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Hate Speech in the Media Discourse of Belarus After the 2020 Presidential Election

Abstract. The subject of this paper is an analysis of the use of hate speech in the media discourse of Belarus in the context of social polarisation against the backdrop of a political crisis after the presidential election in 2020. The authors consider the concept of hate speech, referring to various approaches to its interpretation. The widespread use of hate speech reflects deep internal contradictions within the Belarusian society and a split based on different values. The study analysed the contents of some Belarusian Internet media, TV channels, and social media, which utilised techniques such as the denigration, dehumanisation, or marginalisation of certain groups or individuals. Researchers pay special attention to the different directions in which hate speech is used, distinguishing between domestic and foreign political contexts. In the domestic political context, hate speech in Belarus has heightened social instability and polarised the society. In contrast, in the foreign political context, hate speech has worked to construct the image of an external enemy, serving as a tool aimed at consolidating the Belarusian society and mobilising



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it against external threats. The political crisis specifically served as a catalyst for social tension within the society, leading to the active use of hate speech. Aimed at inciting hatred and intolerance, such materials pose a potential threat to public safety and social stability in the Belarusian society.

Keywords: hate speech, mass media, media discourse, Belarusian society, split of society

Mowa nienawiści w dyskursie medialnym Białorusi po wyborach prezydenckich w 2020 roku

Streszczenie. Tematem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza użycia mowy nienawiści w dyskursie medialnym Białorusi w kontekście polaryzacji społecznej na tle kryzysu politycznego po wyborach prezydenckich w 2020 roku. Autorzy rozważają pojęcie mowy nienawiści, odnosząc się do różnych podejść do jej interpretacji. Powszechne użycie mowy nienawiści świadczy o głębokich wewnętrznych sprzecznościach w społeczeństwie białoruskim oraz podziale opartym na różnych wartościach. W badaniu przeanalizowano treści niektórych białoruskich mediów internetowych, kanałów telewizyjnych oraz mediów społecznościowych, które stosowały takie techniki jak oczernianie, dehumanizacja czy marginalizacja określonych grup lub jednostek. Badacze zwracają szczególną uwagę na różne kierunki, w których używana jest mowa nienawiści, rozróżniając konteksty wewnętrzny i zewnętrzny. W kontekście wewnętrznym mowa nienawiści potęgowała niestabilność społeczną i polaryzowała społeczeństwo. W przeciwieństwie do tego, w kontekście zewnętrznym mowa nienawiści służyła do budowania wizerunku wroga zewnętrznego, będąc narzędziem mającym na celu konsolidację społeczeństwa białoruskiego oraz mobilizację go przeciwko zewnętrznym zagrożeniom. Kryzys polityczny szczególnie działał jako katalizator napięcia w społeczeństwie, prowadząc do aktywnego użycia mowy nienawiści. Skierowane na wzbudzanie nienawiści i nietolerancji, takie materiały stanowią potencjalne zagrożenie dla bezpieczeństwa publicznego i stabilności w białoruskim społeczeństwie.

Słowa kluczowe: mowa nienawiści, media masowe, dyskurs medialny, społeczeństwo białoruskie, podział społeczeństwa.

Introduction

The topic of hate speech as a subject of scientific analysis and a social phenomenon has attracted considerable interest among researchers in recent years. This includes linguists, sociologists, political scientists, legal scholars, cultural researchers, and a broader range of humanists. This trend indicates the interdisciplinary nature of research on this phenomenon in contemporary science, allowing hate speech to be viewed not only as a linguistic issue, but also as a sociopolitical

phenomenon. Moreover, manifestations of hate speech in modern mass media have led to numerous monitoring efforts. These efforts include the creation of reports concerning the content characteristics of specific media outlets, social networks, and more. It is the sociopolitical aspect of this phenomenon that constitutes the focus of our interest.

The dynamic development of the information society implies the involvement of an increasing number of people in information flows who perceive and transmit various narratives. In this context, the growing significance of the information space, as well as the role and influence of media on social processes as a whole and on individuals, becomes crucial. The interest in the phenomenon of hate speech is driven by the fact that the use of elements of verbalisation within the communicative-pragmatic category of hostility poses serious social risks, as it can manifest as a form of discrimination and intolerance (Vasylenko, 2019: 141). In this regard, a significant area of research interest for us lies in analysing the use of hate speech in public communication within Belarus.

This article examines the manifestations of hate speech following the 2020 presidential election in Belarus through a content analysis of various Belarusian media outlets (television, online media, and social media). It also analyses the underlying factors contributing to the emergence of this phenomenon in Belarus. This process was accompanied by increasing social tension and heightened information activity within the Belarusian society. Thus, the primary aim of the study is to attempt to represent the phenomenon of hate speech in the media discourse of Belarus amidst a political crisis and social polarisation. The research was conducted using monitoring methods and elements of qualitative content analysis.

Hate speech and media discourse – defining concepts

There are various interpretations of hate speech that provide insights into different aspects and manifestations of this phenomenon. As there is no universally accepted definition, different countries and international organisations have developed their own terminology for “hate speech”.

For instance, the Cambridge Dictionary defines this phenomenon as “public speech expressing hatred or inciting violence against a person or group based on something such as race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation” (Hate speech, 2013).

Furthermore, in 1997, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation stating that

the term ‘hate speech’ should be understood to cover all forms of expression that incite, promote, support, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance manifested in the form

of aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination against minorities, and hostility towards them, as well as towards immigrants and persons of immigrant descent (Recommendation..., 1997).

In the OSCE, hate speech is understood as “various types of expressions based on animosity that demonstrate or incite hatred against a group of people (or an individual because of their group affiliation) (from the English term ‘hate speech’, which can also be translated as ‘language of hatred’ or ‘propaganda of hatred’)” (Zlochyny..., 2009).

Researchers at the Russian information and analytical centre “SOVA” define hate speech as any inappropriate statements directed at ethnic and religious groups or their representatives (Kozhevnikova, 2006).

Another interpretation of hate speech is provided by the Belarusian human rights initiative “Journalists for Tolerance”. According to this organisation, hate speech refers to statements that pose a threat to public safety, incite hostility, and dehumanise specific groups of people (Monitoring yazyka vrazhdy..., 2020). Based on this definition, in this article we conducted the monitoring and selection of analysed materials from various Belarusian media.

An analysis of recent research

Research dedicated to identifying and studying hate speech in the Belarusian information space has emerged relatively recently. In particular, human rights initiatives and civil organisations have published monitoring reports on hate speech in local media. In 2020, the aforementioned human rights initiative “Journalists for Tolerance” released findings on hate speech in the media of Belarus concerning individuals from vulnerable groups in the context of the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic (Monitoring yazyka vrazhdy..., 2020).

Additionally, a series of publications on this topic has been prepared by the authors of the Media IQ project, who primarily focus on manifestations of hate speech in the broadcasts of state media in Belarus (*Yazyk vrazhdy i nekorrektnaya leksika v belarusskikh media*, 2021). It is also worth noting the periodic analytical reviews of regional press, which have a significant influence on public opinion regarding the presence of hate speech (*Yazyk vrazhdy v Mogilevskoj oblasti*, 2017; *Yazyk vrazhdy. Obozrenie Mogilevskoj regionalnoj pressy za 2016 god*, 2017).

Among researchers focusing on the manifestations of hate speech or language discourse in Belarus, notable works include those by I. Posokhin (2020), A. Kiklewicz and H. Potekhina (2021), O. Aleshko-Lessels and A. Eliseev (Aleshko-Lessels, Eliseev, 2021; Eliseev, 2020), E. Vasilenko (2019), and others. Thus, it can be seen that in recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the topic of hate speech within the Belarusian information space.

In analysing this issue, it is also important to note that its manifestations have deep-rooted causes and preconditions. Therefore, in our view, the issue of hate speech should be examined in the context of the societal divide in Belarus, which has become more pronounced against the backdrop of the political crisis following the 2020 presidential election. A significant phenomenon in the domestic political reality of modern Belarus has been the observed dualism within the Belarusian society concerning official symbols, the state language, civil society institutions, and value orientations. In our opinion, these last factors have been and continue to be the most significant contributors to the divide within the Belarusian society.

A societal divide

The political crisis in Belarus, triggered by the largest protests in the history of independent Belarus following the announcement of election results in August 2020, marked a turning point in modern Belarus. On the one hand, the consequences of the confrontation between the authorities and the active segment of the society led to greater geopolitical isolation of the state; on the other hand, they brought to the forefront the existing internal issues within the Belarusian society. According to Belarusian researcher R. Astapenya, this divide runs deeper than a mere conditional boundary between supporters and opponents of Alexander Lukashenko, with potential long-term repercussions (Astapenya, 2021).

In particular, significant internal contradictions crystallised within the Belarusian society during political protests. Over many years, a definitive societal divide has emerged, characterised by the formation of two groups that have begun to starkly oppose each other.

The divide within the Belarusian society has been pointed out repeatedly by local sociologists and philosophers. Analysing the roots of this division, philosopher V. Matskevich examines the ideological crisis that followed the collapse of the USSR: “The new authorities never initiated a process of decommunisation and failed to present any alternative worldview to communist ideology... Alongside the structures that remained from the Soviet era or were created by the official authorities, alternative civil society organisations began to emerge” (Boguslavskaya, 2019). With the rise and consolidation of Alexander Lukashenko’s power, the Belarusian society split into a pro-government majority and an oppositional-minded minority, as demonstrated by anti-government rallies and protests. Belarusian sociologist O. Manaev noted back in 2013 that “the divide in society is the main historical fault of Alexander Lukashenko, who relied on those who idolise him while pushing other groups to the periphery” (Manaev, 2013). Consequently, the value-based and ideological contradictions that had long existed within the Belarusian society remained unresolved.

The absence of independent sociology in Belarus resulted in the dynamics of social transformations within the state being studied only by external sociological groups. For instance, the existence of a societal divide regarding the perceptions of Alexander Lukashenko is confirmed by sociological surveys conducted in the period of 1997–1998. An analysis of the economic values of the Belarusian society conducted by the Independent Institute for Social-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) indicates that the beliefs of the president's supporters are primarily ideologically political in nature and are weakly connected to reality, suggesting that they will lose their influence sooner or later (Raskol. Opros..., 1998). The analysis of survey results shows that Alexander Lukashenko and his policies have become the most powerful factor in dividing the Belarusian electorate and society as a whole. A significant conclusion of the study is that there is almost nothing in common between the supporters and the opponents of the president, which leads to the impression that two different nations coexist within Belarus (Raskol. Opros... 1998).

In this context, the opinion of Professor H. Ioffe from Radford University is particularly indicative. He asserts that “The Belarusian society has long lived in a state of division, but it has now reached dangerous proportions. There is a mutual demonisation of the two parts of society, creating the impression that these are two different nations. In such a state, Belarus cannot remain an independent state for long” (Ioffe, 2021). Considering the findings of sociological research and expert evaluations, it can be stated that the existing divide in the Belarusian society is fundamentally rooted in value-based and ideological orientations rather than linguistic, religious, or national factors.

According to the results of a study conducted by Chatham House from 23 July to 3 August 2021, there are three key segments within the Belarusian society: the protest core (36%), the neutral segment (36%), and the supporters of Alexander Lukashenko (28%) (Chatham House..., 2021). These results are not representative, as they were obtained through telephone surveys and do not take into account opinions of rural residents. However, in the absence of independent sociology in contemporary Belarus, this survey provides a general overview among politically active citizens, which includes both active opponents and supporters of Alexander Lukashenko and the Belarusian authorities.

At the same time, the neutral segment is not politically active and does not openly support any of the competing groups, which are fundamentally opposed to each other. Thus, against the backdrop of the conflict between these two active groups, a societal divide is evident, which is further exacerbated by the active use of hate speech by both sides. This process is accompanied by each side constructing internal communication based on diametrically opposed narratives, value systems, and rhetoric directed towards the other side.

Below, we will examine specific examples of hate speech in Belarusian media discourse. In our opinion, this phenomenon should be considered in two contexts:

the domestic political context (concerning specific individuals, groups, and processes within Belarus) and the foreign political context (pertaining to individual countries or political alliances).

Hate speech – the domestic political context

Alongside the development of the political crisis in Belarus, there has been a notable rise in rhetoric that assigns negative traits and characteristics to specific individuals or various social groups. Both protest supporters and the proponents of the current official authority have employed negative connotations directed at their opponents with varying degrees of intensity.

An important feature of the Belarusian media discourse has been the active use of labels and neologisms that mark political opponents and ascribe offensive connotations within the framework of the “us” versus “them” narrative. This has led to the formation of two conflicting groups, commonly referred to as “*zmagary*” and “*yabatski*”. The former political label denotes citizens opposing the authorities and, according to Belarusian analyst Eliseev, serves as the Belarusian equivalent of “Banderites” in anti-Ukrainian propaganda narratives (Eliseev, 2020). The second group, conversely, has become widespread in opposition media to negatively denote the supporters of Alexander Lukashenko.

In our view, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that the informational platform for the former group primarily consisted of social media, while the latter utilised more official communication channels. This primarily refers to state-run Belarusian television channels, a vast network of similarly oriented Internet media, and statements from official representatives of the authorities, including Alexander Lukashenko himself. This significantly shapes propaganda capabilities and influences the level of the dissemination and conveyance of necessary messages to a broader audience, reinforcing corresponding labels in public consciousness.

In particular, various methods of discrediting political opponents were used by both sides through attributing negative qualities and unlawful actions to them. Analysing the linguistic and visual components of the sociopolitical confrontation in Belarus at the onset of the political crisis in 2020, Slovak researcher I. Posokhin notes that, from the linguistic perspective, both sides exhibit similar strategies of the marginalisation, demonisation, and dehumanisation of their opponents (Posokhin, 2020). Numerous examples of this can be observed, particularly in news segments on television, Internet media contents, and social media publications.

In addition to the aforementioned general labels (“*zmagary*” and “*yabatski*”), which denote an affiliation with a particular political camp or adherence to corresponding values, it is important to point to the derivatives of these expressions.

Below, we will examine some of the most frequently used labels by representatives of the opposition in one of the most popular and widespread Telegram channels among Belarusian protesters, namely Nexta Live.

Referring to the imagery and themes of World War II in relation to the Belarusian police, terms such as “fascists” are employed to convey strong negative sentiments. This usage reflects a broader tendency within the discourse to invoke historical contexts that resonate with the current political climate, effectively reinforcing the vilification of law enforcement and the government (Segodnya boju MMA..., 2020; Fashisty brutalno..., 2020) – “*politsai*” (Prosto poslushajte..., 2020; Policai budut usilenno..., 2020; Segodnya pervoe voskresene..., 2020) and “*karateli*” (Pytki OMONa, 2020; Bukvalno gory cvetov i zapisok, 2020). To dehumanise and marginalise representatives of the security forces, terms such as “*kozly and ublydki*” were used (Mochi kozlov! Mochi ublyudkov!, 2020; 2 goda kolonii..., 2021), “*nasiloviki*” and “*biomusor*” (Iniciativa BYPOL..., 2020), “*slaboviki*” (GUBOP priznal svoyu bespomoshhnost, 2021; CHu! 17/10 – Marsh molodosti, 2020), or “dogs of the regime” (Po dannym pravozashhitnogo centra “Vesna”..., 2021; Stalo izvestno o gibeli..., 2020; Segodnya v Minske karateli..., 2020).

A separate place in this context is occupied by the figure of Alexander Lukashenko, who is subjected to techniques aimed at his demonisation in the eyes of Belarusians; terms that are applied include: “*Lukaszkesu*” (Polsha uproszhaet..., 2020; Deneg net, no vy derzhites, 2021), “*bloody dictator*” (Belarus zhyve!, 2020; V Zhlobine byla sovershena provokaciya..., 2020), as well as those for the purposes of marginalisation, dehumanisation, and ridicule: “*cockroach*” (Provodim rejdy..., 2020; Belorusy bedneyut..., 2020), “*lukavyj*” (Po sledam vcherashnego strima..., 2021; Geopolitika ot lukavogo, 2020), “*grandfather*” (Prostitute, tut ded..., 2021; Lukashenko namerenno obostryaet..., 2021), “*Shklov pensioner*” (Nedelyu nazad Tarakan..., 2020), and “*collective farm Fuhrer*” (Volyu Belorusov ne slomit, 2020; Marshi v Voskresene, 2020; Marsh sosedej, 2020). Meanwhile, supporters of the Belarusian ruler are collectively referred to as “*Lukashists*” (Ozverevshij yabatka..., 2020) and “*yabatski*” (V seti poyavilos video..., 2021; Iniciativa BYPOL..., 2020). Thus, the designations used by the opponents of the authorities are primarily related to Alexander Lukashenko and the representatives of the security forces.

As for the designations used by the authorities, their supporters, and state media in relation to the protesters, similar trends can be noted. For example, on the Belarusian state television, techniques aimed at dehumanising opposition representatives were employed, namely “*herd*” (Lica protesta..., 2021), “*handheld hamsters*” (Lica protesta..., 2021), “*sheep*” (Lukashenko: vybory proshli..., 2020), “*mold*” and “*demons*” (Izvrashhency, ubijcy..., 2021), “*witches*” (Na liniyu 102..., 2021), “*ghouls*” and “*pigs*” (Azaryonok: nam obyavlena vojna, 2021), “*jackals*” (Grigorij Azaryonok..., 2020), as well as “*snakes and rats, spiders and toads*” (Aleksej Dzermant o vystuplenii Prezidenta..., 2021). In some

cases, dehumanisation masks violence, as it is psychologically easier to approve of it against animals than against humans (Zmei i krysy, pauki i zhaby..., 2021).

Attempts at the marginalisation, discrediting, and demonisation of political opponents are also commonly made. Identical rhetoric has been observed from the authorities (Obkurennye, pyanyh mnogo, s narkotikami..., 2020). As to designations that carry a deliberately negative or ironic connotation, the following labels are applied: “*zmagary*” (Lukashenko: sidyashhie za rubezhom “*zmagary*”..., 2020), “*sviadomyia*” (Lukashenko o prizyvah..., 2020), “*incredible*” (Neveroyatnye..., 2020), “*drug addicts*” (Aleksandr Lukashenko nazval protestuyushhih..., 2020), “*maidanutye*” (Lukashenko: Majdanov v Belarusi ne budet, 2020), “*bastards*” (Grigorij Azaryonok..., 2020), “*murderers, terrorists, and rapists*” (Zhestokie ubijcy..., 2020), “*principle-less, morally deformed, and dangerous to society beasts*” (Zhestokie ubijcy..., 2020), and others. A common technique is the use of certain words in Belarusian within a Russian speech or Russian-language texts. For example, by using Belarusian words such as “*zmagary*” or “*sviadomyia*” and endowing them with ironic connotations, the direct meaning of these words is simultaneously devalued, as is the Belarusian language itself (Neveroyatnyj zmagar, 2021).

Based on the rhetoric presented above, it is important to note the active participation of state media in the aforementioned division of the Belarusian society into the supporters of the authorities, who are portrayed exclusively in a positive light, and their opponents, against whom the aforementioned techniques are used. In this context, it is appropriate to mention the research by analysts from the international expert initiative ISANS, namely Aleshko-Lessels and Eliseev, titled “Discrediting Political Opponents in Belarusian State Media and Hate Rhetoric.” The authors of the article emphasise the danger of hate rhetoric in the form of explicit or implicit calls for violence and note that “its systematic application can intensify tensions in society and foster enmity between groups of the population with different political views” (Aleshko-Lessels, Eliseev, 2021).

Hate speech – the external political context

A separate place in the Belarusian media discourse is devoted to discrediting and creating a negative image of other states. First and foremost, this concerns Belarus’ neighbouring countries: Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine. A characteristic technique in this regard is the comparison of these countries with Nazi Germany and veiled accusations of anti-Semitism, which “go hand in hand with Russophobia” (Rusofobiya i antisemitizm idut ruka ob ruku, 2020), as “the regimes ruling in the Baltic states, Warsaw, and Kyiv trace their lineage to the pre-war regimes of Poland and the Baltics, as well as to the Banderites in Ukraine. All

these regimes have allied themselves with Hitler” (Rusofobiya i antisemitizm idut ruka ob ruku, 2020). The appeal to historical memory and events from World War II is sensitive for the Belarusian society. Thus, by comparing neighbouring states policies to those of fascists, there is an attempt to reinforce labels based on negative emotions and images within the society.

On certain platforms, such as Sputnik.by, commentators sometimes use quite emotional and derogatory rhetoric regarding Poland, employing specific clichés and phrases. For example, the Polish state is positioned as a “watchdog of American imperialism” (Sergeev: soyuz Belarusi i Rossii..., 2019) and as the “main bulldog of the USA” (Baranec: v sluchae voennoj ugrozy..., 2019).

When examining this discourse, particular attention should be paid to the contemptuous rhetoric concerning Ukraine. In various segments on Belarusian television, references to Ukraine are marked by a degree of emotionality and accompanied by evaluative judgments. The ironic tone towards the Ukrainian state and its authorities is reflected, in particular, in the following quotes: “having made a choice different from Belarus,” “renouncing faith and kinship,” and that Ukraine “is forced to be a lackey for the new masters” (Nasha rodnaya, bratskaya Ukraina..., 2020; Ukraina, nasha slavyanskaya sestra..., 2020).

Against this backdrop, a striking technique is the proposal of a dichotomy of “us”–“them,” “friend”–“enemy.” This represents an attempt to impose the image of an enemy to the Belarusian society. It suggests that negative phenomena within Belarus are primarily provoked by external influences, threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. At the same time, a positive and attractive image of Russia is constructed as the only possible ally in defending against the hostile West (Rezolyuciya Evroparlamenta..., 2020).

Thus, the use of hate speech with reference to Belarus’ neighbouring countries is accompanied by attempts to discredit them through derogatory rhetoric and appeals to historical memory and emotions. According to a Slovak media expert and the executive director of the international organisation MEMO 98, R. Kuzhel, the primary aim of using hate speech is to speculate on people’s emotions and manipulate them, which is effective when there is an emphasis on emotions (Manipulyacii..., 2021).

Conclusion

The active use of hate speech in Belarusian media discourse is primarily driven by the long-standing division within the Belarusian society, which has deepened since the mid-1990s. Key factors of this divide include internal political contradictions and value disagreements among Belarusians. The political crisis in Belarus, which emerged after the presidential election in 2020, served as a catalyst

It is important to note the different orientations of hate speech usage. While the internal political context has exacerbated social instability and polarised society, hate speech in the external political context aimed to construct an image of an external enemy. This was intended to consolidate and mobilise the Belarusian society against threats. Furthermore, the active use of hate speech as well as the disparagement, dehumanisation, or marginalisation of specific groups could lead to socially-dangerous phenomena and have negative consequences for the Belarusian society in the future.

[illegible]

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