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“Soft Belarusization” as a Resistance Factor to the Russian Threat

„Miękka białorutenizacja” jako czynnik przeciwdziałania rosyjskiemu zagrożeniu

• Abstrakt •

Artykuł dotyczy problemów „miękkiej białorutenizacji” w kontekście przeciwdziałania rosyjskiemu zagrożeniu. Autor rozpatruje zmianę narracji ideologicznej w Białorusi. Opisuje reakcję strony rosyjskiej i rosyjskich mediów na zjawisko „miękkiej białorutenizacji”.

Słowa kluczowe: „miękka białorutenizacja”; rosyjskie zagrożenie; przeciwdziałanie; ideologia; nacjonalizm

• Abstract •

The paper discusses the problem of “soft belarusization” in the context of counteracting the Russian threat. The author considers the changes in the ideological narrative of Belarus, and describes the reaction of Russia and the Russian media to the phenomenon of “soft belarusization”.

Keywords: “soft belarusization”; russian threat; resistance; ideology; nationalism

Belarus was named a state most vulnerable to Russian influence among all countries of the Eastern Partnership by the report *Civil Society Under Russia's Threat: Building Resilience in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova* published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) at the end of 2018. Weak national identity, dominance of Russian language, distribution of pro-Russian materials in the media, presence of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian governmental and non-governmental organizations are among the main factors defining this vulnerability (Boulègue, Lutsevych, Marin, 2018). Such a situation is a result of geopolitical choices and difficult calls which the leadership of the Belarusian state

had to make, as well as increasing dependence from Russia due to broadening integration of the states. Understanding this issue, Belarusian leadership began to seek the way to counter the threat from Russia – and thus the Belarussian government began to pursue a policy directed at gradual separation from “Russianness”, offering the idea of “soft belarusization” as an alternative.

Recently, the notion “soft belarusization” and its individual aspects became the object of research interest of scientists, analysts, and publicists. One of the researchers focusing on this phenomenon, Belarusian scientist and director of the Belarussian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), Petr Rudkovski posits a definition of “soft belarusization” as the process of strengthening Belarussian national identity in public consciousness through affirmation of importance of the Belarussian language, as well as promotion of the narrative and symbols that emphasize historical and cultural identity of Belarusaiaans (Rudkoŭski, 2018).

“Soft belarusization” that has taken place recently is a result of coincidence of three factors: civic activists’ campaigns, a business initiative launched in 2010–2012, and the decisions of the Belarussian government, which under the influence of the events that took place in Ukraine in 2014–2015 understood well the broader social message of these incidents (Mozheyko, 2018). While the Russian-Ukrainian conflict did not give birth to “soft belarusization” on its own, it certainly was one of catalysts of this process (Rudkoŭski, 2018). At that time, the statement that the real guarantee of independence of Belarus are its good relations with Russia started to be clearly conveyed by the Russian Federation. As prerequisite for such good relations Russia considered the process of factual union of Belarus with Russia (*Prednovogodniy ultimatum dlya Lukashenko*, 2018), what was a direct threat to the sovereignty of the Belarusian state. Thus, with the events in Ukraine fresh in the mind of the Belarussian authorities and the growing threat from the Russian Federation, the process of giving “soft belarusization” a policy shape took place. The authors of the above-mentioned report of the Royal Institute of International Affairs state that in such political environment, “soft belarusization” offers the best perspectives for strengthening this state’s resilience against the Russian threat, as well as for possible post-Lukashenko democratization of Belarus (Boulègue, Lutsevych, Marin, 2018).

The phenomenon of “soft belarusization” gradually stopped to be exclusively a socio-cultural phenomena and became an element of informational and cultural security framework, forming an alternative to the pro-Russian narrative within Belarus. The state policy is significantly oriented towards the strengthening of national identity, highlighting the differences between the interests of Belarus and Russia, and revision of the historical myths of sameness, emphasizing instead differences of

the Belarusian and Russian history (Rudkouski, 2017).

In light of its new significance, the author attempts to analyse the phenomenon of “soft belarusization” on the backdrop of the contrasting Russian narratives within Belarus, as well as to show the response of the Russian side, in particular certain Russian media to the above-mentioned internal Belarusian processes in the presented article.

It is necessary to underline that selecting the course towards “soft belarusization” and the change of ideological discourse takes place despite the pro-Russian ideological line prevailing in the Belarusian state in the period of Alexander Lukashenko’s rule. In fact, nowadays the Belarusian president supports reanimation of processes of national state development, which he opposed in the early years of his presidency as associated with nationalistic forces, opponents of his political regime. The idea of building a national state, declared by nationalistic and democratic forces at the beginning of 1990s was purely theoretical, as Belarus was frequently called the most soviet among all the socialist republics. It was demonstrated in the republican referendum on March 17, 1991, in which 82,2% of the population voted for saving the USSR. The natural consequence of this atmosphere was furthering of integration with Russia, with traditional role of Moscow as the centre of the union, change of state symbols and granting of state language status to the Russian language. These steps met the public need, but led to obvious russification of the state. The Belarusian national project was forgotten, marginalized and superseded by the Soviet/Russian one, while Belarusian identity was developed on the idea of indissoluble connection with Russia, unity of the Slavic peoples and common Soviet past. Assessing the meaning and the role of “soft belarusization”, Belarusian scientist Andrej Vardamacki noted that besides belarusization, the process of re-Sovietization, encouraged by Moscow was ongoing as well (*Krome belorusizatsii v strane idet protsess resovetizatsiyyi, i tozhe sverhu, no ne iz Minska, a iz Moskvyi*, 2017).

Understanding of the Russian threat, coupled with noticeable deactualization of old ideological discourses on the national stage, led the Belarusian government to take over the old project created by its internal political opponents and contrast the idea of “soft belarusization” to the spreading ideology of “Russkiy mir”. This, according to Belarusian analyst Artem Shraybman, does not mean that Alexander Lukashenko became a nationalist, but rather that his perception of external and internal threats has changed: in the 1990s the main threat for him was Belarusian nationalism, nowadays – it is Russian nationalism (Shraybman, 2016).

The issue of state sovereignty and its protection nowadays more often finds its way to speeches of the state leaders (*Bilorus – suverenna i nezalezhna derzhava. My*

zastavymo bud-koho povazhaty nash suverenitet i nezalezhnist, khto vvazhaie, shcho ne bulo, movliav, takoi krainy. Ne bulo, a teper ye, i z tsym potribno rakhuvatysia, 2015). The slogan: “For the future of independent Belarus” was the main slogan of the last presidential campaign, and apparently will remain such for the electoral campaign in 2020 (*S kakim lozungom Lukashenko poydet na novyie pereviboryi*, 2019). Currently the main threat to Belarussian sovereignty and personal authority of Alexander Lukashenko is the idea of “Russkiy mir”, actively promoted by Russian official propaganda. The tactics selected by the Belarusian government – mobbing of overly ambitious pro-Russian political figures, journalists and their expatriation from the country – confirms that. Analyst of the Ukrainian institute of the future specializing in Belarusian matters, Igar Tyshkevich, states that if the fight against pro-west Belarusian opposition, was scattered in nature, with multiple small targets and mainly directed against its leaders, in the case of pro-Russian structures the activity was instead aimed at destruction of the political infrastructure (Tyshkievich, 2018). Surprisingly, at the present time there are no significant pro-Russia political forces on the Belarusian political arena. In fact, the Belarusian president himself remains the main pro-Russian politician.

Taking into consideration the fact that currently the Russian threat to Alexander Lukashenko is bigger than the threat posed by internal Belarusian opposition, the government supports the process of belarusization, but does not speed up its tempo. A good supporting example is the state authority’s refusal to consider the possibility of introducing a bill for state support of Belarusian language (*Gosorganyi vyistupili protiv zakonoproekta o podderzhke belorusskogo yazyika*, 2019). It is necessary to underline the complexity of the situation in Belarus today. On the one side, there is a clear necessity to promote “soft belarusization”, on the other side – the government must refrain from taking any more direct steps that could cause antagonism from the Russian side. While the Belarusian authorities can – sometimes – demonstratively separate its position on an issue from the position of Russia, the internal political tendency towards nationalism may be considered by Russia as a looming threat of exit of Belarus from the sphere of Russian influence... Such perception could, like in the case of Ukraine, lead to launching of a Russian-sponsored propaganda campaign against Belarus. Alexander Lukashenko’s words are demonstrative here: “We cannot lay ourselves open the way Ukraine did it. There is no reason in disturbing Russians and the Russian language. If you want everyone to speak Ukrainian (read Belarusian), do that carefully. If you want, let us talk more in Belarusian, starting from the nursery. Let’s do that quietly” (*Lukashenko: Istoriyu o stozdaniі BNR znat nado, no gorditsya temi sobyitiyami ne stoit*, 2018).

Imprisonment of employees of the pro-Russian online news outlet “Regnum”: Yuriy Pavlovets, Dmitriy Alimkin and Sergey Shyptenko, convicted by the Belarusian court of stirring up nationalistic hatred as a part of an organized group, was however made light of by the Russian media, and the Federation’s reaction was modest. The overall situation serves well as an illustration of the approach of the Belarusian side to the confrontation with Russian propaganda. The texts written by authors associated with “Regnum”, in particular, demonstrated ignorance – wilful or not – of Belarusian history, belittled the Belarusian language, and described Belarus as an intermediary project of Russia (*Sud nad avtorami “Regnuma”. Vse troe vinyi ne priznali*, 2017). Still, despite serious accusations, the agency was not delegalized and continues its functioning – while, interestingly, the web-sites “Khartiya” and “Belarus partisan”, which often criticize Belarusian government and are ran by internal opposition were blocked.

Nevertheless, generally even the most temperate and calculated steps of Belarusian leaders that appeal to national symbols and history, but which in some way represent a departure from the ideology of “Russkiy mir” are negatively perceived in Russia. Any attacks against Russian language and culture in Belarus are frequently discussed in media, and even minor manifestations of Belarusian nationalism – or national identity – are much reviled (*Batkinyyi natsisty. Belorusskie pravyye zachischayut stranu ot Rossii. Lukashenko ne protiv*, 2018). The characteristic feature of such materials are frequent comparisons and contrasts of the Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism, with the unspoken assumption that events in Belarus may follow the Ukrainian scenario. Such materials also ignore or marginalize the phenomenon of “soft belarusization” (*Myagkaya belorusizatsiya Lukashenko*, 2016; *Ne opyat, a mova. Povtorit li Belorussiya put Ukrainyi, zapreschaya russkiy yazyk*, 2017; *Kak v Belarusi idet polzuchaya natsionalisticheskaya belorusizatsiya*, 2017). Nonetheless, the minister of culture of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Medinsky it known to have called the minister of culture of Belarus, Yuriy Bondar asking him to better protect the Russian language in Belarus (*Ministr kulturyi Rossii prosit zaschitit russkiy yazyk v Belarusi*, 2019).

While the initiative of belarusization is a bottom-up one, it is nowadays actively supported by the state – it is likely this tendency will continue, and in a favourable political environment the actions taken will be expanded. Continuation of the “soft belarusization” policy and the political course of highlighting the differences between Belarus and Russia is the policy direction predicted by the Centre for Military and Political Studies at one of the leading “thought factories” in Russia, MGIMO. A passage of their collective monography dedicated to Belarus *The World in the 21st Century: Expectations for the Development of International*

Situation in Countries and Regions states that: “trying to preserve independence from Russia and slowing down integration processes of both countries, Lukashenko continues to install *litvinsky* nationalism in contrast to all-Russian unity in the country (Podberyozkin, Aleksandrov, Rodionov, 2018, p. 257–258). It is necessary to underline parallels, which Russian analysts draw with the events which took place in Ukraine in 2014, emphasizing the need for transition of power in Belarus into the hands of pro-Russian forces. Thus, from the position of current Russian interests, the longer Lukashenko holds the office and pursues his current policies, the more chances there are for a repeat of Ukrainian Maidan in Belarus once he leaves the position (Podberyozkin, Aleksandrov, Rodionov, 2018, p. 258). Although the ideas and expectations expressed by the authors of the above monography do not reflect the official position of Russian leaders, they still to a large extent mirror the atmosphere among the higher echelons of Russian political and military leadership. Appearance of such materials cannot but put on guard the Belarusian side of the Union State.

The new, more independent, policy message prompted the Belarusian leaders to revise their attitude towards some official celebrations, significant historical events and symbols. Prohibition of holding a pro-Russian rally “Immortal regimen” in Minsk on May 9, 2018, and its substitution by the similar in format official celebrations under the slogan “Belarus remembers” (in which Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko participated) led to a scandal and became a demonstration of ideological differences between Belarus and Russia. As a result, the Russian side issued a statement accusing Belarus of “nationalism”, support for Nazi collaborators, and sowing discord between the Belarusian, Russian and other peoples of the USSR, who fought against the Nazi invaders together (*V Minske ne razreshili aktsiyu “Bessmertnyiy polk”. Rossiyskoe informagentstvo: eto “metastazyi neobanderovschinyi”*, 2018). In addition, sporting the brown-and-black St. George’s ribbon is nowadays discouraged in Belarus – new official symbols of the Victory Day were approved to replace it.

Revision of the historical policy in place was made in the spirit of “soft belarusization”. The emphasis in Belarusian history books was put on the unity of Slavic peoples, the Soviet period in history and on the BRSR, from which the independent Belarusian state adopted the main symbols of statehood. As instructed by Alexander Lukashenko, it is necessary: “to put down and inspire people’s minds with the truth” (*V uchebnikah istorii Belarusi rasstavlyat novyye aktsentyi*, 2017) about the history of Belarusian statehood from the 9th century to the Principality of Polotsk. Moreover, in his Independence Day speech the Belarussian president termed the Principality of Polotsk “a historical cradle of Belarus” (*Lukashenko: Polotskoe knyazhestvo – nasha istoricheskaya kolyibel*, 2017).

Another manifestation of Alexander Lukashenko’s ideological manoeuvring was the Freedom Day – celebration of 100th anniversary of proclamation of the Belarussian People’s Republic in Minsk on March 25, 2018. Public celebration of the same event by the opposition had explicitly anti-governmental character and was suppressed by the Belarussian government. This change of attitude towards Freedom Day celebrations and facilitated approvals for organization of events on this date by various circles were quite aggressively interpreted by some Russian media as readiness of the Belarussian government to go hand in hand with so-called “neo-Banderites” and “Nazis” (*Poydut li belorusskie vlasti na strategicheskiy soyuz s neobanderovtsami?*, 2018).

The author however wants to warn against overestimating the significance of a certain uncomfortable compromise existing currently between the Belarussian government and opposition, who have found areas of common interests. This less tense relationship is a manifestation necessitated by the strengthening Russian threat to Belarussian independent statehood.

One can conclude that currently, despite the existing close economic ties between Belarus and Russia, surviving aspirations of integration, and cultural, religious and linguistic closeness of these two peoples, as a reaction to events that took place in Ukraine Belarus is trying to gradually move beyond Russian ideological control. Understanding the threat to its very existence, and having perceived the need to formulate an ideology constituting a real alternative to the pro-Russian imperialistic narrative, the Belarussian government reframed the country’s own history, national symbols, and culture, which are not linked to Russia.

This process of “soft belarusization”, initiated by as a grassroots movement by civil society and now supported by the state, causes tensions in Belarussian-Russian relations and is viewed by the Russian Federation as an attempt of Belarus to free itself of the Russian political and socio-cultural control.

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