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Society in the authoritarian discourse: The case of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus

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Abstract

In August 2020, the presidential election took place in Belarus, followed by unprecedented mass protests due to apparent election fraud. Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the country's long-term authoritarian leader, faced the biggest electoral challenge since his first election in 1994. This article analyzes his official rhetoric during the campaign and after the election focusing on the image of the society. For this purpose, discourse-historical approach is applied to understand his political vision of the developments in Belarus and to explore changes in his rhetoric caused by the unprecedented challenge to his power. The research demonstrates that Lukashenka acts as a classical authoritarian ruler with respective discursive strategies. The text shows that he adopted the imaginary role of Belarus's strict father, who has assumed full responsibility for its fate and offensively reacts to every challenger of this role. It also reveals that Lukashenka sees his personal contract with the Belarusian society as a stable and durable instrument that does not require changes and *per se* implies his personal engagement as a party to it. Finally, the analysis of Lukashenka's rhetoric in 2020 suggests that a voluntary transition of power in Belarus remains rather wishful thinking.

Keywords: Belarus, authoritarian regime, elections, political communication, hegemonic discourse

1 Introduction

This article analyzes the image of the Belarusian society in the official rhetoric of Aliaksandr Lukashenka during the 2020 electoral campaign and the post-election period. The protests were an attempt to terminate the social contract between Lukashenka and the society which have existed in Belarus since 1994. Social contract is a central concept of the political legitimacy because it implies the society's consent to temporarily cede its sovereignty to the leader 'on the basis of understandings and expectations of competence and capacity' (Renshon, 1992, p. 577). Yet, the notion 'contract' also suggests that its parties are bound by enforceable

mutual obligations. Within this patronal contractual relationship, Lukashenka embraced the role of the personal guarantor of the country's security, stability and development and in exchanged required the society's full subordination. Lukashenka's official rhetoric accompanied by brutal use of violence demonstrated a clear border between 'us' (those ready to continue the patronal social contract) and 'them' (those who wished to discontinue it). The post-electoral developments in Belarus demonstrated the irreversibility of this shift due to the repeating alienation pattern determined by the authorities' unwillingness to maintain a dialogue with the protesters. Based on the analysis of Lukashenka's official rhetoric, this text identifies his main thematic discourse paradigms for further elaboration. First, his verbal attacks against the white-red-white flag as the visual symbol and the color spectrum of the 2020 protests were an element of his regime protection because the official red-green flag symbolizes his political victories and visually embodies the social contract. Second, Lukashenka's rhetoric about the lack of necessary presidential competences among his contenders was an evidence of his unwillingness to change the social contract on his part, as it emphasized his irreplaceability. Third, Lukashenka's deliberately offensive statements towards the protesters was a strategy that signified his reluctance to accept any changes of the social contract on the society's part.

The current contour of things in Belarus comprises a combination of the country's Soviet legacy and its political system, for over a quarter of a century associated with Lukashenka's personality (Kascian, 2018, p. 87). The former is linked with a mere allegation of the nation's weak identity and the fact of the country's participation in several integration initiatives led by Russia. Belarus is frequently designated as a 'denationalized nation' (Marples, 1999), 'a perpetual borderland' (Savchenko, 2009), or 'the last Soviet republic' (Parker, 2007) that faces an internal 'struggle over [its divided] identity' (Bekus, 2010). The latter involves a common perception of Belarus as Europe's last dictatorship (Bennet, 2011; Wilson, 2011) characterized by consistent abuses of human rights, electoral frauds, and repressions against political opposition.

Political commentators agree about the authoritarian and populist character of Lukashenka's regime. Yet, like other academic studies (Ezrow & Frantz, 2011, p. XIV) on the non-democratic regimes, this paper uses the notions of authoritarianism, dictatorship, autocracy, and similar terms in the Belarusian context interchangeably. Lukashenka's regime 'in particular derives its legitimacy from maintaining a Soviet-style welfare state' and tries to sustain it 'in a rapidly changing external environment' (Fritz, 2007, pp. 103, 212). His populism has *per se* been defensive because it was placed in 'a quite unfavourable international environment, which regards it as an evil deviation from normal post-communist transitions' (Matsuzato, 2004, p. 240). That is why his regime had to constantly prove the viability of its socio-economic model in comparison with Belarus's neighbors. The official propaganda started exploiting the concept of national unity and welfare state embodied in a series of inclusive slogans, such as 'For a strong and prosperous Belarus' (Belarusian: *Za mocnuju i kvitniejučuju Bielaruś*) or 'The state for the people' (Belarusian: *Dziaržava dlia naroda*).[1]

[1] Belarusian People's Congress. *Belarus.by: Official website of the Republic of Belarus*, n.d., https://www.belarus.by/en/government/all-belarusian-peoples-congress/. Accessed: 13-01-2021.

A more overarching slogan, 'For Belarus' (Belarusian: *Za Bielaruś*), has been materialized in the numerous billboards placed throughout this country in the attempt to deliver 'a strong message of the population's unity behind the idea of the Belarusian state' led by Lukashenka (Leshchenko, 2008, p. 1424).

The assessments of Lukashenka's personality fall into the 'range between dismissive and stridently negative to approvingly unctuous' (Ioffe, 2014, p. 156). During his quarter-century rule, Lukashenka embraced the role of Belarus's 'father' (Belarusian: *baćka*), and the country 'rests its stability and future on the relationship – it is often referred to as a contract – between the president and the people' (Marples, 2014, p. 17). Within this patronal relationship, Lukashenka acts as a strict father who provides immature and feminized Belarusian society with all its needs in exchange for its full subordination. Lukashenka perceives Belarus as a society incapable of making its own decisions and demands not to question 'the genuineness of his good intentions' (Brzozowska, 2007, p. 194). It denotes Lukashenka as an example of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity, as his endeavors are 'intensely focused on accumulating power for domination' (Martín, 2020, p. 227). Moreover, behavioral patterns of an authoritarian politician imply a rejection of the democratic rules of the game, denial of the opponents' legitimacy, toleration or even encouragement of violence, and willingness to abridge the opponents' civil liberties (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 18–19). The political system in Belarus can be described as the single-pyramid patronalistic structure with the elections as a tool to 'generate incentives for other networks in society to coordinate around [the presidential] authority, thereby underpinning single-pyramid politics' (Hale, 2015, p. 73). Under Lukashenka, Belarus never had free and fair elections[2], while all electoral campaigns were an imitation of democracy rather than the real struggle for power (Bedford, 2016, pp. 390–391). Until the 2020 election, there was an overall consensus among commentators about Lukashenka's popularity among Belarus's population that would secure his victory even in a free and fair election (McAllister & White, 2016, p. 361).

The fraudulent presidential election on 9 August 2020 and its aftermath significantly changed the political situation in Belarus. It posed a serious threat to Lukashenka's power to the extent he had never faced before. Being challenged, Lukashenka changed his rhetoric towards more radical statements and sanctioned brutal use of power against the protesters accompanied by persecution of political opponents. Fitted in the 'us vs. them' dichotomy, they were aimed at the protection of the political system created during his rule, and insulting and exclusion those who oppose him as a leader.

This article is a case study that focuses on one specific election in one country. Every election is *per se* unique, as it involves different combinations of contenders, issues at stake, and voters' responsiveness towards the candidates and their agendas (Guber, 1997, p. VII). Additionally, none of Lukashenka's contenders in the 2020 election had previous experience in running for presidency. Combined with the unprecedented political developments in Belarus during and after the election, it also explains the study's focus on Lukashenka's rhetoric starting only from the beginning of the official electoral campaign. Studies on the recent de-democratization patterns in Hungary and Poland conclude that the cases of these two countries are somewhat extreme to be representative for portraying the entire region of

[2] Urgent need for electoral reform in Belarus. Resolution 2371 (2021). *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*. April 21, https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29170/html Accessed: 25-04-2021.

East-Central Europe (Enyedi, 2020, p. 364). This approach could be extended to Belarus under Lukashenka, as his practices, rhetoric, and agendas are somewhat extreme in a wider regional context.

The text neither attempts to understand the political regime in Belarus, nor to explain it. Lukashenka's logic cannot be evaluated within the framework of a democratic political system because it was crucial for him to keep the previous social contract between him and the people unchanged. Thus, it focuses on Lukashenka's rhetoric based on the premise that 'communication is utilized by political actors as a means to achieve their goals' (Sheafer et al., 2014, p. 211). The structure of the text is designed accordingly. After a brief description of the research design, the image of the Belarusian society in Lukashenka's rhetoric is analyzed in the empirical part to elaborate the three above-mentioned main thematic discourse paradigms.

2 Research design and data selection

The research model involved the analysis of Lukashenka's public statements and addresses available at the section 'President' of the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA) website, the state-run company that serves as the official news agency of the Republic of Belarus.[3] Discourse–historical approach (DHA) was applied to process the relevant data. The grounds behind this choice are twofold. First, DHA is based on the principle of triangulation and 'tak[es] a whole range of empirical observations, theories and methods as well as background information into account' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). Being issue-focused, it addresses distinctive features of the specific society and has 'power' among its central concepts to investigate relationships of the major actors within the existing social contract. Second, DHA's triangularity rests upon the concept of 'context' which brings together textual, intertextual, social, and historical levels of discourse (ibid., p. 93). The textual level enables the identification of the relevant contents, strategies, and forms of realization. Constructive strategies are aimed to emphasize unity and at the same time draw the lines between 'us' and 'them' by ascribing specific characteristics to the social actors and explaining the shifts of internal borders within society (Wodak, 2006, pp. 112–113). The role of *topoi* is to bring together an argument with the targeted conclusions, exploiting such issues as a threat, authority, or history. Means of realization refer to the rhetorical content used to fill in the *topoi*. It includes such devices as positive and negative attributions or metaphors aimed to emphasize the categorization and highlight the divisive lines between different segments of society. The intertextual level addresses the connection between different texts by involving its main actors, specific events, or topics covered. the social level merely refers to the events and similar contexts where the discourse is transmitted, whereas the historical level produces the contextual links to the historical developments.

In the context of the developments around the 2020 election in Belarus, the DHA enables analyzing how 'linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations

[3] All Lukashenka's quotations related to the 2020 election come from the English version of the BelTA website (https://eng.belta.by). Specific references are omitted to spare space.

of power' treating the language as 'a means to gain and maintain power by the use 'powerful' people make of it' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88–89). Second, DHA's triangularity is beneficial for the analysis of the hegemonic discourse of the single-pyramid regime because of its strong focus 'on the historical dimension of institutions and situational frames' (Boukala, 2019, p. 88). Following this logic, this text operated within the two-level model summarized by Krzyżanowski (2010, p. 81–89). Its entry level comprised an inductive analysis of Lukashenka's speeches to identify the main thematic discourse paradigms for their further elaboration. It was followed by the in-depth analysis of the specific units of his speech within these paradigms focusing on Lukashenka's discursive strategies in ensuring '*positive Self* and *negative Other* presentation' (Wodak & Boukala, 2014, p. 179) with identification of the *topoi* he employed to back his authority.

The data selection was determined by the factor of time. In the single-pyramid regimes, the presidential election is rather a political stage play and not a contested event. The main Lukashenka's goal was to deliver a message about his power and operability of the current social contract to renew it by the fact of election. At the same time, a fraudulent election can empower people, because '[i]f falsification flies blatantly in the face of public opinion, individual voters will be more willing to take to the streets in outrage' (Hale, 2015, p. 73). Hence, it is the content of the electoral campaign that determines the society's demands and capacities to revise or terminate the existing social contract with the authoritarian ruler. The official electoral campaign started 80 days before the election with the nomination of presidential candidates. During this period, the potential contenders became known to the public and electoral campaigning took place. As the nomination period started on 21 May 2020, this date is a starting point for the data analysis. The election day on 9 August served as a game-changer that determined the capacities of Lukashenka's regime. Before this date, the regime fully controlled the situation, whereas it started facing challenges after the preliminary election results were announced and its official rhetoric was a reaction to these processes. The final date of the analysis was 31 December that wrapped up all events of 2020. Its choice was determined by the contents of Lukashenka's New Year address in which he suggested to remember the lessons of 2020, 'turn this page and start writing a new chapter of independent Belarus together'.

Three main thematic paradigms were identified[4] shaped by the context of the long-established patronal contract between Lukashenka and the society. Since the social contract was put at stake, the special focus was made on the *topos* of competence in Lukashenka's speeches. As Guriev and Treisman (2015, pp. 2–3) observe, authoritarian regimes want to 'convince citizens of their competence to govern' because '[i]f enough citizens infer [...] that the incumbent is incompetent, they rise up and overthrow him in a revolution'. Bunce and Wolchik (2010, p. 74) demonstrate that authoritarianism's effective functioning depends on the ability to persuade the society that the regime's contenders are 'both incompetent and

[4] The research model identified the fourth thematic paradigm designated as the role of foreign actors vis-a-vis imaginary or real challenges and threats for Belarus. It deserves a special article with substantial analysis of Belarus's foreign policy and alliances, whereas this text is focused on the country's domestic developments and interactions within its society. Although the foreign, and particularly Russia's (Denisenko, 2020), factors are important for the assessment of the post-electoral situation in Belarus, the actual effect of the foreign states on the developments within the Belarusian society is limited.

compromised'. In other words, this *topos* seems crucial for understanding Lukashenka's strategies aimed at keeping the social contract between him and the Belarusian society unchanged and countering the attempts of the protesters to discontinue it.

3 Symbols as a visual manifestation of the social contract

The white-red-white flag became the visible symbol and the color spectrum of the 2020 protests aimed at the revision or termination of the social contract between Lukashenka and society. It was used as the official symbol of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918, and in 1991–1995 served as the flag of the Republic of Belarus, being replaced with a Soviet-like red-green flag as a result of a controversial referendum initiated by Lukashenka (Silitski & Zaprudnik, 2010, pp. 209–210). An important element of the Belarusian national identity, the white-red-white flag has been used since 1995 as a visual symbol of struggle against Lukashenka's regime.

In his post-electoral speeches, Lukashenka appealed to the results of the 1995 referendum claiming that the current symbols were supported by 'the nation' or 'an overwhelming majority [of the population].' He used the *topoi* of strong popular support and his personal authority to remind the population about that referendum as a mechanism for approval of the existing social contract. In his speech, he exploited a binary formula to achieve a targeted conclusion. First, he underlined that it was him who immediately after his first election as the president put the choice of the state symbols to the referendum. Then, he excluded any personal responsibility for the people's choice with the phrase 'you [i.e. the people] cannot blame me for it.' These *topoi* also demonstrate Lukashenka's strategy to emphasize positive self as the leader who caters the society's needs.

Another part of his strategy was the portrayal of the negative other. Before the election, Lukashenka mentioned the white-red-white flag only as an attribute of the alternative candidates who used it at their rallying points. After the election, Lukashenka's rhetoric about the white-red-white flag changed significantly, as he repeatedly blackmailed it as 'collaborationist', '(pro-)fascist' symbol that was used by the Belarusian Nazi collaborators during WWII to march around the cities and accompany Hitler's portraits. This peculiar enmity towards the white-red-white flag is nothing new for Lukashenka. During the 1995 referendum campaign, Lukashenka used similar rhetoric about the connection of the white-red-white flag with the Nazi collaborators to gain popular support in favor of the alteration of the state symbols (Silitski & Zaprudnik, 2010, p. 35). After the 2020 election, Lukashenka reminded that the white-red-white flag became the official symbol of independent Belarus because the 'nationalists had lobbied for [it]' and the parliamentary communist majority 'accepted it under pressure' of their nationalistic fellow MPs. He precariously claimed that '[a] surge of extreme nationalistic movements had emerged in Belarus in the wake of the [1986] Chernobyl catastrophe,' and accused nationalism of bringing 'a lot of sorrow to the [post-Soviet] nations, particularly Belarusians.' To strengthen his pre- and post-electoral argumentation, Lukashenka repeatedly contrasted his rule to the political, social, and economic situation in Belarus before his first election back in 1994, emphasizing his competence, necessity, and efficiency for the country. He compared his accomplishments with the situation in the early 1990s. In the post-Soviet political slang, this period is labeled as 'the roaring nineties' (Russian: *likhie devianostye*) with 'both negative and positive connotations

at the same time' (Gel'man et al., 2014, p. 87). The former approach emphasizes the economic inequality, poverty, and dismantlement of the Soviet welfare system, while the latter focuses on the urgent need for economic reforms and democratic changes. Lukashenka consistently presented himself as a person who was asked 'to pull people back from the brink' and was competent enough to subsequently built a sovereign independent country with 'an effective model of a social state that helps defend national interests.' Lukashenka's rhetoric throughout the 2020 electoral campaign and after the election extensively exploited the *topoi* of fear and insecurity caused by economic deterioration and political instability by using such grammatical structures as 'we will never get back to that again,' 'I do not want to return to this time,' or 'the return to the wild 1990s is out of the question.'

To highlight the divisive lines between 'us' and 'them', Lukashenka filled his speeches with derogatory or pejorative denotations that primarily targeted Belarusian nationalism. For instance, he used the form *nacmieny* (i.e. persons belonging to national minorities, Belarusian: *nacyjanaĺnyja mienšasci*) to designate the Belarusian nationalists and accuse them of turning the country into shreds. The BelTA translated this term as 'nationalists'. The term *nacmieny* has clear derogatory connotations in the Soviet and post-Soviet political slang (Shumsky, 2002, p. 159), and Lukashenka put it in the wrong use within the Belarusian context. Thus, Lukashenka tried to demonstrate his disdain towards his political opponents and emphasize their numerical inferiority and incompetence to attract public support and offer any vision of the country's constructive development. Lukashenka's mythomania around the white-red-white flag became an essential element in the campaign for discrediting his current opponents by portraying them as the ideological successors of the Nazi collaborators and connecting them with his 'nationalist' political rivals from the early 1990s. In contrast, Lukashenka designated himself as 'a calm person, who is no nationalist but a complete internationalist.'

The usage of the *topoi* of strong popular support and his personal authority in Lukashenka's rhetoric was aimed at emphasizing his positive self, whilst the *topoi* of fear and insecurity served as tools to depict the negative others. The derogatory denotations were used by him to emphasize the divisive line and highlight the resiliency and effectiveness of the social contract he offered to the Belarusian society. The centrality of the white-red-white flag for the visual manifestation of the protests triggered the increase of Lukashenka's verbal attacks against it after the election. As a symbol of those who wanted to revise or terminate the existing social contract between Lukashenka and the Belarusian society, the white-red-white flag embodies a threat to Lukashenka's personality as a paternalistic leader whereas all identity-related issues are secondary. In contrast, the official red-green flag symbolizes his political victories over his rivals in the mid-1990s followed by the celebration of the current social contract in the Belarusian society, and the subsequent formation of the country's state machinery centered around Lukashenka.

4 The incompetent others: Lukashenka's depiction of political contenders

As Hale (2014, p. 75) observes, 'much of public politics in patronalistic societies with contested elections is about creating both real popularity and, critically, the *impression* of popularity.' Whether fair or manipulated, elections are important for the authoritarian leaders as a symbolic tool that renews their contracts with the societies. Yet, the context of each election in

the single-pyramid regimes involves different need for and the scope of manipulation caused by the combination of contenders and the main issues at stake. These specifics also determine the discourse of the patronal leaders who use the election to renew their popular mandates.

In the 2020 election, none of Lukashenka's actual or potential rivals had previous experience to run for the presidency. This factor predetermined Lukashenka's focus on the *topoi* of competences and personal qualities required for the country's leader. They were supplemented by the additional *topoi* subject to the candidate's professional background and gender. His discursive strategies were focused on portraying the negative others, while means of their realization were personalized depending on the specific rival.

Viktar Babaryka and Valery Tsapkala were well-known public figures in Belarus. Babaryka was the banker and philanthropist, while Tsapkala was former Lukashenka's aide, diplomat, and chairman of a hi-tech park. As for Babaryka, the situation was significantly dominated by the investigation in the criminal case involving Belgazprombank top executives, including himself. On 10 June, Lukashenka instructed the prosecutor general and other agencies to inspect 'these potbellied bourgeois' to bring the country's private businesses 'to their senses'. An allusion to Babaryka's body type was guessable in this statement but without direct references to his personality. Lukashenka also underlined that Babaryka and his entourage 'are not a source of danger or fear' and emphasizing that 'a thief belongs to prison'. Just before the election, Lukashenka accused Babaryka of planning to go into politics just to become a political prisoner and labeled his qualities as 'no president material'. When inquired about rumors on the possible Babaryka's appointment as the country's prime minister before the election, Lukashenka assured that he never made this offer and instantly counterattacked by asking '[w]hat kind of experience does he have to become prime minister?' Lukashenka occasionally demonstrated his disdain towards Babaryka by avoiding mentioning his name and referring to him as to 'a [certain] banker' or mockingly calling him 'a great philanthropist indeed'. Thus, the linguistic content of Lukashenka's statements about Babaryka was aimed to portray him as an incompetent person with a bad professional record who lacks both personal qualities and professional experience to make it to the country's upper post. Lukashenka also exploited the *topos* of corruption underlining Babaryka's dishonesty and claiming his own omniscience with manifold options to control his contenders.

Lukashenka' rhetoric about his former aide Tsapkala very similar, though more personalized. Lukashenka called him 'a sly one' who 'doesn't say why the president fired him'. This assessment dealt with the alleged Tsapkala's lack of honesty to disclose full information about his previous professional activities. It also implied Lukashenka's confidence in having the situation under control embodied in the phrase '[i]f we have to, we will tell [the truth about Tsapkala's past] but we don't want to indulge in smear campaigns.' Lukashenka depicted Tsapkala's professional competencies in livestock-raising terms, claiming that '[i]f a boar is like this person, there will be stillborn piglets.' After the election, Lukashenka underlined that the main purpose of Tsapkala's run for the presidency, as designed by 'foreign strategists,' was aimed at 'sowing dissent among the government elite' by testing their loyalty towards Lukashenka.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenka's main contender, had never been in the public eye before the 2020 election. She decided to run for the presidency because her husband, videoblogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski was detained and denied registration as a candidate. She was rather an accidental candidate. This predetermined the content of the linguistic means of realization used by Lukashenka to portray her. Before the election, Lukashenka spoke

about her as a victim of circumstances and a laughingstock. On 29 May, Lukashenka accused Tsikhanouski of being 'root[ed] for his wife' and emphasized that nobody in Belarus would vote for her. On 16 July, after Babaryka and Tsapkala were denied registration as candidates, their campaign teams joined their forces with Tsikhanouskaya's team. This meant substantial changes in the context of the electoral campaign because Lukashenka was challenged by the electoral team led by three women, namely Tsikhanouskaya flanked by Maryia Kalesnikava (director of Babaryka's team) and Veranika Tsapkala (Valery Tsapkala's wife and director of his team). This fact partially resulted in the change of Lukashenka's rhetoric about Tsikhanouskaya. Just before the election, Lukashenka described them as 'three poor girls' who 'do not understand what they read' and are used by those who want to destabilize the situation in the country. Lukashenka felt sorry for Tsikhanouskaya as the person who 'is simply used' by the people behind the joined electoral team. Lukashenka's post-electoral rhetoric about Tsikhanouskaya and her team largely remained the same. On the next day after the election, he emotionally exclaimed that '[t]hese sheep […] have no idea what one wants from them.' After Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave Belarus on 11 August, Lukashenka continued to call her 'a normal woman [who] loves her children' and emphasized that 'she has been thrown out into this futile fight, and today she is treading water'. In post-electoral Lukashenka's messages, Tsikhanouskaya was depicted as a person who has consistently been used by the foreign 'centers of power' as a sort of 'a female Belarusian Guaidó', by the analogy with the Venezuelan example. Lukashenka claimed that Tsikhanouskaya was about to become 'a sacred sacrifice' and it was he who saved her from this hard luck. Lukashenka viewed her as a person 'who is doing everything to damage Belarus now' and underlined that he would not discuss anything with her. She became the subject of cynical jokes publicly made by Lukashenka. In November, when Lukashenka met Tsikhanouski at the detention facility, the latter reportedly asked him when Lukashenka could release him. Lukashenka answered that 'your president [his wife, Sviatlana] is in Lithuania' and underlined that 'everybody [who attended this meeting] started laughing' after this phrase. The linguistic content of Lukashenka's statements about Tsikhanouskaya's depicts her as a prey to circumstances and simultaneously holds her up for public derision to stress her incompetence and rawness as a public figure. Lukashenka also articulated the *topos* of patriarchy to emphasize Tsikhanouskaya's inability to bear full responsibility for her own actions.

The analysis demonstrates that Lukashenka's rhetoric about his contenders exploited the *topoi* of president's competences and personal qualities required for the country's leader. The discourse was adjusted to the specific contenders and aimed to reveal them as the negative others. The topos of corruption was used against the male contenders, Babaryka and Tsapkala. The *topos* of patriarchy was targeted against Tsikhanouskaya based on her gender and background. The goal of this strategy was to demonstrate Lukashenka's irreplaceability and hegemonic power though negative portrayal of the political alternatives being incapable to inherit his role as a party to the contract with the Belarusian society. This indirect presentation of positive self confirms Lukashenka's unwillingness to change the social contract on his part.

5 Lukashenka's portrayal of the Belarusian electorate

The role of a strict *baćka* embraced by Lukashenka under his contract with the Belarusian society implies two elements necessary for the hegemonic patronal control. The first one is

the ability to designate and neutralize 'them', i.e. those segments of the who demand the revision or termination of the existing social contract. The second one is his own interpretation of the social contract and the vision of society's role in it. This section analyzes Lukashenka's discourse related to these elements.

While designating 'them', Lukashenka spoke about the opposition supporters as essentially the same people whose numbers had not changed. He also argued that 'no new protest movement has emerged' as this process 'takes years'. After the election, Lukashenka's rhetoric exploited two *topoi*. The first one was the foreign entrenchment with the main message about the protests being manipulated by some foreign masterminds that could violate the country's sovereignty and even territorial integrity. His discoursed strategies were consistently focused on the portrayal of the negative other by using derogatory or pejorative denotations and attributions. They also promoted his positive self as a person who looks after society and knows how to cater to all its needs.

In Lukashenka's view, 'even if they [his opponents] calm down today, they will crawl like rats out of their holes some time later.' Later, he emphasized that '*zmahary* [Belarusian: fighters] living abroad keep inventing new tricks against the Belarusian state'. The English version of the BelTA website used this notion without translation or explanation. In the Belarusian propaganda slang, the notion *zmahary* refers to a wide range of Lukashenka's opponents typically affiliated with pro-democratic political or civil organizations. He underlined that the core of the most active protesters comprised 'people with the [decent] criminal past and currently unemployed people.' He claimed that many protesters 'were under the influence of alcohol or drugs.' In November 2020, Lukashenka argued that 'most of those coming to the streets earn big money.' Lukashenka argued that the way of life, needs, and behavior patterns of these groups differ from those of common people. He also underlined the numerical inferiority of the protesters vis-a-vis an imaginary silent majority. To stand in stark contrast to his contenders and emphasize his positive self as a leader, Lukashenka argued that people 'say [that Belarus before the election] was the country they wanted to live in, and it will always be so as long as I am President.' In his view, Belarus's efficient development without revolutions could be ensured only if three conditions are met, namely 'if people stay united, the government remains strong and the social and political system is stable.' He presented himself as the only competent person who could ensure it, being a central element of this architecture.

Equally important in Lukashenka's discourse was the designation of the victims of the opposition's endeavors to emphasize the immaturity of the Belarusian society to make its own decisions and its vulnerability before the external influences. Lukashenka called the protesters 'sheep […who] do not understand what they are doing' and promised to 'deal with every one of those who were provoking and pushing young people into the streets.' He argued that some segments of society, particularly young people, could be easily influenced. Lukashenka tried to portray the situation, not as a mass conscious movement, but as manipulation of his contenders and their foreign allies against an immature Belarusian society. His message to the public was to 'use your head until it is too late, otherwise, others will think for you.'

His interpretation of the social contract can be exemplified by the contrast between his hegemonic patriarchal masculinity and the feminized nature of the Belarusian society. He used the *topos* of his personal authority to demonstrate to the population that Belarus needs

a male president who is strong and competent enough to take care of the immature and vulnerable society. In late May, Lukashenka expressed his absolute certitude that the 2020 election would result in the election of a male president. He specified that the society 'is not ready to vote for a woman' while the Constitution 'is not suitable for a woman' because it 'gives strong authority to the president'. To back his argument, he brought a domestic and a foreign example. He argued that Natallia Kachanava, Chairwoman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly and former head of the Presidential Administration, would fail to win the election, 'although she is a hard-boiled, ready president already.' Lukashenka's words about Kachanava imply that he could not see any real political contender among Belarusian women whatsoever. He also exemplified the case of Dalia Grybauskaitė, Lithuania's president from 2009 to 2019, who 'came, smiled, sat a bit and went away' as 'she was not responsible for anything because it is a parliamentary republic over there,' though scholars classify Lithuania as a semi-presidential democracy (Raunio & Sedelius, 2020). He used these contrasts to underline his irreplaceability for Belarus's political system. Lukashenka's inaccuracy in the description of Lithuania's political system serves as a manifestation of his mythomaniac populism when the reliability and credibility of arguments are irrelevant for his discourse strategies.

Lukashenka's words about the inability of a woman to hold office as Belarus's president had a two-fold effect. First, these statements were counted against him in the situation when he was challenged by an alliance personified by three independent and confident women – Tsikhanouskaya, Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala. However, Lukashenka still did not perceive them as independent politicians with their agendas, as he called them 'three poor girls' used by those who want to overthrow the stability in the country. This attitude implicitly suggested that Lukashenka did not treat them seriously as real challengers to his power, being convinced that a feminized society requires a patriarchal president. Second, he appropriated the women's factor for his benefit to emphasize his positive self. Thus, he demonstrated 'his ability to identify with the mood of the general public' (Ioffe 2014, p. 126). Less than a week before the election, Lukashenka described Belarus in the likeness of a woman as 'a clean and light, honest and beautiful, hardworking, a bit naive, and slightly vulnerable country,' emphasizing that 'you don't give away your beloved'. On 17 September, during the state-sponsored women's forum, Lukashenka nearly repeated this emotional message saying that '[w]e will not part with Belarus' because '[we] love it and loved ones are not to be parted with!' Later, he also labeled himself as a 'women's president' claiming support of the female electorate, recalling that he was brought up by a single mother, and accusing the opponents of misinterpreting his words about women's inability to be president in Belarus. By portraying Belarus in the likeness of a beloved woman, Lukashenka tried to emphasize his necessity and centrality for its protection and prosperous development vis-a-vis his contenders.

The above evidence demonstrates that Lukashenka's offensive statements towards the protesters embodied his discursive strategies that signified the relationship within the social contract between Lukashenka and society. Lukashenka's designation of the protesters as people with different from the majority way of life and behavior patterns present them as negative others whose goal was to terminate his social contract and deteriorate the country. Yet, Lukashenka's designation of victims of these endeavors emphasizes the *topos* of the foreign entrenchment against an immature and vulnerable society that allegedly requires Lukashenka as a strict father to ensure its efficient development. The debate around the

women's factor in the election was centered around the *topos* of Lukashenka's personal authority. Besides, it demonstrated his vision of the parties of the social contract in Belarus that, in his view, shall comprise a hegemonic patriarchal president who, as a strict father, takes care of a feminized Belarusian society.

6 Conclusion

The 2020 presidential election in Belarus and its aftermath formed a series of unprecedented events in Belarus's recent history, as they posed the biggest threat to the long-standing social contract between president Lukashenka and the Belarusian society. Within this relationship, Lukashenka embraced the role of a strict patriarchal father who effectively exercises his personal hegemonic control over the immature, vulnerable, and feminized Belarusian society. By doing so, Lukashenka expresses his masculinity, manifests his irreplaceability, and conveys his omniscience about society's needs and demands.

As the article demonstrated, Lukashenka's rhetoric during the 2020 election and its aftermath provided substantial evidence about him as a classical authoritarian ruler with respective and well-developed discursive strategies. being capable to swiftly identify and react to the private nuisances, and act as per wider public's mood.

His disdain towards the white-red-white flag was merely caused by its role as a visual color spectrum of the protests that posed a threat to the official red-green flag that, in Lukashenka's view, was a symbol of his personal political victories and the current social contract. His discursive strategy employed the *topoi* of strong popular support and his personal authority to emphasize positive self by reminding the population about the popular mandate it gave to Lukashenka. Those who want to dismantle the social contract were depicted through the *topoi* of fear and insecurity served filled with diverse derogatory denotations to emphasize Lukashenka's personal effectiveness as a party to the current social contract he offered to the Belarusian society. Lukashenka's rhetoric about his contenders was dominated by the *topoi* of competences and personal qualities necessary to act as Belarus's president with the discursive strategy aimed at portraying the negative others to discredit and disdain them. Adjusted to specific contenders, his discourse distinguished the female and male candidates. Lukashenka felt more danger from his male contenders, Babaryka and Tsapkala, as they could potentially challenge his position as an omniscient strict father. He employed an additional *topos* of corruption against them to demonstrate manifold options to control the situation. Lukashenka's attitude towards female contender Tsikhanouskaya was patriarchal, if not chauvinistic, as he perceives her not as real opponents but as a puppet of a third power, 'sheep,' and victim of circumstances.

While his contenders were depicted as persons as the persons incapable to inherit Lukashenka's role as a party to the contract with the Belarusian society, the core of the discontented electorate was depicted as the people with different behavior patterns and ways of life to contrast them from the silent majority and create an impression of Lukashenka's popular support. In contrast to these negative others, Lukashenka's portrayal of his positive self was achieved through the *topos* of foreign entrenchment to deteriorate an immature and vulnerable Belarusian society. To back this, he also extensively exploited the women's factor to emphasize the *topos* of his personal authority. By doing so, Lukashenka clearly demonstrated his unwillingness to change the social contract between him and the Belarusian

society which he depicted in the likeness of a beautiful, somewhat naive, and vulnerable woman. By taking on this task, Lukashenka assumed full and unlimited responsibility for everything that happens in the country. He offensively responded to every attempt to challenge this role by the others which resonated with his phrase 'you don't give away your beloved.'

This article demonstrated Lukashenka's vision of Belarus's political reality. It implied that all post-electoral debates about the peaceful and voluntary transition of power were wishful thinking due to his unwillingness to change the social contract and renounce the role of the country's strict father. This study suggested at least two topics for additional research. The first one includes the role of foreign actors vis-a-vis imaginary or real challenges and threats for Belarus, identified as the fourth thematic paradigm but omitted in this text. The second one brings domestic and foreign issues together, as it suggests the analysis of the relative irrelevance of the geopolitical factors on Belarus's domestic developments.

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