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Belarusian propaganda about Poland after the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine

Abstract

The objective of this article is to conduct an analysis of the Belarusian propaganda narrative concerning Poland and the Polish-Belarusian border after the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24th February 2022. The study delves into the underlying factors influencing Belarusian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, the utilization of politics of memory as a tool to discredit Poland, the disinformation operations linked to artificially induced migration from the Middle East, and the involvement of Belarusian services in such activities. Additionally, it explores the actions aimed at discrediting the work of Polish uniformed formations on the border with Belarus. The research methodology employed entails the utilization of the desk research method and the comparative method, where we attempt to juxtapose the propaganda narrative of Belarus and Russia.

Key words: Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, Poland, border, disinformation, propaganda

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With the escalating pressure of the Russian Federation on the states of the so-called „near abroad” since 2007, the political and economic dynamics of the individual former Soviet republics became heavily contingent upon their relations with the Kremlin authorities. Nations that embraced a loyal stance towards Vladimir Putin and his inner circle were assured of stable and cost-effective supplies of hydrocarbon raw materials, as well as political backing in countering opposition forces both domestically and internationally. However, the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 significantly altered the geostrategic landscape in the region, particularly weakening the economic position of the Russian Federation and consequently rendering the subsidization of Russia’s dependent states increasingly challenging.

Since December 2018, the Russian authorities have intensified their pressure on Belarus, demanding that the Union State agreement be fulfilled in practical terms (referred to as the „Medvedev ultimatum”). Simultaneously, they have constrained Belarus’ capacity to benefit from oil resale through the implementation of the „tax maneuver”. Consequently, secret negotiations aimed at deepening integration between the two nations transpired throughout 2019, culminating in the signing of confidential agreements on September 6. However, these negotiations did not align with Alyaksandr Lukashenko’s expectations, who feared a potential loss of power. Consequently, the proposed roadmaps for integration were not approved, leading to a deceleration of the integration process. In response, Russia declined to endorse gas and oil contracts on the same terms as in previous years, insisting that Belarus adopt market-oriented approaches in handling these agreements¹.

The Russian-Belarusian dispute endured for several months and inflicted substantial economic repercussions on Belarus. The situation was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a notable decline in the global prices of hydrocarbon raw materials, thereby partially contributing to the alleviation of the dispute. An additional factor influencing the dynamics was the upcoming presidential elections. Early signals and communiqués emanating from the Kremlin suggested an intention to exploit the elections as a leverage point to compel Lukashenko into making concessions or even to effect his removal from power. This narrative found support in Lukashenko’s own assertions, wherein he accused Moscow of meddling in the electoral process,

1 A. Szabaciuk, *Integracja Białorusi z Rosją: próba sił*, „Komentarze Instytutu Europy Środkowej” 2020, no. 104.

as evidenced by the purported involvement of Wagner's Group – detained by the Belarusian KGB. However, the incident was adroitly suppressed, and the detained members of the private military company were subsequently released from custody. A more substantial threat loomed with the opposition's effective mobilization of the masses, despite facing unprecedented repression from the regime during the election campaign. This successful organization and mobilization of opposition forces posed a greater challenge to the stability of the existing political order in Belarus².

The manipulated presidential elections in 2020 constitute a significant turning point, both in the context of Belarus' domestic policy and its geostrategic positioning. The aftermath of these elections witnessed a notable transformation in Polish–Belarusian relations, marked by an unprecedented surge in anti-Polish propaganda, repressive measures targeting the Polish minority and the Roman Catholic Church, and a series of aggressive acts of vandalism directed towards Polish memorial sites. Conversely, these elections definitively terminated the phase of balancing Belarus between the spheres of influence of Eastern and Western powers, thereby exacerbating the Lukashenko regime's international isolation and intensifying its political and economic reliance on Russia. This scenario was further compounded by the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, compelling Belarus to align itself with its closest partner.

The primary objective of this article is to elucidate the principal Belarusian propaganda narratives pertaining to Poland and the Polish–Belarusian border following the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine after 24th February 2022. Our research adopts the desk research method and employs the comparative approach, facilitating the juxtaposition of propaganda narratives emanating from Belarus and Russia.

The justification for involving Belarus in Russian aggression

The onset of the new phase of Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 had a profound impact on the geostrategic landscape of Belarus. For the Lukashenko regime, the pressing concern was the potential escalation of the conflict and the necessity to adopt a decisive stance towards

2 *Idem, Masowe protesty na Białorusi. Społeczeństwo oczekuje zmian, ibidem, no. 240.*

Russian actions. It is pertinent to highlight that Belarus openly supported the Russian Federation right from the outset of the large-scale aggression. By granting access to its military and civilian infrastructure, Belarus facilitated Russia's missile attacks on Ukrainian territory and its ground invasion towards the Ukrainian capital.

Furthermore, Lukashenko adeptly propagated the Kremlin's narrative regarding the motives behind the Russian attack on Ukraine, deftly intertwining it with the situation in Belarus. In a speech delivered on 22 February 2022, just prior to the Russian aggression, Lukashenko accused the West of harboring intentions to instigate a war and called upon Ukrainian authorities to resist the influence of external powers. He also insinuated that Polish and Lithuanian troops might potentially target Russian forces, thereby urging Belarusian forces to focus on securing the state's borders.

These insinuations were reiterated on numerous occasions after the outbreak of Russian aggression. On 24 February 2022, during a meeting with representatives from ministries, Lukashenko asserted that Belarus would not permit other parties to target Russian civilians, suggesting that Poland and Lithuania might be planning to attack Russia through Belarusian territory. Similarly, in speeches on 27 February and 1 March 2022, Lukashenko underscored how he had successfully thwarted the so-called „blitzkrieg” aimed at challenging Belarusian independence and quelling the „nationalist frenzy” sparked by popular protests following allegedly fraudulent presidential elections in 2020. He cynically implied that his repressive measures against civil society had forestalled the outbreak of war in Belarus. He argued that the resolution of the Ukrainian–Russian conflict could occur independently of Western involvement and called upon Ukrainians to seek alternatives to violent confrontations by making certain concessions to the Russian Federation, notably through „demilitarisation”, a declaration of neutrality, and a renunciation of ambitions to join the North Atlantic Alliance³.

The purported menace posed by Ukraine and the North Atlantic Alliance serves as a justification for Belarus's indirect involvement in the Russian

3 *Полная версия! Лукашенко обратился к украинцам*, Информационное агентство БелТА, www.youtube.com [access: 21.01.2023]; *Совещание с членами Совета Безопасности и руководством Совета Министров*, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/soveshchanie-s-chlenami-soveta-bezopasnosti-i-rukovodstvom-soveta-ministrov> [access: 21.01.2023]; *Сильная речь Лукашенко! Украина: что происходит?*, Информационное агентство БелТА, www.youtube.com [access: 21.01.2023].

aggression against Ukraine. This involvement is manifested through the provision of military and civilian infrastructure, as well as the transfer of arms and ammunition to support Russian actions. Concurrently, an amplified portrayal of the NATO threat is used to rationalize the reluctance to deploy the Belarusian military directly to Ukraine. It is noteworthy, however, that Lukashenko has indicated on multiple occasions that he might consider such a course of action if circumstances require it. For instance, on 17 June 2022, he asserted the possibility of responding to the perceived peril of being „encircled by Poles”, referencing the alleged annexation of western Ukraine by Poland⁴.

The threat from the West

Concurrently with targeting the Polish minority and the Roman Catholic Church, the Belarusian authorities intentionally engaged in the destruction of several Polish cemeteries within Belarus. In July, 2022, the cemetery of Home Army soldiers in Mikulishki and the gravesites of the Home Army in Stryjewka, Kashytsy, and Volkowysk, all located in the Grodno region, were deliberately dismantled. Subsequently, in August, the cemetery in Surkanty and in Plabanishki near Grodno suffered the same fate. This pattern of destruction raises concerns regarding the cultural and historical heritage of the affected areas.

Simultaneously, the Belarusian authorities are employing tactics to instil public apprehensions concerning an alleged annexation of western Belarus by Poland. On 12 October 2022, a propaganda demonstration was orchestrated at the Polish consulate in Grodno, where representatives of local „social organizations” protested purportedly against Poland’s assertive policies and its supposed interference in Belarus’s internal affairs. Such events contribute to heightening tensions between the two countries.

Adding to the atmosphere of tension, on 1 November 2022, General Ivan Tertel, the head of the Belarusian KGB, delivered a speech in Mogilev, during which he asserted the existence of plans for a nuclear and conventional attack on Belarus originating from Polish territory. He cited the involvement of the

⁴ Лукашенко о видах Польши на Западную Украину: тут нам придется реагировать, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-o-vidah-polshi-na-zapadnuju-ukrainu-508559-2022/> [access: 21.01.2023].

US 101st Airborne Division among others, further exacerbating the security situation in the region⁵.

The promotion of fears related to an alleged Western attack is coupled with accusations regarding Poland's imperialistic aspirations, as seen in both Belarusian and Russian propaganda. A recurring subject of interest in the Belarusian media is the topic of enhancing the Polish armed forces through the acquisition of modern weaponry, primarily from the United States and South Korea. BelTa (Belarusian State News Agency) has frequently published content casting doubt on the justifiability of such acquisitions. According to the agency's assertions, Poland's procurement of advanced weaponry should not be rationalized solely by the perceived threat from the Russian Federation, given Poland's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. Instead, the agency claims that the true motive behind these acquisitions lies in the ambition to annex the territories of western Ukraine and potentially Belarus.

This narrative aligns with the perspective promoted by the Russian Federation. For instance, on 9 March, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova explicitly stated that an ongoing process of Ukrainian territory's subjugation by Poland is being observed. The convergence of Belarusian and Russian discourses on Poland's actions reinforces a narrative of perceived aggression and territorial designs, thereby fostering a climate of tension in the region⁶.

Moreover, state media in Belarus includes remarks cautioning Poland about the potential consequences of engaging in military support, suggesting that such involvement may lead to direct entanglement in a conflict with Russia. For instance, statements made by Leszek Sykulski regarding the possibility of the United States compelling Poland to deploy its troops to Ukraine in the event of military setbacks faced by the Ukrainian army have garnered significant attention and discussion. The military aid provided by Poland is portrayed as of limited efficacy in the current war conditions. It is claimed that Poland is dispatching outdated or defective equipment, such as the Grot carbines, to

⁵ *Тертель: создаются предпосылки для серьезного мирового конфликта*, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/tertel-sozdajutsja-predposylki-dlja-serjeznogo-mirovogo-konflikta-532672-2022/> [access: 21.02.2023].

⁶ *Захарова: Россия имеет право разорвать дипломатические отношения с Польшей*, <https://www.belta.by/world/view/zaharova-rossija-imeet-pravo-razorvat-diplomaticheskie-otnoshenija-s-polshej-564200-2023/> [access: 4.05.2023]; A. Szabaciuk, *Nowa ofensywa propagandowa Białorusi wymierzona w Polskę*, „Komentarze Instytutu Europy Środkowej” 2023, no. 830.

Ukraine, while modern heavy Western tanks are deemed unsuitable for the challenging terrain of eastern Ukraine.

Additionally, the financial aspect of Poland's support for Ukraine is highlighted, with reports indicating that the Polish authorities have allocated substantial funds, totaling \$ 103 billion, for the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and additional financial aid to support Ukraine's military efforts. All this purportedly occurs amidst an economic crisis in Poland, which has been exacerbated by escalating hydrocarbon commodity prices and high inflation⁷.

Denigration of Poland in the international arena by Belarus

Belarusian allegations of hostile actions attributed to Poland are closely linked to an ongoing dispute concerning border crossings. Specifically, the closure of the Polish-Belarusian border crossing at Bobrowniki on 10 February 2023 and the imposition of restrictions on trucks from regions outside the European Economic Area and the Swiss Confederation at the Koroszczyń (Kukuryki) crossing on 21 February are central points of contention. Poland's actions in this regard were partly in response to the reported persecution of the Polish minority in Belarus, exemplified by the sentencing of Andrzej Poczobut to 8 years in a maximum security prison on 8 February.

Hybrid operations along the Polish-Belarusian border continue, with Belarusian services allegedly involved in the facilitation of migrant movement from the Middle East and Africa towards the border. Moreover, a disinformation campaign has been carried on to portray a specific narrative concerning the border situation. Notably, the project „Polish and Lithuanian crimes against refugees: facts and testimonies” (available at <http://whitebook.by>) persists, and an exhibition titled „The border between life and death” was inaugurated in Minsk (March 2023), subsequently traveling to other Belarusian cities. During this exhibition, the West, primarily Poland, was directly accused of human rights violations and of treating individuals from Africa or the Middle East as second-class or inferior. Such accusations against Poland of crimes against

7 A. Szabaciuk, *Nowa ofensywa propagandowa...; GW: США могут заставить Польшу отправить войска в Украину при дальнейшем ослаблении Киева*, <https://www.belta.by/world/view/gw-ssha-mogut-vynudit-polshu-vojt-na-territoriju-ukrainy-535752-2022/> [access: dostęp: 4.05.2023].

migrants at the border have been recurrently propagated in state media. Statements from Mateusz Piskorski, a pro-Russian activist facing allegations of espionage for Russia, have been repeatedly cited, implicating Poland in crimes against migrants, including the existence of mass graves of migrants in border forests⁸.

The regime's rhetoric has witnessed a consistent escalation of accusations aimed at both Poland and the North Atlantic Alliance. An exemplification of this trend is evident in Alyaksandr Lukashenka's address on 31 March of the current year. The self-proclaimed president levels charges against Poland, alleging aggressive intentions, as substantiated by a notable surge in arms expenditure in recent months. Lukashenko also raises concerns regarding Poland's purported plan to augment its military personnel to 300 000, thereby establishing the largest army in Europe. Concurrently, he expresses apprehension over a systematic increase in the presence of North Atlantic Alliance troops on the eastern flank, primarily concentrated in Poland.

Furthermore, the accusations become increasingly peculiar, encompassing assertions of clandestine efforts to orchestrate „regiments, flags, or legions” with the purported purpose of fomenting a coup d'état within Belarus. Additionally, Poland is alleged to be preparing „terrorists” poised to execute acts of sabotage on Belarusian territory. Moreover, there are claims of Poland establishing „extremist cells” with the intention of conducting illicit activities across the eastern border⁹.

On 4 April 2023, General Ivan Tertel, the previously mentioned head of the Belarusian KGB, reiterated his accusations against neighboring countries, namely Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine, alleging their complicity in attempting to destabilize Belarus. He specifically insinuated the existence of recruitment centers and training facilities operating within the territories of these aforementioned countries, purportedly aimed at preparing militants to initiate actions intended to destabilize Belarus. As per the assertions made by the head of the Belarusian KGB, there is a looming

8 A. Szabaciuk, *Nowa ofensywa propagandowa...; Фотовыставка БЕЛТА „Граница между жизнью и смертью” открылась в Минске*, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/fotovystavka-belta-granitsa-mezhdu-zhiznjju-i-smertjju-otkrylas-v-minske-555921-2023/> [access: 4.05.2023].

9 *Послание белорусскому народу и Национальному собранию*, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/poslanie-aleksandra-lukashenko-belorusskomu-narodu-i-nacionalnomu-sobraniyu-sostoitsya-31-marta> [access: 4.05.2023].

possibility of a significant deterioration in the prevailing situation, with potential ramifications expected as early as the approaching spring season¹⁰.

Ensuring the security of Belarus is contingent upon the reliance on security guarantees from the Russian Federation, with the expectation that any assault on Belarusian territory would be perceived and addressed as an attack on Russian soil. Paradoxically, such demands made by Lukashenko appear puzzling, given that these guarantees are already stipulated in the Agreement on the Establishment of the Union State and the Treaty of Tashkent, which establishes the framework for the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

During the beginning of April, a series of meetings and consultations were convened to address this security concern. Notably, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Minsk on 10 April drew considerable interest. In a statement to the Belarusian news agency BelTa, he alluded to the possibility of expanding the framework of military cooperation, a topic slated for discussion during Lukashenko's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on 5 April. The precise contours of Shoigu's proposal remain ambiguous, leaving room for conjecture. One plausible interpretation entails an augmentation in the number of Russian conscripts trained at five Belarusian training grounds since October 2022. Estimates indicate that the number of Russian conscripts undergoing training in Belarus may range from several thousand to as many as 15 000¹¹.

Another area of cooperation that merits examination is potentially connected to the proposed deployment of nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, which was announced by Vladimir Putin on 25 March. Despite Lukashenko's proclamations, it is unlikely that Belarus would have any substantial influence in determining the potential use of such nuclear assets. The security guarantees sought may stem from concerns surrounding the potential employment of tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Belarus against Ukraine, which could have significant repercussions for the stability of the Lukashenko regime. Furthermore, the issue of security guarantees might also be interrelated with the question of potential engagement of Belarusian

10 *Руководитель КГБ обвинил Польшу в подготовке терактов и пригрозил «жестким ответом»*, <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/04-04-2023-rukovoditel-kgb-obvinil-polshu-v-podgotovke-teraktov-i-prigrozil-zhestkim-otvetom> [access: 4.05.2023]; A. Szabaciuk, *Białoruś, gwarancje bezpieczeństwa a sprawa polska*, „Komментарze Instytutu Europy Środkowej” 2023, no. 830.

11 *Idem, Białoruś, gwarancje bezpieczeństwa...*; БелТА: *Лукашенко и Шойгу обсудили подготовку союзной группировки войск*, „Российская Газета” 2023, no. 86.

troops in direct combat operations in Ukraine. In this manner, Lukashenko may seek to safeguard himself from the unpredictable ramifications of such decisions.

Paradoxically, Lukashenko's repeated calls for a ceasefire in Ukraine and the initiation of peace negotiations may also be related to this context. It is possible that his appeals serve as a means to mitigate the perceived risks of escalation and to advocate for diplomatic resolutions to the conflict. However, it is crucial to consider the possibility that the deliberate exaggeration of the threat from Western nations and the calls for additional security assurances may serve as tactics to buy time and further resist Russian pressure for greater Belarusian involvement in the ongoing conflict against Ukraine.

Conclusions

Since the manipulated presidential election in 2020, Belarusian propaganda has increasingly aligned with the Kremlin's narrative, seeking to delegitimize the democratic opposition by denying its agency. The opposition is accused of betraying national interests, attempting to destabilize the state, and acting as puppets of „overseas hosts”. In this propaganda framework, Poland and Lithuania, alongside the United States, are presented as the primary geopolitical adversaries of Lukashenko's regime, aiming to forcefully seize power in Belarus and exploit its resources.

Poland has been repeatedly accused in Belarusian propaganda of waging a hybrid war against Belarus, purportedly utilizing the paid democratic opposition, as well as the Polish minority and Roman Catholic Church structures, which are depicted as a „fifth column”. Poland's objectives are purportedly not only to seize power in Belarus but also to annex western Belarus and revert to the borders of 1939 – a narrative similar to the one propagated by Kremlin propaganda, which disseminates disinformation about Poland's alleged plans to annex western Ukraine.

The manipulation of historical memory constitutes a critical element in discrediting Poland both within Belarus and internationally. The launch of an investigation into the so-called „genocide of the Belarusian people” by the Belarusian General Prosecutor's Office in April 2021 exemplifies this effort. Such actions aim to discredit Polish and Lithuanian independence movements operating in Belarus, accusing them of collaboration with the Nazis during World War II. This not only tarnishes the image of the Polish minority in

Belarus, which seeks to preserve the memory of the Polish independence underground, but also discredits Poland by attributing fascist collaboration during the war, holding it responsible for alleged genocide on Belarusian territory, and accusing it of promoting fascism's resurgence.

The artificially created crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border primarily aimed to pressure the European Union to ease economic sanctions against Belarus. Simultaneously, the Lukashenko regime capitalized on this opportunity to smear the Polish authorities on the international stage. Belarusian propaganda extensively covered the alleged crimes committed by Polish authorities against migrants attempting to cross the border illegally. Poland was accused of violating fundamental human rights and disregarding international conventions regarding the granting of international protection. This served not only to discredit Poland as an advocate for the persecuted democratic opposition in Belarus and Russia but also to cast doubt on Polish appeals to respect human rights when Polish services purportedly violate international law at the border with Belarus.

The artificially magnified threat posed by Poland, Lithuania, or the North Atlantic Alliance serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it seeks to consolidate Belarusian society around Lukashenko, positioning him as the supposed sole guarantor of Belarus' security and sovereignty. This narrative also justifies the regime's brutal repression against the Belarusian opposition, accused of acting on behalf of foreign powers, and rationalizes Belarus's support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, including providing military and civilian infrastructure. Furthermore, it explains Russia's increased military presence in Belarus and its reported plans to deploy nuclear weapons. Secondly, the inflated Western threat is employed to justify the regime's hesitancy in sending the Belarusian military to Ukraine. Belarus is portrayed as a bulwark purportedly defending Russia from the North Atlantic Alliance troops stationed in Poland and the Baltic states, who are accused of planning an attack from the rear.

In conclusion, the convergence of Belarusian and Russian propaganda narratives, the manipulation of historical memory, and the artificial exaggeration of threats from the West collectively underscore the complexities of Belarusian politics and the dynamics of its interactions with neighboring countries and the broader international community. Understanding these strategic narratives and their implications is essential for comprehending the multifaceted geopolitical landscape in the region.

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Białoruska propaganda o Polsce po pełnoskalowej agresji Federacji Rosyjskiej na Ukrainę

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza białoruskiej narracji propagandowej dotyczącej Polski i granicy polsko-białoruskiej po pełnoskalowej agresji Rosji na Ukrainę 24 lutego 2022 roku. Badanie dotyczy czynników wpływających na białoruskie kampanie propagandowe i dezinformacyjne, wykorzystania polityki pamięci jako narzędzia dyskredytacji Polski, operacji dezinformacyjnych związanych ze sztucznie wywołaną migracją z Bliskiego Wschodu. Dodatkowo analizowane są działania mające na celu dyskredytację pracy polskich formacji mundurowych na granicy z Białorusią. Zastosowana metodologia badawcza zakłada wykorzystanie metody *desk research* oraz metody porównawczej.

Słowa kluczowe: Białoruś, Aleksandr Łukaszenko, Polska, granica, dezinformacja, propaganda