Therefore, the analysis of identities is the analysis of practices helping political communities to define their identity (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 4). Monuments are one of the practices that construct and consolidate the state identity. Monuments not only decorate or fill public spaces. They commemorate specific historical, cultural, or political events and their participants. In this way, monuments significantly contribute to the formation of collective memory indicating what needs to be collectively remembered, honored, and preserved.

As creative practices, monuments are also collective memory practices conveying “social process which transmits group identity through time” (Bachleitner, 2021, p. 24). Thus, by perceiving monuments as a narrative about the practices creating and representing state identity, we can identify the meanings allowing us to define state identity arising from different groups of society that contribute to the emergence of specific monuments. At the same time, the nature of creative monuments, the use of Aesopian language, and aesthetic solutions provide us with opportunities to convey more than just meanings that coincide with dominant identity narratives.

The analysis does not seek to identify all the monuments in Belarus and to define the identity narratives represented through them. Due to limited opportunities to conduct a field study or use the interview method, the article explores the cases available online. This analytical-methodological approach allows for the extrapolation of the identity meanings created by monuments from the dominant discourse on monuments, *i.e.* the information available to the public about monuments. The analysis also pays attention to the monuments presenting a specific historical statement, *i.e.*, dedicated to an actual historical event, person, or a group of persons (Rimaitė, 2019a, p. 65). As already implemented research show, it is through such monuments that the meanings representing state identity and identifying the basic categories of self and other unfold most clearly in identity analyses.

### **3. Monumental practices as a construction of Belarusian identity: empirical overview**

The monuments in Belarus can be typologized into three thematic groups according to historical figures or events they commemorate: 1) common history with Russia, 2) national cultural monuments, and the 3) history independent of Russia. Also, additional sub-categories for the first category can be identified: 1) monuments commemorating World War II and the Soviet era, 2) the Holocaust memorials and Stalinism, and 3) Russian Empire history monuments.

#### **3.1. Common history with Russia**

##### **3.1.1. Monuments commemorating World War II and the Soviet era**

Commemoration of the victoriously won World War II and the courageous partisan anti-Nazi movement remain one of the most important driving forces of the monument-making process in Belarus. This is evidenced by the fact that today there are about 9000 various monuments, graves, or other memorials commemorating the World War II.

No other stage in the history of Belarus unites Belarusians as much as the story of the World War II, in the country called the *Great Patriotic War*. More than 2 million people, *i.e.*, a third of the Belarusian population, lost their lives during the war (1941–1945). A large number of Belarusians were actively involved in anti-Nazi partisan activities, served in the Red Army and otherwise contributed to the fight against Nazism. Therefore, the monuments or memorial ensembles commemorating the end of World War II receive special attention from the authorities and the public.

Since most of the war memorials were built during the Soviet era, it may seem that there are hardly any new monuments to the World War II/Nazi occupation in Belarus. On the other hand, unlike in the Baltic states where many war monuments built during the Soviet period are dismantled (Čepaitienė, 2021, 2023), in Belarus war monuments are carefully maintained and renovated, various commemorations are held there.

In other words, on an analytical level, the above-mentioned phenomenon and its interpretations are connected. The meanings are not eliminated from the identity narrative, on the contrary, they are very much supported.

The World War II monuments can be found in almost every city and town in Belarus. Some of them, for example, National Memorial of the Republic of Belarus built in 1969 for the victims of the German occupation during the World War II mourns the victims of war and occupation, whereas others, such as the Mound of Glory, Victory Monument in Minsk, Belarus, the stela Minsk Hero City Obelisk, Proryv Memorial Complex, or the Brest Fortress celebrate a glorious victory (Khatyn State Memorial Complex, 2025; Belarusturist, 2024; Proryv. ushachi.museum.by, 2023).

A great variety of monuments highlight commonality between Russia and Belarus, particularly the ones commemorating painful experiences, including the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979–1988. To mark this historical event in Minsk, the memorial complex Island of Courage and Sorrow was completed in 1996. The residents of the Belarusian capital call it simply the Island of Tears, Minsk (Vorkov, 2025).

The Chernobyl disaster in 1986 in Ukraine was yet another accident that strongly affected the Russian and Belarusian people as well as contaminated a large part of Southern Belarus. It is noteworthy that many Belarusians liquidated the consequences of this Chernobyl disaster. In 2018, a memorial to honor the power engineers of the Soviet Union who coped with the outcomes of the Chernobyl disaster was unveiled in Khoiniki district, Gomel region, Belarus (Sb.by: Belarus' segodnya, 2018).

### **3.1.2. The Holocaust memorials and Stalinism**

The most recent trend in monument-making in Belarus is the memory of the Holocaust. It is estimated that 80% of the Belarusian Jews, or 800 000 in figures, were killed by the Nazis. The most famous monument to the victims of the Holocaust is located in Minsk. A monument called *The Pit* (memorial) is located at the site where in 1942 the Nazi forces shot about 5000 Jewish residents of the nearby Minsk Ghetto. About 12 kilometers South-East of Minsk, close to the village of Maly Trostenets, a memorial complex and several memorial stones erected in 2015 honor those who were killed here. Between 1942 and 1944, Maly Trostenets was the place of the biggest Nazi execution camp in the occupied parts of the Soviet Union (Belarus Holocaust Memorials Project, 2013–2025).

However, commemorating the victims of the Stalinist period in Belarus is problematic. For example, the mass shootings of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Russian: *Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del, NKVD*) in the period of 1937–1941 in Kurapaty, Minsk, still cause a lot of passion. Here the *NKVD* officers shot and buried at least 30 000 people. The mass execution was kept in secret until 1988 when the burials were found and made public. Nevertheless, no official memorial has been erected in Kurapaty so far, only numerous

wooden and metal crosses put up by the activists and relatives of the victims over the past three decades.

Such a way of commemorating the dead did not satisfy the Belarusian authorities leading to various tensions with activists (Boika, 2019; BBC, 2019). Kurapaty is the only place in Belarus where the victims of the Soviet repressions are commemorated. It is also one of the most important places for the political manifestations of the Belarusian opposition. The regime avoids discussing the topics of the Stalinist crimes and suppresses the resulting debates in various ways and, in turn, tensions in society. Thus, although there are some initiatives of certain groups of society “from below” to memorialize Stalinism, the official discourse of the regime does not support the memory of repression.

Typically, Stalinist repressions in other Soviet bloc states, such as the Baltic states or Poland, take a very serious position in the creation of memory practices. In this case, the commemoration of the Soviet repression aims to distance itself from Russia and instrumentalize the memory of the mentioned period thus supporting the image of current Russia as a hostile power. As shown by the case of Kurapaty and the absence of practices of commemoration of the Soviet repression “from above”, such an image of Russia is avoided in Belarus.

### 3.1.3. Russian Empire history monuments

The monuments to cultural figures also testify the Russian-Belarusian amity. For example, Alexander Pushkin’s monument in Belarus (Holiday.by, 2025). During the Soviet era, more monuments dedicated to the classics of the Russian literature appeared in Belarus. One of them is Maxim Gorky. The Monument to Maxim Gorky was erected in 1981 in the park named after the writer in the very center of Minsk. The Monument to Pyotr Rumyantsev, one of the foremost Russian generals of the 18th century, stands in the Eastern Belarusian city of Gomel. It is not by chance that he is immortalized here. The general built a magnificent palace in Gomel, which today is a part of the city’s landscape. Several monuments witnessing historical ties with Russia can be found in the city of Kobryn, in Southern Belarus: a monument to the founders of the city, prince Vladimir Vasilkovich and princess Olga Romanovna, and even three commemorations of the Russian general Alexander Suvorov. It should be noted that Catherine the Great gifted the city of Kobryn to Suvorov for the victory over the uprising of Tadeusz Kościuszko.

## 3.2. National cultural monuments

The personalities who unite the nation and are famous in the Belarusian culture play a significant role in the monument creation process. This tradition dates to the Soviet Union times as a part of the *korenizatsiia* policy emphasizing the national distinctiveness of an individual Soviet republic. These monumental practices continue to this day. No other historical figure can match Francysk Skaryna in the abundance of monuments except for perhaps only the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin whose monuments were erected in almost every city and town of Belarus during the Soviet era.

The number of monuments dedicated to Skaryna in the neighboring state stimulates a discussion about a certain cult of Skaryna. Born in Polotsk, Skaryna’s contribution to the historical self-awareness, national culture and collective identity of the Belarusian people is

enormous. In 1517, Skaryna founded the first printing house in Eastern Europe and printed the first books in Belarusian. In Minsk alone, as many as five monuments dedicated to Skaryna can be found. The most monumental one have been standing since 2005 in the square in front of the National Library of Belarus (To Belarus!, 2025). There are monuments to Skaryna in Polotsk and Lida, Belarus. In fact, every city, town and even village in Belarus has in some way commemorated the merits of Skaryna.

It is agreed that two poets of the 19th and 20th centuries junction Yanka Kupala and Yakub Kolas, who are called the national poets of Belarus, left a deep mark on the modern Belarusian language. These personalities are widely commemorated through monuments. The Belarusian poet, writer, playwright, and journalist Kupala is considered one of the pioneers of the new Belarusian literature and literary language and one of the first creators of the Belarusian national dramaturgy. Kupala's monument in Minsk was unveiled in 1972.

The same year, 1972, a monumental memorial composition dedicated to the memory of Kolas was erected in the capital of Belarus. Kolas is a prominent Belarusian poet and one of the founding fathers of the classic Belarusian literature.

A poet, journalist, literary critic, and historian Maksim Bahdanovič also belongs to the pantheon of the Belarusian literature. To commemorate the 90th anniversary of Bahdanovič's birth, a sculpture was erected in Minsk in 1981. Although he lived for a short time, just 26 years, he made a great impact on the national self-consciousness of Belarusians (Probelarus, 2012–2023b).

One of the most remembered literary personalities in Belarus is Mickiewicz, a famous Polish and Lithuanian poet who was born in the town of Zawosse in the Brest region, Belarus, and spent his childhood in the city of Novogrudok, Belarus. Mickiewicz is related to Belarus not only because of his birthplace but also his works that described Navahrudak Castle, Svitiaz lake, wars with the German Crusaders, and local traditions. The poet is commemorated in Minsk, Grodno (Belarus), Lida, Brest (Belarus) and, of course, Novogrudok (Belta, 2018).

In 2001, the monument to the Belarusian printer Pyotr Mstislavets was set up in the city of Mstislav, Eastern part of Belarus. He published the first Russian dated printed book *Apostole* in 1564, in Moscow, Russia, and in 1565 Mstislavets set in print two editions of the *Breviary*.

In Polotsk, in 2003, a monument was built to Symeon of Polotsk, a poet, dramatist, churchman, and enlightener of the Belarusian ancestry who came from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth to the Tsardom of Russia. The monuments were also put up to the reformation figure Symon Budny in Nyasvizh, Belarus, where he preached, and Belarusian writer and poet, one of the initiators of the modern Belarusian literature Francišak Bahuševič in Smarhon, Belarus, where he lived for some time.

### **3.3. The history independent of Russia: Polotsk, Belarus, and Turov, Belarus, principalities and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania**

In recent years, especially after the annexation of Crimea, Belarus, has made efforts to memorialize certain political meanings and ideas. One of the ideas is the perpetuation of different stages of the Belarusian statehood, including the heritage of Kievan Rus' and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In this way, an identity narrative opposing the narrative of commonality with Russia is created and supported.

A monument to grand duke Algirdas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, who ruled Vitebsk, Belarus, in the 14th century, was unveiled in 2014 celebrating the 1040th anniversary of the city of Vitebsk. Grand duke Algirdas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, whose wife was Maria of Vitebsk, the daughter of the last prince of the principality of Vitebsk, Yaroslav Vasilievich, played a significant role in the history of Vitebsk. After Vasilievich's death, grand duke Algirdas inherited the duchy and added it to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. He built well-fortified castles and palaces and financed the Orthodox Church of the Holy Spirit, the main shrine of Vitebsk. Algirdas' second wife, princess Uliana of Tver, established a monastery in the city where she lived and was buried (Kurilo, 2012; Pasternak, 2014).

Another monument commemorating the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania stands in Lida. This is a monument to Algirdas' father, grand duke Gediminas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The monument to the founder of the city was unveiled in 2019 commemorating the 696th anniversary of Lida. Interestingly, the construction of the monument was financed by the Lida-based private company *Belteks optik* (Boguslavskaya, 2019; Belta, 2019b).

Other noble figures of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are also commemorated in Belarus. One of them is Lew Sapieha, Chancellor and Great Clerk of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, who led the drafting of the Third Statute of Lithuania. The monuments dedicated to the memory of this prominent political figure emerged in Slonim, Belarus (2019), and Lyepyel, Belarus (2022). Sapieha was in charge of the Slonim precinct since 1586. In 1591, at his request, the King of Poland Sigismund III Vasa renewed the Magdeburg rights for Slonim. It is important to note that granting the Magdeburg rights was a significant part of the city's identity since it gained independence (Belta, 2019a). In Lyepyel, the monument for Sapieha was erected in commemoration of the city's 571st anniversary. It is claimed that the local priest Andrey Anishkevich took care of its construction (Lepel-kraj, 2022).

When deconstructing the meanings corresponding to the Belarusian identity narrative through creative monumental practices, the other period of the country's statehood, *i.e.*, Kievan Rus', plays an important role. It is another driving force behind the construction of monuments in Belarus. One of the most remembered personalities of this period is Kirill of Turov, a bishop and saint of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was one of the first and finest theologians of Kievan Rus'. Principality of Turov was a Medieval East Slavic principality and key subdivision of Kievan Rus' since the 10th century on the present territory of Southern Belarus and Northern Ukraine. Princes of Turov often served as the Grand princes of Rus' in the 10th–11th centuries. Kirill of Turov is highly respected in Belarus. There are monuments dedicated to him in his native Turov, Minsk, and Gomel (Probelarus, 2012–2023a).

The times of the principality of Polotsk are commemorated by the monuments to the Orthodox saint Euphrosyne of Polotsk erected all over the country and, of course, in Polotsk. This depiction is not accidental. Euphrosyne of Polotsk, the daughter of prince Vseslav of Polotsk, is not the only of the most revered saints, the patroness of Belarus, and first canonized woman on the territory of Belarus. In the 12th century, Euphrosyne of Polotsk founded a monastery in Polotsk that became one of the most significant centers of science and education in the principality. She helped the reconstruction of the Saint Sophia Cathedral, Polotsk and worked on the Polotsk chronicles. Euphrosyne of Polotsk wrote music and is considered the first Belarusian art patron. Under her supervision, the Transfiguration Church, Polotsk was



built in the 1150s. It is the outstanding example of the Polotsk architectural school (Belarus. by, 2009–2025). For these reasons, Euphrosyne of Polotsk is regarded as the most famous woman in the history of Belarus.

Gomel boasts of the monument to Bohdan Khmelnytsky, a military commander of the Ukrainian Cossacks (Vdovenko, 2025). He was in charge of the uprising against the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and its magnates (1648–1654) who brought about the formation of an independent Cossack state in Ukraine. This context is also relevant to the famous Ukrainian poet in Belarus Taras Shevchenko. The first monument to Shevchenko in independent Belarus was erected in Minsk in 2002 (Probelarus, 2012–2023c).

#### 4. The analysis of the bistable model of the Belarusian identity

The empirical analysis of monuments allows us to distinguish certain identity narratives co-existing in Belarus. The first one is the narrative of commonality with Russia created and represented through monumental practices of the Russian Empire, World War II, and Soviet periods.

There is an abundance of monuments in Belarus marking the unity of the Belarusian and Russian people. Nevertheless, the ones dedicated to the World War II dominate the largest group of monuments. The extremely painful historical period for the Belarusian nation unites the absolute majority of the Belarusian population regardless of their place of residence or the language they speak. From a geographical point of view, this group of creative monumental practices is characterized by a universal, statewide layout. Also, the group includes monuments to outstanding figures of the Russian culture, including the ones to Gorky or Pushkin, as well as Russian military persons who lived in Belarus, for example, general Suvorov. On the other hand, these monuments are not dominant, some of them were built during the Soviet era, while others were donated by Russia.

Since it emphasizes the closeness of Russia and Belarus, it is not surprising that the memory of the victims of the Stalinist regime is problematic. For example, Kurapaty topic is suppressed both in public discussions and in the construction of the monument because the narrative of Stalinist repressions does not correlate with the narrative of the glorious victory in the World War II. Furthermore, the active memory of the victims of this period would prevent from creating an integral meaning of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) period in the identity narrative.

Similarly, the uprising of 1863 receives little attention in Belarus today. In fact, there is no commemoration of this event or its participants in the country whatsoever. Even one of the leaders of the uprising Konstanty Kalinowski, who was from Belarus, is almost excluded. The only monument honouring this historical figure is in Svislach, Belarus. It leads to the conclusion that the uprising of 1863–1864 in Belarus is disregarded due to its anti-Russian nature.

The second group of dominant and recently strongly expressed monuments are the ones dedicated to the perpetuation of the periods of the Belarusian history independent from Russia, *e.g.*, Polotsk and Turov principalities and Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It represents the second political-historical identity, *i.e.*, the political independence of Belarus from Russia.

This group of monuments is characterized by a certain geographical arrangement. The monuments dedicated to the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are usually located in the Western, Central, or Northern parts of Belarus, *i.e.*, Lida, Grodno, Vitebsk, and Novogrudok. Naturally, it is because of the fact that the mentioned areas are closely related to the period of the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. On the other hand, in the Eastern cities of the country, *e.g.*, Gomel and Mogilev, Belarus, one can see more politically neutral (mostly perpetuating local memory) monuments or common history of Russia. It is because the discourses of, for example, Polotsk principality or Grand Duchy of Lithuania are less supported by the authorities. Consequently, the monuments dedicated to political figures, such as the dukes of Polotsk or the grand dukes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are more often presented as creating local memory. For example, the monument to the grand duke Gediminas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in Lida is officially called the monument to the founder of this city. The same can be said about the monuments to Sapieha described in the context of the history of Lyepyel and Slonim.

The abundance of monuments to previously ignored historical periods and political figures not related to turning to Russia speaks of the strengthening search for Belarusian national political self-identification. The new political-historical identity narrative of political independence from Russia naturally competes with the historical-political narrative emphasizing commonality with Russia and raising the question of which political formation, *i.e.*, BSSR or Polotsk principality/ Grand Duchy of Lithuania, should be considered as the predecessor of the current state of Belarus. However, the existence of this narrative can be viewed not only from a competitive but also from an integrative perspective. When creating the identity of Belarus, different groups of society can find the basis for identification in this case: those supporting the narrative of commonality with Russia and those promoting the images of an independent Belarus.

The third large part of monuments in Belarus is intended to commemorate the figures of the national culture. The tradition started in the Soviet times as a part of the policy of *korenizatsiia* emphasizing the national distinctiveness of an individual Soviet republic. The national-cultural identity narrative can be clearly distinguished from the discussed two political-historical identity narratives. This group of monuments includes the monuments of the most famous Belarusian cultural figures, such as Kolas, Kupala, Skaryna, and other encouragers of Belarusian national self-consciousness.

National-cultural identity is intersubjectively recognized by most Belarusian society members. In the case of this narrative, it is possible to record both the commemoration of personalities who maintain commonality with Russia and the memory of personalities who support the narrative of independent Belarus. Thus, the national-cultural identity does not form any political agenda, as it can be integrated into different political-historical discourse of the Belarusian identity.

## 5. Conclusions

Guided by the principles of social constructivism and the research direction of monument design popularized in scientific literature, the article aims to demonstrate that monumental practices are one of the ways to reveal and understand the state's collective identity.

Seemingly, Belarusian identity is formed in the “shadows”. It is not reflected in the usual identity-creating and supporting practices: foreign and security policy, public debates, official speeches or documents. As a result, the monumental practices have become one of the main means of creating and expressing the state identity. It is for this reason that the article analyzes monumental practices. This is the only way to reveal a deeper and more comprehensive image of the Belarusian identity “from above” but emerges “from below”.

The study reveals that Belarus is not a denationalized state or a state with an exclusively Soviet identity. On the contrary, despite the linguistic similarity with the Russian language, national identity is gradually forming in Belarus. It is evidenced by the emergence of creative monumental practices related to the mentioned periods.

Through monumental practices, various narratives that create and support Belarus’ collective identity are spread revealing the Belarusian state the surrounding world. A concise analysis and bistable analytical model revealed that three identity narratives exist in Belarus: a universally reflected cultural-national narrative and two competing political-historical ones (commonality with Russia and political independence from Russia). The strengthening of Belarus’ political independence from Russia’s political-historical narrative can partly explain the maturity of Belarusians’ awareness of their national identity. It is one of recent most prominent manifestations is the mass protests in 2020. However, in parallel, a strong identity narrative of commonality with Russia remains active in Belarus. For example, a dominant group of monuments in Belarus remains the monuments or monumental ensembles marking the victory in the World War II and commemorating the Nazi occupation.

Based on indirect and non-verbal ways of expression, the monumental reconstruction of the Belarusian identity is not sufficient to understand which historical-political narrative dominates or will be established in the Belarusian society. As both historical-political identity narratives have strong support in society, it is difficult to finally decide which of them will determine the self-identification of Belarus in the long term. It could be the case for another research, whereas the analysis of the monuments shows that the Belarusian society remains in a bistable state of political-historical identity.

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