COLLOQUIA HUMANISTICA

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Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or "Border Reinforcement"?

Abstract

The paper focuses on shifts in official discourse in Belarus since 2014, after the Ukrainian events, that are labelled "soft Belarusization". This new approach can be interpreted as an attempt to support nationally oriented identity practices and as an attempt to establish more visible political and cultural boundaries between Belarus and the "Russian world". Firstly, this paper elaborates on the specifics of Belarusian identity and presents the historical and political background of the ongoing events. Secondly, several manifestations of soft Belarusization processes are analysed, such as changes in Belarusian authorities' rhetoric, their changing attitude towards the Belarusian language and unofficial state symbols and previously officially disregarded historical events and personalities, steps towards the creation of new symbols, and new relationships between official and "alternative" discourses.

Keywords: Belarus, soft Belarusization, identity, boundaries, discourse.

Since 2014, the post-Soviet region has witnessed crucial shifts in its political, social and everyday life. To a larger extent, these shifts were catalysed by the events that took place in Ukraine after the Ukrainian Revolution, the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the east of the country. Having affected Ukraine directly and the most, these events also had far-reaching consequences for other former Soviet countries, particularly Russia, which anchored its hegemonic role in the region, and Belarus. These events have also shown that the present-day geographical (physical) borders in Europe could still be subject to change and that former seemingly definite national boundaries could be reinterpreted, shifted and/or deformed by the "soft power" moves of authorities who are extensively supported by the media.

As Russia's political ambitions (supported by military force) became clearer, Belarus, known as one of the most pro-Russian countries in the region, found itself in a difficult position: on the one hand, the country felt a need to strengthen its position as a sovereign state, but on the other hand it had to deal with the consequences of a long period of a strong "Russifying" influence from inside and outside the country, which in the end has led to what can be described today as a "blurred national identity".

Belarus's Path Towards a "Blurred" Identity

As is known from history, Belarus in its present-day geographical borders did not become an independent "national state" until 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throughout most of its history, this territory has always been a part of larger multinational states, and the political, cultural, religious and linguistic influences of its "greater" neighbours, particularly Poland and Russia, have always been prominent. Following the rise of the nationalist[1] movement at the end of the 19th century and the significant development of Belarusian culture during the first two decades of the 20th century, ideas of creating a nation-state started to emerge among the Belarusian intelligentsia. In 1918, the short-lived Belarusian People's Republic (BPR, БНР – Беларуская народная рэспубліка) appeared and was considered by many to be the starting point of modern Belarusian statehood. However,

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[1] For the purposes of this article, the term "nationalism" is used in a broad sense, and with no specifically negative connotations, as "the articulation of a political agenda in the name of one particular imagined community with the intention of establishing a nation-state" (Rudling, 2015, p. 115).

it was soon replaced with various other state forms with changing borders which ultimately became the BSSR, a part of the Soviet Union until its demise. The BSSR's territory changed radically throughout the 1920s and 1930s, being divided between the Soviet Union and Poland. Large parts of the BSSR's western half were acquired after the Second World War started. After the war, the geographical borders of Belarus settled in their present-day form (Frear, 2019, p. 6).

Culturally and linguistically, however, the historical development of Belarus in the 20th century was characterized by significant heterogeneity caused by several internal and external factors that had prevented the nationalist idea from becoming the indisputable and generally accepted basis for state building. One internal factor could be seen in the lack of support for the nationalist agenda among the population. As Rudling states, "Belarusian nationalism remained a marginal and contested phenomenon with a limited popular following within an overwhelmingly rural and illiterate population with vague ideas of concepts such as nations, nationalism, popular sovereignty, and political organisation" (Rudling, 2015, p. 127). From outside, Belarusian territory after the First World War served as a field for its two neighbours with the most ambitions to exercise their influence: resurrected Poland and the newly formed Soviet Russia (though the nature of the rivalry and the influence itself was rooted in numerous conflicts between those two in previous centuries). In the 1920s, the first historic *Belarusizatsiya* (*Belarusization*) process started in the eastern parts of today's Belarus, which were under Soviet rule (as part of the korenizatsiya (nativization) policies implemented in national republics by the new Soviet authorities). Even though these processes, mostly shut down by the new Stalinist agenda, lasted less than a decade, and their real results were far from achieving any strong basis for an ethnic nation, this period has an almost idyllic image and holds a strong place in official national narrative.[2]

From the 1930s, the BSSR had been at the avant-garde of Sovietization processes and subsequently became one of the pillar republics of the Soviet Union. While Belarusian was widely used in education and culture, Russian steadily became the main means of communication. As Bekus noted, "the replacement of Belarusian by Russian in Belarusian public life was viewed as a sign of the successful 'Sovietization' of Belarusians" (Bekus, 2014, p. 29). Russification was briefly slowed down in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the nationally oriented Belarusian elite tried to "Belarusify" the country by building its national identity on the basis of its independence

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[2]   Among recently published studies of Soviet Belarusization, one could mention Aliena Markova's Czech and Belarusian books: *Sovětská bělorusizace jako cesta k národu: Iluze nebo realita?* (Markova, 2012) and *Шлях да савецкай нацыі. Палітыка беларусізацыі (1924–1929)* (Markava, 2016).

(with allusions to the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) as the starting point of Belarusian statehood) and the Belarusian language as the main "identity builders". The situation changed drastically when Aliaksandr Lukashenka won the presidential elections in 1994 and started a campaign to reduce the national revival policy, which had antagonized those who did not wish to abandon Russian as their main language or who had not wanted to identify themselves as Belarusians. One of the more crucial changes made by Lukashenka was a referendum which saw Russian and Belarusian established as the two official languages. His strategy pursued an almost Soviet model of building up a new identity that would not be based on language or ethnicity but rather on the concept of a multiethnic society, where the Belarusians were deprived of their role as a "state-forming nation". Therefore, "Lukashenka's language policy made Belarus a unique post-Soviet republic where political independence constituted a step towards further 'Russification'" (Bekus, 2014, p. 34); Belarusian was almost intentionally forced out of public discourse and, more crucially, everyday communication.

Another aspect that complicates the process of identity building lies in different interpretations of Belarusian historical heritage, especially when identifying the beginnings of Belarusian statehood. The latter could be used as a reference point in developing the national narrative, supporting existing geographical borders, and even providing a basis for "holding a grudge" against neighbouring states for owning territories and cities that could/should have been Belarusian (for instance, Vilnius, Smolensk, and Białystok). Traditionally, textbooks on Belarusian history cite the principalities of Polatsk and Turav as the first state-like forms where Belarusian statehood took root. However, the greatest significance is attributed to the period of the GDL. The range of interpretations in this case is broad and tends to be even idealized in pro-European (as opposed to pro-Russian) discourse, where "the Grand Duchy was constructed as the essence of everything Belarusian (including the old Belarusian language and culture)" (White & Feklyunina, 2014). Subsequent periods, when Belarusian territories were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and were later acquired by the Russian Empire, are respectively presented as periods of Polonization and Russification. The short period of the Belarusian People's Republic, which proclaimed its independence on 25 March 1918, is another key moment in nationalist discourse and is most frequently used as the point of origin for Belarusian sovereignty. Later Soviet discourse and neo-Soviet discourse from Lukashenka, however, centred their views on Belarusian sovereignty around the BSSR and, most importantly, the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), which became an almost mythologized basis for the officially promoted national idea and the sole source of a "heroic past".

On Belarusian Identity and its Boundaries

The aforementioned aspects of historical, cultural and linguistic development have led to a situation where it is almost inevitable for scholars to elaborate on the Belarusians' complex identity. Earlier in the text, I characterized this as "blurred", since, as I see it, this identity does not have a proper shape; it is not always confined to the country's geographical borders and can transform under different circumstances. In other studies, Belarusian identity is seen as "split", "Creole", "hybrid", and even "non-existent",[3] addressing in the simplest terms the presence and different proportions of inclination towards the Soviet past, today's Russia, and/or Europe.

Analysing the post-Soviet development of Belarus, Belarusian writer and philosopher Ihar Babkou has interpreted the Belarusian experience within a postcolonial[4] paradigm and expressed the idea of today's Belarus as a country with a *repressed* identity. According to him, Belarusian identity itself cannot be easily explained because of the country's transculturality and existence being defined by real and imaginary boundaries surrounding it (Bobkov, 2005, pp. 127–136). Boundaries are particularly significant for Babkou's reflections, which he centres around the notion of "borderland" (погранично):

> A borderland is a space adjoined to a boundary, connected and bound by the boundary. This is a space for which the boundary itself is the organising principle, the essence, and the centre of attraction. The borderland lies on both sides of a boundary and its topologic status is paradoxical: the borderland achieves a certain integrity through being divided, i.e. through a dynamic event of division, encounter and transition between the Self and the Other… .[5] (Bobkov, 2005, p. 128)

The boundary itself can be explained in Lotman's terms as a "line which ends an alternating form. This space is defined as 'ours', 'own', 'cultural', 'safe', 'harmonically organised', etc. It is confronted by 'their space',

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[3]   See: Bekus, 2014; Hall, 2015; Ioffe, 2003; White & Feklyunina, 2014.

[4]   Several observations on Russia's colonial practices in the "North-West Territories" can be found in Ėtkind, Uffeľmann, & Kukulin, *2012.* For instance, Belarusians and Ukrainians were not considered "foreign"; they were deprived of their right to be a separate *ethnos, and their languages were seen as dialects of Russian. At the same time, the inversion of cultural and social differences led to the creation of deep, almost racial differences between members of different social strata of the same people* (Ėtkind et al., 2012, pp. 14–15).

[5]   "пограничье – это пространство, прилегающее к границе, соединенное и связанное границей, пространство, для которого именно граница является организующим принципом, сущностью и центром притяжения. Пограничье лежит по обе стороны от границы, и его топологический статус парадоксален: пограничье приобретает определенную целостность через факт собственной разделенности, т. е. через динамическое событие разграничения, встречи и перехода Своего и Чужого…" Translations into English, if not stated otherwise, are the author's.

'another's [space]', 'hostile', 'dangerous', and 'chaotic'"[6] (Lotman, 1999, p. 175). He also argues that "the notion of a boundary is ambiguous. It divides but also connects. It is always a border with something, and subsequently it belongs to both bordering cultures, to both semiospheres adjoined to each other. The border is bilingual and polylingual"[7] (Lotman, 1999, p. 183). If one combines this interpretation with Babkou's definition of borderland applied to Belarus, one will see that, at least linguistically, it is indeed an identity too heterogeneous to grasp and appeal to. The significance of language in identity building is indisputable, although, as Neumann points out: "what makes language an important bearer of national identity, however, is not necessarily its distance to other languages relevant to the social setting in question. … even states that profess to have the same state language will make linguistic differences a matter of political identity" (Neumann, 1999, pp. 6–7). As is generally known, the Russian language dominates all spheres of life (except for "serious" fiction writing) in Belarus, since Belarusian has been successfully marginalized. Moreover, "Belarusian Russian" has slowly become a new identity marker in official Belarusian discourse. As its main actor, Lukashenka is attempting to move Russian into the realm of the Self and draw a line between the two variants of the language, hence seeking to create a new boundary for national identity:

> I want to emphasize that Russian is not alien for us. It is our national patrimony. For centuries Belarusians contributed to its development and enriched it. … The Russian language is my Russian language. It lives. And it has contributions from not only Russians. It is a completely different Russian, intertwined with the morals, characters and tolerance of the Belarusian people too. It has developed through the centuries. Our language, Russian, spoken by Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians and many others – it is an entwinement of many peoples' souls.[8] (Matveev, 2017)

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[6] "черту, на которой кончается периодичная форма. Это пространство определяется как «наше», «свое», «культурное», «безопасное», «гармонически организованное» и т.д. Ему противостоит «их-пространство», «чужое», «враждебное», «опасное», «хаотическое»."

[7] "Понятие границы двусмысленно. С одной стороны, она разделяет, с другой – соединяет. Она всегда граница с чем-то и, следовательно, одновременно принадлежит обеим пограничным культурам, обеим взаимно прилегающим семиосферам. Граница би- и полилингвистична."

[8] "Хочу подчеркнуть, что русский язык для нас не чужой. Это и наше национальное достояние. Белорусы за свою многовековую историю внесли немалый вклад в его развитие, обогатили его. Русский язык – это мой русский язык. Это живое. И в нем вклад не только русских людей. Это совершенно иной русский язык, куда вплетены нравы, характеры, толерантность в том числе белорусского народа. Он развивался из века в век <…> Наш язык, русский язык, на котором разговаривают россияне, белорусы, украинцы и многие другие, – это сплетение душ многих народов."

Returning to the problem of boundaries and borders, it should be said that in Belarus the border itself has become a polysemantic phenomenon that sometimes tends to function on a symbolic level. In this *borderland,* real geographical borders get intertwined with imaginary boundaries, such as the boundaries of an ethnicity or boundaries that define belonging to a greater context and boundaries of sovereignty. The situation is reasonably clear when one looks at the border with those countries that are now a part of the European Union and Schengen area. From the perspective of social practice, this border is non-transparent and has physical attributes. The process of crossing it is linked with several social conventions individuals must follow, which results in their realization of their place in a social hierarchy[9] followed by shifts in political, cultural and economic paradigms. In terms of social practices and identity, Belarus's physical border with Ukraine (with no visas but with border and customs control) may be interpreted as a semi-transparent boundary. There is a more significant aspect of recent shared historical experience, but cultural and linguistic contrasts are less obvious and less rigid. The most ambiguous border is the Belarusian–Russian one; it is transparent on a social level with almost no physical attributes as a result of the agreement about the Union State of Russia and Belarus with the visa-free movement of citizens. Consequently, an average Belarusian who travels by train to Moscow might not even realize the moment of change between the "Self's space" and the "Other's space". Linguistic differences are almost absent, and ultimately there is little to no sense of alienation on either side. However, the Belarusian–Russian border has frequently become a subject of politicization during various conflicts and fallouts between the two countries. The border and customs controls for commercial transportation have become stricter, and mutual threats are made to tighten the border regime. Recently, this became especially relevant after Belarus introduced a short-term visa-free regime for tourists and was suspected of transporting banned European products from the sanctions list into Russia under the guise of "Belarusian" products. From Russia's standpoint, the border with Belarus can be seen as conditional; in the eyes of the "imperially tempted" neighbours, the boundaries of the "Russian world" *protrude* over the Belarusian borders. After Crimea, this *protrusion* became more palpable and threatening, and several shifts were manifested in the current national narrative as well as in the official discourse of the Belarusian political elite.

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[9]   The process of crossing the border and its connection to social hierarchies have been analysed by Olga Sasunkevich (2015).

A threat From the East?

As was said earlier, the events in Ukraine in 2013 and 2014 are generally recognized as the main impulse for rather radical changes in official discourse, especially in the Belarusian context. As Mozheyko sums up the situation, "After Crimea, the Belarusian authorities suddenly realized the risks of a not fully formed national identity together with political, cultural, information, and economic dependence on Russia" (Mozheĭko, 2018). Politically and economically, during the two decades after Lukashenka was elected president for the first time, Belarus was mostly playing the role of a "smaller brother" for Russia, providing loyalty in exchange for economic benefits. Culturally and information-wise, Belarusian territory has been strongly influenced by Russian media, which may have the image of being a more advanced and quality source of information and entertainment.

However, after 2014 the situation has changed from both sides of the border. Firstly, according to Wilson:

> Russia is much more aggressive towards all of its neighbours. But it is also more demanding of them. … it is looking for more value-for-money in all its relationships. The old subsidy regime cannot be as generous as it was, and, with Russia struggling to subsidise Crimea and the Donbas, it is pretty clear that it could not afford to pay all the bills of an extra nine and a half million Belarusians. (Wilson, 2016, p. 87)

Besides economic moves, there are clear ambitions to claim Belarus as a land of absolute Russian influence by different means: by exporting the ideology of the "Russian world", promoting possible benefits of Eurasian integration, and strong media propaganda. As Wilson observes:

> Russia clearly has an option on 'Operation Belarus'. Russian nationalists have been given license to criticise Lukashenka for his lack of loyalty, and his shift towards, or firmer embrace of, some kind of statist nationalism since 2014. Networks like zapadrus.su and imperiya.by are promoting the old nineteenth century idea of Belarus as 'West Russia' and have attacked 'Litvinism' – depicting the idea of an independent and Western Belarus as an artificial emanation of the 'foreign' Grand Duchy of Litva (Wilson, 2016, pp. 79–80).

Paradoxically, these seeds of Russia's campaign for influence in the region have fallen on fertile soil, because a substantial part of Belarusian society, as surveys show, was supportive of Russian actions in Crimea and the Donbas and expressed a favourable attitude towards their eastern neighbours during the conflict with Ukraine.[10] Having in mind the twenty-year period of sup-

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[10]   According to a national survey conducted by IISEPS, around 50% of respondents supported Russia's actions during the conflict with Ukraine and were not ready to defend Belarus in

pressing "radical nationalism" together with national culture and the Belarusian language, Klaskovskiy has come to the conclusion that the "Russification of not only the language but also the thinking has come so far that it creates grave risks for Lukashenko's regime"[11] (Klaskovskiĭ, 2014). In this situation, as Lukashenka was not willing to go for direct confrontations, he opted for new, rather hectic strategies that were partly centred around the idea of supporting social practices that could theoretically lead to strengthening Belarusian national identity. Since then, "soft Belarusization" has become a new trend in the political, cultural and social spheres, and it can be interpreted as an attempt to support nationally oriented identity practices and as an attempt to establish more visible political and cultural boundaries between Belarus and the "Russian world". On an official level, "the term 'soft Belarusization' was employed by Lukashenka publicly for the first time during his open dialogue with the media in January 2015" (Mojeiko, 2015).

Soft Belarusization: Official Rhetoric and Discursive Events[12]

When speaking of soft Belarusization, it should be mentioned that this concept, although adopted in the official discourse of Belarusian elites, has several levels, and only a few of the processes at these levels were initiated by the authorities; rather, they have happened spontaneously and, notably, had their beginnings even before the events in Ukraine, in the form of several business and civic initiatives, cultural events and creatively reinterpreted courses of the Belarusian language. These activities may be the real substrate of the Belarusization processes; however, here I will mostly concentrate on the manifestations of soft Belarusization processes at the official/state level, as some of the changes appear to be quite unconventional for otherwise rather predictable official discourse.

As stated earlier, a number of shifts were observed in this area, many of which had an almost symbolic meaning in the geopolitical situation that changed after the Ukrainian events. For example, Lukashenka's speech on 1 July 2014 (Lukashenko, 2014b), two days before Belarus's Independence Day, resonated in the Belarusian media space. For the first time in many

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military conflict with Russia (Nezavisimyĭ institut sotsial'no-ėkonomicheskikh i politicheskikh issledovaniĭ [NISEPI], 2014).

[11] "русификация не только языка, но и мышления белорусов зашла настолько далеко, что создает серьезные риски для режима Лукашенко." In the body of the text, "Lukashenka" is transcribed from Belarusian, whereas "Lukashenko" is transcribed from Russian.

[12] I understand a discursive event as an event that "appears on the discourse planes of politics and the media intensively, extensively and for a prolonged period of time. … If an event becomes a discursive event, it influences the further development of discourse" (Jäger & Maier, 2009, pp. 48–49).

years, a part of the president's speech was presented in Belarusian, and this part of the speech was devoted to the country's freedom and independence, talking about the unity of the nation formed by the experience of the Great Patriotic War. The codification of the given message in the given politically ambiguous situation in a language which Lukashenka himself has often referred to in an unflattering manner,[13] and which has often been associated with the country's political opposition, can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture. Here, the language is a symbol of independence with a special accent on the unity of the nation regardless of the language of communication as, according to Lukashenka, "everyone who encroaches on the unity of the nation is an enemy of Belarus" (Lukashenko, 2014b). Generally, in the official discourse after 2014, Belarusian is frequently given the place of a significant factor in protecting sovereignty and is now presented as a key component of Belarusian national identity. In this respect, another now famous statement by Lukashenka should be mentioned, as it presents his (i.e. officially promoted) idea of the bilingual character of Belarusian identity: "If we lose Russian, we'll lose our mind. If we forget how to speak Belarusian, we'll cease to be a nation" (Lukashenko, 2014a). Here, Russian is attributed rational, practical meaning, whereas Belarusian is given an "imaginary" and symbolic quality. In 2019, these ideas have been reflected even in the official document titled "The Foundations of Information Security in the Republic of Belarus", where Belarusian is attributed the role of a catalyst for "national self-identification of Belarusian society" whereas expanding its "social functions and communicative potential … its proper and comprehensive development … acts as a guarantor of the state's humanitarian security"[14] (Sovet bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus', 2019, p. 16).

However, the Belarusian authorities tend to take a somewhat evasive stance and have tried to avoid confrontation, emphasizing that by supporting Belarusian they do not attempt to either turn away from Russia or turn to the West. This approach can be seen in one of the interviews given by Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makei, who manages to simultaneously deny and admit the existence of soft Belarusization:

> I would not call it 'soft Belarusization'. Yes, 28 years of independence by historical standards is an instant, a moment. And I think that, of course, we should talk about the formation of national identity, the national idea, national identification, and identity. But probably this is due to the fact that some things are developing, and

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[13] Lukashenka's famous words from 1994 declared that Belarusian was a poor language not capable of expressing anything great (https://ru.wikiquote.org/wiki/Александр_Григорьевич_Лукашенко).

[14] "расширение социальных функций и коммуникативных возможностей … его полноценное и всестороннее развитие … выступают гарантом гуманитарной безопасности государства"

someone calls them 'soft Belarusization'. But why should we abandon our historical past? Why shouldn't we talk about someone who we consider to be a national hero? Why shouldn't we wear our national clothes, and why shouldn't we speak Belarusian? These are normal things, and I do not see anything wrong with that. This in no way, as some marginal politicians and media try to interpret, means that Belarus is turning somewhere and trying to leave somewhere.[15] (Tolkacheva, 2018)

Makei's series of rhetorical questions refers to three important aspects in relation to which there have also been shifts in official rhetoric. The first aspect is related to the historical past and historical memory. Both elements have also been reflected in the aforementioned "Foundations of Information Security", which declare that there is a need for consistent implementation of the "official historical politics aimed at consolidating the Belarusian national concept of the country's historical past and the Belarusian memory model both in Belarus and beyond its borders"[16] (Sovet bezopasnosti Respubliki Belarus', 2019, p. 17). As with the problem of Belarusian, the document does not mention the threats and "enemies" directly, although one cannot but notice the part saying "beyond its borders" which certainly provides room for speculating about its addressee.

As mentioned above, in the "pre-Crimean times", it was the Soviet past that was primarily used as the historical basis for identity building practices in which the Great Patriotic War was the key event that in the Belarusian interpretation combined two discourses: heroism and victimhood.[17] At the same time, a parallel "oppositional" national narrative has been developing, in which key significance is attributed to the period of the GDL, and the most widely celebrated holiday is Freedom Day (Дзень Волі), celebrated every 25 March, on the day of the declaration of independence of the BPR. In recent years, the official authorities have begun to adopt a part

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[15] "Я бы не стал называть это «мягкой белорусизацией». Да, 28 лет независимости по историческим меркам — это миг, мгновение. И я считаю, что, конечно же, мы должны говорить о формировании национального самосознания, национальной идеи, идентификации и идентичности. Но, наверное, это связано и с тем, что развиваются какие-то вещи, которые кто-то называет «мягкой белорусизацией». А почему мы должны отказываться от своего исторического прошлого? Почему не должны говорить о том, кого мы считаем национальным героем? Почему не должны носить свою национальную одежду, не должны говорить на белорусском языке? Это нормальные вещи, и я не вижу в этом ничего зазорного. Это ни в коей мере, как пытаются это трактовать некоторые маргинальные политики и СМИ, не означает, что Беларусь куда-то разворачивается и пытается куда-то уйти."

[16] "государственная историческая политика, направленная на закрепление в Беларуси и за ее пределами белорусской национальной концепции исторического прошлого страны и белорусской модели памяти"

[17] At the beginning of the 21st century, a new subject was introduced into the curricula of schools and universities, entitled "Ideology of the Belarusian State", which was subsequently complemented by another compulsory course entitled "The Great Patriotic War".

of discourse uncharacteristic for them, but once again, as Lastouski observes, "slow Belarusization takes place mainly wherever it does not arouse conflicts. For instance, the actualization of the GDL's history does not lead to a direct confrontation with the Russian state's historical narrative"[18] (Kazakevich & Lastoŭski, 2016). A certain recognition of the non-Soviet historical heritage is also observed in the official permission to celebrate Freedom Day. Previously, these celebrations were almost always associated with arrests of political activists and participants of unauthorized marches. In 2018, on the 100th anniversary of the BPR, celebrations were allowed in Minsk and other Belarusian cities, where they attracted the highest ever number of participants.[19] However, in 2019 officials have radically changed their stance towards the holiday. It was not allowed to celebrate it publicly in Minsk, therefore the main activities took place in Hrodna, whereas in Minsk several people were arrested during the unofficial celebrations.

In addition to Freedom Day, 2018 also saw the authorization of the "Dzyady" memorial march. This march carries a strong element of anti-Soviet discourse, since one of its goals is to commemorate the victims of Stalinist repressions. At the end of the marches, there are usually rallies at the Kurapaty memorial complex, a place of mass executions in the 1930s.[20]

By allowing these events to take place, the authorities tacitly agree with the presence of the historical symbols of Belarus – the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms, both repressed symbols replaced by slightly modified Soviet symbols after the 1995 referendum. In the official discourse, therefore, one can observe a partial rehabilitation of the symbols of a competing discourse. This can be interpreted as the adoption of a "lesser evil" (elements of opposing rhetoric) strategy in order to achieve a greater consolidation of identity practices (at the same time, of course, partly depriving the political opposition of its influence). In addition, the problem of these symbols was recently medialized once again, on the occasion of a draft law proposed by the sole representative of the opposition

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[18] "павольная беларусізацыя праходзіць, перш за ўсё, там дзе гэта не выклікае канфліктаў. Напрыклад, актуалізацыя гісторыі ВКЛ не вядзе да наўпростай канфрантацыі з гістарычным наратывам расійскай дзяржавы."

[19] Even though the celebrations were sanctioned, several opposing politicians were detained "preventively". In 2017, the Freedom Day celebrations took place together with a rally against a new law on preventing "social parasitism", which led to numerous arrests of participants.

[20] As is also the case in Russia, the attitude of the Belarusian authorities towards the period of Stalin's rule is very ambiguous. For a long time, Kurapaty has remained an "eyesore" for the official leadership of the country, who have long promised to erect a memorial there. In addition, in the early 2010s, the protected area around the memorial was reduced to allow the construction of entertainment facilities in the immediate vicinity. A restaurant was built near the site, where activists constantly organise pickets. In spring 2019, the authorities ordered the removal of a number of wooden crosses installed around Kurapaty (officially: "to move them to a more suitable location").

within the Belarusian parliament. The law's main idea is to give the white-red-white flag the status of historical and cultural heritage and allow it to be used during public, cultural and sports events. However, experts such as Klaskovskiy appear skeptical, since legitimization of this flag could diminish the results of Lukashenka's personal struggle against it and the nationally oriented opposition (Klaskovskiĭ, 2018). Consequently, the symbolic function of the current Soviet-ish flag could also diminish together with the long-promoted Soviet model of Belarusian identity.

Speaking of other symbols, it is worth mentioning two discursive events in which one can follow a certain definition of identity boundaries through recognizing, honouring and "appropriating" national heroes (Makei mentions them too). Here I refer to the installation of two monuments to historical personalities whose activity was in one way or another in confrontation between the Belarusian and Russian lands. The first of these was Grand Duke of Lithuania Algirdas (*Algerd* in Belarusian historiography), whose monument was erected in Vitebsk. He is regarded as a highly successful ruler with numerous achievements and is known for the fact that he undertook at least three campaigns against Muscovy and significantly expanded the territory of the GDL, which then included all of today's Belarus. The installation of the monument, according to Lastouski, was presented by some as an anti-Russian action (Kazakevich & Lastoŭski, 2016). But again, such interpretations were officially suppressed and softened. According to coverage by Tut.by, the authorities in attendance did not say anything about the monument during the opening ceremony, and the sculptor in his interpretation tried to exclude the militancy of the monument (the duke has a falcon sitting on his hand, which is a sign of hunting, and the monument itself is oriented to the east):

> The falcon on the duke's hand, in the vision of the sculptor Bondarenko, is a message from the past to the future: 'There is no need to interpret it as if he has been hunting. There are no attributes of hunting: for example, there is no hunting glove. He left his castle, but not to hunt. It is more of a message, symbolism. This duke has founded something for each of us, something to be proud of, something that can be used in our national identity.[21] (Matveeva, 2014)

The wording of the last sentence is rather peculiar as it presents contemporary national consciousness in Belarus as something that is under construction, and such monuments can have "utilitarian" meaning in this process.

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[21] "'Сокол на руке у князя, в видении ‹скульптора› Бондаренко, – «это посыл из прошлого в будущее»: «Не надо трактовать, что князь выехал на охоту, здесь нет ее атрибутики, например, охотничьей перчатки. Он выехал из своего замка, но не на охоту. Это больше символика, посыл. Этот князь что-то такое заложил для каждого из нас, чем можно гордиться и что можно использовать в нашем национальном самосознании.»

Another historical figure whose monument was recently erected in Belarus is Tadeusz Kościuszko, who, among his other merits, led the 1794 uprising against the rule of the Russian Empire on the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth after its second partition in 1793. Kościuszko is a multinational hero, but his birthplace is in Belarus, therefore the "Kościuszko narrative" is very strong there. Remarkably, financing for the monument was received through crowdfunding and not from the authorities. However, it is also worth noting that the installation of such a "spontaneously people's" monument was authorized by the local authorities. As a result, the unveiling ceremony provided a meeting place for both official and nationally oriented discourses. According to the person behind the idea of erecting the monument, "We have so many things that separate us. But then we found a person that united everybody. … today there are different flags here. Because Kościuszko is a hero of all Belarusians and the whole of Belarus"[22] (Kasperovich, 2018). At the ceremony, Uladzimir Arlou, a Belarusian writer and historian, interpreted this event from the point of view of the significance of the historical component in delineating the boundaries of a national identity (and in defending the physical borders of the state): "historical memory, culture, and the nation's language protect the borders of the state better than whole armies"[23] (Kasperovich, 2018).

In 2015, another prominent event took place which had the purpose of drawing another symbolical boundary between Belarus and the domain of Russia's ideological influence. As mentioned above, the theme of the Great Patriotic War is practically the only element around which the official national ideology of modern Belarus has been built for more than two decades. Similar processes are observed in Russia, where Victory Day is an extremely important and ideologically charged holiday. One of the symbols of the victory is the Ribbon of St. George, whose ideological message has changed significantly since the Ukrainian events:

> At first, it was an element of 'micropolitics' to include common people in memory practices. But in the last couple of years, the Ribbon of St. George became an obvious symbol of the expansion of the Russian view on history that is closely related to the ideas and practices of the 'Russian world'.[24] (Kazakevich & Lastoŭski, 2016)

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[22] "У нас так шмат рэчаў, якія раз'ядноўваюць. І вось мы знайшлі асобу, якая аб'яднала нас усіх. <…> сёння тут ёсць розныя сцягі. Таму што Касцюшка – герой усіх беларусаў і ўсёй Беларусі."

[23] "гістарычная памяць, культура, мова нацыі бароняць межы дзяржавы лепей за цэлыя арміі."

[24] "гэта быў элемент 'мікрапалітыкі', каб уключыць у практыкі памяці звычайных людзей, але ў апошнія пару год георгіеўская стужка стала відавочным сімвалам пашырэння расійскага бачання гісторыі, моцна звязаным з ідэяй і практыкай 'рускага свету'"

The large-scale use of the Ribbon of St. George in Belarus provoked disapproval from the authorities. In 2015 it resulted in the creation of their own Victory Day symbol – the Flower of Victory (an apple flower on a red and green background along with the colours of the current Belarusian flag and the BSSR flag), which looked like another attempt to create identity boundaries and to force out the protrusion of the "Russian world". A similar practice has been carried out in Ukraine, where the new symbol of the poppy flower is used, symbolizing the commemoration of the victims of war. Assessing the importance of the new symbols through the lens of national memory, Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko argued that:

> The Lukashenka regime opted for a new, semantically empty symbol that both rejects the Russian memorial hegemony of the St. George's Ribbon and maintains a distance from the Western European victim-centred narrative. The Belarusian case is therefore a curious patchwork of reworked Soviet tropes that simultaneously assert Eurasian civilizational identity – rejecting Western victim-centred narratives and claiming descent from the pan-Soviet Victory – and carve out a separate, non-Russian space of national memory. (Fedor, Lewis, & Zhurzhenko, 2017)

Moreover, in 2015 Lukashenka did not visit the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, which could be regarded as an attempt to further distance himself from Russia. However, in analysing this step, Fedor, Lewis and Zhurzhenko do not see grounds for an escalation of their confrontation:

> Against the background of events in Ukraine, Lukashenka's snub and the Flower of Victory are minor changes that suggest an apprehensiveness against Russian influence, but hardly a desire to antagonize. Regional politics may yet have a pro-found effect on Belarusian war memory, but for now the memory war is mostly confined within the boundaries of the state. (Fedor et al., 2017)

Thus, the Flower of Victory is an example of the way the actors of the official Belarusian discourse try to create new symbols and promote them in everyday life. However, as Viktar Martsinovich, a Belarusian writer and journalist, has pointed out, the new symbol lacked the viral character that would make it an appropriate alternative to the Ribbon of St. George and make it meet with genuine acceptance. Secondly, its contradictory nature ("the semiotic referent of this sign is the Soviet domination; the designate is the colour symbolism of the Belarusian SSR"[25] (Martinovich, 2016) made it empty (hence unpopular) on the inside.

Returning to Makei's three rhetorical questions, I would like to mention yet another transformation which can be seen as one of the manifestations of the processes of "soft Belarusization", but at an everyday level. Speaking

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[25] "семиотическим референтом этого знака является советское господство, десигнатом — цветная символика Белорусской ССР"

of "national clothing", Makei apparently had in mind the *vyshyvanka*, a traditional shirt with embroidery in the form of ornaments, which became fashionable in Belarus in 2014. Originally a product of folk crafts, the *vyshyvanka* quite quickly went into mass production by clothing manufacturers with a nationally oriented concept.[26] Here one might also see a parallel with Ukraine, where the *vyshyvanka* had earlier become a symbol of one's patriotic stance. The *vyshyvanka* was initially promoted as a unifying element for "Belarusians with different political views" ("ArtSiadziba", 2014) by private organizations. One of them was ArtSiadziba, which organized the first *Vyshyvanka* Day in October 2014. However, in 2016 the initiative was taken by the Ministry of Culture, which decided to organize its own Vyshyvanka Day. Here we see the process of the official discourse borrowing elements of an alternative national discourse and adapting them to its own needs. If the original initiative had an important natural, spontaneous and common essence, the official initiative, as in the case of the Flower of Victory, was dominated by formalism, the purpose of which lay partly in suppressing spontaneous manifestations of national self-consciousness within the country and partly in demonstrating Belarusian identity boundaries.[27] Martsinovich has described the essential nature of the conflict that emerges when the state tries to "appropriate" elements and symbols of alternative discourse: "If one tries to explain what the difference is between 'our *vyshyvanka*' and 'their *vyshyvanka*', 'our Belarusian' and 'their Belarusian', which is eventually coming, it will be very easy. For us, the *vyshyvanka*, the Pahonia and the Belarusian language provide access to a whole universe full of meaning. Belarusian books …, Belarusian artists, … exile, the BPR etc. For them, it is an empty envelope, a camouflage to cover all of the same primitive ideas. Their core is in keeping 'their' stability. And yes, it smells like Sevastopol" (Martsinovich, 2016).

Conclusions

Zygmunt Bauman's *Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* includes the statement that "identity is a 'hotly contested concept'. Whenever you hear that word, you can be sure that there is a battle going on. A battlefield is

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[26] It should also be mentioned that on the back of soft Belarusization, several shops were opened around the country selling clothes and accessories with national motifs, including the non-official Belarusian flag and coat of arms.

[27] "І калі спрабаваць растлумачыць, чым жа ўсё такі адрозніваецца «наша вышыванка» ад «іх вышыванкі», «наша мова» ад «іх мовы», якая ўжо на падыходзе, атрымаецца вельмі проста. Для нас вышыванка, Пагоня, мова – гэта ўваход у цэлы сусвет, які напоўнены сэнсам. Беларускімі кнігамі, … Беларускімі мастакамі, … выгнаннем, БНР і г.д. Для іх усё гэта – пустая абалонка, маскіроўка, якой яны абгортваюць усё тыя ж прымітыўныя ідэі. У аснове якіх – захаванне «іх» стабільнасці. І так, гэта пахне Севастопалем."

identity's natural home" (Bauman, 2004, p. 77). After the Ukrainian events, the Belarusian identity, after a virtually stagnant period, became a similar battlefield, with soft Belarusization as one of the "weapons". Naturally, it is still premature to assess its tangible results. It seems that today it is not a coherent and consistent development strategy, but rather a set of fragments or "discursive events". Their influence on discourse as a whole is yet to be seen. The ability of these unsystematic steps to correct the negative consequences of insufficient nationally oriented policies in the country and to strengthen Belarusian national identity is unclear, as the task is really difficult. According to an official survey, only 48 percent of Belarusian inhabitants named Belarusian as their native language, and only 3 percent use it in everyday communication (Informatsionno-analiticheskiĭ tsentr pri Administratsii Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus', 2018). The education sector is still predominantly Russian-speaking, with only 291 university students studying in Belarusian in 2017; however, according to the president's latest statements, "[Belarusians] don't need a Belarusian-language university" (Tsyhankoŭ, 2019). This statement once again reflects the inconsistency and fragmentary approach to this problem on the part of the authorities.

Nevertheless, there are several signs pointing to a more favourable direction for the Belarusian language. According to some experts, there is a growing demand for a wider presence of Belarusian in everyday life, especially among active urban citizens (see, for instance, Sverdlov, 2019). This can be seen, for example, if one follows the increasing interest in such seemingly obvious things as watching popular films with Belarusian dubbing, which are extremely few today. The situation is corrected, among others, by the VOKA streaming service, which offers films with Belarusian dubbing watched by more than 45,000 viewers in 2018, and velcom (one of the largest mobile operators), which sponsors so-called "Belarusian weekends" at Minsk cinemas visited by more than 50,000 viewers in two years ("Vidèasèrvis VOKA", 2018).

On a more skeptical note, the authors of the semi-anonymous Belarusian media *Belaruski Partyzan* claim that:

> Although positive rhetoric against the Belarusian language has become more noticeable, investment in the popularization of Belarusian in education and media is clearly not enough. In fact, Belarusization is turning into a political tool, not a social movement. If the regime seeks to contain the influence of Russian propaganda, the Belarusization policy should primarily focus on real reforms in all areas, not just on symbolic steps.[28] ("Belarusizatsyia 2.0", 2019)

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[28] "Хоць станоўчая рыторыка ў дачыненні да беларускай мовы стала больш заўважнай, інвестыцый ў папулярызацыю беларускай мовы ў сферах адукацыі і сродкаў масавай інфармацыі відавочна не хапае. Фактычна, беларусізацыя ператвараецца ў палітычны

As Belarus remains strongly dependent on Russia, it is unprofitable for today's government to draw a clear boundary between "them" and "us". At the same time, the actors of official discourse are still trying to create the appearance of this boundary in the hope that it will be taken seriously inside the country (and lead to strengthening the national identity and consolidating the patriotic feelings of the population) as well as beyond (by recognizing the right to make their own decisions without ideological pressure). In the end, it will be necessary to convince the "interested parties" of the genuineness of the ongoing shifts on either side of this boundary.

Post Scriptum

The paper was completed shortly before Russian-Belarusian relations reached a new confrontational level and became the subject of attention in many world media, from Slovakia to the United States[29]. The main narrative of recent months is developing around the idea that Russia is preparing to take over Belarus (thus claiming the symbolic "protrusion" over Belarusian borders as its own continuation), therefore the terms of the "Union State" project have been dragged out of non-existence and it is widely speculated that Vladimir Putin has a plan to run for the presidency of the new Russian-Belarusian state as a way of solving his "2024 problem".

In the context of such socio-political realities, the concept of "soft Belarusization" has, of course, become bleaker, but, on the other hand, its real potential may really begin to emerge at this moment. In the militant atmosphere of the past months, there is even a new transformation of this concept, "hybrid Belarusization" (Tsyhankoŭ, 2019).

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інструмент, а не грамадскі рух. Калі рэжым імкнецца стрымаць уплыў расійскай прапаганды, то палітыка беларусізацыі ў першую чаргу павінна засяродзіцца на сапраўдных рэформах ва ўсіх сферах, а не толькі на сімвалічных кроках."

29 See for instance: Meyer, Kudrytski, & Arkhipov (2019); Šimečka (2019).

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Мягкая белорусизация: возрождение идентичности или «укрепление границ»?

В статье рассматриваются сдвиги, происходящие в официальном дискурсе в Беларуси после украинских событий 2014 г., получившие условное название «мягкая белорусизация». Данный подход может рассматриваться как попытка поддержать национально-ориентированные идентичностные практики, а также как попытка провести более заметные политические и культурные границы между Беларусью и «Русским Миром». В первую очередь в статье говорится о некоторых спецификах белорусской идентичности и представляется исторический и политический фон происходящих событий. Затем анализируются некоторые проявления «мягкой белорусизации»: изменение риторики официальных представителей республики; изменения в их отношении к белорусскому языку и неофициальным государственным символам, а также к историческим личностям и событиям, которые в недалеком прошлом обходились стороной; шаги по созданию новых символов; новые отношения между официальным и «альтернативным» дискурсом.

Ключевые слова: Беларусь, мягкая белорусизация, идентичность, границы, дискурс.

Miękka białorutenizacja: (od)budowa tożsamości czy „wzmacnianie granic"?

Artykuł poświęcony jest zmianom w oficjalnym dyskursie publicznym na Białorusi, jakie obserwować można po 2014 roku, czyli po wydarzeniach na ukraińskim Majdanie, określanych mianem „miękkiej białorutenizacji". To nowe zjawisko może być interpretowane jako próba wspierania narodowo zorientowanych praktyk tożsamościowych, a także jako próba ustalenia bardziej widocznych granic politycznych i kulturowych między Białorusią a „światem rosyjskim" (*russkij mir*). Przede wszystkim w artykule mowa jest o specyfice tożsamości białoruskiej oraz o tle historycznym i politycznym aktualnych wydarzeń. W następnej kolejności analizowane są niektóre przejawy „miękkiej białorutenizacji": zmiany w retoryce władz białoruskich, ich zmieniający się stosunek do języka białoruskiego i nieoficjalnych symboli państwowych, a także wcześniej negowanych wydarzeń i postaci historycznych oraz kroki podejmowane w kierunku tworzenia nowych symboli, a także budowania relacji między dyskursem oficjalnym a „alternatywnym".

Słowa kluczowe: Białoruś, miękka białorutenizacja, tożsamość, granice, dyskurs.

Note

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