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Soft Belarusianisation. The ideology of Belarus in the era of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

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Over the past three years, a distinct change has become visible in the ideological discourse of the government of Belarus. To an increasing degree, the state ideology is focusing on strengthening national identity, emphasising the divergence of Belarus's interests from those of Russia, and re-examining the historical narration in a direction which emphasises the distinctiveness of the history of Belarus from that of Russia. Above all, the government has changed its attitude towards the Belarusian language and culture. A campaign promoting the Belarusian language is being carried out on a large scale – under the auspices of state ideologues. The government has also become involved in the promotion of vyshyvanka, traditional, embroidered Belarusian clothes and their ornamentation. This allows us to talk about a process of 'soft Belarusianisation'. Articles criticising Kremlin policy have begun to appear fairly regularly in the government media. Official representatives of the authorities, while not going so far as to promote the idea of friendship with the West, no longer refer to it using the rhetoric of the 'enemy', as was previously the case.

This modification of ideological discourse probably means that the regime is looking for new ways to arrange its relationships, both with its own society and with the countries of the West. This does not mean, however, that the authorities are ready for systemic changes. The role of the President and the concept of the state remain unaltered in ideological discourse; there is still no tripartite division of power, and civil society's room for manoeuvre remains narrow.

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Belarusian ideology before Russia's annexation of Crimea

The ideology of the Belarusian state has never been a coherent system with a clearly defined message, although it is possible to highlight some elements that have predominated for more than ten years in this discourse, since it was institutionalised in 2003.

First, the regime's ideology spent a long time fighting against the version of the national idea which emphasised the Belarusian language and took a critical approach to the Soviet and Russian imperial eras in the history of Belarus. The state ideologues promoted a version of the national idea in which the central element was the modern Belarusian state, which owed its existence to Bolshevik power. As during the existence of the BSSR, the Belarusian language was not seen as an important element in the foundation of the state. During this period, the regime's natural ideological allies were the Slavophiles and that part of the Communists who drew upon the heritage of the Communist Party of the BSSR.

A light alteration of the attitude to the national idea in the government's discourse had already begun a few years before the annexation of Crimea.

Secondly, a belief predominated that the specificity of 'Belarussianness' lay not so much in cultural or historical differences, as the other way round – in total fidelity to Russian (and ultimately Slavonic) civilisation. The idea of state sovereignty also emerged in ideological discourse, but was usually accompanied by the strongly reiterated thesis that such sovereignty was only possible within the Union State of Russia and Belarus. The West was generally portrayed as the 'traditional' enemy of East Slavonic civilisation, and thus of the Belarusian nation.

This image was needed above all in the fight against the democratic opposition, which was ideologically and financially linked to the West. Thirdly, the Soviet period was idealised, and earlier periods in the history of Belarus were deprecated, in particular the eras of the Principality of Polotsk and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Back in 2014, the leading Belarusian ideologue Vladimir Melnik stressed that "the Belarusians took possession of their own statehood at the beginning of the 20th century, namely on 1 January 1919", i.e. upon the creation of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. This, he wrote further, was the result of "the truly invaluable help of the fraternal Russian people in the creation, preservation and strengthening of the Belarusian state".¹

The first change: in the direction of 'soft Belaruthenisation'

A light alteration of the national idea in the government's discourse had already begun a few years before the annexation of Crimea. In 2010-2012, new textbooks on the history of Belarus were published which no longer presented the idea of 'all-Russian' unity, as had previously been the case. However in the public space, formed by official ideologues, the message was still strong that Belarusian identity is closely tied to Orthodox Russian civilisation. Until 2014, Lev Krishtopovich, Vladimir Melnik and Cheslav Kirviel were the leading ideologues; it was they who promoted the Russocentric version of Belarusian identity, and warred against Western European trends in Belarusian society. Since the first half of 2014, more significant changes have become apparent in the official ideology of Belarusian identity. During this period, President Lukashenko's statements started to discuss the question of the Belarusian language more frequently than before, and always

¹ Национальная идея или белорусская идея?, *Беларуская думка* 3/2014, p. 54, http://beldumka.bel.by/isfiles/000167_941630.pdf

in a positive manner. In April that year, shortly after Russia's occupation of Crimea, he said in a speech: "If we forget Russian, we will lose our mind. If we forget how to speak in Belarusian, we will cease to be a nation." In the same speech, he implicitly criticised himself, saying, "They could be right, those who criticise me for neglecting the [Belarusian] language".² This was a signal to the state ideologues that his previous language policy (of Russification) should no longer be treated as binding by government officials.

In 2014 an ideological conflict arose between Lukashenko and Putin for the first time.

Other visible manifestations of interest in building a national community have appeared at different levels of government. In summer 2014, the Belarusian parliament adopted a resolution 'On Belarusians abroad',³ which not only regulates the Belarusian state's cooperation with the diaspora, but also includes an ideological message. Article 2 speaks about the need to build a supra-territorial community, moreover, one which is based on the national culture. In the last two to three years, the Belarusian government has actively engaged in promoting *vyshyvanka* embroidery, which is one of the most important attributes of the non-Soviet national culture.

As for the authorities' attitude towards the most important national symbols, i.e. the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms, their display in public spaces is still officially prohibited. However, in summer 2017 an event took place which could be understood as a harbinger of gradual changes in this area.

² Послание Президента Республики Беларусь А.Г. Лукашенко белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию Республики Беларусь, «Сильная и экономика честная власть - фундамент независимости страны и процветания нации», 22 April 2014, <http://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P014p0001>

³ Аб беларусах замежжа, a bill passed by the House of Representatives on 14 May 2014, and adopted two weeks later by the Council of the Republic; came into force on 16 July 2014.

On 13 June, the Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus (LDPB) released a statement in which it called for the legalisation of the white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms, and for them to be given the status of historical and cultural values⁴. Considering the origin of this party and its specific function in the Belarusian political system, it is difficult to treat the statement above as just an element of the usual changes in image. The LDPB was created in the first half of the 1990s as a branch of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, and a significant part of its history is marked by a struggle for Belarusian-Russian unity. Besides, this party is an instrument of the Belarusian government, thanks to which the latter maintains a semblance of pluralism and can, in the event of a joint boycott from the real opposition, smother any attempts to create alternatives during elections. The statement above, coming from the 'systemic opposition', could be part of a process to prepare the public for the possible rehabilitation of these symbols.

The second change: Russia is more 'them' than 'us'

In 2014, perhaps for the first time, an ideological conflict arose between Presidents Lukashenko and Putin. Earlier controversies between them were based on economic matters, or were simply personal animosities; however, since Russia took over Crimea, Lukashenko has publicly accused Russia of violating international law on at least three occasions. During an interview for Euronews TV on 1 October 2014, the Belarusian president struck at the very core of Russian propaganda's argument that Crimea was once 'ours' and ergo today must also be 'ours' again. Lukashenko pointed out that in accordance with the Kremlin's logic, one could make a demand to return to the days of the Batu-Khan (that is, to return a huge part of Russian terri-

⁴ ЛДП заклікае легалізаваць бел-чырвона-белы сцяг і «Пагоню», <http://belsat.eu/news/ldp-zaklikae-legalizatsi-vats-bel-chyrvona-bely-stsyag-i-pagonyu/>

tory to Mongolia), or demand the return of the Pskov and Smolensk regions to Belarus.

Changes in the vision of the Soviet era are still minimal, and mostly consist of the admittance into the discourse of non-Soviet ideological elements.

Changes in rhetoric towards Russia are also taking place at other levels of power. In summer 2014 Pavel Yakubovich, editor-in-chief of the presidential newspaper *Belarus Segodnia*, published a quite stinging criticism of Aleksandr Dugin, an influential Russian ideologue, who had called for a more aggressive policy towards Ukraine. Yakubovich subjected Dugin's approach to withering criticism, even though the latter had always been positive about Lukashenko, and his articles had even been published on the pages of *Belarus Segodnia* itself. It is also noteworthy that Yakubovich gave voice in this article to the belief that Dugin is 'the Kremlin's man' and an 'unofficial spokesman' for the views of the Kremlin's rulers. Shortly after the publication of Yakubovich's article, the journal *Belaruskaya Dumka* printed an essay by Professor Leonid Lych, one of the most colourful Belarusian nationalists⁵, almost half of which was dedicated to condemning the Russification policies of Tsarist Russia.

In 2017, criticism of at least some aspects of Kremlin policy has persisted. During the 'Great Conversation with the President'⁶ on 3 February, Lukashenko said: "If Russian tanks enter Belarus, they'll leave here straight away", and

"Freedom and independence are more important than oil"⁷. In August 2017 an article was published in *Belaruskaya Dumka* by Aleksandr Gura, a principal military ideologue. In its six pages, the phrase 'national interests' appears 24 times and 'national idea' 10 times. The author concludes that "the Republic of Belarus defending its own national interests will not satisfy everyone", and notes that the threats come both from the West and the East. However, it is also interesting that the author mentions threats from the West only once, and in quite vague terms. Meanwhile, threats from Russia are mentioned several times; in addition, the evaluation of the 'Russian threat' is more vivid and specific than that of the 'Western' threats. As part of this evaluation, a reference to the 'Russian world' (*russkiy mir*) appears with a negative connotation⁸.

The third change: non-Soviet elements

Changes in the vision of the Soviet era are still minimal, and mostly consist in the admittance into the official discourse of non-Soviet ideological elements, rather than any direct revision of the Soviet elements. In March 2017, the historian Olga Levko from Polatsk University was awarded the prestigious State Prize. The work which won her the award was entitled *The source of Belarusian statehood. The lands of Polotsk and Vitebsk from the 9th to the 18th century*. It is very significant that Professor Levko, like the co-author of the work Prof. Denis Duk, has categorically spoken against the thesis of a short (i.e. since the start of the Soviet period) history of Belarusian statehood. After reading a summary of Levko's work, Lukashenko allegedly said it "reflected an appropriate image of the creation

⁵ Л. Лыч, Духоўны дзямент нацыі, *Беларуская думка*, 8/2014 http://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167_819358.pdf

⁶ "The Great Conversation with the President", which took place on 3 February 2017, is Lukashenko's meeting with journalists, experts, social activists, and representatives of the Parliament and the ministries. Lukashenko responded to questions about the situation in the country for more than seven hours.

⁷ A recording of the 'great conversation' is available in the archives of Channel 1 of Belarusian TV: <https://www.tvr.by/televidenie/belarus-1/>

⁸ See A. Гура, Основы консолидации общества, *Беларуская думка* 8/2017, pp. 82-83, http://beldumka.belta.by/isfiles/000167_418626.pdf

of Belarusian statehood”, and added, “This truth must be inscribed and implanted in the minds of the people. Even if there is some sort of nationalism in it, it is a healthy nationalism”⁹. There was also a reference to Levko’s concept in a sentence in the President’s address on Independence Day (3 July): “the Principality of Polotsk is our historical cradle”. It thus seems very likely that the Levko-Duk concept will be reflected in future editions of Belarusian history textbooks, as well as in the textbooks of Belarusian state ideology.

There is no reason to claim that there has been a genuine breakthrough in the ideological discourse of Belarus’s government, although there are clear symptoms of changes in this area.

In 2017 the Belarusian authorities were actively involved in the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the publication of the Bible by Franciszek Skaryna, a Belarusian humanist of the Renaissance era, the first printer in the East Slavic lands, who translated part of the Bible into the Old Belarusian language. The public space this year has been filled with slogans and images of Skaryna and his work. In 2017 this topic has appeared in the government press almost as often as the Great Patriotic War, which (as we know) is an enormous part of the Belarusian government’s discourse. For example, in the June issue of *Belaruskaya Dumka* five of the seventeen articles concerned the war¹⁰. However,

in the August issue, seven of the eighteen articles were devoted to Skaryna¹¹.

At the end of May 2017, an article appeared in *Belarus Siegodnia* entitled ‘In search of a national idea’ by Piotr Krauchanka¹², which included moderate criticism of the Soviet period (especially the Stalinist era) and emphasised that “without the Belarusian People’s Republic (BPR), there would have been no Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR)”. A month after the publication of Krauchanka’s article, the same newspaper ran an article by Mikhail Strelets¹³, a representative of the establishment, supporting Krauchanka’s idea that ‘without the BPR there would have been no BSSR’. This is a new accent in the discussion of the role of the Soviet era, as previously the argument had been that the BPR was an ephemeral puppet of Germany which had no importance in the development of Belarusian statehood, and that only the Soviet era enabled the rise of the Belarusian state and the emancipation of the Belarusians as a separate nation.

Conclusions

However, there is no reason to claim that there has been a genuine breakthrough in the ideological discourse of Belarus’s government, although there are clear symptoms of changes in this area. These are most visible in the field of the conception of national identity; here there has been a very clear move in the cultural direction (emphasising the Belarusian language and historical memory) of the national idea, while maintaining the present focus on the state’s nation-building role. Less clear, but still visible, are the changes in determining Belarus’s geopolitical

⁹ Лукашенко: историю становления белорусского государства нужно достоверно отразить в новых учебниках, <http://www.belta.by/president/view/luka-shenko-istoriju-stanovlenija-belorusskogo-gosudarstva-nuzhno-dostoverno-otrazit-v-novyh-uchebnikah-235365-2017>

¹⁰ Traditionally many articles on this topic are published in June to mark the anniversary of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union (22 June), as well as on the occasion of the anniversary of the liberation of Minsk from the Nazis (3 July).

¹¹ Linked to this was the anniversary of the publication on 6 August 1517 of the first translation of the Bible into the Old Belarusian language (the Skaryna Bible).

¹² In the first half of the 1990s Krauchanka was the Minister for Foreign Affairs; for a long time, however, he has been a non-establishment activist.

¹³ *Беларусь Сегодня*, 30 June 2017.

space. The West is no longer the clear enemy and Russia is not an unambiguous friend. Changes in the understanding of the Soviet past, however, remain minimal. In this respect, we are dealing with a tactic of accumulation: the introduction of new elements without denying the Soviet element. The thesis about the key role of the Great Patriotic War in the history of Belarus remains an unquestioned dogma. Yet we may also observe an increasingly clear move towards the 'pre-Soviet' stage in the history of Belarus. The effect of Crimea's annexation to the changes in the Belarusian ideology seems undeniable.

These events made Lukashenko aware that Moscow's imperialist temptations must be treated very seriously. The broken ties with the West, the lack of a strong national identity among the citizens, as well as his country's economic and energy dependency on Russia, all make Lukashenko vulnerable to the Kremlin. Strengthening his country's national identity and improving relations with Western countries and the United States will not, of course, guarantee protection against any possible aggression by Russia, but these moves mean that Kremlin strategists will not see Belarus as easy pickings.

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