

# The Politics of the Belarusian Self: Performing Truth, Converting in Public

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores narratives of personal transformation publicized by the “How I Became Belarusian” campaign and documenting rites of passage into the state of “true Belarusianness.” As the narrators describe their becoming aware of who they think they really are and the work of embracing a new self, their biographical accounts are stories of self-understanding, of purposefully creating a meaningful self. The key claim of the narrators is their sincerity and acting in response to conscience. While this national(ist) conversion takes place internally, it is proven to outsiders by switching to the Belarusian language in everyday personal communication, which implies a drastic change in internal signifying practices. This requires permanent self-control and discipline and thus becomes the source of one’s authority over oneself. Based on the application of the concept of conversion to nationalism, this article argues that “authentic Belarusianness” becomes a way to articulate social criticism and make political claims, which may not be made overtly not only for political reasons, but also because the group’s moral righteousness needs to be asserted. The tool with which this can be done is one’s own identity. Switching to Belarusian performs the function of “sincere speech” and works as a symbolic manifestation of internal changes.*