"POWER" AS AN IDENTITY CATEGORY IN THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE POLITICAL DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF BELARUS

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This paper analyses ways of speaking about politics in Russian-language political discourse by focusing on key cultural terms that describe political relationships and positionality. Data were collected from articles on Russian-language news sites and Russian-language comments on "Facebook". The analysis shows how "power" is constructed as an identity category through oppositional codes and metonymic substitution in public political discourse. Agonistic relationships are political entities reflected in political discourse and a cornerstone for constructing and maintaining the status quo among participants in public political discussions. This analysis shows how discursive oppositions in the Belarusian context are central to the reproduction of populist rhetoric. In sum, this study advances a cultural mode of thinking about political events.

KEYWORDS: political discourse, cultural discourse analysis, identity, power, Belarus

INTRODUCTION: POWER AS IDENTITY

During the election for the office of Belarus's President in 2020, Lidiya Ermoshina, an ally of the incumbent and chair of Belarus's Central Election Commission, gave an interview to the state-owned newspaper, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi* on 17 June 2020 (Euroradio 2020). The interview came shortly after the pro-democracy activist Sergei Tsikhanovsky was released from detention and announced his intention to run for president. His supporters were collecting signatures on a public square during the officially permitted period to put his name on the ballot. However,

Tsikhanovsky was arrested and later imprisoned; his spouse, Svetlana Tsikhanovska-ya, then ran in the election campaign instead, receiving widespread public support.

One statement by Ermoshina caught widespread attention: "The Tsikhanovsky group was striving to shatter the situation, used the collection of signatures, directing it toward a change of power" (author's translation). Speaking formally and without apparent self-awareness, she said that collecting signatures for an election was a threat because this might result in a "change of power". The irony of this statement was not lost on Belarus's politically active populace. Soon afterwards, a meme went viral across the Russian-language Internet (i.e., Belarus, Ukraine, Russia): "The opposition wanted to seize power via elections" (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Pryanikov (2020). Author's translation: "The opposition wanted to seize power via elections".

Even in Belarus, where leaders often make official statements that do not consider citizens' concerns (Klymenko 2016), Ermoshina's tone-deaf statement was remarkable.

This study explores what it means for state officials to speak like Ermoshina, and why such statements lead to responses as illustrated by this meme. Focusing on the web of relationships discursively constructed between "power", political processes and identity, this study explores the following questions: (1) What forms of relating between themselves and others do Belarusians discursively construct when talking about politics? (2) How does this discursive construction relate to different identities? (3) How can an understanding of social and historical contexts of discursive constructions allow a cultural mode of thinking about politics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Rich points" and a cultural mode of thinking about politics

To understand a culture, we should look at "rich points" – encounters with words or expressions that are puzzling because they are tied to richly layered and interconnected concepts of meaning (Agar 1994, Sandel 2015). Russian-language political vocabulary has many such rich points, where terms such as *vlast'* ("power") or *gosudarstvo* ("state") have layers of meaning that are language – and culture-specific; this includes "major rich points" – instances even cultural participants who are "insiders" find incomprehensible (Agar 2006). Hence, by examining discourses and political speech in Belarus, we uncover here the rich, cultural meanings of key Russian-language political terms and show what can be gained from a cultural mode of thinking about politics (Boromisza-Habashi 2013).

Belarus: Context and Studies

Belarus is a post-Soviet republic that gained independence in 1991 and, since 1994, has been ruled by the authoritarian leader, President Alexander Lukashenko. After winning the popular vote in a freely contested election in Belarus's first presidential election, he won each succeeding election by using the tactics of authoritarian leaders: controlling the press, eliminating the opposition and changing vote tallies (Wilson 2011). Hence, Belarus has earned the moniker of the "last dictatorship in Europe", whereby civic and political engagement are barred and marginalised, creating conditions of civic conformity and political passivity under the state (Bedford 2017; Pham and Kaleja 2021).

This does not mean, however, that the state has total control over society. Opposition movements are found in former Soviet bloc countries that are non-political and cultural (Kubik 1994). In Soviet times, opposition happened in underground and dissident movements; in such activities as *stiob*, satirically mocking authorities and official state-related practices (Boyer and Yurchak 2010); or *kvartirniki*, private meetings attended by poets, artists, writers, musicians and other non-conforming individuals (Yurchak 2005). More recently, Belarus has witnessed the proliferation of public creative practices and related forms of grassroots public life, such as urban festivals, public lectures, workshops, poetry and music jams (Dinerstein and Sandel 2024; Street 2019). Belarusians have introduced a variety of social and cultural routines, alternatives to state-sponsored activities that can transform everyday social and cultural life and confront the status quo (Dinerstein 2021; Dinerstein and Sandel 2023). Yet the problem remains: political actors and other Belarusians, wittingly and unwittingly, repeatedly construct a discursive opposition between the "state" and the "people" through the category of "power" in political discussions and everyday talk.

Many studies of Belarus use a top-down approach, such as studies of nation-building and national identity (e.g., Bekus 2010; Fabrykant 2019; Ioffe 2008; Wilson 2011), politics, identity, democratic processes (e.g., Bedford 2017; Bekus 2014; Ioffe 2008; Wilson 2011) and collective and historical memory (e.g., Goujon 2010; Wilson 2011). Accounts of Belarusian identity and culture are also provided. For example, Cherniyavskaya (2006) describes the archetype of "a traditional Belarusian" as shown via folklore data; Engelking (2013) examines *kolkhozniks*, who define themselves as simple, hardworking men "from here" that are responsible for their own well-being; and Cherniyavskaya (2010) explains historical cultural divisions within Belarusian society.

A "bottom-up" understanding of Belarus can also be found. For instance, Rohava (2017, 2020) examines how Belarusians reflect on the meaning of national identity, the meaning of state celebrations and related forms of state-sponsored public life. Vasilyeva (2019) shows how a Belarusian identity is enacted in everyday interactions, and how speaking either Russian or Belarusian can be a marker of identity. Others have studied the period of "soft Belarusization" (Boulègue et al. 2018), when people were actively involved in independent grassroots activities that facilitated social and cultural spaces where alternative identities and ideologies were enacted, spread and reproduced (Dinerstein and Sandel 2023).

These studies show that current protest movements, while motivated by precipitating activities such as election fraud, violations of the law and repression, are also the outgrowth of cultural differences across society or the "two parallel Belaruses", representing "grassroots" and "state" cultures (Dinerstein 2021). They also point to political processes in Belarus as cultural spaces that require an understanding of how people perceive and discursively construct politics. Hence, this paper suggests a cultural mode of thinking about politics (Boromisza-Habashi 2013) that questions simplistic assumptions about political meaning and discourse.

CULTURAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION

Discourses both shape and are shaped by ongoing social processes (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Fairclough 1995) and play significant roles in the continuous reproduction of ideologies – shared systems of beliefs and values which guide everyday practices and give particular meaning to the world (van Dijk 2007). Ideologies often emerge out of conflict and struggle, thus creating "Us" and "Them" dichotomies and may be used to legitimate opposition and resistance to the status quo (van Dijk 2007). Furthermore, discourse is not only reflected in talk or cultural texts but also seen in what is silenced, repressed and not openly stated – discourse assumes

a particular articulation in the society that both facilitates a discourse and is reproduced in it (Foucault 2004, 28).

We draw upon cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) and the ethnography of communication (EOC) to examine the discourses of power and identity. EOC focuses on how culture is constructed and negotiated through various communicative means and meanings (Fitch 2005). To make sense of a culture, one should not simply document behaviours but also understand the meanings attributed to them (Leeds-Hurwitz 2005). CuDA claims that culture is a dynamic, creative and transformative process. Whenever people engage in communication, they produce meta-cultural commentary about identities, relationships, feelings, acting, dwelling and timing (Carbaugh 2007; Carbaugh et al. 2024). These offer insights into cultural practices and meanings. Moreover, cultures are communal conversations – a historically situated and ongoing process whereby participants construct, express and negotiate the terms of their social life (Philipsen 2002).

Therefore, we analyse words as cultural concepts that are packed with local meaning, used routinely and prominently or are potent in their meaning (Carbaugh 2007, 177). For example, the Israeli term *dugri* refers to direct, dense speech among the Sabra Jews (Katriel 2004); the interplay between *puhuminen* (speaking) and *vaikeneminen* (silence) in Finnish discourse reflects an oppositional agonistic relationship between "traditional" and "globalised" culture; and the British idiom "stiff upper lip" reflects shared cultural stereotypes about politeness as opposed to "exhibitionism" (Wilkins 2006, 2017). Other cultural terms refer to various communication rituals and practices, such as Israeli *griping* (a form of plaintive talk) (Katriel 1985), Bulgarian *oplakvane* (complaining) (Sotirova 2018) or German *jammern* (whining) (Winchatz 2017). Thus, the key premise is that all cultural discourses contain terms that are deeply symbolic and studied as "a historically transmitted expressive system of communication practices, of acts, events, and styles, which are composed of specific symbols, symbolic forms, norms, and their meanings" (Carbaugh 2007, 169).

We analyse key cultural terms in political discourse and their associated local meanings in collective activities and for social and political events from the standpoint of cultural participants (Carbaugh 2017). Furthermore, since concepts and practices unfamiliar to an outsider may have unexpected or distinctive meanings, it is necessary to study these from an insider's perspective. Hence, we approach the Belarusian community through its communal conversation, whereby cultural terms are explicated through both current cultural discourse and historical perspectives.

Scholars describe ethnographic research as a cyclical investigative enterprise (Leeds-Hurwitz 2005). EOC focuses on discovering local cultural meanings, symbols and the symbolic forms that are found in ongoing communication within a given speech community (Carbaugh and Hastings 1992, 157) and on training one's

"eyes and ears to local means of communicating, and to local system of meanings associated with those means" (Philipsen 2009, 88). CuDA suggests that to understand a practice, the researcher should first analyse discursive *hubs* (what is being said – a discursive form) and, second, interpret the *radiants* of meaning (what is being claimed about the discursive form) to explicate meta-cultural commentary enacted in and about the practice (Carbaugh 2007).

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The goal of CuDA is to examine cultural practices based on hubs and radiants of meaning in symbolic terms that show identity, relations, feelings, acting, dwelling or timing (Carbaugh 2007; Carbaugh et al. 2024). This includes six hubs and radiants of meaning: being/identity, relationship, feeling, acting, dwelling and timing. Of these, we focus on two: the hub of *being/identity* and the radiants of *acting* and *relating* in order to understand routine communication practices according to indigenous terms and participants' meanings (Carbaugh 2017). We thus analyse "power" as a key cultural term that is potent in meaning and used routinely in public political discussions in Belarus. However, we do not analyse symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) or power dimensions (Foucault 2004), nor provide a critical analysis of power relations that tap into existing power structures behind the language, as this is beyond the aims of this study.

Key cultural terms about identity and forms of relating in political discourse were collected from participant observation, public discussions and media accounts about political topics. Field observations took place between May 2020 (when pre-election activities in Belarus began) and February 2022 (when a referendum was held to change the country's constitution), resulting in a collection of video and photo materials (approximately five hundred items) and in-situ reflection papers (approximately 20,000 words).

From informal conversations with Belarusians, the first author found that, regardless of political affiliation, participants used discursive oppositions that consisted of similar key terms when describing political events. Belarusians contrasted "state" and "people" or "people" and "authorities" while also speaking of *vlast'* ("political power") in personified form when referring to state institutions and officials. Similar discursive oppositions were found in previous research on public creativity, where cultural participants drew divisions between the "two parallel Belaruses", where "creative people" were excluded from the public events organised via *vlast'* and "gosudarstvo" ("the state") (Dinerstein 2021). The same dynamic was observed in public messages displayed by protesters in 2020 (the reference illustration was withheld for safety concern).

The first author followed both the activities that unfolded in Minsk in 2020 and local news about the ongoing political situation in both independent and state

media. Examples of key terms in political discourse were identified. In addition, public discussion was followed on Facebook and Telegram, recording comments by supporters and opponents of the political authorities. This analysis allowed us to identify the salient political terms most active in identity discourse as used in public discussion.

Next, a focused analysis of news and social media accounts was done to extract themes about politics in public commentary by state officials and citizens. This examined the degree to which political arguments used the same and/or a consistent political vocabulary across political topics, themes and actors. The purpose was twofold: (1) to extract key cultural terms from participants' accounts to assemble an analytic interpretive lens based on local codes and meanings, and (2) to discover the codes and meanings that allowed for the interpretation of political activities and events.

Two online media outlets were selected: Sputnik.by and Onliner.by. There were three reasons for selecting these two outlets. First, each used Russian as a primary language in publications and had a similar-sized online audience in Belarus. According to Similarweb, a web service that shows data on online audiences and their demographics based on location, these two media outlets had similar online audiences in terms of numbers and demographics. Likewise, since both outlets used Russian and the study focused on Russian-language political discourse, comparisons could be made based on the same language.

Since a 1995 referendum granting Russian and Belarusian official language status, the Russian language has received institutional support. In contrast, Belarusian has been marginalised (Bekus 2014), hence why we focus on Russian-language political discourse – Russian is the language used by most Belarusians in everyday communication. While we acknowledge that the use of the Belarusian language can be an important marker of one's identity (Fabrykant 2019; Vasilyeva 2019), and in some situations, the choice of Belarusian over Russian may reflect an oppositional political stance (Vasilyeva 2023), we analyse Russian-language political discourse because it is the language that permeates most spheres of Belarusian society; that is, it is used the most widely inside the state bureaucracy as well as for education, work, media and everyday life.

The second reason for choosing these outlets was their difference in coverage: Sputnik.by leaned more towards official-oriented coverage, while Onliner.by tended towards independent-oriented coverage. Since media consumption tracks with political stance – pro or anti-government (Greene 2022) – comparisons across political views could be made. Additionally, the Belarusian media system has been deeply divided, with state-affiliated media financially supported by the state to serve the "common majority" by spreading the official narrative. Independent media is left to survive on its own, allegedly offering coverage for the "advanced minority" that goes beyond the official narrative; it is especially critical when covering political

events and electoral campaigns (Manaev 2014). It was essential to compare whether the use of key political terms would differ between the two media outlets when they report on the same political events.

Third, both outlets operated between May 2020 and February 2022 and had reporters and journalists working in Belarus when other major independent media (e.g., TUT.by) had either been closed by the authorities or operated outside the country (e.g., Belsat). Other major official online media (e.g., BelTA) had a smaller online audience.

Eleven search terms, based upon prominent political persons and events, were selected for data collection: "Sergei Tsikhanovsky", "Roman Protasevich", "Roman Bondarenko", "Victor Babariko", "Svetlana Tsikhanovskaya", "Bruzgi" (a border crossing Between Belarus and Poland associated with refugee crisis), "referendum on the constitution", "Alexander Taraykovsky", "Maria Kolesnikova", "TUT.by closure" and "police raid at BELAPAN". Publicly available Facebook posts on these topics were also collected. All corresponding entries posted between May 2020 and February 2022 on each media outlet's website were analysed. As a result, 1,027 media articles were found on Sputnik.by, 314 on Onliner.by and 159 posts on Facebook. The first author and a research assistant, paid for a three-month data collection assignment using guidelines developed by the first author, then looked at the parts of each media article in the sample. Title, body and direct quotes were employed to identify whether they contained the previously identified key terms: "*vlast'*" (power), "*vlasti'*" (those in power), "*gosudarstvo*" (state), "*strana*" (country), "*narod*" (people), "*liudi*" (people), "*suverenitet*" (sovereignty) and "*zapad*" (west). To find the key terms used by journalists, we analysed titles and the body of each article by excluding quoted passages. For the analysis of the key terms used by actors, such as officials, oppositional figures, activists, "regular" citizens and experts, we studied the quoted passages. This method was used to compare the different ways in which such types of actors (e.g., journalists vs others) used key political terms.

It was also important to collect data to determine how the key terms were used by citizens who were not political experts, journalists, political figures or activists. Thus, the first 30 public posts on Facebook per search term (from 2020 to 2022) were additionally analysed to learn how key terms were used across the same 11 topics from the collected data in Onliner.by and Sputnik.by. Since many Facebook users deleted their posts or changed privacy settings after the 2020 political protests – to avoid potential prosecution – for some, it was not possible to find 30 public posts per topic. Therefore, 159 posts were selected for further analysis.

This study examines how identity emerges and is constructed – a dynamic and fragmented process, an accomplishment performed or enacted by an individual or a group in scenes and settings (Tracy 2002, 17). Identities can be *ratified*, *contested*

or *rejected* in interactions and communication practices (Carbaugh 1996, 146), which are created and maintained through local contexts of interaction; they are discursive constructs that emerge from these interactions (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 585–586). Identities can also appear across categories of nation, ethnicity, race, class and rank, and gender (Kroskrity 2000). Yet these categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact on multiple levels. Thus, people experience what Kroskrity (2000, 112) calls "repertoires of identity". Identities may also be situational: group members establish situationally relevant identities enacted within the interaction (ibid., 113). The choice of situational identities involves both individual autonomous agency and social structure, meaning that one is not entirely free in enacting or playing out a particular identity; however, one is also not fully restrained by the outside environment (ibid., 113).

In sum, identity is *positioned* in discourses (Hall 1990, Carbaugh 1996) that come from interactions and narratives which originate both from within a group and are offered by outsiders (Barth 1969, 14). Hence, identities are shaped by interactions with and, in distinction, from outsiders (ibid.). This leads our attention to the explicit and implicit messages about identity in communication: by looking at identity terms, pronouns, terms of address or membership categorisation devices (Carbaugh 2007, 175). Therefore, this analysis shows the relationship between key cultural terms in Russian-language public political discourse and the ways of speaking about politics that allow for the construction of "power" as an identity category.

Thus, attention was paid to the source of the discourse (what kind of actor used key terms) represented in both news media and Facebook. We identified actors whose quotes were found in media articles: public officials, unofficial political actors, official experts, independent experts, regular citizens, journalists, foreign officials (translated into Russian by media), foreign experts (translated into Russian by media), foreign officials (original quote in Russian) and foreign experts (original quote in Russian). These actor categories were identified from the articles; they were not pre-determined but developed in subsequent data analyses.

For Facebook, we selected only those posts authored by regular users not explicitly affiliated with mass media, political entities or expert communities: the aim was to find examples of political discourse and key terms as used by Belarusians not directly involved in professional politics, journalism or expert practice. For each post, we also looked at first-level comments and second-level replies when a first-level comment contained a key term. This meant that in addition to analysing each of the 159 posts, we did further analysis of how the content of each post was discussed by those who commented on each post. Thus, the analysis of posts also included the analysis of comments and replies to these comments, which increased the data. That is why we had to limit the number of Facebook posts analysed, since some posts generated multiple

discussions. This allowed us to see how key political terms were used by people in public online discussion. Thus, we collected news outlets and Facebook examples from a range of actors discussing the same political topics. This showed whether actors employed the same political vocabulary, and if so, what differences/similarities emerged.

<div align="center">ANALYSIS</div>

Key political terms identified during initial field observations appear in all parts of the media articles and Facebook posts – titles, article body, quotes, Facebook posts, comments to the posts and replies. As Wierzbicka (1997) argues, one can demonstrate that a term is a cultural keyword by showing both the frequency of its use in a semantic domain and its centrality in discourse.

Out of 1,027 articles on Sputnik.by, 62 contained key terms in titles and 792 in the bodies. Additionally, 862 articles out of the total contained quotes. Out of these articles with quotes, 431 articles contained key political terms in quotes. Thirty-six out of 314 Onliner.by articles contained key terms in the titles and 213 in the body. Additionally, 263 articles out of the total contained quotes. Of these 263 articles with quotes, 187 contained key political terms in quotes. Based on these data, both Sputnik.by and Onliner.by are heavily populated with key political terms identified during the preliminary fieldwork stage, especially in the text's body and the quotes in the articles.

Similarly, out of 159 posts on Facebook, 107 contained key terms in the post itself, 81 contained them in the first-level comments and 34 in the second-level comment replies. This suggests that key political terms are also used in discussions of Belarusian political topics among individuals not affiliated with journalist, political or expert communities. The analysis illustrates how these terms are central to political discussion by first showing what meanings they create in political statements, and second, how these terms are used by different actors in public political discourse.

Construction of meaning via key terms in political statements
The problem of "state"
Here we consider an excerpt from Lukashenko's statement on opposition, grassroots and NGOs to see how these key terms play out in discourse.

> **Excerpt 1.**
> 1 **Deal with them**, especially with the managers: **too many managers we have,=**
> 2 **=who take an anti-state position**. And what amuses me (this is mostly in=
> 3 =Minsk): the managers of the medical institutions. Well, **too many of the=**

4 =**"smart" ones have appeared there, who are ready to work in place of a=**
5 =**prime minister, in place of the Head of the Administration, the head of=**
6 =**the parliament – in place of everyone**.=
7 =One more time I repeat: **one cannot forgive it to traitors**, **to those who=**
8 =**were trying to turn over the country and give the country away to=**
9 =**"there",** no forgiveness will be given. **We see them and are identifying=**
10 =**them by dozens, and even by hundreds. Those organisations, that were=**
11 =**financed from abroad and were organising the coup and rebellion, we=**
12 =**have liquidated all of them.** No matter how hard, we knew what=
13 =consequences there will be. And today they howled: "Reinstate back!"=
14 =**They will never be reinstated**.
(First author's translation; contact the authors for the original in Russian.)

In the first two lines (1–2), Lukashenko asks to "deal with them", the "managers" who "take an anti-state position", as there are "too many" such "managers" that "we have". The "managers" here refers to the managers and administrative staff of the state-affiliated institutions, such as "the managers of the medical institutions", whereas "we" refers to the "state" and affiliated entities, such as state-owned "medical institutions", as most of the medical workers in Belarus work in public clinics and hospitals. Based on this discourse, "state"-affiliated individuals, especially the managers, cannot "take an anti-state position", and that is why Lukashenko asks to "deal with them", those who dare to take such positions toward the "state". In lines 3–6, Lukashenko says that there are "too many of the 'smart' ones" who "have appeared there", in the "state"-affiliated institutions, "who are ready to work in place of […] everyone", "in place of a prime minister, in place of the head of the administration, the head of the parliament". Following this logic, anyone willing to "work in place of" a high-ranked state official or aiming for such a high-ranked post is taking "an anti-state position".

This is elaborated further in lines 7–9, where those who aspire for official posts are called "traitors" and that "one cannot forgive it to them", because those who "take an anti-state position" "were trying to turn over the country and give the country away to 'there'" . "There" refers to the "West", the countries of Western Europe (the EU and UK) and North America (especially, the USA) that are frequently accused of financing colour revolutions and wishing to take over Belarus. This means that those who take an oppositional stance towards the "state" and current high-ranked officials are considered "traitors" because by taking this oppositional stance, they are willing to "turn the country" over to the "West". Thus, "no forgiveness will be given" to these individuals. Therefore, in lines 9–10, the "state" and those who do not take an "anti-state" position "see" the "traitors" and "are identifying" them "by dozens, and even by hundreds" – "identifying" those who are "willing to work in place of […] everyone" and "trying to turn over the country and give it away to 'there'".

In lines 10–14, Lukashenko goes further, saying that this refers not simply to "managers" but also to the NGOs and other organisations and entities not affiliated with the "state" "that were financed from abroad and were organising the coup and rebellion". As a result, these organisations and entities "were liquidated" by "we", the "state", because these entities "take an anti-state position" by being "willing to work in place of […] everyone" and because they "were trying to turn over the country and give the country away to 'there'". And that is why those "liquidated" "will never be reinstated", because they oppose, go against and are willing "to work in place of" "we", the "state".

Discursive oppositions

The above excerpt introduces two interconnected discursive concepts: the "state" and the "country". Now consider the following.

> **Excerpt 2. Vyacheslav Orlovskiy, head of the Anti-Criminal and Corruption Department of the State Interior Affairs Office:**
> 15 Yes, really, it was found by us that **the opposition leaders, who ran**=
> 16 =**abroad**, have **assigned themselves a task to create the conditions for**=
> 17 =**non-recognising the referendum** results **by the Western countries**.
> 18 Various options were discussed by them with the goal of completing this task.
> 19 From boycott to creating **provocations at the election sites**=
> 20 =**with the goal of the election breakdown**. As a result of all their=
> 21 =discussions and considering the risks for executors, they currently=
> 22 =have accepted **a single strategy – the election breakdown by massive**=
> 23 =**stuffing of invalid ballots**. In relation to this, **I warn: all instigators**=
> 24 =**to performing such anti-state activities and their active accomplices**=
> 25 =**found in the country, will be isolated by us, held accountable**.

This excerpt shows how the concepts of "state", "country," and the "West" come together in the political discourse of officials. In lines 15–17, the speaker claims that "the opposition leaders" are willing to "create the conditions for non-recognising the referendum results by the Western countries". Moreover, the speaker argues that these "opposition leaders […] ran abroad", meaning that they are not a part of the "country" and, thus, are trying to influence the situation in the "country", Belarus, while physically located in the "Western countries".

After the 2020 presidential elections, the opposition had to relocate to Lithuania and Poland from Belarus because of political persecution. Thus, these lines show how the term "country" is used to disassociate a certain group of people by discursively aligning them with "Western countries". According to this logic, those who

are "abroad" are with the "Western countries", not with Belarus, whereas those still in the "country" are with Belarus.

Moreover, this is not a simple division between "us", who are in the "country", and "them", "who ran abroad" and are with the "Western countries". In lines 18–23, the speaker claims that those "who ran abroad" are trying to create the conditions for an "election breakdown", either via "boycott" or "provocations at the election sites" during the "referendum". As a result, those "who ran abroad" "have accepted a single strategy – the election breakdown by massive stuffing of invalid ballots". This refers to the protest voting strategy suggested by Sviatlana Tsikhanovskaya and other opposition leaders: the people of Belarus should express their political will during the "referendum" by checking all possible choices on the ballot with an "X". The ballot had two options, and since only one was possible to choose when casting a vote, marking all the possible answers with an "X" would make the ballot invalid, choosing none of the options proposed by Lukashenko and his administration.

However, according to line 24, such behaviour constitutes "anti-state activities", which is why "all instigators to performing" such behaviour during the election and "their active accomplices found in the country, will be isolated by us", the "state", and will be "held accountable". As a result, there are only two types of behaviour – pro-"state" and anti-"state", where pro-"state" behaviours mean choosing among the choices offered by Lukashenko in the "referendum" and anti-"state" behaviour means marking all choices with "X" to invalidate the ballot and vote against these choices.

This excerpt illustrates the complex relationship between "state" and "country" as key cultural terms: those who are in the "country" are supposed to be pro-"state" and supposed to support the "state". At the same time, those who do not support the "state" and are willing to express their own alternative political position are considered "instigators" and "active accomplices" of those "who ran abroad", working together with the "Western countries" against the "state". The populace is discursively deprived of agency in making their own choices because choices, especially political, made contrary to those offered by the "state" are considered "anti-state activities".

"State", "power" and "country"
This next excerpt shows a relationship between these cultural key terms.

Excerpt 3. Anatoliy Markevich, the minister of culture:
26 Dismissal and rotation of staff is happening today, same is in any other=
27 =sphere, **there is nothing going on here**. **People retire**, **young**=
28 =**specialists come** – this is **an absolutely regular process**. **But if the**=
29 =**people take a destructive position**, my deep conviction is – **they cannot**=

30 =**stay working in the state service ((*gossluzhba*))**. […]
31 =**If you are working at the state service – you must be an adherent of the**=
32 =**state power ((gosudarstvennaya vlast'))**. This is my conviction. It has=
33 =not changed in many decades.

When Anatoliy Markevich, the minister of culture, was asked about those who left positions at state-affiliated institutions managed by the Ministry of Culture, he said that "dismissal and rotation of staff is […] an absolutely regular process" – "there is nothing going on here" (lines 26–28). However, he added in lines 28–30 that "if people take a destructive position", then "they cannot stay working in the state service". Moreover, in lines 31–32, the speaker suggests that should a person work at the "state service" (*gossluzhba*), then this person "must be an adherent of state power" (*gosudarstvennaya vlast'*).

The key cultural terms that are linguistically and semantically related to such phrases as "state service" and "state power" require elaboration. They show cultural codes that are inscribed into political discourse and why the relationships between the terms "state", "power" and "country" appear.

The term "gosudarstvo" (state) has the following related terms:

1. *Gosudarstvo* (**state**), *gosudar'* (**ruler**), *sudar'* (**sir/master**) **(**Vasmer 1996b, 446)
2. *Gospod'* (**master / also the form of address to the Christian god**), *gospod* (**master**), *gospodstvo* (**domination**), *gospodin* (**master/host**), *gospodar'* (**master/owner**), *gospodarstvo* (**household/dominion**) (Vasmer 1996b, 446-447)
3. *Gosstruktura* (**a state structure**), *gospredpriyatie* (**a state enterprise**), *gossluzhaschiy* (**a state official (literally, state servant)**), *gosapparat* (**a state apparatus**), *gosplan* (**a state plan**), *gosnadzor* (**state supervision**) and similar linguistic forms currently used as complex titles in Russian.

Uspenskij (2021, 2023) makes several claims about gosudar' (ruler) and gosudarstvo (state). One is that the first use of the term "gosudar'", in the meaning of ruler, dates to the end of the sixteenth century, whereas the other term, "gospodar", also in the meaning of ruler, was still in use but was later succeeded by the former (Uspenskij 2023, 10–12).

Uspenskij (2023) argues that gosudar' cannot be directly derived from the term "gospodar" and is more likely derived from *sud,* which refers to the process of judging or a court; nevertheless, both gosudar' and gospodar were used to refer to a ruler during that period until the form gosudar' became the main form of addressing the Russian monarch (Uspenskij 2023, 12–14). Gosudar' was based on the form sudar', which Uspenskij argues meant a "monarch" – the one who can judge and decide singlehandedly – hence, gosudar' is the head of the gosudarstvo – the state (Uspenskij 2023, 14-15).

Note that this transformation is rooted in the fifteenth century, when the confrontation between Novgorod and Muscovy took place – for the people of Novgorod, which was a republic, gospodarstvo was something that preceded gospodar (the ruler was a part of the city and the community). Muscovy was a principality, meaning that the ruler, gospodar, preceded the city and the community, gospodarstvo (Uspenskij 2021). Therefore, the idea that a state, or gospodarstvo, is a domain of gospodar comes from an understanding of the ruler as head and owner of the state as developed in the Principality of Moscow, which differed from how the role of the ruler was understood in the Novgorod Republic (Uspenskij 2021). However, since Muscovy prevailed and became the Tsardom of Russia, the terms "gosudar'" and "gosudarstvo" also prevailed – the closest equivalents to these terms would be "dominus" and "domain" – meaning full control by the ruler over the territory and people (Kharkhordin 2001).

Returning to the present, a *glava gosudarstva* (head of state) is simultaneously a ruler, a judge, an owner and a master. A court and judges are a part of the "state" in this semantic relationship. Even the Christian god is semantically related to the "state", as the word gospod' (master) refers to God in Russian Orthodox Christianity. Unsurprisingly, both Russian and Belarusian Orthodox churches are closely related to the "state", are part of the overall "state" structure and aligned with the "state".

Consequently, gosudarstvo refers to a person or a group who can make judgments with the power to judge and make orders, to state and to rule. This differs from the current use of the English word *state,* which differentiates the personal *status* of a ruler from the *state*, as in *state apparatus,* a mere structure without personal connotations (Kharkhordin 2001). Thus, Russian presumes "state" as something inherent to a ruler or a group of rulers, not an abstract structure as in English. The "state" in Russian is *personal*, whereas in English it is *impersonal*. A similar relationship was identified by an analysis of the key terms from 20 years of Vladimir Putin's speeches (The Russia Program 2024). "Gosudarstvo" was one of the top key terms, referring not to "state" as a system of management but to the domain of determining people's lives and interacting with other states.

The term "country" has the following related words:

1. *Strana* (**a country/territory**), *storona* (**side**), *prostor* (**space, plain**). It can also refer to a part, as in *storona sveta* (**a part of the world**) (see Vasmer 1996b, 380–381; 768; 771 for more details).

Here, a country is a territory, space and side. By side, it means that one can be on this side, or on that side, on the right or the wrong side, on the same side or the opposite side. A "country" is associated both with the territory and a specific side of the territory. Furthermore, territory belongs to the "state", and the "people" who live in the "country" must belong to the side of the "state", according to this discourse. Otherwise, these

"people" belong to a different side, meaning that if they are against the "state", they are against their own "country" and are referred to by officials as "traitors", "extremists", "criminals", "terrorists", and so on. Similarly, when officials talk about the "West", Russia, NATO and so on, they conceive of "country" as a space and territory that belongs to a specific side, to the side of the "state". If someone from amongst the "people" disagrees, it means they belong to the opposite side and are enemies, as anyone not on the side of the "state" is against the state in this discourse.

The identity of "power"

By using these terms, speakers enact the category of "power", or "vlast'", which is both an ability (a quality of an entity) and an entity itself: it refers not simply to an ability to make orders and coerce but also to affiliation with a particular group – the "state". "Power" in this discourse is the entity of the "state". It is the materialisation of the "state" in a particular group of "people" – the "people" of the "state" who belong to the "country" in this case, or *vlasti* – the plural form of the word "vlast'", which is used to refer to those in "power" and can be translated into English as "authorities". This is concordant with a recent analysis of Putin's speeches over the last 20 years – it is argued that management functions of the "state" in this discourse are delegated to vlast', which presumes that vlast' is not merely a quality of an entity but also an entity that is responsible for administering the "state" (The Russia Program 2024). Kudaibergenova (2020) reports a similar issue in Kazakhstan, where the meanings of the words "vlast'" and "gosudarstvo" were transformed in the early 1990s during institutional building, making sense of the new independent reality to represent the ruling regime and its goals rather than commonly shared values (pp. 55–56).

In Russian, vlasti and vlast' are derived from the same root. This semantic relationship constructs a connection between the concepts of "power" (*vlast'*) and "authorities" (*vlasti*), making them both related to the same entity – the "state"; both "power" and "authorities" refer to each other and are frequently used interchangeably. While the term "vlasti" refers directly to the particular group of those in power, "vlast'" refers to both the power and the authorities simultaneously.

Several related words explain how "power" is both an ability and entity: *vlast'* (from *volost'*: **a region, territory, state, power**) is related to *vladet'* (from *volodet'*: **to rule, to own, to inherit**); *volok, voloki* (**refers to the territories between rivers where people had to drag a ship** (a *drakkar* or a rook) to continue sailing); and, similarly, *volochit', vlachit'* (**to drag something**) (Vasmer 1996a, 340–345).

"Ship dragging" was done in the times of the Rus (nineth to twelveth centuries), when merchants and soldiers moved ships across the territory of what is now modern-day Belarus to get from Scandinavia to the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), as this territory was a part of the trading route from the Vikings (Varangians) to

the Romans (trading route to Constantinople). Thus, a name for the territorial unit – *volost'* – the place where people drag a ship. Similarly, a person who controls this process and/or territory is a *vlastitel', vlastelin, volodar* or *vladyka*, a ruler, an owner, a master. Vladyka now refers to the priest in a Church and to higher clergy in the religious administration of the Russian and Belarusian Orthodox churches.

These show how the concept of "power" is historically related to a *certain territory* and *specific activities* as well as *the people* involved in these activities. "Power" here refers to the ability to rule the people on this territory and to the group of people with this ability – those affiliated with the "state" in the context of the modern-day Belarusian political discourse. That is why "power" is a form of identity: it is affiliated with a person or a group of people and an inalienable part of personality, selfhood and identity. One can say things like: "*Ya zdes' vlast*" (I am the power here), or "*Ya predtsavitel' vlasti*" (I am a representative of power), which shows personal affiliation to "power" as one gains the power to be the power based on this discourse. Thus, "power" is a membership category. As De Fina (2011) argues, "Categorization processes are central to understanding how the local identities expressed in interaction are both reflective and constitutive of wide social processes, including representations, beliefs and ideologies and social relations between individuals and groups" (p. 274).

Variations in the use of key terms by different actors

The argument about "power" is further demonstrated by a corpus linguistic analysis of the data (Dinerstein 2024; please see the analytical note to the dataset for more details). An additional parameter was used to categorise key terms as "passive" and "active", which allowed us to see whether personality was ascribed to each key term. For example, "power" might be used in a passive form when *power* is deemed a quality or an attribute of an entity or in an "active" form when personality is ascribed to *power*, meaning that it possesses its own agency and acts on its own behalf, thus representing a particular group of actors instead of the mere quality of those in power. Consider the following:

"Power" as an actor

> Quote: "When they rushed at the guys, how should one have acted? And you look at other **countries** <…> And whether you like the **power** (*vlast*) or not, today it (she) is the **power** (*vlast*)."

"Power" as not an actor

> Comment reply: "[…] And after all, it does not bother anyone that the German leader has been holding on to **power** with blue fingers (("with a death grip")) for 16 years. Because there it is allowed, and here – not allowed…"

The data indicate that unofficial Belarusian political actors tended to use the active form of the term "power" over passive more than Belarusian officials and regular citizens, thus constructing antagonism between them and "power" as an entity. Nevertheless, the tendency to treat "power" as an entity persists in political discourse across a variety of actors in the sample (including journalists and those not affiliated with political or expert activities) – the term was used in the active form in more than 50 per cent of cases on Sputnik.by, Onliner.by and Facebook. Also, note that the journalists who wrote for independent media tended to use the term "power" in active form more frequently than those who wrote for state-affiliated media. Thus, we see how a variety of actors from different sides of the political spectrum reproduce this discourse.

Moreover, when looking at how the term "people" (both *narod* and *liudi*) was used by different actors in the corpus examined, it is clear that Belarusian officials more often use both terms in passive form, while unofficial political actors and citizens tend to use these terms in active form (Dinerstein 2024; see the analytical note pp. 7–9 in the dataset for more details). Thus, the data show that the Belarusian officials in the corpus examined, by using the terms (both *narod* and *liudi*) passively, tend to discursively deprive "people" of agency.

According to Brubaker (2019, 18), such use indicates a populist discourse, where one can appeal to people as plebs or "ordinary people" vs. those on top (or at the bottom), to people as demos vs. those who actually possess power and to people as a bounded community who differ from both outsiders and those with a different status within the polity (e.g., elites or marginal groups). As a result, opposition, ambivalence and ambiguity are key elements of populism, as reflected in discourse (Brubaker 2019). The data in this study show that in the Belarusian case, such populist discourse is employed by both official and unofficial political actors, as well as by regular citizens and other actors examined – opposition becomes a widespread discursive practice where agonistic relationships between different political entities reflected in political discourse become a cornerstone for constructing and maintaining the existing status quo by the participants of public political discussions.

CONCLUSION

Several concluding points can be made. First, Russian-language terms that describe key political concepts differ significantly in meaning from their English-language counterparts based on their linguistic origins. Second, Russian-language terms may contribute to an understanding of political power as something personalised rather than impersonal – political power in this discourse does not exist without an entity who uses this power, and thus, power and entity become discursively inseparable.

Third, it is important to understand the historical contexts of these political terms, as this helps explain the logic of political argumentation used by both officials and citizens.

On the one hand, the categories of "power" and "people" are constructed via public political discussions and therefore allow the reproduction of existing political discourse. On the other hand, these categories are central for describing the political process in Belarus: they index specific forms of relationships within and across society, thus allowing one to distinguish between different kinds of political identities. For one to ascribe agency to power and to use it in active form means to position some people in a category while positioning the rest as outside. Similarly, ascribing agency to people and using it in active form means dissociating some people from power and putting them in an antagonistic relationship with it, as well as depriving people of agency and discursively making them subjects, rather than actors.

Such positioning reflects two ways of speaking about politics that reflect opposition as a discursive practice: (1) politics as a domain of "those in power", those who are deemed "professional politicians" possessing "sacred" and "hermetic" knowledge that regular "people" do not have, and (2) politics as a nationwide enterprise, where each participant is seen as political actor, regardless of whether they belong to the category of "power" or not, because politics concerns everyone. Thus, two oppositional understandings of politics are discursively constructed via public political commentary, discussions and media reports (see Figure 2 below). This suggests several ideas about the political process in Belarus and indicates a lack of consensus as to which is "proper". Moreover, different notions become intertwined when various people discuss political topics, leading to antagonism and oppositional readings of political events, be it elections, the voting process, legislation and so on. Thus, we see such statements as "The opposition wanted to seize power via elections".
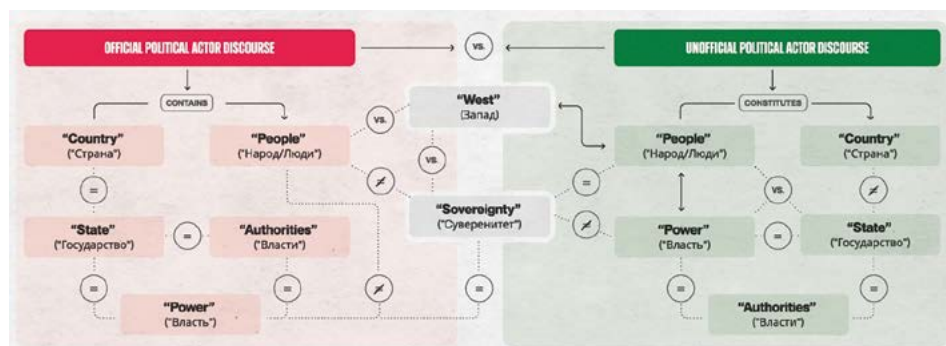

Figure 2. Oppositional codes in Russian-language political discourse in Belarus.

As a result, these relationships reflect populist elements – a specific type of discourse (Stavrakakis 2017) – but in a somewhat double-edged and reversed form. Here, the *elites* at the same time juxtapose themselves with everyone not considered part of the "state" and claim to protect "people" against "instigators", "traitors" and the like, whereas the political opposition juxtaposes themselves and the "people" with the current *elites* (or *establishment*). The latter is consistent with the common understanding of populism (Wodak 2020), while the former somewhat contrasts this by constructing a continual antagonism between the notions of "state" and "people".

This becomes possible due to the metonymic substitution occurring in Russian-language political discourse, with roots in socio-historical connotations. Metonymy (conceptualising one thing by means of its relation to something else; Lakoff and Jonson 1980) is conceptualising "state" in terms of "country", "country" in terms of those in "power", "people" in terms of a non-political entity that simply lives in the country, "sovereignty" in terms of "state" defined in terms of "country" that belongs to those in "power", and so on. The danger of metonymy in political discourse is that it is processed as literal language and can be used for manipulation (Cabrejas-Peñuelas 2020). However, in some cases, such manipulation may also happen, at least to some extent, as a by-product of the existing political vocabulary rather than a deliberate discursive strategy, as the Russian-language political discourse case presented in this paper shows.

As a result, the key problem created through such political discourse is that power becomes an identity instead of a mere quality. This means that the transfer of power aims to deprive an actor of their core identity: the loss of power means the loss of identity. Hence, metonymy may be an important element in constructing false identities and antagonism in political discourse, while to uncover such issues, one should employ the cultural mode of thinking about politics and consider local cultural and historical contexts beyond the political vocabulary at the core of the political discourse being used.

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