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TRANSFORMATION OF AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IN THE DIGITAL REALITY (THE CASE OF BELARUS 2006–2015)

The collapse of the USSR gave scholars a variety of different political regimes that can't be easily defined. Among all these examples, the Belarusian case seems to be an interesting one. In scholarly discourse, the country's regime hasn't obtained a constant definition. Moreover, the case of the Belarusian regime may help us shed some light upon the peculiarities of this type of post-Soviet authoritarian regime and seek additional peculiarities in it, which will prove helpful in further approaches to define contemporary 'mixed' regimes of former USSR republics and other countries all over the world.

The main objective of the study is thus to show the Belarusian political regime's transformation on the basis of political news of an independent online mass media site Belapan. News between April 2006 – August 2015 was collected and analysed.

The tendencies of the decrease of participation in communication and the increase in the number of unique positions were detected. During the observed period, the indicators of participation in communication and unique political actors show the low dialogism of communication, and low number of stable figures in it, which may lead to minimised citizen familiarity with political figures, their political positions and actions; low level of political engagement. All these features characterise an authoritarian regime, and the fact of indicators decreasing/increasing testify to consistent tightening of the regime.

Low intensity of political communication in Belarus may be additionally observed with the low constant attention towards Belarusian political actors. Dealing with the findings, one should consider digital transformation in journalism. A prevalence of unique political actors has been making political communication more complicated and fragmented, where different positions of these episodic actors are not presented in a structured unity.

Key words: *Belarus, political regime, political communication, authoritarian regime, online mass media.*

Introduction

The collapse of the USSR gave scholars a variety of different political regimes that can't be easily defined. Independent states predominantly call themselves democracies, have parliaments and some other institutions important for a democratic state, hold elections etc. However, in many cases scholars and experts point out an existence of only an imitative democracy, used for covering frequent civil and political freedom violations, corruption, and other abuses.

Among all these examples, the Belarusian case seems to be an interesting one. Having a geographical position similar to Ukraine and Moldova, between Russia and 'the West', it has been demonstrating clear intentions towards authorisation of its political regime since mid-90s and has a 'Not Free' status since 1996 in Freedom House reports. In scholarly discourse, the Belarusian regime hasn't obtained a constant definition. It's been referred to as a 'paradox' one [19] or just a 'phenomenon' [22]. It (as well as regimes of some other post-Soviet countries in their early years of independence) has a variety of definitions such as, in McAllister and White, 'a grey zone polity', 'third world patrimonialism with Bonapartist tendencies' [20, p. 6]. Hutcheson and Korosteleva write about 'competitive authoritarianism' or 'demagogical democracy' [19], additionally "'managed" democracy' by P. Pospieszna [22] or 'unconsolidated autocracy' by L. Way [31]. V. Shlapentokh even mentions 'feudalism' [25]. There are also more common forms as 'Europe's last dictatorship', 'outpost of tyranny' and 'Lukashenkism' [22]. It's also remarkable that, in Belarusian state academic discourse, the regime is characterised as a 'young democratic legal state' and a 'democratic state of a transitive type' [14, p. 166-167]. These numerous attempts to define the Belarusian regime are definitely worth further systematisation and consideration. Moreover, a clear distinction of the post-Soviet regimes is needed, because sometimes scholars use such blurred terms as 'more democratic' or 'more repressive' [27, p. 2].

Since the fact of holding of elections or the existence of a list of freedoms in a country's legislation can't be used for a clear distinction of a regime, the term 'democracy' shouldn't be used to describe a country that only imitates some democratic procedures. For instance, L. Way in 2005 insisted that the term 'emerging democracies' shouldn't be exploited in the case of Belarus and some other countries [31]. Similarly, the term 'authoritarianism' may be expanded to include countries with imitative democratic processes and institutions. And now, in the time of the democracy crisis, Hutcheson and Korosteleva's claim should be mentioned: not all regimes are moving from authoritarianism towards 'an inevitable democratic "end point"' [19]. Thus, some of them will remain 'Not Free' and may mutate, especially in the digital times.

However, scholars' attempts to stress on post-Soviet regimes specifics may question the contemporary typology of political regimes as a whole. After all, by defining a majority of a post-Soviet regimes as being 'hybrid' or 'transitive', one may overlook actual differences between them.

Thus, the case of the Belarusian regime may help us shed some light upon the peculiarities of this type of post-Soviet authoritarian regime and seek additional peculiarities in it, which will prove helpful in further approaches to define contemporary 'mixed' regimes of former USSR republics and other countries all over the world. Moreover, modern digital reality is able to transform the regimes and their representation, and the issue of clear distinction becomes more vivid.

The objective of the study, material and method

To define a political regime, the Belarusian one in particular, this research uses journalistic texts of independent media; political news. According to professional journalistic standards, political news in countries with different political regimes shouldn't display differences, and all texts must be written within the framework of accuracy, objectivity, neutrality, completeness, balance et cetera. However, according to the main hypothesis of this study, a political text (a corpus of political news in our case) reflects a political regime. Thus, compliance to standards may differ from one regime to another, so far as political journalism depends on politicians and officials as news sources. It is thus possible to define a regime through the analysis of the text (source usage in particular). As a result, the dynamics of some professional standards compliance may show the dynamics of a regime. Moreover, the constant process of journalism digitalisation has been causing changes in both political communication and political news and may be harmful for some aspects of communication and journalism quality [16; 17; 21; 24, 29; 33; 34; 28].

The main objective of the study is thus to show the Belarusian political regime's transformation on the basis of political news of an independent online mass media site, Belapan (belapan.by). It exists since 1991 and is financed by 'private individuals' [6]. In 2018, the site's editor, along with an editor of an independent site Tyt.by, was charged 'with illegally obtaining information via the Internet from the state-run BelTA news agency' [20].

News between April 2006 (on the 8th of April the inauguration of Lukashenko was held) – August 2015 (the beginning of the Political Campaign before the Presidential Election) was collected and analysed. For the study, every third month was chosen (with a month shift in the beginning of each year). To collect and process the corpus of political news, several Python programmes were designed.

To define the Belarusian political regime and to show its transformations reflected in text in the digital age, several research questions were stated.

An authoritative political regime may be defined via:

- Low participation of different political actors in communication (including official sources); the lower the participation is, the stricter is the regime.
- Low number of constant participants in communication (including official sources), and as a result, large number of unique participants; the larger the percent of unique participants, the stricter is the regime; as far as there is no any constant popular figure, alternative to officials.

To define political actors in the text, Python regular expressions were used (all proper names were collected and processed, geographical names were excluded). Next, a list of all actors per month was created, where one mention of an actor was an indication for including this actor in the type of unique ones. Additionally, the list of five most popular actors was generated.

Belarus in Ukrainian academic discourse

In Ukrainian academic discourse, the Belarusian political regime has not been studied deeply. Generally, Ukraine-Belarus relations are considered a subject for constant research. Here, the differences in the political regimes of the countries are casually mentioned. For S. Vasylyshyn it's an obstacle for a strategic partnership in the sphere of politics [3, p. 140]. Democratisation in Ukraine after the Orange

Revolution also caused the deterioration of mutual relations [11]. The directions of foreign affairs of both countries are studied as well. Belarus-Russia relations are described as 'specific' [9]. Russia, as well as some other 'Not Free' countries (Venezuela, Iran, Vietnam, China) are mentioned as Belarusian economic partners [2, p. 42-43]. However, pro-European Ukrainian political orientation is also perceived as major interference in cooperation [11, p. 161].

Comparative studies of some aspects of political life are also provided; for instance, parliamentary models of both countries. L. Balykina considers bicameral parliament employed in Belarus more suitable for Ukraine [1]. Civil codes of the states are also studied, and some positions from the Belarusian one are mentioned as being worth implementing in Ukraine [8, p. 110]. Social needs of citizens, ignorance and financial crises in post-Soviet countries are also observed, and thought to influence the countries' fates significantly [13, p. 119-120; 5, p. 106].

The peculiarities of the Belarusian regime in comparison with some other post-Soviet countries

As for political regimes of Belarus and some other post-Soviet countries, the first years of countries' independence are usually considered. For instance, T. Polovij considers Belarusian society to have been economically, physiologically and culturally unready for the collapse of the USSR; however, it was a different situation in Ukraine [10, p. 318]. Low activity and support of the BNF (Belarus People's Front) as an alternative to the Communist Party was also the reason for an authoritarian path for the country [30]. This was also the case on the eve of the elections in 2006: Belarus opposition members were not members of parliament, didn't occupy high positions in the country and were less known among wide public, contrary to Ukrainian opposition leaders in 2004 and 2005 [22, p. 53]. In Belarus, parties alternative to Lukashenko's regime had no influence on mass media, and comparably to Ukraine, the majority of mass media in Belarus suffered harsh state control from the beginning of independence [18, 318]. And obviously, low Belarusian resistance against Russia's intentions to restore its sphere of influence, and European indifference to the new republic's fate were also the case [10, p. 322].

Decisive actions of the old political elite are named as a crucial in the early years of Belarusian independence; according to Korolevska, it was only in 1990–1994 when a parliamentary republic existed there. Afterwards, the country changed its course vastly because of Lukashenko's victory in the election [4, p. 425]. Balykina also claims that Belarusian Parliament failed in a political struggle with the 'energetic' president [1, p. 8]. P. Pospieszna states that in Belarus, parties 'play a negligible role in the political process', whereas Lukashenko himself 'has no party affiliation' [22, p. 33-34]. Different scales of state control over economic actors are also important: L. Way claims that, in Belarus, the regime is more closed, and the president controls the members of elite; in Ukraine and Moldova the system is less organised [31, p. 233].

Additionally, Nedokus states, police and special services in Belarus are being enlarged excessively, and Lukashenko from the beginning of his extended presidency declined the idea of civil control over the structures, so important for a democratic state [5, p. 103-104].

Another difference in comparison to Moldova and Ukraine is a national identity. According to L. Titarenko, issues of identity should be put behind the process of Belarus post-Soviet transition; it wasn't popular during Soviet times and after the collapse of the USSR neither [28, p. 7-8]. Sociologist Z. Sikevich notices a parallel tendency in the perception of the Belarusian people among Russians: 'between Russians and Belarusians, ethnic distance is virtually absent; in contrast to Ukrainians, Belarusians are perceived as "our" people, like us' [26]. Thus, low national identity (as well as in the Russian case: not ethnic, but Soviet identity is mostly addressed) may correlate with state authoritarianism (see also: [31, p. 233]). Here, E. Zhukova's finding may be added: she differentiates two types of national identity construction: a 'past-centered' one (for Ukraine, where national traditions are exploited) and 'present-oriented' for Belarus [35].

As for crucial events that enabled further 'authoritarianisation' of Belarus in the 21st century, scholars and experts name:

- The referendum of 2004, where the Belarusian president gained a possibility to be elected 'for an unlimited number of terms' [20];
- Pro-democracy opposition's inability to choose a single representative for the 2006 election and to 'create an attractive picture of Belarus without Lukashenko' [22, p. 54];
- Large protests of citizens in 2006 as a sign of a civil society's existence, and the violent suppression of the protests [22, p. 52-53];
- The restrictive media law of 2008 [15].

Additionally, according to OSCE report, Belarus doesn't have an appropriate legislative base for fair elections; 2013 and 2014 edits didn't consider several significant OSCE and Council of Europe

recommendations. The state didn't allow some oppositional figures to participate in the election; some state organisations engaged in signature collection etc. [7]. The country is also known as 'one of the most hostile media environments in the world with one of the worst records on freedom of expression', where digital media are used 'to silence free voices and track down dissent' [22, p. 2].

Findings: Belarusian political actors' participation in communication

A tendency towards a decrease of the indicator of participation in communication may be observed in tabl. 1; three periods with different levels of participation may be defined: relatively high for an authoritarian regime April 2006 – August 2008, moderate November 2008 – June 2012, relatively low September 2012–August 2015. In the table, cells with indicators higher than median are highlighted.

In parallel, a tendency of unique name percentage increase may be defined. In the first period, there are only two months with high percentage of unique names; in the second period, the number starts to increase and remains stable in the third period.

Within these three periods, the different character of mentions of most popular political actors may be observed (Fig. 1). Actors and institutions that were popular no less than twice during the observed period were included.

In the first period, there were some figures of oppositionists, alternative to Lukashenko: Milinkevich (in 2006 he ran against Lukashenko as a candidate from several leading opposition parties) and Kozulin (the former leader of BSDP – Belarusian Social Democratic Party, former minister). There were also some periods when Milinkevich and Kozulin had more mentions than Lukashenko. However, they were not top figures in two other periods. In the second period, it was Nyaklyayew, who became the most popular opposition figure. Political prisoner Avtukhovich was top figure only twice, when the charges against him were discussed. In the third period, opposition leaders were not at the list of popular figures at all, with the only state official Makei as an alternative Belarusian political actor to Lukashenko.

Along with the politicians, in the first period, three parties were mentioned: the BNF (Belarusian Popular Front), the ODS (United Democratic Forces), the OGP (United Civil Party). In the second period, the number of mentions starts to decrease. International institutions and politicians become more popular in the third period, which is definitely the reaction to Russian aggression.

To sum up, two research questions are supported. For the Belarusian political regime, low participation of political actors in communication is observed. Moreover, there is a high number of different political actors with low constancy of mention. The gradual decrease of political participation is discovered; there is thus no democratic change for the regime during the observed period.

Conclusions

Thus, the tendencies of the decrease of participation in communication and the increase in the number of unique positions are related. This is particularly evident in the third period with low number of political actors involved in communication and a high percentage of unique actors. During the observed period, the indicators of participation in communication and unique political actors show the low dialogism of communication, and low number of stable figures in it, which may lead to minimised citizen familiarity with political figures, their political positions and actions; low level of political engagement. All these features characterise an authoritarian regime, and the fact of indicators decreasing/increasing testify to consistent tightening of the regime. The research's data correlates with Freedom House data (democracy score) and may be used to forecast changes in Belarusian political regime's transformations. Additionally, recent research on the so-called 'transitive' regime in Ukraine shows higher numbers for the indicators [12].

Low intensity of political communication in Belarus may be additionally observed with the low constant attention towards Belarusian political actors. Thus, citizens gain fragmented information about them, especially in the third period, when events in neighbouring countries seem more important for journalists than domestic ones.

Dealing with the findings, one should consider digital transformation in journalism. Belarusian political communication has a low level of dialogism, and between 2006 – 2015 it has been becoming less and less balanced. Additionally, a prevalence of unique political actors has been making political communication more complicated and fragmented, where different positions of these episodic actors are not presented in a structured unity.

To sum up, the analysis of Belarusian political regime supports its authoritative character with low intensity and dialogism of political communication and low constancy and engagement of political actors. These indicators, along with digital indicators of political journalism, may be used to identify political regimes of other, not univocally defined countries.

Personal names in Belapan headlines (average of names, unique names)

		<i>number of news</i>	<i>number of names</i>	<i>number of unique names</i>	<i>average of names (number of PN/number of news)</i>	<i>unique name percentage</i>
2006	Apr	122	142	78	1,16	54,93
	Jul	108	122	56	1,13	45,90
	Oct	74	94	49	1,27	52,13
2007	Mar	82	95	55	1,16	57,89
	Jun	56	65	43	1,16	66,15
	Sep	84	114	85	1,36	74,56
	Dec	105	145	70	1,38	48,28
2008	Feb	99	127	60	1,28	47,24
	May	63	78	41	1,24	52,56
	Aug	100	151	67	1,51	44,37
	Nov	54	54	33	1,00	61,11
2009	Jan	63	68	58	1,08	85,29
	Apr	87	91	47	1,05	51,65
	Jul	49	64	41	1,31	64,06
	Oct	53	61	41	1,15	67,21
2010	Mar	64	66	40	1,03	60,61
	Jun	73	75	47	1,03	62,67
	Sep	71	77	45	1,08	58,44
	Dec	197	203	99	1,03	48,77
2011	Jan	110	157	91	1,43	57,96
	Apr	76	112	66	1,47	58,93
	Jul	116	126	70	1,09	55,56
	Oct	78	84	53	1,08	63,10
2012	Mar	75	104	64	1,39	61,54
	Jun	107	126	72	1,18	57,14
	Sep	118	118	73	1,00	61,86
	Dec	72	50	29	0,69	58,00
2013	Feb	72	69	50	0,96	72,46
	May	75	52	38	0,69	73,08
	Aug	94	95	54	1,01	56,84
	Nov	93	81	57	0,87	70,37
2014	Jan	101	86	46	0,85	53,49
	Apr	91	87	54	0,96	62,07
	Jul	88	80	55	0,91	68,75
	Oct	84	62	31	0,74	50,00
2015	Feb	61	43	31	0,70	72,09
	May	96	105	63	1,09	60,00
	Aug	133	143	67	1,08	46,85

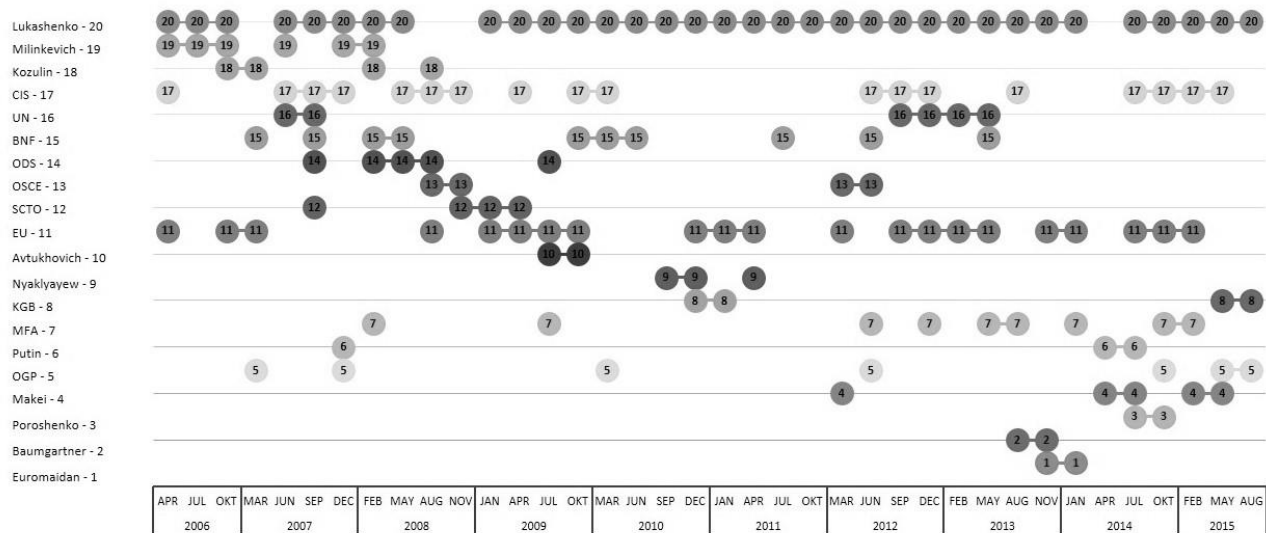


Fig. 1. The most popular political actors and institutions on Belapan

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**Стеблина Н. О. Трансформація авторитарного режиму у цифровій реальності
(на прикладі Білорусі 2006-2015 рр.)**

Після розпаду СРСР на його теренах утворилося різноманіття політичних режимів, які не піддаються однозначному визначенню. З-поміж них випадок Білорусі є одним із найбільш цікавих. У науковому дискурсі білоруський режим не отримав чіткого визначення, при цьому у визначеннях зустрічаємося як із термінами «демократичний», «перехідний», «авторитарний». Тож випадок Білорусі може дати змогу науковцям чіткіше визначити особливості цього типу пострадянського режиму та окреслити додаткові його характеристики, які стануть корисними для визначення реалізації «змішаних» режимів колишніх радянських республік та й інших країн по всьому світу.

Метою дослідження є показати трансформацію білоруського політичного режиму на основі аналізу політичних новин незалежного мережевого видання «Белпан». Для цього вивчалися новини із квітня 2006 – по серпень 2015.

Тенденції зниження участі у політичній комунікації та збільшення кількості епізодичних учасників були визначені – упродовж встановлених трьох періодів участь поступово знижувалась, кількість епізодичних учасників – зростала. Загалом для політичної комунікації авторитарного білоруського режиму характерний низький ступінь діалогізму, що має відбиватися на залученості громадян до участі у політичній комунікації та їхній поінформованості щодо перебігу подій.

Низька інтенсивність політичної комунікації у Білорусі має також розглядатися із урахуванням цифрових трансформацій, що відбуваються у журналістиці. Зокрема, у цій країні, як і по всьому світу, політична комунікація стає більш емоційною, а коментарі переважають над фактами. Тож у Білорусі участь у комунікації великої кількості епізодичних політичних суб'єктів призводить до того, що суспільний діалог стає більш ускладненим та фрагментованим, де різноманітні позиції не подаються як структурована цілісність.

Ключові слова: Білорусь, політичний режим, політична комунікація, авторитарний режим, мережеві ЗМІ