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## **The Roaring 20s: Soft Belarusization in 2020**

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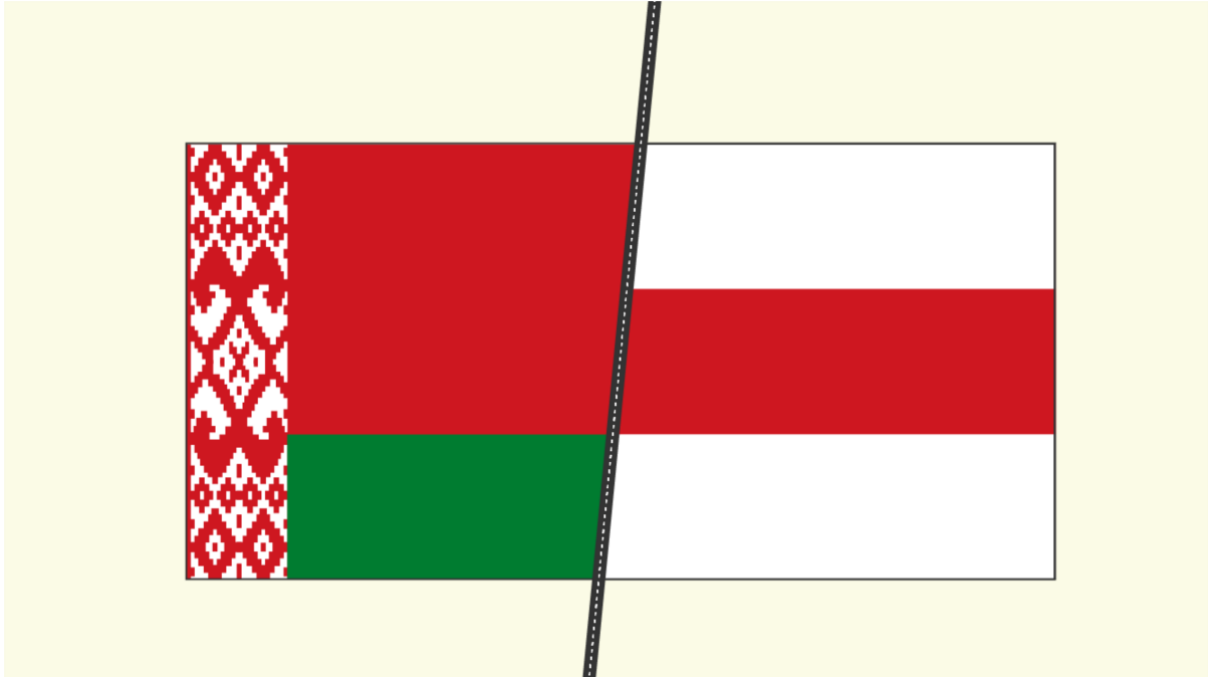
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# The Roaring 20s: Soft Belarusization in 2020.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 History of Belarusian statehood

The start of Belarus as a state or nation is a highly contested subject in academia, as the country made several ‘false starts’ in its history: a number of unsuccessful attempts to establish a viable state on the territory of modern Belarus before its eventual permanent independence after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Belarus has had a long history of occupation by other countries. The territory of what is now known as Belarus was incorporated into Slavic culture around the third century. It eventually became part of Kievan Rus’, where it joined the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania transformed into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the mid-sixteenth century. This is when a distinctive Belarusian culture started to develop, which was symbolized by the translation of the Bible into the Belarusian language.<sup>2</sup> When the Union between Poland and Lithuania ended, the Belarusian territories were acquired by the Russian Empire and remained under Russian rule until 1918, when Belarus declared its independence with the formation of the Belarusian People’s Republic. This declaration lasted until 1919, when Belarus emerged as the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and merged into the Lithuanian-Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, eventually becoming one of the founding members of the USSR. Belarus had no centralized government or culture for many years, but was instead often incorporated in larger territories. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus entered its first

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wilson, “Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe.”, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) 48.

<sup>2</sup> David Marples, “Belarus: A Denationalized Nation.”, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 1.

period of independent nationhood, as it was henceforth uncontested that it was a country.

The concept of a 'false start' in Belarusian statehood can also be applied to the Belarusian national identity. Andrew Wilson argues that the first stirrings of a Belarusian national identity developed after the 1905 revolution.<sup>3</sup> This is when a centralized government was instated, and even though this was primarily ruled by the Polish or Russian, it allowed for a central place to gather and from which to organize national activities. Per Anders Rudling argues that the first signs of Belarusian nationalism can be found in the foundation of the newspaper *Nasha Niva*, a Belarusian weekly newspaper, as it started to inform the public about the ideas of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> From then on, Belarusian national activities became more widespread.

Although the interest in a Belarusian national identity had begun, there was little room for development as Belarus was only an independent country for the better part of a year. As it was still primarily ruled by the Russian government, large parts of Belarus were Russified, until 1924. From 1924-1924, Belarus was subjected to the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiya*, which entailed the promotion of local, ethnic cultures in order to strengthen the allegiance of these countries to the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> This was meant to promote the de-russification of the republics and by encouraging them to get attached to the Soviet Union. In Belarus, there were three simultaneous processes that developed the national identity: *korenizatsya*, the promotion of Belarusian literature, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson, "Belarus: The Last Dictatorship in Europe.", 62.

<sup>4</sup> Per Anders Rudling, "The Beginnings of Modern Belarus: Identity, Nation, and Politics in a European borderland." *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7.3 (2015): 115-127.

<sup>5</sup> Marples, "Belarus: A Denationalized Nation.", 7.

linguistic emancipation in which Belarusian was promoted as the main language.<sup>6</sup> The period of *korenizatsiya* was however followed by intense Russification, as Stalin started the policy of homogenization throughout the Soviet Union after the war.

What followed for Belarus was a complete integration into the Soviet Union, which included the Russification of all aspects of life. Belarus thrived during its time as a Soviet Republic as it had industrialized extremely quickly, making it one of the most technologically advanced republics. As a result, society was thriving, as more housing, more jobs, and more agricultural yield were the result of the Soviet leadership and policies.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the Soviet generation of Belarusians still reflects positively on this period. The end of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of an unexpected independence for Belarus. The general unpreparedness and lack of interest in independence in Belarus left the country open to a choice in national identity. From 1991-1994, a national movement was formed which demanded the development of a national culture and the promotion of the Belarusian language. This period, dubbed 'neo-belarusization' by Alena Markova, resembles the Belarusisation of the 1920s.<sup>8</sup> There was increasing output of Belarusian culture and a renewed interest in the Belarusian language. In 1994, the newly elected president, Alexander Lukashenka, began to consolidate his newly established regime and integrated his views and opinions throughout Belarus.

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<sup>6</sup> Alena Markova, "Language, Identity, and Nation: Special Case of Belarusian State- and Nation Formation." *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 8.3 (2018): 25-39.

<sup>7</sup> Grigory Ioffe, "Understanding Belarus: Economic and Political Landscape." *Europe-Asia Studies* 56.1 (2004): 86-88.

<sup>8</sup> Markova, "Language, Identity, and Nation: Special Case of Belarusian State- and Nation Formation.", 33.

## 1.2 The Rise of Lukashenka

Riding a wave of popular discontent, Lukashenka altered economic policy, which slowed privatization and partially restored price controls, leading to a rise in living standards while maintaining low levels of income inequality.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this, Belarus did not experience the criminalization of society that characterized most post-Soviet republics during the 1990s, which, in combination with the relative economic success, gained Lukashenka a substantial level of trust from the population.<sup>10</sup>

By consolidating his regime through destroying independent judiciary, NGOs and independent media, Lukashenka has weakened civil society in Belarus.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, he has strengthened his own power and effectively homogenized society. The social homogenization of the country means that Lukashenka can use national ideology to drive his economic, social and foreign policies.<sup>12</sup>

Under the leadership of Lukashenka, Belarus strove to integrate financially and culturally with Russia. Several attempts were made to create a Union State between the two countries, but in true Soviet fashion, nothing ever came of it. In a multiethnic state, stronger ties with other states have a powerful effect on ethnic consciousness and, as a result, “foreign policy becomes a key element in the construction of national identity and an object of political contestation between groups with different visions of this

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<sup>9</sup> A.V. Buzgalin and A.I. Kolganov, “The Protests in Belarus: Context, Causes and Lessons.” *Critical Sociology* 47.3 (2021): 442-443.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Lenzi, “Lost Civilization: The Thorough Repression of Civil Society in Belarus.” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 10.3 (2002): 401.

<sup>12</sup> Natalia Leshchenko. “The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60.8 (2008): 1419-1433.

identity”.<sup>13</sup> Following this line of argument, the national identity of Belarus and its development can be tied to the development of its foreign policy. Since the national identity of Belarus had been subjected to several bouts of Russification, the focus of the foreign policy in the following years would be on Russia. This focus on Russia also applied to civil society and the majority of Belarus was Russified once more.

### 1.3 Belarusian National Identity in the 2000s

This changed during the course of Lukashenka’s presidencies. From the early 2000s onwards Belarus experienced a growth in interest in the Belarusian culture, mostly in civil society. The project Budzma Bielarusami (‘Let’s be Belarusian’) was launched in 2008 and an increasing number of independent media started to exclusively use the Belarusian language.<sup>14</sup>

What started as a grassroots movement in society was eventually picked up by the government and they became more tolerant of nationally-oriented actions. In 2011, a state authorized campaign advertised the ‘taste of Belarusian language’, which promoted the use of Belarusian through billboards across the country. Several monuments to historical figures of Belarus were authorized and placed through cities. In 2014, the law ‘on Belarusians abroad’ was published, which officially recognized

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Shulman, “National Integration and Foreign Policy in Multiethnic States.” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 4.4. (1998): 110.

<sup>14</sup> Vadzim Smok. “Belarusian Identity: the Impact of Lukashenka’s rule.” *Belarus Digest, Analytical Paper 3*, December 9, 2013. <https://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarusianidentity.pdf>

Belarusians living abroad as Belarusians as well.<sup>15</sup> This showed an increased interest in the definition of Belarusian culture.

It is agreed upon that the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014 provided a catalyst for the development of the Belarusian culture.<sup>16</sup> The highly imperialist actions of Russia when its authority in Ukraine was threatened made Lukashenka aware of the dangers when defying Russia. This caused the Belarusian leadership to begin to 'seek the way to counter the threat from Russia' by offering the idea of a 'Soft Belarusization' as an alternative.<sup>17</sup> Soft Belarusization denotes the policy of the government to promote the Belarusian culture in order to strengthen civil society.<sup>18</sup>

#### 1.4 2020: A Year of Pandemonium

The state ideology was thus slowly shifting away from the pro-Russian and pro-Soviet narrative to a more Belarusian centered ideal. August 2020 saw the rise of a mass mobilization movement of civil society as a result of the fraudulent presidential elections. It was an unusual election from the beginning, for several reasons. For the first time since Alexander Lukashenka came to power in 1994, there was real opposition as three different candidates officially ran in the election. Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world which Lukashenka initially chose to ignore, leading to frustration

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<sup>15</sup> "On Belarusians Abroad." *Law of the Republic of Belarus*, June 16, 2014. Translation available at <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=69864>

<sup>16</sup> See Mojeiko (2015), Rudkouski (2017), Pososkhin (2019), Polovyi (2020).

<sup>17</sup> Taras Polovyi. "'Soft Belarusization' as a Resistance Factor to the Russian Threat." *Historia i Polityka* 32.39 (2020): 102.

<sup>18</sup> Vadim Mojeiko. "Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka's Domestic Policy?" *Belarus Digest* April 21, 2015. Available here: <https://belarusdigest.com/story/soft-belarusization-a-new-shift-in-lukashenkas-domestic-policy/>

among the citizens. Thirdly, civil society had been severely repressed in Lukashenka's consolidation of the authoritarian regime, but the increasing sense of Belarussianes had led to a stronger civil society as well.

The massive civil unrest that prevailed in Belarus since August 2020 has caused unprecedented violence and oppression from the regime. This has drawn more and more people into the resistance, forcing them to create structure of mutual support, new forms of communication and to develop new symbols different from the ones associated with the brutality of the Belarusian authorities.<sup>19</sup> This has reoriented the national ideology of the regime, as they had to refocus on obtaining the support of the people.

### 1.5 Research Question and Hypothesis

In this thesis I will research the role of civil society and the government in the establishment of the Belarusian national identity. The active role that the government has undertaken in the establishment of the increased Belarusization of the country, means that the phenomenon is subject to change in the event of regime destabilization. This research will therefore add to the existing literature on the relationship between Belarusian civil society and the government and will provide insight into the workings of an authoritarian regime. My research question is *how have the events of 2020 altered the course of the policy of Soft Belarusization?*

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<sup>19</sup> Tatsiana Kulakevich. "National Awakening in Belarus: Elite Ideology to 'Nation Practice'." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 40.2 (2020): 106.

This research will go into the interplay of civil society and an authoritarian regime with regards to the national identity of a country. The regime has employed national ideology to strengthen its own legitimacy, yet civil society has made it its own, creating a national backlash. By looking at the changes in national ideology in a relatively small time frame, I will determine the extent of the susceptibility of the official discourse. My hypothesis is that I will find a significant decrease in the Soft Belarusization policy of the government while there will be an increased interest in the Belarusian culture in civil society.

#### 1.6 Overview of the structure

The thesis will start with the literature review to provide the reader with a sense of the context of the research. This will also provide an examination of the manifestations of the policy of Soft Belarusization, which will be used in the analysis of the material. This will be followed by the methodology, where I will elaborate on the sources used and the analysis applied. The analysis will consider the findings by content analysis and will be discussed in the next chapter. In the conclusion, I will reflect on the research and the process.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to research how the course of Soft Belarusization has been altered in 2020, a literature review on the academic literature on the on the Belarusian national identity, the role of Lukashenka in the development of this, and the phenomenon of Soft Belarusization has been done.

### 2.1 Definitions

The term nationalism in this thesis will be used in the broadest sense possible: the ideology of one's interest in and loyalty to the state. The term national identity will mean the idea of the common culture. For this thesis, the concepts of national identity and nationalism will be used interchangeably because I argue that in the context of Belarus, the national identity and the sense of nationalism in the country are entwined to such an extent that there is little difference.

### 2.2 Belarusian National identity

The scattered periods of Belarusization throughout the 20th century, followed by intense periods of Russification, meant that there was no long-lasting success for the development of a strong Belarusian national identity or a strong sense of Belarusian nationalism.<sup>20</sup> This means that there is little basis for an 'ethnic nationalism', a

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<sup>20</sup> Markova, "Language, Identity, and Nation."

“nationalism based on claims of kinship as manifested in a shared culture”, in Belarus.<sup>21</sup>

There are, however, grounds for the formation of a ‘civic nationalism, a “nationalism rooted in shared citizenship and political values”, which is often based on more recent shared experiences.<sup>22</sup>

Markova has argued that this distinction between two types of nationalism is important in the case of Belarus. The two periods of intense Belarusization in the 1920s and in the beginning of the 1990s were both aimed at creating an ethnical rather than a cultural nation, which was not successful due to the little sense of ethnic kinship in the country, but a civic nation and civic nationhood have appeared in its stead.<sup>23</sup>

Buhr, Shadurski and Hoffman argue that the Belarusian identity is still in flux but does display more markers of a civic nationalism than of an ethnic one.<sup>24</sup> Their study found that the majority of the respondents (Belarusian citizens) found the ‘soft boundaries’ of culture, i.e. “to respect the state’s laws and institutions” and “to value freedom and equality” more important than the ‘hard boundaries’, such as “to be born in Belarus” or “to speak Belarusian”.

From the academic literature that is available on the Belarusian national identity come two major themes, namely the role of Alexander Lukashenka and the relationship of Belarus with Russia. These two themes, often overlapping due to the authoritarian

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<sup>21</sup> Aviel Roshwald. “Civic And Ethnic Nationalism.” *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism*. Published 30 December 2015. Available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen436>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Markova, “Language, Identity, and Nation.”

<sup>24</sup> Renee L. Buhr, Victor Shadurski and Steven Hoffman. “Belarus: an Emerging Civic Nation.”, *Nationalities Papers* 39.3 (2010): 425-440.

regime of Lukashenka, play an important role in the creation of a national awareness and will be discussed below.

### 2.3 The role of the State and Civil Society

As discussed in the introduction, the civil society of Belarus has been severely homogenized by the regime of Lukashenka in order to strengthen his legitimacy and authority. This has included the oppression of symbols other than the accepted state symbols and violence against those who are resisting or protesting the regime. Yakouchyk has argued that an authoritarian regime does not aim to base its entire rule on oppression, as it is too costly for regimes and shows its weakness, therefore preferring to seek ways in which to make the regime acceptable to the people.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, the state chose to follow the policy of Soft Belarusization. The citizens were expressing a growing interest in Belarusian culture, and by passively allowing this, they attained more approval from the population. Belarusization is thus instrumentalized by the regime for survival purposes.<sup>26</sup>

By re-introducing the concept of the Belarus identity, a civic nation and civic nationhood have appeared in Belarus, built around a shared citizenship in a state which is based on common territory, state borders, state sovereignty and citizenship.<sup>27</sup> As discussed above, this is visible in the attitude of people to what constitutes a Belarusian.

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<sup>25</sup> Yakouchyk, "Belarusian State Ideology: A Strategy of Flexible Adaptation.", 4.

<sup>26</sup> Anais Marin. "Belarusian Nationalism in the 2010s: a Case of Anti-Colonialism? Origins, Features and Outcomes of Ongoing "Soft Belarusianisation"." *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 9.1: 29.

<sup>27</sup> Markova, "Language, Identity, and Nation.", 37.

This has caused nationalism to become more widespread among the 'everyday people' in Belarus rather than the elites.<sup>28</sup> This has led to mobilization among the population, especially in the face of heavy repression. Experiencing unparalleled civil backlash as a direct result of the nationalization policy will therefore be likely to result in a new policy.

## 2.4 Belarus and Russia

Currently, Belarus is financially almost completely dependent on Russia for discounts, loans and subsidies to keep its economy running. Russia uses this as a political tool to ensure Belarus's cooperation in international relations. The relationship is therefore established as a patron-client relationship, in which Belarus is Russia's client. It is however important to note that Belarus is not simply unequivocally supporting of and integrating with Russia, because Belarus also follows its own agenda in its relationship with Russia.<sup>2930</sup> Minsk is pursuing its own agenda regarding Eurasian integration, although its primary goals is not integration per se but rather securing beneficial deals from Russia.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, it is carefully weighing the pros and cons, namely the strengthening of the economy and the weakening of the sovereignty of the country, and trying to get into a situation that is optimal for Belarus, which sometimes frustrates Russia due to Belarus not simply following the orders. Furthermore, Russia needs

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<sup>28</sup> Tatsiana Kulakevich, "National Awakening in Belarus: Elite Ideology to Nation Practice."

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Frear. "Belarus: Player and Pawn in the Integration Game." In Dragneva, R. and Wolczuk K. (eds) *European Economic Integration: Law Policy and Politics* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Randall Newnham. "Russia and Belarus: Economic Linkage in a Patron-Client Relationship." *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 9.1 (2020): 3-26.

<sup>31</sup> Frear, "Belarus: Player and Pawn in the Integration Game.", 2013.

Belarus as political back-up, to support integration initiatives.<sup>32</sup> This means Belarus has some leeway in making the political decisions.

Belarus has been diversifying its economy in recent years. This phenomenon should not be simply taken as Belarus 'freeing' itself from Russia, but rather as the process of state emancipation.<sup>33</sup> This can be tied to the development of the national identity: as Belarus is increasing its national identity of Belarus as a nation, it seeks more sovereignty as a state by moving away from Russia's hold. Russia is threatened by this, as it viewed Belarus as an unconditional partner and a military and security risk due to its geopolitical location between Europe and Russia.<sup>34</sup> Usov even goes as far as to argue that some form of aggression is inevitable, as a critical point in Belarus-Russia relations has been reached.<sup>35</sup> This shows how the relationship between Russia and Belarus is mutual, as Russia is afraid to lose Belarus, and therefore tries to manipulate the people into a more pro-Russian mindset.

By immediately signing on with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus did not establish much of a relationship with the European Union. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that was signed in 1995 was never ratified or implemented and Belarus was included in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). However, the framework of the ENP was 'an extension of the EU's internal rules and policies', which meant that any project implemented in the Eastern neighborhoods were applied according to the structure which functioned in the democratic West, but not in the

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<sup>32</sup> Newnham, "Russia and Belarus: Economic Linkage in a Patron-Client Relationship.", 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Ryhor Astapenia and Dzmitry Balkunets. "Belarus-Russia Relations after the Ukraine Conflict." *Belarus Digest Analytical Paper* 5 (2016). Available at <https://belarusdigest.com/papers/belarus-russia-relations.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Pavel Usov. "Evolution of the Belarus-Russia Union State: From Integration to Attempts of Incorporation." *Studia I Analizy Nauk o Polityce* 1 (2020): 95-108.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

authoritarian Belarus.<sup>36</sup> Since the EU did not put in much effort to actively pursue the relationship with Belarus and Belarus did not seek closer integration with the EU.

This has been changing in the last few years, as Belarus is looking to weaken its dependence on Russia. A new awareness is growing in Belarus, and the Belarusian nationalist movement (largely in the form of the Belarusian Popular Front) has been advancing slogans such as 'returning to Europe'.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the main slogan of the presidential campaign in 2015 was "For the future of independent Belarus", hinting at the move away from Russia in foreign policy. The move towards the West is, however, quite difficult. Nizhnikau and Moshes name Belarus' structural dependence on Russia, the deep mistrust of the West amongst the Belarusian elite and the lack of strategy regarding Belarus in the West as important factors.<sup>38</sup> This means that an active pursuit of aid from the West is highly unlikely. Furthermore, Belarus remains highly important to Russia, especially in geopolitics, which means that Russia will not let Belarus diversify without a fight, reminiscent of the situation in Ukraine in 2014. Furthermore, Belarus is not trying to completely turn away from Russia, but is rather looking for alternative options. A survey conducted by Ryhor Astapenia states that 41,6% of the respondents still believe that Belarus should align with Russia, while 23,2% want to avoid geopolitical blocks altogether.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Dorit Happ and Bettina Bruns. "The EU and Its "Ring of Friends" – Eye-level or Top-down Relationships?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 64.2 (2017): 94-105.

<sup>37</sup> Aliakse Kazharski. "On "East", "Central" and "Eastern" Europe: Belarus and Central European Politics of Identity." In *Understanding Central Europe* by Marcin Moskalewicz and Wojciech Przybylksi (eds) (London: Routledge, 2017): 91-97.

<sup>38</sup> Ryhor Nizhnikau and Arkady Moshes. "Belarus in Search of a New Foreign Policy: Why is It So Difficult?" In *Danish Foreign Policy Review 2020*, edited by Kristian Fischer and Hans Mouritzen: 48-73.

<sup>39</sup> Ryhor Astapenia. "What Belarusians Think About Their Country's Crisis." *Chatham House*, October 21, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/10/what-belarusians-think-about-their-countrys-crisis>

## 2.5 Soft Belarusization

Piotr Rudkouski defines the Belarusization in this process as “the process of strengthening the Belarusian national identity in the public consciousness by asserting the importance of the Belarusian language, as well as promoting narratives and symbols that emphasize the historical and cultural identity of Belarusians.”<sup>40</sup> Rudkouski provides a more active definition of the term, denoting the active assertion and promotion of one party that aims to emphasize or promote the Belarusian culture. Others see the term of Soft Belarusization more as a practice rather than a policy, choosing to define and discuss it as an ongoing process.

Vadim Mojeiko has defined it as “the gradual, purposeful expansion of the use of Belarusian language, support for the development and dissemination of Belarusian culture, and the preservation and promotion of the Belarusian historical and cultural heritage”.<sup>41</sup> This type of definition is taken on more frequently. Polovyi presents Soft Belarusization as an ‘idea’ that provides an alternative to the Russian cultural influences and Posokhin considers it a ‘process’ that manifested at the official/state level that presented itself in e.g. speeches of the president and the attitude of the government towards cultural events and the Belarusian language.<sup>4243</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Piotr Rudkouski. “Toward a ‘Healthy’ Nationalism: BISS Research on the National Identity Policy.” *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies*, January 22, 2018:2. Available at <https://belinstitute.com/en/article/toward-healthy-nationalism-biss-research-national-identity-policy>

<sup>41</sup> Vadim Mojeiko. “Chto Takoe ‘Miagkaia Belarusizatsiia.’” *Nashe Menie*, April 3, 2018. Available here: <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/6584.html>

<sup>42</sup> Polovyi, ““Soft Belarusization” as a Resistance Factor to the Russian Threat.”, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Ivan Posokhin. “Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or “Border Reinforcement”.” *Colloquia Humanistica* November 2019: 65-66.

Taras Polovyi has argued that the increasing interest in Belarusization could be classified as a socio-cultural phenomenon that was formed as an alternative to the largely pro-Russian narrative of the Belarusian government, which was subsequently picked up by the state.<sup>44</sup> Mojeiko argues that it was after the events in the Crimea that the Belarusian authorities realized the risks of a not fully formed national identity, especially in combination with political, cultural, information and economic dependence on Russia.<sup>45</sup>

The term of Soft Belarusization can thus be defined in different manners, with the largest difference being in the active effort of the people in promoting it. For this thesis, Soft Belarusization will mean the passive process of the increasing interest in the Belarusian national identity and cultural practices.

## 2.5 Manifestations of Soft Belarusization

The signs of the government were namely not an active role in the stimulation of the Belarusization of the country, but it rather allowed the process to happen. Examples of this are found in the attitude towards the Belarusian language, the amount of cultural festivals taking place, the changes in interpretation of history, the usage of national symbols and foreign policy.

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<sup>44</sup> Polovyi, ““Soft Belarusization” as a Resistance Factor to the Russian Threat.”.

<sup>45</sup> Vadim Mojeiko. “Chto Takoe ‘Miagkaia Belarusizatsiia.’”

### 2.5.1 Language

The struggle with national identity and Belarusian culture meant that the usage of Belarusian language fluctuated strongly, often developing parallel to the national identity. That means the language flourished when Belarus experienced their short periods of independence and was then diminished during the intense periods of Russification. Statistics from 1984 indicated that Belarus ranked last (15th) among the republics of the Soviet Union in speaking their native language, as only 74,2% of the population reported to speak Belarusian.<sup>46</sup> In 1995, Lukashenka provided the Russian language with the same status as Belarusian language, on paper making Belarus a bilingual country. Anthony Brown conducted research on the use of Belarusian versus Russian in Belarus in 2005 and found that there was a significant shift in the direction of Russian in terms of both native language and mother tongue.<sup>47</sup>

From a 2009 census conducted by BELSAT, 60,8% of the Belarusians consider Belarusian their native language, with only 26% stating that they use the language at home and only 10% of the population actively uses it in real life.<sup>48</sup> With the renewed interest in Belarusian culture also came a renewed interest in the Belarusian language. This led to an increase in usage of the Belarusian language, especially in the public sphere through advertisements and on social media, with language activists taking it upon

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony N. Brown. "Language and Identity in Belarus." *Language Policy* 4.3 (2005): 311-332.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 329.

<sup>48</sup> "Population Classified by Knowledge of the Belarusian and Russian Languages by Region and Minsk City." *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, 2009, available at <https://www.belstat.gov.by/en/perepis-naseleniya/perepis-naseleniya-2009-goda/main-demographic-and-social-characteristics-of-population-of-the-republic-of-belarus/population-classified-by-knowledge-of-the-belarusian-and-russian-languages-by-region-and-minsk-city/>

themselves to protect the language against judicial attempts of extinction.<sup>49</sup> In 2014, Lukashenka first publicly addressed the country in Belarusian, which was widely perceived as a statement against the Russian annexation of the Crimea.<sup>50</sup> The speech, given in celebration of Belarusian independence day on the second of July, was partly in Russian and partly in Belarusian. The part of the speech that was given in Belarusian was devoted to the history of the country's freedom and independence and the collective experience of the Great Patriotic War, which could be taken as a symbolic gesture where the language is a symbol of independence.<sup>51</sup>

As part of the Soft Belarusization, the government chose to accept the increasing usage of Belarusian, but does not actively endorse it. Research has shown that although more Belarusian is found in society, there is no little growth in education of the Belarusian language.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.5.2 Culture

The renewed interest in Belarusization led to an increase in cultural output, largely tolerated by the government. There was a growth in the demand for cultural festivals, which was allowed by the government. The previously mentioned 'Budzma Belarusami'

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<sup>49</sup> Ales Plotka. "Belarus 2020: A Course to Decolonisation?" *Global Voices*, November 12, 2019. <https://globalvoices.org/2019/11/12/belarus-2020-a-course-to-decolonisation/>

<sup>50</sup> "Belarus leader switches to state language from Russian." *BBC*, July 10, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-28246782>

<sup>51</sup> Ivan Posokhin. "Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or "Border Reinforcement."", 66.

<sup>52</sup> Andrey Rasinski. "Belaruskaya Mova: 1918-2018." *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies*. Available at [https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2020-06/2019-2-18%20Mova\\_Rasinski\\_FINALIS.pdf](https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2020-06/2019-2-18%20Mova_Rasinski_FINALIS.pdf)

public cultural campaign played a large role in encouraging people to take up interest in the Belarusian culture. The Adnak festival, an initiative of Budzma Belarusami, was a festival focused on the advertising the language. The fact that these festivals were allowed to take place largely show the tolerance of the government and encouraged people to look into their cultural heritage. There was also increasing output of Belarusian culture in the form of songs, plays, and literature.

### 2.5.3 Interpretation of history

An important part of the Belarusian national identity is the historical narrative. The regime of Lukashenka has created a 'state ideology', which consists of a mix of Soviet and nationalist historical narratives, myths and symbols to legitimize itself.<sup>53</sup>As discussed before, the formation of the Belarusian nation is highly contested, with some viewing the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the start of the nation, others the declaration of independence in 1918 and others seeing the independence after the Soviet Union as the most important event. In 1991, a narrative was introduced that emphasized the medieval statehood and the European past of the country, but Lukashenka reversed this in 1995 and replaced it with a Soviet narrative of history, with the bravery of Belarus as its core element.<sup>54</sup> The Second World War is considered to be the Great Patriotic War that took place between 1941 and 1945, rather than 1939-1945. This glosses over the role of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the Second World War.

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<sup>53</sup> Smok, "Belarusian Identity: the Impact of Lukashenka's rule.", 5.

<sup>54</sup> Smok, "Belarusian Identity: the Impact of Lukashenka's rule.", 11.

The Great Patriotic War includes the myth of the partisans. The official narrative states that most of the Belarusian people rebelled against the Nazis and struggled as partisans in the forests in Belarus.<sup>55</sup> This is why the Great Patriotic War is often recalled as a great Belarusian victory.

Another Belarusian holiday is Freedom Day, which commemorates the declaration of the Belarusian National Republic in 1918. This has become a symbol of the Belarusian opposition's struggle for independence and democracy.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, the Belarusian state run media and the government considered the BNR a "puppet-state created with the support of the occupying German forces."<sup>57</sup> IN 2019, the authorities authorized the celebration of Freedom Day in the city center for the first time. Furthermore, the government allowed the 'Dzyady' memorial march, a Slavic ritual that celebrates the forefathers that was forbidden in 1996, as it was linked to the Belarusian opposition.<sup>58</sup>

The change in history discourse is found in history lessons in schools in Belarus. Ostrovskaya analyzed schools books in Belarusian history that were published and used in schools from 1990 to 2010 and found significant differences in interpretation of the same historical events.<sup>59</sup> The first post-independence books negatively assessed the Soviet past and tried to cultivate interest in the Belarusian history and pride for the country. The introduction of the more Belarusized official ideology lead to history books

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<sup>55</sup> Vadzim Bylina. "Belarus: The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War." *Belarus Digest*, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2013. <https://belarusdigest.com/story/white-red-white-flag-the-true-belarusian-symbol-or-a-sign-of-the-opposition/>

<sup>56</sup> Alesia Rudnik. "Belarusian Freedom Day 2019: Are the Authorities Warming to the Idea?" *Belarus Digest* March 25, 2019. <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-freedom-day-2019-are-the-authorities-warming-to-the-idea/>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ivan Posokhin, "Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or "Border Reinforcement.", 68.

<sup>59</sup> Tat'yana Ostrovskaya. "Genealogiya istoricheskoi pamyati belorusov v kontekste obrazo-vatelnykh praktik." *Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies*, October 20, 2010. Available at <https://belinstitute.com/be/article/genealogiya-istoricheskoy-pamyati-belorusov-v-kontekste-obrazovatelnykh-praktik>

highlighting the pre-Soviet history of Belarus.

#### 2.5.4 Symbols

The two most controversial symbols of the Belarusian nation are the flag and the state emblem, because they have been closely entwined with the national identity and were often used to convey the national ideology. Belarus knows two flags: a white-red-white one (introduced in 1918) and a red-and-green flag with a white-and-red ornament pattern on the right hand side (introduced in 1951). The two state emblems are: an emblem which features the colors of the national flag, a map of Belarus, wheat ears and a red star (introduced in 1995), and the coat of arms in Belarus, known as the Pahonia (introduced in 1366). The white-red-white flag and the coat of arms are often used together. They were both introduced with the declaration of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918. Belarusian diaspora and nearly all opposition parties in Belarus consider it as the only true symbols of Belarus.<sup>60</sup> Both these symbols were used by the Nazis during the Nazi occupation of Belarus in the second world war. The red-green flag was introduced during the Soviet period, but was replaced by the original symbols in the short period of democracy after the declaration of independence in 1991 until 1995. In 1995, Lukashenka changed the official state symbols to a newly designed state emblem and to a flag design based on the Soviet Belarusian flag. The white-red-white flag and the coat of arms then became symbols of the brief democratic period and

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<sup>60</sup> Vadzim Bylina. ““White-Red-White Flag: the True Belarusian Symbol or the Sign of Oppositions?” *Belarus Digest*, May 24 2013. <https://belarusdigest.com/story/white-red-white-flag-the-true-belarusian-symbol-or-a-sign-of-the-opposition/>

were unofficially banned by the government, as it was technically legal but was often punished to possess or show one. With the introduction of Soft Belarusization, the responses to the white-red-white flag became more moderate, as a notion of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus ensured its legalization, but the 2020 protests have led to a strong response of the authorities, who banned the flag and the colors. The brief usage of the Nazis has been the official reason for forbidding the white-red-white flag.

Next to the flag and the state symbol, the vyshyvanka was once more promoted as a unifying symbol for the country of Belarus. A vyshyvanka is an embroidered shirt that is part of the national costume of Belarus. This is not present in Russian culture, and the newly introduced celebration of this garment therefore celebrates the Belarusian culture more clearly. In 2016, the pro-government youth organization, Belarusian Republican Union Youth, led an initiative for the vyshyvanka by organizing the “day of embroidered national clothing”.<sup>61</sup>

### 2.5.5 Foreign Policy

As discussed in a previous section, the homogenization policy of Lukashenka included a turn of the country towards Russia. There was a growing interest in Belarusian culture and a growing dislike for Russia. Since the government both wanted to move away from Russia and was looking to increase its popularity, the government has been choosing to tolerate initiatives aimed at the promotion of the Belarusian language and strengthening of national identity, which shift goes parallel to the quickly

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<sup>61</sup> Kulakevich 100

improving relations between Belarus and the West on the one side and the increasing distance from Russia on the other side.<sup>62</sup> The increased interest in Belarusian culture therefor goes hand in hand with foreign policy, as Belarus is increasingly looking towards other partners.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The Belarusian identity is fractured, due to small periods of Belarusianisation and large, intensive periods of Russification that followed these periods. Although there is little historic base for an ethnic Belarusian identity, a current trend is the development of a civic Belarusian nationalism, based on citizenship and shared experiences rather than a culture, since the culture is to a large extent Russified. The government of Belarus is encouraging the development of this civic nationality, which is also known as soft Belarusianisation.

The literature concurs that the policy and effects of Soft Belarusization are mostly visible in the use of symbols, the increasing interest in Belarusian language, the increase in Belarusian cultural festivals and the move away from Russia in both economic and foreign policy. The combination of the government and the people in the structure of Soft Belarusization makes for a precarious combination. As the government allowed, or at least did not actively oppose but tentatively encouraged, the development of a Belarusian identity, the people started to develop a national conscious. In 2020, Lukashenka started tightening his grip on society once more, as the usual outcome of

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<sup>62</sup> Yakouchyk, "Belarusian State Ideology: A Strategy of Flexible Adaptation."

the presidential elections was threatened before the elections and then challenged afterwards.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

To find out what impact the events in 2020 had on the policy of Soft Belarusization, I will examine Belarusian news sources and presidential speeches by looking for the manifestations of Soft Belarusization. I will do so by looking for articles that cover subjects such as nationalism, Belarusization and the people of Belarus. By analyzing these articles, I will determine whether any of the signs and symbols of Soft Belarusization are discussed and whether there is a change in reporting during 2020.

### 3.1 Primary sources

#### 3.1.1 Newspapers

Firstly, three online news media will be examined. To give a complete picture of the narrative, both independent and official state news sources will be used. The following newspapers will be considered in the analysis:

##### *Belarus Segodnya (state-owned)*

Belarus Segodnya (Belarus Today) is a daily newspaper established in 1927 and owned by the presidential administration of Belarus. The news agency is well known for being the biggest advocate for Lukashenka. This paper is linked to the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA), often citing their articles as a source for their own. BelTA is a government owned news agency that is, similarly to Belarus Today, known for the

spread of pro-governmental propaganda. The newspaper publishes its articles in Russian.

*Narodnaya Volya (independent)*

Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) is an independent opposition newspaper which has been opposing Lukashenka's regime. The newspaper was shut down in 2006 and has therefore stopped publishing physical papers, as its distribution was forbidden. It is now only available online in Belarusian.

*Radio Svaboda (independent)*

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (RFE/RL) is an uncensored news provider which is based in and funded by the United States government. It broadcasts and reports news, information and analysis to countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East. The origins of the institution lie in the attempts of the United States to infiltrate the Soviet Union with their news. It has since grown to encompass a larger area and has formulated a new mission: "to promote democratic values and institutions and advance human rights by reporting the news in countries where a free press is banned by the government or not fully established." (RFE, 2021) RFE/RL in Belarus is named Radio Svaboda and provides all news in Belarusian.

These were chosen because Belarus Segodnya is the biggest state-owned media outlet and would therefore accurately represent the government's opinion, Narodnaya

Volya is an independent media outlet and would therefore represent topics from the point of view of society. Radio Svaboda is a media outlet that has its roots in the West and therefore reports in a different style from the other two, with a more Western oriented focus. These three will provide rounded picture of the media in Belarus.

Only online news sources will be taken, due to the fact that those are more accessible. On every news site, searches were conducted for articles containing the following words in the main language of each newspaper: nationalism, Belarusization and people of Belarus. Articles from January – December 2020 were considered. This time range envelops the height of Lukashenka’s election campaign and the direct aftermath of the elections. The results have been summarized in Table 1.

Newspaper	Nationalism	Belarusization	People of Belarus
Belarus Today	5	7	11
Narodnya Volya	7	1	9
Radio Svaboda	15	15	731 <sup>63</sup>

*Table 1: Overview of results of articles.*

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<sup>63</sup> Due to the amount of articles that resulted, the author has foregone the analysis of this term at the Radio Svaboda website. The combination of nationalism and Belarusization provided ample material to work with. The amount of articles was the result of the lay-out of the search engine, as it showed all articles including any variation of the words *narod* and *belarusi*.

### 3.1.2 Speeches

The second source to be considered is speeches given by the president. Due to the authoritarian nature of the regime in Belarus, the president he embodies the government and the official narrative of the government. These speeches therefore provide a lot of information about the course the governments takes with Soft Belarusization. Three speeches will be considered: the Independence Day speech on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, a speech given at a pro-Lukashenka rally on August 16<sup>th</sup>, and the speech given at the presidential inauguration on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September. The time frame of these speeches will show any immediate changes in discourse

### 3.2 Data

The data that is gathered through these methods will consequently be processed through content analysis. By reading through the articles, an assessment will be made regarding the topics of the articles, the manner in which topics are discussed and how they represent Soft Belarusization.

The analysis will focus on reporting on the manifestations of Soft Belarusization that have been found in the literature review: increasing use of Belarusian symbols and language, the interpretation of Belarusian history and the attitude towards Russia. The analysis will detect on the differences in reporting between state-owned and independent media and on differences between reports before and after the elections.

## Chapter 4: Findings and analysis

The analysis is structured per newspaper. For each newspaper, the amount and type of articles will be noted, discussed and analyzed per search term.

### 4.1 Belarus Segodnya

#### 4.1.1 Nationalism (национализм)

The term национализм resulted in five articles between July 2020 and October 2020. Of these articles, there was one about a speech by Lukashenka on the 9th of August 2020, the day of presidential elections, in which he states that “the pandemic has shown that [we] need to rely on [ourselves]”, for he argues that the states that should have helped each other (e.g. the EU) did not do so and are in fact now more divided than ever.<sup>64</sup> He poses this as an example of why Belarus should not seek closer relations with any other countries. This is an interesting angle, as he had previously often relied on tying himself or the route of the country to other countries, such as Russia before 2014, and then a larger focus on collaboration with the EU. It does, however, not come completely out of the blue, for the campaign slogan of his presidential election in 2015 was “For a future of an independent Belarus.”

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<sup>64</sup> Dmitrii Ympirovich. “Lukashenko o dejatel'nosti integracionnykh obrazovaniy: pandemija pokazala, chto nadejat'sja nado na sebja.” *Belarus Segodnya*, August 9, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/lukashenko-o-deyatelnosti-integratsionnykh-obrazovaniy-pandemiya-pokazala-cto-nadevatsya-nado-na-se.html>

The other four articles are interviews with experts in several fields. This seems to be a method of publishing the current narrative of the government without outright stating so, as the experts all vehemently oppose the protests and the West, while strongly supporting Lukashenka. One of these articles was published before the elections and was entitled “What to choose. Reasoning by Anatoly Rubinov.”<sup>65</sup> Rubinov is a Belarusian scientist, statesman and public figure, who held several high positions in the government of Belarus, such as chairman of the parliament. In this article, he goes into the hypothetical scenario of change in Belarus. He addresses those who are calling for a change, largely, by describing the everyday life that they are supposedly so unsatisfied by. He emphasizes that they are unhappy with all that they have got, namely housing, food and relative freedom. He describes how one can safely drive to work (“Boring!”) and on the way back you might go to your house, to your dacha or stop by the store first.

Rubinov describes how the opposition promises how, as soon as they come to power, the country will immediately become fully democratic like Sweden, Switzerland or Singapore. This reference is striking, as it could be a direct reference to research conducted by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic studies, an independent think tank. The research, conducted in 2014, asked respondents the question “In your opinion, which country should Belarus look like in terms of its social and economic development?” 40,4% of the respondents answered Sweden (democracy, high level of political rights and freedom, high taxes, insignificant property stratification in society,

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<sup>65</sup> Anatoliy Rubinov. “Chto budem vybirat’. Rassuzhdaet akademik Anatolij Rubinov.” *Belarus Segodnya*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/chto-budem-vybirat-rassuzhdaet-akademik-anatoliy-rubinov.html>

high level of social support) and 13,9% responded with Singapore (a strong state, modest level of political rights and freedom, high living standards, developed capitalism.<sup>66</sup> By sarcastically referring to these countries as role-models for the electorate, the idea of Belarus straying from the current path is ridiculed.

The second interview published was Mykola Azarov, who was Prime Minister of Ukraine from 2010-2014, that was originally aired on the All-National Television network, Belarus's second state-owned television station.<sup>67</sup> In this interview, the former Prime Minister compares the post-election situation in Belarus to the events of Maidan in Ukraine. The main point of discussion is the role that the West played in the revolution. Azarov mentions, for example, the 'so called friends' that are Poland and Lithuania, who pretend to be friendly towards the country but only have their own interests at heart. Concludes that the economic situation in Ukraine has worsened quite a bit, points towards the doubled costs of electricity, and that the West is at fault for Ukraine becoming the poorest country in Europe. This interview paints a bleak picture of the results of a revolution of the people against an authoritarian regime. This also ties in to Lukashenka's frequently used narrative of the foreign enemy.

The president often constructs an image of an foreign enemy, which can be NATO, the United States, nationalists in Latvia or "arrogant European officials".<sup>68</sup> By asking a

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<sup>66</sup> Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, "What Belarusian Society Thinks on Reforms." June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Available at: [https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/BISS\\_SA10\\_2014en.pdf](https://belinstitute.com/sites/default/files/2020-05/BISS_SA10_2014en.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> Azarov: sobytija v Belarusi ochen' napominajut podgotovku pervogo majdana v Ukraine." *Belarus Segodnya*, August 28, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/illyuziya-mira-i-dobra.html>

<sup>68</sup> Vadzim Bylina. "'Belarus: The Great Patriotic War vs the Second World War.'" *Belarus Digest*, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2013. Available at: <https://belarusdigest.com/story/white-red-white-flag-the-true-belarusian-symbol-or-a-sign-of-the-opposition/>

Ukrainian official to recount their experiences with Western meddling in the Ukrainian protests, a warning signal is given that Belarus should rely on itself.

The two other articles that come up go along the same line. There is an interview with Elena Ponomareva, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, who is an expert in the subject of color revolutions.<sup>69</sup> She analyzes the current situation, insinuating that those who believe in the cause of the opposition and Tikhanovskaya are simply unable to see that the West is trying to gain control over the country, claiming that the West wants to overthrow the existing legal power in Belarus in order to take over the high-tech and modernized production facilities of Belarusian enterprises. The other article is an interview with Valery Bainev, a Doctor of Economics and head of the Department of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Belarusian State University.<sup>70</sup> In this article, he discusses who is benefitting from the information attacks that are occurring in Belarus and what the intent behind the call for strikes. He takes an economic approach to the current situation in Belarus, discussing how the call for strikes is ill-considered because the economic consequences are not thought through. Both these articles warn the people of possible consequences of a successful revolution and seem to warn them against Western influences, especially the idea that the West is interfering simply for their own gain and that they would be untrustworthy partners.

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<sup>69</sup> Alexander Bushev. "Elena Ponomareva — o situacii v Belarusi i budushhem Sojuznogo gosudarstva." *Belarus Segodnya*, September 10, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/nas-pytayutsya-rastashchit.html>

<sup>70</sup> Evgeny Kononovich. "Komu vygodny informacionnye ataki na biznes i chto stoit za prizyvami k zabastovkam." *Belarus Segodnya*, October 23, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/opasnyy-endshpil-biznes.html>

#### 4.1.2 Belarusization (белорусизация)

The term белорусизация resulted in seven articles between February 2020 and October 2020. Three of these articles cover historical events: the “Belarusian cultural revival” in 1941-1944,<sup>71</sup> the day of reunification of the Belarusian lands on September 17th 1939,<sup>72</sup> and the Polish uprising of 1863-1864.<sup>73</sup> In these articles, the term Belarusization is largely used to denote certain periods in history when the culture of Belarus was promoted and the country and the events are glorified. The independence of Belarus is often emphasized and discussed in small detail. It is common that there are references to the sacrifices and bravery of the Belarusian people.

The fourth article discusses the problems that the Belarusian intelligentsia are facing, talking through the history of the intelligentsia and linking it to current events.<sup>74</sup> It is a round table discussion with several scientists that discuss the challenges that the current situation poses to people of culture and science, as the riots pose a threat to academics. The fact that these articles are published in a state-owned newspaper points to the changing ideology about the history narrative. There is a strong emphasis on the independency and agency of Belarus.

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<sup>71</sup> Evgeny Podlesny. “Pravda o Pol’skom vosstanii 1863-1864 godov.” *Belarus’ Segodnya*, October 29, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/pravda-o-polskom-vosstanii-1863-1864-godov.html>

<sup>72</sup> Maksim Osipov. “Den' vossoedineniya belorusskih zemel' — v ocenkah sovremennyh istorikov.” *Belarus Segodnja*, September 18, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/akt-istoricheskoy-spravedlivosti-3.html>

<sup>73</sup> Evgeny Podlesny. “Pravda o Pol’skom vosstanii 1863-1864 godov.” *Belarus’ Segodnya*, October 28, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/pravda-o-polskom-vosstanii-1863-1864-godov.html>

<sup>74</sup> Irina Ovsepyan. “Problemy, stojashhie pered belorusskoj intelligenciej v tekushhij istoricheskij moment, obsudili za kruglym stolom.” *Belarus Segodnya*, September 11, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/kuda-idet-intelligentsiya.html>

Two of the articles are news articles about Sergey Lavrov, the Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, both commentating on the outcome of the elections and the subsequent protests. The first one, published on September 2nd 2020, is about how Russia having no interest in meeting with the Belarusian opposition.<sup>75</sup> He mentions that the individuals that they are associating with the opposition are calling for Belarusization and a break with the Russian culture, especially infringing on the Russian language. The second article, published on September 17th 2020, covers the statement of the minister that the West is covertly using the Belarusian opposition in many ways.<sup>76</sup> In this article, Sergei Lavrov mentions that the Belarusianization of all aspects of life in Belarus is a goal of the opposition and issues thinly veiled threats. He believes that Tikhanovskaya is simply a mouthpiece for the West.

These two articles show a reversal of the previously used narrative of Russia as the enemy. Whereas the government had been diversifying its economic and geopolitical dependence on Russia, after the unrest in the country that followed the elections, Russia is once again presented as an ally and an expert.

One of the results was an article published before the elections, on February 15th 2020. This article covers the conversation that Lukashenka had with the Belarusian heads of the media, in which his key message was that the most important component

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<sup>75</sup> "Lavrov: Rossii ni k chemu vstrechat'sja s chlenami "koordinacionnogo soveta" belorusskoj oppozicii." *Belarus Segodnya*, september 2, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/lavrov-rossii-ni-k-chemu-vstrechatsya-s-chlenami-koordinatsionnogo-soveta-belorusskoy-oppozitsii.html>

<sup>76</sup> "Zapad ispol'zooyet byelorooskooyoo oppozitsiyoo vo mnogom vtyemnooyoo." *Belarus Segodnya*, September 17, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/lavrov-zapad-ispolzuuet-belorusskuyu-oppozitsiyu-vo-mnogom-vtemnuyu.html>

of independence of any state is the information sovereignty.<sup>77</sup> This article covers the challenges of modern media, and seems especially concerned with the issue of fake news and misinformation that is spread easily. It justifies the grasp the government has on the media by stating it is because of protective reasons against this issue. This shows how the policy of Soft Belarusization, although it had included a lot less repression from the state in cultural expression, only goes so far. When there is an imminent danger of protests and a threat to the regime, measures are put in place to justify choices of the regime.

#### 4.1.3 Narod Belarusi (народ беларуси)

The term *narod* Belarusi resulted in 11 articles. One of these articles consisted of the texts of Alexander Lukashenka's inauguration speech on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, which will be discussed under the chapter 'speeches'.<sup>78</sup> Three of these articles concerned the Day of Unity of the Peoples of Belarus and Russia. The first article is a short message from Grigory Raporta, who is the Secretary of State of the Union State.<sup>79</sup> He celebrates the Union of Russia and Belarus, stating that the two peoples have conquered many battles together and that they, as a good family, have not divided these achievements in

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<sup>77</sup> Dmitrii Kryat. "O pravilah informacionnoj gigieny. Posleslovie k vstreche Prezidenta s rukovoditeljami SMI." *Belarus Segodnya* February 15, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/o-pravilakh-informatsionnoy-gigieny-posleslovie-k-vstreche-prezidenta-s-rukovoditelyami-smi.html>

<sup>78</sup> "Aleksandr -Lukashenko vstupil v dolzhnost' Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus'." *Belarus Segodnya*, September 23, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/sluzhit-narodu-lukashenko-inauguraciya.html>

<sup>79</sup> "Pozdravlenie s Dnem edinenija narodov Belarusi i Rossii." *Narodnaya Volya*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/pozdra22vlenie-s-dnem-edineniya-narodov-belarusi-i-rossii.html>

half, but consider them common. This emphasizes the common features of the Belarusian and Russian culture. The second article concerns the congratulations of Putin, who has also expressed confidence that the accumulated experience of joint work will help to find optimal solution to any, even the most difficult, issues that stand in the way of union building.<sup>80</sup> This is a thinly veiled reference to the expectations of the presidential elections, suggesting that Russia will assist in any issue that may arise in the name of the union state. The third article is about Lukashenka congratulating Putin with the Day of Unity.<sup>81</sup> In his congratulatory message, he mentions that today, Belarus and Russia are on the threshold of a new unification stage, expressing confidence that the two countries would be able to maintain high dynamics of bilateral and integration cooperation in the future.

Four of the articles consider events as well. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, a statement of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia in connection with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War was made.<sup>82</sup> This looks ahead to the celebrations of the 9<sup>th</sup> of May. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, an announcement was posted that events dedicated to the Day of Unity of the Peoples of Belarus and Russia have been cancelled.<sup>83</sup> The reasons given for this are ‘the difficult epidemiological situation in Moscow’ and the fact that Russians are unable to attend the festivities, completely

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<sup>80</sup> “Putin pozdravil Lukashenko s Dnem edinenija narodov Belarusi i Rossii.” *Belarus’ Segodnya*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/putin-pozdravil-lukashenko-s-dnem-edineniya-narodov-belarusi-i-rossii.html>

<sup>81</sup> “Lukashenko pozdravil Putina s Dnem edinenija narodov Belarusi i Rossii.” *Belarus’ Segodnya*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/pozdravlenie-lukashenko-putin-den-edineniya-2020.html>

<sup>82</sup> “Заявление Парламентского Собрания Союза Беларуси и России в связи с 75-й годовщиной Победы в Великой Отечественной войне.” *Belarus’ Segodnya*, January 30, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/zayavlenie-parlamentskogo-sobraniya-soyuza-belarusi-i-rossii-v-svyazi-s-75-y-godovshchinoy-pobedy-v-.html>

<sup>83</sup> “Meroprijatija ko Dnju edinenija narodov Belarusi i Rossii otmeneny.” *Belarus’ Segodnya*, March 27, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/meroprijatija-ko-dnyu-edineniya-narodov-belarusi-i-rossii-otmeneny.html>

ignoring the fact that the pandemic was also present in Belarus. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, Lukashenka and the Belarusian people receive congratulations on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory day.<sup>84</sup> The article specifically goes into Lukashenka being the recipient of the congratulations, portraying him as the true leader that represents the entire country. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, world leaders congratulate Lukashenka and the Belarusian people on independence day, taking the liberation of Belarus from the Nazis as the start of independence.<sup>85</sup> This article provides a long list of countries who have congratulated Belarus and have, in doing so, insinuated that they are interested in closer relationships. This is an interesting deviation from the normal narrative, where the image of a foreign enemy has the overhand. It is interesting to note that there are no western countries considering better relations.

Three articles consider international relations. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, an article was posted where Cui Qiming, ambassador of China to Belarus, commented on the relationship between the two countries.<sup>86</sup> It thanks Belarus for the support for China in the fight against the coronavirus. This article seems to imply that China was the originator and was the one most severely hit by the virus, whereas Belarus was a great help to the country. This once again deviates from the norm of the isolator policy of Belarus. The second article, published on February 14<sup>th</sup> as well, concerns the Russian oil

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<sup>84</sup> "V adres Lukashenko i belorusskogo naroda postupajut pozdravlenija s 75-letiem Pobedy." *Belarus' Segodnya*, May 9, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/v-adres-lukashenko-i-belorusskogo-naroda-postupajut-pozdravleniya-s-75-letiem-pobedy.html>

<sup>85</sup> "Mirovye lidery pozdravljajut Lukashenko i belorusskij narod s Dnem Nezavisimosti." *Belarus' Segodnya*, July 3, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/mirovye-lidery-pozdravlyajut-lukashenko-i-belorusskij-narod-s-dnem-nezavisimosti.html>

<sup>86</sup> "Cuj Cimin: podderzhka Belarus'ju Kitaja v bor'be s koronavirusom otrazhaet bol'shuju druzhbu narodov." *Belarus' Segodnya*, 14 February, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/mirovye-lidery-pozdravlyajut-lukashenko-i-belorusskij-narod-s-dnem-nezavisimosti.html>

and gas companies.<sup>87</sup> Lukashenka has stated that the Russian leadership is hinting at Belarus' accession in exchange for uniform energy prices. He has replied to this that "Belarus, of course, will never go for this". The article states that Russian oil and gas companies are draining the people of both Belarus and Russia and will lead to the diversification in economy of Belarus. This points to one of the main narratives in Soft Belarusization: the move away from Russia. It is one of the few articles making a direct allusion to this. The fact these two articles were both published on the same day strengthens this. By publishing a negative report on the relationship between Belarus and Russia and a positive one about the relationship of Belarus and China, the diversification becomes more clear. The third article is a comment by Andrei Savinykh, Chairman of the Standing Commission of the House of Representatives, about the recommendations of the European Parliament.<sup>88</sup> Savinykh states that: "We see this document as an example of inappropriate and biased politics bordering. calls for the expansion of restrictive measures against Belarus, as well as proposed restrictions on access to the EU market for certain categories of goods from Belarus, are a gross attempt at economic pressure on a sovereign state in violation of international law." This condemns the reply of the EU to the protests in Belarus, namely the restrictions and bans on both high placed officials and on the economy. It creates the idea of the EU being against the people of Belarus, having no regard for their wellbeing or for nuances in the situation.

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<sup>87</sup> "«Klub redaktorov»: rossijskie neftegazovye kompanii, po suti, stravlivajut narody Belarusi i Rossii." *Belarus' Segodnya*, February 14, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/klub-redaktorov-rossijskie-neftegazovye-kompanii-po-suti-stravlivajut-narody-belarusi-i-rossii.html>

<sup>88</sup> "Savinyh: rekomendacii Evroparlamenta napravleny protiv naroda Belarusi." *Belarus' Segodnya*, October 30, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/savinykh-rekomendatsii-evroparlamenta-napravleny-protiv-naroda-belarusi.html>

The last article concerns the presidential elections and the protests. On August 8, a collection of write-ins to the newspaper was published.<sup>89</sup> They are introduced as reflections of the people of Belarus, and consist of many of the subjects that Lukashenka is also warning people about. Many of the write-ins reflect the official stance of the government, such as the dangers of color revolution and the despise for the protesters.

## 4.2 Narodnaya Volya

### 4.2.1 Nationalism (нацыяналізм)

The term nationalism resulted in seven articles between February and October 2020. One of these articles announces a Belarusian musical that will be brought to the stage in Minsk.<sup>90</sup> The revival of this musical celebrates the Belarusian culture, but is not given any significant attention, besides its announcement, in the news.

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<sup>89</sup> "Zhiteli Belarusi razmyshljajut o politike i zhizni v strane." *Belarus' Segodnya*, August 8, 2020. <https://www.sb.by/articles/s-lyubovyu-k-belarusi-chitateli.html>

<sup>90</sup> Elena Molochko. "Vasil' Bykaŭ na muzyku dy jashchje anlajn!" *Narodnaya Volya*, April 20, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/04/20/vasil-bykau-na-muzyku-dy-yashche-anlajn.html>

The first relevant article to come up is from February 2020 and is an interview with an orthodox priest about the role of the Orthodox Church in today's Belarus.<sup>91</sup> The priest considers the role of the church to be able to fight all evil and to be on the side of its subjects, which is why he says the church should not be silent in the protests.

In July, an article discusses the intended changes during the elections quite extensively, concluding that the most likely result will be a move away from Russia but also concludes that the Belarusian state propaganda is unable to effectively resist the Russian propaganda.<sup>92</sup> One of the discussed aspects is the fact that Lukashenka took part in events dedicated to the Great Patriotic War in Russia. This points to effort from Lukashenka's side to improve the bilateral relations, which can be attributed to the upcoming elections. However, Putin refused to go deeper into the relations. Next to this, the article discusses the repressive nature of Belarusian legislation and mentions the frequent falsification of statistics. It takes the water collapse in Minsk as an example. On June 24th, problems with the drinking water started, as the quality of it became so disgusting that it became a problem to drink it, wash yourself or dishes, and even to water the plants. The government inadequately handled this acute crisis, first staying silent about the problems with the water and then ignoring the issues.<sup>93</sup> The author discusses how the response to the water crisis shows the ineffectiveness of the government. This article does show that Belarus is still quite involved with Russia, even

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<sup>91</sup> Michas Skobla. "Aljaksandr Shramko, svjatar: «Carkva za prymirjenje? Kali josc' kankrjetnae zlo, z im trjeba zmagacca!" *Narodnaya Volya*, October 2, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/10/02/alyaksandr-shramko-svjatar-tsarkva-za-prymirjenje-kali-yosts-kankretnae-zlo-z-im-treba-zmagatstva.html>

<sup>92</sup> Viktor Belyaev. "BSBLOG: Belorusskaja gospropaganda nesposobna jeffektivno protivostojat' rossijskoj." *Narodnaya Volya*, July 17, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/07/17/bsblog-belorusskaya-gospropaganda-nesposobna-jeffektivno-protivostoyat-rossijskoj.html#>

<sup>93</sup> "Fresh Water System in Minsk Collapses." *BNE Intellinews*, June 25, 2020. <https://www.intellinews.com/fresh-water-system-in-minsk-collapses-186248/>

though the Belarusization has increased over the past few years. Although the article does not provide insight into the opinion of the author on the subject, the fact that it is critical of the way Belarus is run does show the difference between state-run and independent media.

On August 31st, an interview with a professor on why the Belarusian people took to the streets after the elections was published.<sup>94</sup> This article is an extensive piece in which the situation in Belarus is discussed completely the interviewee does not speculate about eventual outcome of the protests. This is a very interesting article and quite different from the ‘interviews with experts’ that are produced in the state-owned newspapers. There is little bias in the expert and the article aims to be informative rather than persuasive. The professor says that Lukashenka’s power is based on domination without hegemony, where hegemony means the leading ideological position in society which the majority of the citizens are willing to follow. The fact that Lukashenka decides on and upholds the ideology is thus clear. There is a change underway in society, as the protests are leading to full social mobilization and as she claims, the formation of a ‘full civic society’ is now happening.

On the sixth of September, a photo rapportage of the protests in Gomel is published.<sup>95</sup> A short introduction summarizes the protest so far. In the pictures, the most noticeable trend is the usage of the white-red-white flag. Many people are carrying

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<sup>94</sup> Natal’ya Benichevitz. “Proishodit katastrofa — i nastupaet predel terpeniju». Professor o tom, pochemu belorusy vyshli na ulicu.” *Narodnaya Volya*, August 31, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/08/31/proishodit-katastrofa-i-nastupaet-predel-terpeniyu-professor-o-tom-pochemu-belorusy-vyshli-na-ulitsu.html>

<sup>95</sup> Anatol’ Lipski. “Lukashenku – u aŭtazak!». 29-y dzen’ pratjestu ŭ Gomeli (fotarjupartazh).” *Narodnaya Volya*, September 6, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/09/06/lukashenku-u-autazak-29-y-dzen-pratestu-u-gomeli-fotarepartazh.html>

a flag, or are carrying signs or umbrellas, or are wearing clothing in the colors of the white-red-white flag. One of the signs states: “Нет!!! Путинскому национализм в Белоруси.” The irony in this is that the sign is in Russian. The pictures of the protests show a clear usage of the symbols associated with the democracy in Belarus.

Two of the results are articles written about Belarusian men. In November, an article was published about Igar Alinevich.<sup>96</sup> Alinevich (1983) is a Belarusian anarchist political prisoner. In this article, he explains how he joined the “Youth Front” and quickly became “repulsed by nationalism”<sup>97</sup> and started to form anarchist views. He explains how he saw the country fall into a dictatorship. In 2010, he left for Russia after partaking in anarchist actions in Minsk but was detained in Moscow in November and transported to a pre-trial detention center in Minsk. In May 2011, he was found guilty of “hooliganism” and “Intentional destruction or damage to property” and sentenced to eight years in a maximum security prison under abominable circumstances. Alinevich wrote and published a book (“I’m going to Magadan” about himself, his views and his life in prison. He became internationally recognized as a political prisoner and was released early in 2015, which was seen as a step towards normalizing relations with the European Union. After his release he moved to Poland. He was, however, detained once more in October 2020 near the Belarus-Ukraine border and was charged with “terrorist acts”. The second article tells the story of Roman Popkov, who was detained in Minsk on November

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<sup>96</sup> Ales’ Svyatlanich. “Chto taki anarchist Igar Alinevich?” *Narodnaya Volya*, November 6, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/11/06/hto-taki-anarhist-igar-alinevich.html>

<sup>97</sup> яго адштурхоўваў нацыяналізм

seventh.<sup>98</sup> He extensively tells the story about his torture and detainment following the protest. The honesty in the article is typical for an independent newspaper, as there is little censorship in the details of Popkov's story, providing the reader with actual insight into the workings of the regime.

#### 4.2.2 Belarusization (Беларусізацыя)

The term belarusization only results in one article in 2020.<sup>99</sup> This article is an exposé on the Belarusian flag, told through the works of Belarusian authors and poets Vasil Bykau (1924-2003), Ryhor Baradulin (1935-2014) and Genadz Buraukin (1936-2014) (Shapran, 28-08-2020). The author of the article recalls a story written by Buraukin, who was also a diplomat for Belarus, holding the position of permanent representative of Belarus to the United Nations from 1990-1994. In this story, Bukharin recalls an overseas trip while Belarus officially became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. Being in the United States at the time, he and several other (American) Belarusians looked to celebrate this occasion and did so by sewing the Belarusian white-red-white flag themselves and flying it near the office. Both Bykau and Baradulin wrote poems about the pried that is attached to this flag. Both the tone and the content of the article make

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<sup>98</sup> Roman Popkov. "OMON, sudy i jelektroshokery. Reportazh Romana Popkova iz minskogo izoljatora na Okrestina." *Narodnaya Volya*, November 11, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/11/27/omon-sudy-i-jelektroshokery-reportazh-romana-popkova-iz-minskogo-izoljatora-na-okrestina.html>

<sup>99</sup> Cyargej Shapran. "'Inshaga scjaga ŷ nas njama". Shto gavaryli pra bel-chyrvona-bely scjag Vasil' Bykaŷ, Rygor Baradulin i Genadz' Buraŷkin." *Narodnaya Volya*, August 28, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/08/28/inshaga-stsyaga-u-nas-nyama-shto-gavaryli-pra-bel-chyrvona-bely-stsyag-vasil-bykau-rygor-baradulin-i-genadz-buraukin.html>

very clear that the white-red-white flag is supposed to be considered as a sign of courage and peak Belarusian culture. Little direct reference is made to the role the flag was playing at the time of the protests when this article was published, but from the context it becomes clear that the newspaper strongly supports those who carry the flag as a sign of Belarusian pride.

#### 4.2.3 Narod Belarusi (Народ Беларусі)

The term '*Narod Belarusi*' resulted in nine articles. Two of these articles announced the death of Belarusian folk artists, the artist Irina Shikunova and the conductor Mikhail Drinevsky.<sup>100</sup><sup>101</sup> There was no additional information in the articles.

Three of the articles concern Belarusian theater. On June 25th, a history piece about the Belarusian poet Petrus Brovka was published.<sup>102</sup> The article details the life of the poet, his work and his accomplishments. This article could be part of the larger trend to celebrate Belarusian culture, as the poet wrote in Belarusian. The second article was published on the 13th of August and consists of an open letter written to Lukashenka from the staff at the Grodno Drama Theatre.<sup>103</sup> The letter states that there "are no

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<sup>100</sup> "Payshla z žytzzya narodnaya artistka Byelaroosi Irina Shikoonova." *Narodnaya Volya*, March 6, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/03/06/pajshla-z-zhytstsya-narodnaya-artystka-belarusi-iryna-shykunova.html>

<sup>101</sup> "Pamjor dyryzhor i narodny artyst Belarusi Mihail Dryneŭski." *Narodnaya Volya*, November 10, 2020.

<https://www.nv-online.info/2020/11/10/pamjor-dyryzhor-i-narodny-artyst-belarusi-mihail-dryne-ski.html>

<sup>102</sup> "Sjonnja — 115 gadoŭ z dnja naradzhennja narodnaga pajeta Belarusi Petrusja Broŭki." *Narodnaya Volya*, June 25, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/06/25/syonnya-115-gadou-z-dnya-naradzhennya-narodnaga-paeta-belarusi-petrusya-brouki.html>

<sup>103</sup> Alyaksey Michaley. "«Perad vami ne zlachyncy, a narod Belarusi» — adkryty list supracojnikaŭ Grodzenskaga dramtjeatra." *Narodnaya Volya*, August 13, 2020. <https://www.nv->

criminals in front of you, but the people of Belarus” and that “none of this would have happened if the country had held fair elections”. This article shows the involvement of civil society in both the protests and the Belarusization. By drawing on the idea of unity, promoted by the recent Belarusization, the authors try to appeal to Lukashenka. The third article was published on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September and it reports on the resignation of the Belarusian folk artist Viktor Manaev.<sup>104</sup> He resigned in solidarity with the dismissed director of Pavel Latushko, who was lost his job after openly supporting peaceful protestors. This reveals the solidarity that the artists have, reflected in civil society, but also the tight grip that Lukashenka still has on civil society. Open support of the protests leads to dismissal from the public spheres, showing the willingness of the president to interfere in cultural matters.

The other four articles all concern the Belarusian protests and their aftermath. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, a short statement of Valery Voronetsky is published.<sup>105</sup> Voronetsky states that the situation regarding the independent media is abnormal, as the independent mass media is forced to publish in another country where they do not reach the subscribers or Belarusian kiosks. This reveals the crackdown of Lukashenka on the media. On November 11<sup>th</sup>, two articles were published. The first one is a short report on the address of the Polish ambassador to Belarus, who addressed Belarus on

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[online.info/2020/08/13/perad-vami-ne-zlachyntsya-a-narod-belarusi-adkryty-list-supratsounikau-grodzenskaga-dramteatra.html](https://www.nv-online.info/2020/08/13/perad-vami-ne-zlachyntsya-a-narod-belarusi-adkryty-list-supratsounikau-grodzenskaga-dramteatra.html)

<sup>104</sup> “Narodny artyst Belarusi Viktor Manaev syshoŭ z Kupalaŭskaga tjeatra.” *Narodnaya Volya*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/09/02/narodny-artyst-belarusi-viktar-manaev-syshou-z-kupalaukaga-teatra.html>

<sup>105</sup> “Valeryj Varanecki, chlen Komisii pa mizhnarodnyh spravah Palaty pradshtaynikoŭ Belarusi: «Intarjesy belaruskich SMI i ih chytachoy pavinny byc' abaroneny!»” *Narodnaya Volya*, September 22, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/09/22/valeryj-varanetski-chlen-komisii-pa-mizhnarodnyh-spravah-palaty-pradstaunikou-belarusi-intarjesy-belaruskich-smi-i-ih-chytachou-pavinny-byts-abaroneny.html>

the Polish day of independence.<sup>106</sup> He wishes independence for Belarus too. This points to a difference between state-owned and independent media, as this goes against the narrative of the foreign enemy. This redirects the attention to the narrative of friendly neighbors, and makes people more likely to be interested in a diversification of foreign policy. The second article of that day is an interview with the a scientist, namely a specialist in infectious diseases: Nikita Kachanava.<sup>107</sup> She discusses the violence against ‘the best of society’, i.e. doctors, athletes, culturalists, workers, university professors etc. The actions consists of medical personnel against violence, especially since the violent crackdown of the protests is also aimed at them. Medical personnel aiding protestors are arrested and support of the protests leads to dismissal. This article shows the involvement and mobilization of civil society. The fourth article is a small statement by the former coach of the national football team.<sup>108</sup> This man is held in high regard in society and by involving him, the involvement of civil society is once more emphasized.

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<sup>106</sup> “Ambasadar Pol'shchy ŷ Belarusi: Nezalezhnasc' – gjeta kashtoŷnasc', daragaja kozhnamu narodu.” *Narodnaya Volya*, November 11, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/11/11/ambasadar-polshchy-belarusi-nezalezhnasc-gjeta-kashto-nasc-daragaja-kozhnamu-narodu.html>

<sup>107</sup> Minski infekcyjanist – Kachanavaj: dyjalog budze tam, dze zahocha narod Belarusi.” *Narodnaya Volya*, November 11, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/11/11/minski-infekcyjanist-kachanavaj-dyjalog-budze-tam-dze-zahocha-narod-belarusi.html>

<sup>108</sup> “«Kiraŷnik, jaki znishchae svoj narod, zabivae dzjarzhavu». Jeks-trjener zbornaj Hackevich rjezka vykazaŷsja pra padzei ŷ Belarusi.” *Narodnaya Volya*, November 16, 2020. <https://www.nv-online.info/2020/11/16/kira-nik-jaki-znishchae-svoj-narod-zabivae-dzjarzhavu-jeks-trjener-zbornaj-hackevich-rjezka-vykaza-sja-pra-padzei-belarusi.html>

## 4.3 Radio Svaboda

### 4.3.1 Nationalism

The search term ‘Нацыяналізм’ resulted in fourteen articles between January 2020 and November 2020. These articles are often interviews with experts in certain areas that apply a theory to the Belarusian situation (regarding COVID-19 or the elections) and grow in number in August, when they publish pieces about people playing a large role in the protests. As opposed to the state-owned newspapers, the experts that are interviewed and published at Radio Svaboda are independent academics who tie the situation in Belarus to research and theories previously conducted.

There are three articles that report on current events. One was published on 21st of February 2020 and concerns Putin’s statement that there is an unknown foreign power that is currently obstructing cooperation between Russia and Ukraine, even though the Ukrainians and Russian are one people according to the Russian president.<sup>109</sup> The article adds no own perspective to the situation, instead simply summarizing the interview with Putin. The second article concerns a speech delivered by Alexander Lukashenka four days before the elections, where he states that “the attempt to organize a massacre in the center of Minsk is obvious.”<sup>110</sup> The entire speech has been captured in screenshots,

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<sup>109</sup> “Аўстрыжскі гэнштаб і «ўкраінцы ў Пскове»: што Пучін распавяжыў пра ўкраіну.” *Radio Svaboda*, February 21, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30447095.html>

<sup>110</sup> “«Sproba arganizavac' bojnju ў cjentry Mensku vidavochnaja». Lukashjenka vystupiŭ z paslan'nem za 4 dni da vybaraŭ. Cytuem i kamjentuem.” *Radio Svaboda*, August 4, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30765181.html>

but there is no substantive comment about the content of the speech. The third article reports on the rally that took place for Lukashenka in Hrodna and was published on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020.<sup>111</sup> The pictures of the rally see people carrying the red-green flag and people carrying signs with slogans such as 'за мур' and 'за Беларусь'. The article also reports that the day before, activists in Hrodna had wanted to hold a rally in the center of Hrodna but the authorities had denied permission, because the square were not set aside for mass events. The center was now used to gather the supporters of Lukashenka. These articles all report objectively on the matters which is less likely to happen in a state-owned newspaper.

Two articles report on the COVID-19 situation in Belarus. The first article, published on the 18th of march 2020, is a discussion with a few well-known Belarusian intellectuals where they answer questions about COVID-19 and the government, stating that the pandemic exposes a lot about the state of affairs in Belarus.<sup>112</sup> Pjatra Rudkoŭškaga says references Chernobyl. This critiques the government in a subtle yet clear way, as Chernobyl is infamous for exposing the failure of the Soviet regime to actually function. Both the pandemic and Chernobyl were unexpected disasters that revealed a lot about the internal functioning of a government. The other article was published on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2020 and is a piece where sociologist van Kristeva draws seven lessons from the corona virus, concluding that it will strengthen authoritarianism and reveal a lot about the

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<sup>111</sup> ««Ja—my—bac'ka!» Jak u Goradni prajshoŭ mityng za Lukashjenku.» *Radio Svoboda*, August 22, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30797393.html>

<sup>112</sup> Yuri Drakachryst. ««Raseja ŭ galave» shto ŭ Bond, shto ŭ Babaryki. Ale gjeta ne abvinavaŭchy vjerdykt, a shanec.» *Radio Svoboda*, May 15, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30614637.html>

workings of the government.<sup>113</sup> This article also criticizes the government for its approach. Neither of these articles mention the elections or Belarus as a people.

There are three articles that directly address the (aftermath of the) presidential elections. The first one is published on the 8th of August 2020 and is an interview with journalist Sergei Dorofeev on Lukashenka and his predictions for the upcoming elections.<sup>114</sup> He is heavily critical of Lukashenka and cautiously optimistic regarding a win for the opposition. The second article was published on the 13th of August 2020 and is an interview with the philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich.<sup>115</sup> He answers questions about what is happening in Belarus and whether it points towards the uprising of a nation or the deepening of its division. According to Akudovich, the people are calling the riot police 'Nazis', because the way the police acts reminds them of the way in which the Nazis severely damaged Belarus during the occupation in the Second World War. He claims that the West has been moving towards the East and has begun to occupy a dominant position in Belarus, because people are looking for a democracy to begin and the influences of the West are helping. This is rather speculative, as the professor does not state his reasons for thinking this. It does point to the fact that the Belarusization, and the turn towards the West that is associated with it, plays an especially large role amongst the Belarusian intelligentsia. The third article was published on August 19th

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<sup>113</sup> "Ivan Krystjeŭ pra sem pershyh urokaŭ karanavirusu." *Radio Svaboda*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30499708.html>

<sup>114</sup> Ganna Soŭs'. 2020. "Darafeeŭ pra «haryzmu» Lukashjenki, papjarjedzhan'ni i pytan'ni da ab'jadnanaga shtabu." *Radio Svaboda*, August 8, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30771713.html>

<sup>115</sup> Yuri Drakachryst. 2020. "Akudovich pra nacyjanal'ny sjens belaruskaj rjevaljucyi." *Radio Svaboda*, August 13, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30781939.html>

2020 and is an interview with the writer Algerd Bakharevich, who talks about peace and revolutions.<sup>116</sup> He has been protesting against the dictatorship by writing about freedom and fascism before and is now involved with the protests against the reelection. He thinks that the protests are uniting the people, making the Belarusians more of a nation than before. The years of oppression have now resulted in the mass uprisings. This reflects a popular notion in the West, especially regarding color revolutions, and the idea that an uprising in a country with an authoritarian regime will automatically lead to democracy.<sup>117</sup> These articles are all published when the situation was most precarious and are often critical of the government and the government's response to the protests. They encourage people to take a stand and to unite as a people.

The other six articles in the search result cover historical or cultural topics, such as the disbanding of the Gulags over 60 years ago<sup>118</sup>, an expose on the Belarusian writer Vasily Semukh<sup>119</sup>, an interview with the Belarusian culturologist Olga Romanova<sup>120</sup>, and an expose on the life of Mikola Ermalovich, who is considered a founder of Belarusian historiography.<sup>121</sup> These articles do not make any explicit statements about the state of the Belarusian culture, but do point towards an increase in interest in Belarusian culture.

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<sup>116</sup> Ganna Soŭs'. 2020. "Baharjevich: Ja vedaŭ, dze ja zhyvu. Use gady dyktatury ja pisaŭ pra svabodu i pra fashyzm." *Radio Svaboda*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30792356.html>

<sup>117</sup> For more on colour revolutions see Finkel, Evgeny and Yitzhak M. Brudny. 2013. "Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactins." *Routledge*: London.

<sup>118</sup> "«Ljagjery byli vjel'mi daragimi i nJavygadnymi». 60 gadow tamu rasfarmavali GULAG." *Radio Svaboda*, January 24, 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Yan Maksimok. 2020. "«Ja haj sabje kryhu i prydurak, alje zh nje zusim durny...» Cytaty z" njaskonchanaj razmovy z Vasiljom Sjomuham." *Radio Svaboda*, February 2, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30416240.html>

<sup>120</sup> Alena Litvinava. 2020. "Jak stvarali «savjeckaga bjelarusy». 5 tezisaw bjelaruskaga kul'turoljaga Vol'gi Ramanavaj." *Radio Svaboda*, February 7, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30421899.html>

<sup>121</sup> Pavel Abramovich. 2020. "«Raz'bivac' shmatvjakovuju hlus'nju njaljogka, ale trjeba». Pravily zhyc'cja Mikoly Ermalovicha." *Radio Svaboda*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30468047.html>

These articles often emphasize the uniqueness of the Belarusian culture rather than the similarity with other 'Slavic brothers'. This emphasis on the originality of Belarusian culture is a recurring facet of Soft Belarusization.

On May 15th 2020, an article was published about the role of Russian in the Belarusian society.<sup>122</sup> In this article, it is described how the Russian culture is starting to play a smaller role in society, as social media has become more important and more Belarusian is spoken there. The youth has easier access to materials in Belarusian and can therefore choose to take on a more Belarusian culture. Once more, the role of young people in Belarusization is emphasized. On the 21st of November, an article was published on the political birth of Belarus.<sup>123</sup> The author states that the Belarusian national idea originated in the early 19th century amongst educated priests and how Kalinouski's activities and ideology marked the beginning of the political birth of modern Belarus. This fits into the narrative of Soft Belarusization, as it emphasizes the sovereignty of Belarus rather than the relation to Russia. It creates a discourse of oppression of the Belarusian culture. These types of articles are rarely published in state-owned newspapers, because they criticize the government and encourage people to think critically for themselves.

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<sup>122</sup> Yuri Drakachyst. 2020. "«Raseja ŷ galave» shto ŷ Bond, shto ŷ Babaryki. Ale gjeta ne abvinavaŷchy vjerdykt, a shanec." *Radio Svoboda*, May 15, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30614637.html>

<sup>123</sup> Sergey Ablameyka. 2020. "Kalinoŷski i palitychnae naradzhen'ne Belarusi." *Radio Svoboda*, November 21, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30962242.html>

#### 4.3.2 Belarusization

The search term Беларусізацыя resulted in 14 articles, of which one was previously discussed in the analysis of the articles that concerned nationalism.

Of these articles, four consider contemporary current events. On the 2nd of February 2020, the visit of Mike Pompeo to Belarus is covered.<sup>124</sup> The article goes into the possible consequences and meanings of this visit, and celebrates how it seems that Lukashenka is getting more involved with the West. It states that both Moscow and Minsk pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. This is a piece of evidence for the diversification policy of Belarus in foreign policy and economy. This article presents Soft Belarusization as a factual aspect of politics that is currently not to be forgotten, as it might be the reason for Belarus' relatively new multi-vector policy. The second article, published on 19th of February 2020, reports on how the Brest City Executive Committee refuses to upload its website in both Russian and Belarusian, as it is not mandatory according to the law.<sup>125</sup> This is an objective short article that shows that not everything in Belarus is bilingual, although the reports of a decrease in Russian language usage are appearing more often. It provides perspective to the idea of Soft Belarusization, as the increasing interest in Belarusian culture does not mean that the Russian aspects are completely ignored. The third article is the announcement of an online cultural even

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<sup>124</sup> “«Gjeta rjevaljucyja». Shto ŷ Rasei kazhuc' ab pryvez'dze kiraŷnika Dzarzhaŷnaga djepartamjentu ZShA ŷ Mensk.” *Radio Svoboda*, February 2, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30412532.html>

<sup>125</sup> “Beras'cejski garvykankam admoviŷsja rabic' belaruskuju vjersiju sajta.” *Radio Svoboda*, February 19, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30443930.html>

that celebrate Belarusian life, published on April 20th 2020.<sup>126</sup> This is a sign of the increasing interest in cultural festivals that celebrate the Belarusian culture. The fourth article, published on July 14th 2020, reports on how people took to the streets after two potential candidates for the presidential elections, Barbariko and Tsepkalo, were denied registration.<sup>127</sup> The article reports that two journalists were detained as they were reporting on the protests in the streets. It is a notifying article of repressive measures against the press, signaling the upcoming crackdown after the elections.

There are five articles that directly address the ongoing Belarusization in the country, largely by discussing the decline of pro-Russian sentiments. The first article is published on the fifth of February 2020 and discusses the collapse of pro-Russian sentiment. It is a discussion of a survey conducted by the Belarusian Analytical Workshop in December 2019 that showed that the number of supporters of the union with Russia decreased from 64% to 40%.<sup>128</sup> This article claims that Soft Belarusization has changed to hard, because of the recent changes in changes in attitude towards Russia. A follow-up article was published on the 11th of February 2020, where the results of the survey are discussed with Andrei Varamatski, a Belarusian sociologist.<sup>129</sup> He goes into the meaning of the outcome of the survey in a more mathematical manner, explaining what the numbers actually mean.

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<sup>126</sup> "Pagljadзец' na gistorychny zamak, pasluhac' Shuma. Belaruskae zhyc'cjo onlajn na 20–26 krasavika." *Radio Svoboda*, April 20, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30565975.html>

<sup>127</sup> "Ljudzi vyjshli na vulicy pas'lja nerjehistracyi Babaryki i Capkaly. Adbylisja zatryman'ni." *Radio Svoboda*, July 14, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30625083.html>

<sup>128</sup> "Obval'noe Padenye: Chislo Storonnikov Soyza s Rossiy Snizilos' na Tret'." *BelSat* May 2, 2020. <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/obvalnoe-padenie-chislo-storonnikov-soyuza-s-rossiej-snizilos-na-tret/>

<sup>129</sup> Yuri Drakachryst. 2020. "Vardamacki: Lahnaja chastka belarusaŭ hocha i ŷ JeZ, i adkrytuju mjazhu, i adsutnas'c' mytni z Rasejaj." *Radio Svoboda*, February 11, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30428742.html>

Two of the articles go more into the cultural side of Belarusization. On February fourteenth 2020, an article was published where Pavel Tereshkovich, a professor of History at the Belarusian State University, explains how the traditional culture of the Poleshuks is not of the Ukrainian, but of the Belarusian type.<sup>130</sup> In this article he mentions that the subculture of the Polesians is also influenced by the Belarusianization and Russification that goes on in Belarus. On the 21st of February, an article was published in which the historian Aleg Trusau discusses the role of the Belarusian language in Belarus.<sup>131</sup> It is a very positive outlook on the increase in spoken Belarusian. He states that although there has been an increase in Belarusian since 2014, as part of the new Belarusization policy, there is still little Belarusization in the government. Trusau goes as far as to say that only when the Belarusian patriots will be educated to speak Belarusian, only then will we become a nation. He argues that the increasing appearance of Belarusian language comes from below, as more and more supporters of the Belarusian language supporters appeared in society. This supports the notion of the Belarusization being a process 'from below', stemming from society and being allowed by the government. Lastly, on the fourth of March, an article was published about Michail Samborski, whose grandfather was deported to Russia during the Second World War.<sup>132</sup> He has now returned to the homeland of his ancestors and is an advocate for Belarus becoming 'more European'. It is interesting to note that all articles that directly

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<sup>130</sup> Sergey Ablameyka. "Pavel Cerashkovich: tradycyjnaja kul'tura paleshukoŭ ne ŭkrajinskaga, a belaruskaga typu." *Radio Svaboda*, February 14, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30432247.html>

<sup>131</sup> Vital' Tchigankoy. 2020. . "Trusaŭ: U vjoscj cjaper gavorac' na trasjancy z rasejskim matam, a pa-belaruskju gavorac' u Mensku." *Radio Svaboda*, February 21, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30445873.html>

<sup>132</sup> "«Chym dalej ad Rasei». Jak unuk rjeprjesavanaga belarusa vjarnuŭsja na radzimu prodkaŭ." *Radio Svaboda*, March 4, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30466537.html>

address Belarusization in comparison to Russian cultural aspects are published in February.

There are four articles that address political topics. On March 24th 2020, an article is published that compares the approach of the United Kingdom and Belarus regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>133</sup> It critiques the approach of Belarus, as the number of infections are high and the government did little to stop it. Drakachyrst compares the COVID-19 strategy to Soft Belarusization: a casual process that was more based on the response of the people than the actual government strategy. This reveals how once more, the process of Soft Belarusization is established as a fact by the newspaper. On May 26th 2020, Piotr Rudkouski, head of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, answers questions on the alternative candidates for the elections, saying that “the king is weakening”, referencing Lukashenka.<sup>134</sup> Rudkouski also talks about how Belarusization, which would happen in case of the victory of a candidate other than Lukashenka, is a great risk to the Kremlin, who is, for that reason, very involved in the Belarusian elections. On June 16th, an interview with a Ukrainian expert is published, who is asked for their perspective on the Belarusian elections.<sup>135</sup> The article is similar to the previously mentioned one, as the expert lets out negatively about Lukashenka and is cautiously optimistic about a different course of action. He recognizes a national revival in Belarus, similar to one that

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<sup>133</sup> Yuri Drakachyrst. “Brytaniya i Belarus': hto dzejnichae bol'sh jefjektyŭna padchas pandjemii.” *Radio Svaboda*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30507018.html>

<sup>134</sup> Vital' Tchigankov. “Babaryka mozha stac' bol'sh pradkazal'nym dlja Kramlja, chym Lukashjenka, — palitoljag.” *Radio Svaboda*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30635597.html>

<sup>135</sup> Yuri Drakachyrst. “Na vybarah u Belarusi bessjensoŭna kazac', hto tam ruka, naga ci vusy Maskvy — ukrainskaja jekspjertka.” *Radio Svaboda*, June 16, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30673864.html>

happened in Ukraine, and mentions that the Belarusization is an important factor in that. On the 23rd of August, an article is published which analyzes the statements that were made by the Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov, which confirms that Putin has decided to support Lukashenka.<sup>136</sup>

## 4.4 Speeches

### 4.4.1 Alexander Lukashenka, 02-07-2020

In a meeting ahead of Belarus' independence day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, Alexander Lukashenka gave a speech in which he celebrated the Belarusian heritage.<sup>137</sup> This is a yearly occurrence and often offers a platform for Lukashenka to inform the country of changes in internal and foreign policy. As mentioned before, in 2014 he chose to address the audience in Belarusian, leading to a wide understanding of a new course for Belarus vis a vis the relationship with Russia. The speech given in 2020 reflects the precarious situation that the president is in as civil unrest is growing.

The speech is addressed to compatriots, foreign guests, veterans and friends and starts with the congratulating of the attendees with Independence Day – the main state holiday which has become a symbol of freedom of Belarusian people, as they “defeated

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<sup>136</sup> Yuri Drakachyrst. “«Pazycyja robicca bol'sh zhorstkaj». Jak gljadzic' Maskva na belaruski palitychny kryzis.” *Radio Svaboda*, August 23, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30798594.html>

<sup>137</sup> A summary of the speech in English is available here: <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-points-out-deep-roots-of-belarusian-statehood-131477-2020/>. In full Russian/Belarusian, the speech can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beW-k2AAX0I>.

death in the worst war in the history of mankind.” He draws on the heroic efforts of the ancestors, which gives the current generation a sense of self-sufficiency and pride in their origins, causing a strong and independent nation. The heroic effort is a reference to the partisan movement of the 1940s.

He continues saying: “Therefore, we will regard any attempts to discredit the generation of winners as an encroachment on sovereignty.” He is subtly warning his opposition. By drawing himself directly as one of the leaders of the free nation, one that could only be due to the heroic efforts of previous fighters. He compares protesting his leadership as directly disrespecting the efforts of the previous generation. Referring to the opposition as Nazis is a tactic more frequently used by the president. He has likened white-red-white flag, used by the Nazis to unite Belarusians, as a Nazi symbol to discourage people from voting for the opposition, who were using that flag.

This first part of the presidential address reveals a lot about the narrative that currently presides in the government. The unrest in the country was growing during the campaign of Lukashenka, and people seemed less willing to accept him as the president for another four years. By emphasizing the freedom of the country and the tumultuous history of the country, he subtly implies that it is his merit and he subtly threatens those who are planning to destabilize him. He already creates a narrative that those who do not comply are disrespectful and need to be handled quite harshly.

He then continues the speech in Belarusian. He addresses this to Belarusians and ‘citizens of the country’ and mentions the origins of the independence of Belarus, which lie in the Polotsk principality according to him, although those years of independence were followed by years of repression until the Belarusian rose to the historical stage and

became true defenders and guardians of the motherland. He then alludes to this independence being the greatest desire for true freedom and how the Belarusian people will always choose that path.

The part of the speech that was given in Belorussian was devoted to the history of the country's freedom and independence and the collective experience of the Great patriotic war, which could be taken as a symbolic gesture where the language is a symbol of independence.<sup>138</sup>

The speech continues with Lukashenka addressing the crowd again in Russian with the words 'dear comrades'. He dives into the history of Belarus again, stating that the Belarusians chose a path of political, cultural and social traditions of their own, and not a historical path imposed by external forces. Here, he seems to elude to the long tradition of Russia looming over Belarus. He states that 'lately, [he] has been hearing criticizing of this form of state structure', which is interesting since he is largely responsible for this form of rule. He distances himself from the issues that are ongoing in the country by continuously eluding to different actors in the situation. He directly addresses the ongoing tensions with Russia with the words 'a terrible competitive struggle is going on and we, Belarusian, must withstand this struggle'. He considers the country a modern and unique combination of Western and Eastern European cultures. This is the first comment in this speech he makes towards the West, relations he has earlier not been interested in, but he now says that Belarus is not only the historical but also the modern center of Europe and that there is the important question of what place in the geopolitical space will Belarus occupy in the near future? Belarus is at a crossroads and

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<sup>138</sup> Ivan Posokhin. "Soft Belarusization: (Re)building of Identity or "Border Reinforcement.", 66.

the presidential election will determine the future of the country. Lukashenka mentions the older and the middle generations, who are smart, work hard and tried their best to raise the youth, which is, “regretfully dissimilar” (к сожалению, разнородна). He ends with saying that ‘today, there is no time for emotions, today they play on your and my emotions’.

#### 4.4.2 Alexander Lukashenka, 16-08-2020

The 16th of August, a rally in favor and support of Alexander Lukashenka was held near the House of Government on the Independence Square in Minsk.<sup>139</sup> In this speech, he vehemently judges the protests. This analysis is based on a translation posted on the website Belarusfeed by Tatiana Volkova.<sup>140</sup>

He starts the speech by thanking the audience for coming, stating that he knows the people are busy and that he does not support revolutions or rallies, and that he is sad that there had to be a rally today. He reminisces about his own experiences and accomplishments while he was president.

He draws attention to neighboring countries and NATO – the perceived enemies, stating that they are waiting at the border to enter Belarus. He reminds the audience of his ‘accomplishments’ once more, how the Belarusians now have more than 20 dollars a month, how they wiped out thirty two gangs in Minsk and how the “healthcare is no worse than others”, which has been demonstrated by the pandemic. The experts that criticize his approach are simply wrong and those who rally against him are not keeping to the rules and therefore falling ill. The focus here is once more on the stability. The reference to his accomplishments try to convince the listeners that living in Belarus is not as oppressed as some think.

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<sup>139</sup> BBC News. “‘Za Bat’ky’ i ‘pozor’. Kak proshli Aktzii v Minske i chto skazal Lukashenka.” Uploaded August 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TySUwo7rfH8>

<sup>140</sup> Tatiana Volkova. “Lukashenka Speech Rally.”, August 16, 2020. <https://belarusfeed.com/belarus-president-lukashenko-speech-rally-16-august/>

He then moves on to the elections, saying that the elections were not rigged and only “bandits and criminals” would participate in new elections. He urges those present to not be violent and to support him, and by doing so supporting the entire country, using the phrase “If you lose Lukashenka, you will lose the first president, and it will be the beginning of the end.” This speech is an obvious attempt to arm himself against the ramifications of the 2020 elections. He makes several references to all that he has given to the Belarusian people, going as far as to say that it was thanks to him that the country is now flourishing. He is strongly invoking a sense of Belarusianness among the audience, comparing the current situation to the beginning of the 90s, while tying himself directly to the improvements that have been made since, economically and socially. Furthermore, he refers to the ‘outside threat’ quite a bit, making several comments on the willingness of neighboring countries to get involved in the situation in Belarus for their own personal gain.

This speech exemplifies the close ties of the national identity and government narrative with Lukashenka. His focus on his accomplishments and the threat of the outside enemy signify how he is in charge of most large decisions, and his strong language makes sure that people know that a second narrative will not be accepted.

#### 4.4.3 Alexander Lukashenka, 23-09-2020

On the 23rd of September 2020, Alexander Lukashenka was officially sworn in as president of Belarus.<sup>141</sup> The most striking element of the beginning of his speech is that Alexander Lukashenka chooses to talk about the president as a third person. He starts the speech by saying that “on this solemn day, the president takes an oath of allegiance to the Fatherland and the people with a passion” and he adds that “we did not just elect the president of the country – we defended our values, our peaceful life, our sovereignty and our independence.” He truly presents himself as a Belarusian in this way.

He then addresses the protests by saying that Belarus is one of the few countries where a color revolution could not succeed, as it was the choice of the Belarusians who did not want to lose the country. It was “despite the devilishly sophisticated pushes from the outside” that the country remained untouched. This is a classic example of the foreign enemy narrative that is skillfully added in a single sentence.

Lukashenka says that it was unexpectedly that the people of Belarus gained their independence, which makes it a very young independent state by world standards but that “Belarusians as a nation are no longer children.” The people chose their independence and upheld their wisdom by electing him once more.

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<sup>141</sup> Entire speech available here: “Aleksandr -Lukashenko vstupil v dolzhnost' Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus'.” *Belarus Segodnya*, September 23, 2020.  
<https://www.sb.by/articles/sluzhit-narodu-lukashenko-inauguraciya.html>

He addresses the society of Belarus, thanking the workers and stating that among his priorities will be a new society, which will include a more active promotion of socio-political initiatives. The government will work on a new constitution to improve the electoral legislation and Lukashenka is “convinced that the only formula for the survival of Belarus is a strong government, loyalty to the course and the support of the people.” Here he hints to an ongoing course, but it is unclear whether he here adheres to the increasing Belarusization or simply the legitimacy of his own government. He concludes that they themselves, “without any external participation”, will sort out their problems, referring once more to the solitude of Belarus regarding other countries.

He continues on, stating that as a “strong state, we will remain open and friendly” and that “unprecedented external pressure only hardened us”. This once more paints the idea of Belarus as an open and free nation that could be an example on the world stage. He ends the speech by stating that he will do everything to make sure the people will not regret choosing him, changing the perspective from the third to the first person.

It is noticeable that his speech is given entirely in Russian, forgoing Belarusian completely. As Lukashenka is becoming more dependent on Russia for support, this could point to a new course that would decrease the influences of Belarusization. The speech is largely focused on the promise of the future, but reveals little about the course of Belarusization in the country. The isolation of Belarus as a superior state to others, unharmed by those wanting to take advantage of it, is a frequently occurring

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 General findings

#### 5.1.1 Nationalism

The term nationalism resulted in 33 articles in total. In Belarus Segodnya, the majority of the articles consisted of interviews with experts. These experts would discuss the situation in Belarus and strongly advocate for electing Lukashenka. The articles encouraged people to think of their country and choose rationally, i.e. choosing stability over change and potential democracy. Although there are no direct appeals to the Belarusian culture, the articles try to employ the narrative of a shared culture and common sense to unite the people in favor of Lukashenka. In Narodnaya Volya, the articles were of a more varied nature. The majority of the articles discuss the elections, but they offer a more nuanced picture of the once published in Belarus Segodnya. These articles also emphasize the unity of the Belarusian people, but rather than encouraging them to rally behind Lukashenka, it conveys a message that if the people of Belarus unite, they might change the course of the country. In Radio Svaboda, half of the articles concern the elections whereas the other half concern broader topics. The articles that cover the elections are, like in Narodnaya Volya, focused on encouraging the people of Belarus to unite and critically consider who to vote for in the upcoming elections. The articles that cover cultural topics point toward an increased interest in Belarusian culture. Overall, nationalism seems to be linked to the elections rather than Belarusian

culture. In both the state-owned and in the independent news media, nationalism is used to convince people to unite and vote for the future of Belarus.

### 5.1.2 Belarusization

Belarusization resulted in a total of 23 articles. In Belarus Segodnya, half of the articles cover historical events that discuss periods of Belarusization in Belarusian history. Although these articles provide little insight to the current period of Belarusization, it does show that there is an increased interest in reviving the Belarusian culture. In Narodnaya Volya, only one article resulted from looking for the term 'belarusization', which is an article on the Belarusian flag. It likens the symbol to one of Belarusian pride, explaining its presence at the Belarusian protests and emphasizing the fact that Belarus was once independent. By far the most articles regarding the topic of Belarusization were found in Radio Svaboda. The majority of the articles directly address the ongoing Belarusization in the country, largely by discussing the decline of pro-Russian sentiments. Other major topics are international relations and Belarusian history. These topics celebrate the unique Belarusian history and encourage people to keep this focus on their native culture.

### 5.1.3 Narod Belarusi

*Narod Belarusi* resulted in 751 articles, of which 20 were considered in the analysis. In Belarus Segodnya, most of the articles concern a type of event. Several articles discuss the day of Unity between Belarus and Russia, or the Great Victory in the Great Patriotic War. The major narrative that is visible in these articles is the people of Belarus in relation to other people. The people of Belarus are considered to be a single entity, which is e.g. thanked for its assistance in the fight against the COVID-19 crisis in China or which is congratulated with its feats in the Great Patriotic War. In Narodnaya Volya, *Narod Belarusi* resulted largely in articles about Belarusian culture and its role in the protests. It creates a narrative of the people of Belarus protesting against the injustices that are continuously inflicted upon them.

### 5.1.4 Independent vs state owned newspapers

There is a clear difference in reporting of the state-owned media versus the independent media, which is to be expected. The state-owned media represent the national ideology supported by the state, whereas the independent media have more freedom in what they choose to report on. The most glaring difference is the reporting on Lukashenka as a president. The state media clearly condemn those who are protesting and published several articles meant to discourage the people from choosing for the opposition. No article in the state-owned media is, however, writing outright that Lukashenka is the only choice. The reader is reminded of the far more preferable option

of stability. The general idea that is put forward through this type of reporting is that although the idea of democracy and freedom is nice, the actual stability provided by Lukashenka is far more preferable.

Furthermore, there is a clear difference in the narrative regarding certain topics. This can be seen from the different results that arise from the same search term. Nationalism is, for example, associated with the elections only in the state-owned newspaper, whereas it results in a more varied selection in the independent newspapers. As for Belarusization, in the state-owned newspaper, it is represented as a cultural thing of the past, whereas it is represented as a contemporary cultural phenomenon in the independent newspapers. Narod Belarusi shows the biggest difference. The term results mostly in articles about foreign policy and Belarus in relation to other countries in Belarus Segodnya. In Narodnaya Volya, the term results largely in articles about Belarusian culture. The state-owned media use the term to create this idea of the Belarusian people against a foreign enemy, whereas the independent media puts the focus on the idea of a common culture.

## 5.2 Newspapers

### 5.2.1 Language

There is little comment on the Belarusian versus Russian language debate in the Belarus Segodnya. It is, of course, important to note that the entire newspaper publishes in the Russian language. There is one article published about Sergey Lavrov commenting

on the situation in Belarus and saying that those who are currently causing the instability are calling for a break with Russian language, heavily implying that this would be a negative turn of events.

There is little mention of the Belarusian language in the independent media as well, except for one article published in Radio Svaboda, where historian Trugau discusses the increase of spoken Belarusian and the role it will play in the protests and the development of civil society. Trusau strongly argues for the link between Belarusian language and the strength of the Belarusian culture, reflected in the use of Belarusian in the protests in the country. Furthermore, Radio Svaboda published a short message on the refusal of the Brest City to become completely bilingual. This provides some nuance in the Belarusian situation, as not everyone is completely interested in a full Belarusization in the country, contrary to what some might imply.

### 5.2.2 History and culture

The topic of history comes up often in the news media. Especially in Belarus Segodnya, the subject of Belarusian history is a frequent topic of the articles. The topics are quite diverse, but the narrative is always the same: pride of Belarusian achievements. The articles repeat the official discourse, namely that it is especially the Great Patriotic War that the Belarusians played a large role in and Belarusian independence started in 1991 with the collapse of the USSR. This is also found in the emphasis of the reporting on the Victory day and the independence day. By highlighting the congratulations of other countries at these dates, extra stress is put on those days

being the glory days of Belarus. Here, the focus of the Belarusian narrative is on the history, emphasizing historic deed rather than Belarusian culture in other forms.

There are no articles in the independent newspapers that directly address historical events. Instead, the focus is directly on Belarusian cultural events. There is extensive reporting on Belarusian cultural happenings and updates on cultural events. It is difficult to establish whether there is an increase in interest in the Belarusian culture in this matter, for there is no comparative research available.

### 5.2.3 Symbols

Except for one article published about the flag in *Narodnaya Volya*, there is little mention of the Belarusian symbols throughout the articles in all the papers. The article that does come up, appears in the search term Belarusization, alluding to its important status in the advance of Belarusization. Although little is written about the flag and the state emblem, there is some visual material. The pictures that are uploaded about the protests always include people carrying around white-red-white flags and other objects in the same colors. It is noticeable that only the independent newspapers post pictures of the use of this symbol of the protests. The state-owned newspapers choose to represent the rallies in favor of Lukashenka, where people carry the red-green flag and state symbol. Since the flag is so widely used by the protestors, the importance of the Belarusian symbols are not to be underestimated.

#### 5.2.4 Foreign Policy

In the state-owned media the creation of the narrative of a foreign enemy is a frequent occurrence. The interviews with experts who discredit the (color) revolutions in other countries or with foreign officials who discuss their own negative experience with the results of civic instability always put forward the notion of foreign countries meddling in the internal affairs and causing general upheaval that had nothing but negative results. Minsk has officially labelled the protests a 'color revolution' and the Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenun has said that "color revolutions are a major international security threat".<sup>142</sup>

What becomes noticeable in the media is that Lukashenka is somewhat moving away from the anti-Russian notion that had become more widespread during the period of Soft Belarusization. Putin's statements on Belarus are featured as expert knowledge in the newspapers and there is no mention of the Russia as a possible foreign enemy. Lukashenka's focus is for Belarus to remain politically stable, largely to not endanger his own power

The Soft Belarusization included the authorities no longer referring to the West as enemies. In the period after the elections, the state media has reverted back to this narrative of the west as an enemy. This could be attributed to an attempt to unify the country, but rather against a foreign enemy than against Lukashenka.

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<sup>142</sup> George Barros. "Moscow claims Poland is the Lead Sponsor of Belarusian Protests; Minsk calls Protests a 'Color Revolution'." *Institute for the Study of War*, September 4, 2020. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep26442.pdf>

### 5.2.5 Civil Society

One of the narratives that becomes increasingly clear through the analysis is civil society and the role it plays in both the protest and in Soft Belarusization. Especially young people are often mentioned in the speeches of Lukashenka and in the news media. Whereas academic literature has not mentioned the role of the youth, it becomes increasingly clear that young people play an increasingly large role in the building of society. The president often directly blames them for any civil unrest.

They are also addressed by the independent media. As they have more access to social media and information, they are more aware of the problems and shortcomings of the regime and the country. From the articles it becomes clear that the efforts to mobilize the people are often aimed at a specific audience as well.

The president seems to recognize how the growth of civil society, aided by the increasing Belarusization of the country, has played into the unrest in the country. By introducing the narratives of the uneducated, naïve protestors in the media, there is an attempt to pit the citizens against each other. The narrative of a foreign enemy threatening Belarus is a frequent occurrence in both speeches and the media. It is therefore unsurprising that a similar tactic would be used to weaken those opposing Lukashenka.

### 5.3 Speeches

The speeches by Alexander Lukashenka show the closest connection with the reporting in Belarus Segodnya. The speeches focus on the history of Belarus too, the accomplishments of the Belarusians in the Great Patriotic war and draw on the unity of Belarus in order to strengthen his own position. There is no mention of Freedom day in the speeches.

After the elections, the speeches are given in Russian only, instead of the Belarusian-Russian mix that occurred before. In the recent years, the attempts to revive the language by speaking it publicly had been more prevalent in speeches. This can be attributed to Lukashenka either caring less about involving society with the regime, or to Lukashenka realizing he might have to rely on Putin for help if the situation remains unstable. It shows the flexibility of the regime regarding cultural policies, as compared to the rigidity of the legitimacy.

In his speeches, Lukashenka relies heavily on the narrative of a foreign enemy. Although the policy of Soft Belarusization had meant a diversification of international partners, he is now emphasizing the self-centered intentions of the neighbors.

The narrative of civil society and the role of the youth in it plays a role in the speeches as well. Lukashenka frequently refers to the corrupted youth, that has been corrupted by technology and is simply not as good as its forefathers. A lot of the

protestors are young people and the voter base of Lukashenka is established as older Belarusians.<sup>143</sup>

Overall the official government narrative seems to have let go of the Soft Belarusization in the speeches surrounding the elections. Although Lukashenka was interested in creating a better established civil society, this also led to threats to his legitimacy, therefore abandoning this narrative once more.

#### 5.4 Implications

The changes in pre- and post- election reporting show how liable the policy of Soft Belarusization was to the ideology of the government. For example, the year 2021 has been declared the 'Year of People's Unity' and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2021, Lukashenka signed a decree that specified the actions to be undertaken.<sup>144</sup> A new national holiday has been introduced: the Day of People's Unity and will be celebrated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, to symbolize the "restoration of historical justice and the reunification of the Belarusian nation that was forcibly divided in 1921 in line with the Treaty of Riga."<sup>145</sup> A new national ideology is being introduced in the country to replace the one of Soft Belarusization. This reveals how the Belarusian culture is a tool to the Belarusian government, rather than a true interest.

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<sup>143</sup> Sergei A. Mudrov. "Doomed to Fail? Why Success was Almost not an Option in the 2020 Protests in Belarus." *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* (2021): 1-12.

<sup>144</sup> "O Respublikanskom Plane Meropriyatniy po Provedeniy v 2021 Gody Goda Narodno Edinstva." Presidential Decree, February 2, 2021. Available at <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C22100064&p1=1&p5=0>

<sup>145</sup> "Day of People's Unity Established in Belarus." *BelTA*, June 7, 2021. <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/day-of-peoples-unity-established-in-belarus-140634-2021/>

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

As Lukashenka struggles to hold on to his legitimacy and support, he has reverted to old methods of doing so. There is a renewed focus on Russia as the brother and friend of Belarus, whereas the West is once again the offender out to destroy Belarus. Next to this, there is an increased focus on Soviet symbols and history to offset the narrative of the opposition. In civil society, however, there is an increased interest in the old symbols of Belarus and the Belarusian culture. The events of 2020 have thus altered the course of the Soft Belarusization policy by stimulating the mass mobilization of the population, which lead to a new form of national identity in Belarus that was untethered to the official national ideology.

The research has pointed to a new narrative in the official discourse of Belarus. Since the media analyzed were online news media, it was relatively easy to look for articles about the topic. This does, however, not provide a full picture of all news media in Belarus, as print media often reports on many more topics and would therefore also include more information about certain narratives. It would be advisable to expand on this study with more sources. Furthermore, the search for articles was done manually, which lead to the suitability of the article for content analysis being judged quickly. Not all websites were equally accessible in terms of searching through the archives. Some would not allow for time periods to be a factor, or would not display articles chronologically. Not all articles were relevant to the analysis, which sometimes lead to little useful material from certain sources.

The results do show a change in reporting in 2020. For full context, I would recommend doing a comparative study in a larger time frame. That way, one could further investigate whether the Soft Belarusization policy is visible in the news media. By doing comparative analysis, focused on the amount of certain articles or topics, rather than content analysis, one could see if there is a definite increase in interest in Belarusian culture visible in news media.

Overall, a parallel in the development of a Belarusian national identity in the 1920s and in the 2010s can be seen. In both cases, the development got a boost from the regime in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the government by creating goodwill among the population.

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