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## Social security discourses in a non-democratic state: Belarus between Soviet paternalistic legacies and neo-liberal pressures

Tatsiana Chulitskaya

European humanities university (EHU)  
Savičiaus str. 17, LT-01126, Vilnius, Lithuania

Irmina Matonyte

General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania  
Šilo str. 5, LT-10322, Vilnius, Lithuania

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**Abstract.** *The article presents an analysis of social security discourses produced by contending political actors in non-democratic Belarus. Initially, we outline the current situation of social security policies in Belarus. Then we identify key concepts regarding social security and examine how they are used in presidential campaigns of 2006, 2010 and 2015. We focus on political candidates' perception of responsibilities and distribution of duties among different welfare agents (state, business, society and family). President Lukashenka incrementally enriches his idea of the social security – predominantly organized by a paternalistic state – with neo-liberal elements (oriented towards free market) and conservative values (cherishing traditions and the family). The alternative candidates highlight important social problems and propose innovative ideas. The non-democratic leader appropriates social security ideas from the opposition. The Belarusian case is an example of pragmatic autocracy which constructs its social policy discourse using paternalistic legacies, populist promises and references to the free market, yet the arbitrary and repressive state maintains the monopoly.*

**Keywords:** *Belarus, discourse, presidential elections, social security, alternative candidates.*

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** *Baltarusija, diskursas, prezidento rinkimai, socialinė apsauga, alternatyvūs kandidatai.*

## Introduction

Along with socio-economic studies of the welfare programmes and institutions in contemporary liberal democracies, academic thought is also attracted by the inquiry of their moral foundations (Kildal, Kuhnle 2007; Schubert, de Villota, Kuhlmann 2016). The questions of functional-instrumental arrangements and normative grounds of social security in non-democratic states are also pertinent, especially in the light of the emerging paradigm of autocracies as pragmatic actors (Trenin 2011, Goodman and Peng 1996), exploiting available windows of opportunities and copying good practices from abroad. The concept of pragmatic autocracy is mostly used for the explanations of such regimes in the sphere of foreign policy (Weyland 2017) and for understanding of different coercive practices (Gerschewski 2013). Yet, as Korosteleva (2012) claims that pragmatic autocracies also adroitly monitor and shape the issues brought to the domestic public discussion, in particular, during elections. The analysis of such political campaign discourse sheds light on how the theme of social provision is gauged in the periods when “the risk of losing elections and the potential of democratization are at their maximum” (Michalik 2015, 36) even though the alternation in power is highly improbable with the elections orchestrated by regime (Diamond 2002).

In social security discourses the autocratic leaders make populist redistributive statements (van Gils, Yoruk 2015), cherish ideas of social equality (Haddad 2003), stir sentiments of national identity (Leshchenko 2008) and boost the values of national independence (Wilson 2016). Empirical research concerning social security rhetoric in non-democracy is provided by Hellinger and Smilde (2011) (on Venezuela), Haddad (2003) (on Cuba) and Chulitskaya (2014) (on Belarus). The overall insight of this research is that, in spite of their occasionally bombastic public statements, non-democracies provide shallow social security policies and their major role is to insulate the leader from popular discontent.

In this article we concentrate on the production, adjustment and evolution of social security discourse in Belarus. The country has hardly undergone any reform since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Chulitskaya 2014, Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė et al. 2014, Wilson 2016) and its paternalistic leader (Alexander Lukashenka since 1994) imposes himself through domestically used coercion, propaganda and geopolitical manoeuvring in foreign affairs (Balmaceda 2014, Wilson 2016).

Our main thesis is that under the pressure of deteriorating economic situation and in response to the socio-political issues voiced by the political contenders, the Belarusian presidential discourse gradually drifts from the Soviet big state with universalistic social security policy towards more refined patterns of the redistribution of social welfare responsibilities to non-state agents, serving targeted social groups. Yet, these operational changes are still clouded in the discourse of a paternalistic state. The reformist social security ideas are produced by the political opposition during presidential electoral campaigns. In our analysis, we trace if (how) the pragmatic autocrat leader reacts to social discontent as it is articulated by opposition, and to their alterna-

tive innovative proposals. Alongside, we look if (how) political contenders refer to international organization's advice, international experience, and to the national CSOs.

The article pursues three objectives: first, to define the ideological grounds of social security discourses during three presidential campaigns in Belarus (2006, 2010, 2015); second, to identify key ideas regarding the distribution of social security responsibilities among different social agents and, third, to interpret discursive shifts in official and oppositional social security discourses.

### **An overview of Belarusian political and economic situation**

Social security policies in Belarus are shaped by the national specific political and social-economic situation. According to the international assessments, the country has one of the harshest political regimes in New Eastern Europe (Freedom House 2016). Yet, the current case of Belarus – if compared to Ukraine or Russia – is not that “harsh” if we evaluate its several dimensions: international circumstances, domestic political repression and socio-economic wellbeing.

In geopolitical terms, Alexander Lukashenka rather than playing the role of Moscow's loyal ally in exchange for economic privileges, engaged into complicated geopolitical manoeuvring (Trenin 2011). In the periods of relative political liberalisation - 2008-2010 (Rudkoŭski & Kolb 2013; Matonyte & Chulitskaya 2013) and the one since 2015 till nowadays (late 2018) - when Belarus could “be selling” to the West the refusal to be a “puppet of Moscow”, the Belarusian President engaged into positive relations with the EU. However, Belarusian economy remains heavily dependent on Russia. In 2016, when the Russian subsidies to Belarus were reduced, the economic situation in the country noticeably deteriorated and authorities started downplaying economic concerns drawing attention to the issues of state-sovereignty and international security (Wilson 2016).

The Belarusian regime is hierarchical and bases itself on the absence of the rule of law, limitations of political and civic freedoms, and on repressions against opposition (Rouda 2011, Freedom House 2016). Yet, in the periods of relative political liberalization it has become more inclusive and less harsh on its opponents. Thus, the inner Belarusian situation could be characterised as “limited authoritarian pluralism” (Linz 1973) or “hegemonic authoritarianism” (Diamond 2002) meaning that national political opposition could exist and produce their own political agenda, however, its chances to compete in fair and free elections are small or nearly absent.

Since the Soviet times Belarusian social policy had undergone limited transformation. Yet, in socio-economic terms Belarus always was and currently is in a perceptibly better position than neighbouring Ukraine or Moldova (Trenin 2011, WB 2014). The official Belarusian statistics report low levels of social inequality and poverty, and almost zero rate of unemployment (Belstat 2017). However, reacting to global changes and deteriorating national economy, the Belarusian government is reducing social support.

## **Social security system in Belarus: paternalistic legacies and scattered reforms**

Belarus has one of the largest state-run social security systems in the post-Soviet region. It also has one of the highest individual social security contribution rates, reaching 35% (where 29% go for pensions and 6% - for other social programs) (IMF 2016). The system of national social security is based on two main pillars: social insurance (SI) and social assistance (SA). The social benefits nowadays include family allowances, pensions of different types, unemployment and survivor benefits, benefits in kind, etc.

Social policy implementation is centralized. The approval of the state-run programs of social and economic development with subprograms on social protection and unemployment is synchronised with presidential elections and the programs are revised every five years (the current one covers 2016-2020). Local executive institutions could adjust the development programs (Chubrik et al. 2009), but in line with the benchmarks of central authorities. Officially, private business is obliged to be socially responsible. It provides social services in direct (construction of socially important buildings, e.g. ice hockey arenas) or indirect (engaging into philanthropic activities) forms. CSOs are regarded as instruments helpful for specific socially vulnerable groups (Matonyte & Chulitskaya 2013).

Until the mid-2000s more than a half of adult Belarusian population was eligible for social benefits of different types (Chubrik et al. 2009). The Soviet-type social security system in Belarus was skilfully maintained: the state guaranteed the universalistic provision of social assistance and controlled consumer prices; the costs of public utilities were subsidized; state-owned enterprises and trade union were ascribed complex social functions (providing jobs, maintaining social infrastructure, etc.). However, under external (deterioration of relations with Russia, demands of Western international institutions) and internal (unfavourable demographic tendencies, economic instability, growing labour migration to Russia, emerging/ budding social discontent) pressures the Belarusian social security system started undergoing neoliberal changes, although their implementation and outcomes are ambiguous.

One of the first changes was the abolishment of universalistic provision of social benefits and the introduction of the means-tested system in 2007 (Chubrik et al. 2009). However, there are still many social support programs in Belarus. The list of socially vulnerable groups was not comprehensively revised, and it did not include some categories (e.g., temporarily unemployed or homeless people). Other innovations included new social services and additional benefit for big families. In 2013 the system of the "social procurement order" was introduced. Under this system authorities on presumably competitive conditions could fund organisations which provide social services. However, national experts question efficiency of the instrument (ACT 2016). Critical demographic tendencies in the wake of the presidential elections 2015 forced him to introduce the "maternal capital" (a lump-sum benefit in amount of US dollars

is around 10 thousand for the 3rd and each additional child in a family which could be spent for the limited purposes).

The next neo-liberal change emerged in early 2016 (soon after the presidential elections). Faced with the economic downturn and the pressure from the IMF, Belarusian authorities passed a decision to increase the pension age (by 3 years, differentiated by gender, up to 63 for men and 58 for women by 2022). The minimum eligibility period for a retirement pension has been increased for almost all occupational categories (except the state-functionaries and military personnel) from 5 to 20 years. In addition, the Belarusian government promised to raise utility tariffs (one of the most important, albeit hidden social benefit) in 2017-2018 and to introduce a compensatory mechanism for those in need (IMF 2016). In late 2018 these plans were partly realised and the prospect of their implementation is vague.

Separately from the above-mentioned neoliberal steps stands the introduction in April 2015 of “social dependents” tax which requires people who work less than 183 days a year to pay the tax of around \$250 for the state-provided social services. In March 2017, after massive public protests, the Decree on the tax had been suspended. In late January 2018 the tax was reintroduced in a limited volume, however, the perspectives of its implementation are unclear.

Summing up, the social security system in Belarus is fragile and miserable. No systemic reforms are carried out, only partial changes which are inevitable in the context of the deteriorating economic situation, growing social discontent and neo-liberal pressures. However, Belarus manages to preserve its centralized system of social security; exceedingly generous social guarantees for state functionaries, military and security personnel; state subsidies for utility costs still run against any free-market logic.

### **Discursive aspects of the social security in pragmatic autocracy**

If we follow the general definition of deliberation as a broad communication process entailing the contestation of discourses in the public sphere (Dryzek 2000), we can claim that the macro-deliberative approach referring to discussion that takes place within the broader public sphere composed of multiple publics is also applicable to the political campaigns in pragmatic autocracies. The campaigns give rise to a deliberative system, containing three key components: sites, agents and discursive elements. If the sites and agents are largely controlled and confined to small numbers, by their essence, the discursive elements are much freer. Therefore, it is meaningful to concentrate on discursive elements pertinent to social security and to engage into the discursive analysis of the political campaigns in a pragmatic autocracy (Belarus). The discursive analysis allows to see not only formal political institutions and their functions, but also to analyse their contextual features, dynamic development as well as different types of statements, produced in their support or in their opposition (Schmidt 2010).

The main unit of our analysis is a statement produced by political actors during three (2006, 2010, 2015) presidential campaigns in Belarus which focus on changes in

social security. In our data collection and coding exercise we closely followed Esping-Andersen definition of welfare regimes (1990) and took statements, related to the roles of the four typologically distinguished welfare actors (the state, free-market / business, civil society and family). Alongside, we identified statements which provide the normative basis for the social security promoted in the governmental and oppositional discourses. In the empirical part of analysis, we used electoral programs, transcripts of candidates' public speeches and publications of some (official and oppositional) Belarusian internet media as well as slogans of the campaigns. However, due to the limited volume of the article we do not provide full references to all the sources used but just indicate the names of the proponents (meanwhile, upon the request the full list of primary references might be obtained from the authors).

### **Political communication in Belarus: one person-show?**

Following the logic of institutional and symbolic domination the Belarusian President aims to limit potential of alternative agents. The President handles and articulates national political agenda, with other public institutions providing organizational support to him (Chulitskaya 2014).

However, the President does not operate in a total political vacuum. In spite of all limitations, in late 2018 there are 15 political parties and 2 907 CSOs officially registered in Belarus (the Belarusian Ministry of Justice 2018) apart from unregistered ones. Belarusian CSOs are divided alongside the line of loyalty – autonomy towards Lukashenka's regime: a big group of subordinated to the state large Soviet-type mass organizations (trade unions, women, youth organizations, etc.) on one extreme (loyalists) and grass root organizations (focusing on human rights, cultural expression, etc.) are on the other (independent, in opposition to the state) (Matonyte, Chulitskaya 2013). The longitudinal analysis of three consecutive presidential campaigns shows that all the candidates relied on the support of political parties and CSOs. Incumbent President mostly mobilised loyalist organisations, while oppositional candidates relied on political parties and grass-root CSOs.

The Belarusian presidential campaigns in 2006-2015 reveal shifts in the overall political rhetoric, and in the statements relative to social security policies. During electoral campaigns the alternative candidates not only articulate existing social problems, but they also grasp and use the opportunity to come out with their statements and political projects, to which the President and his administration has to react.

In spite of the fact that in all three elections (in 2006, 2010 and 2015) participated more than one candidate (see Table 1), none of those elections is evaluated as free and fair (OSCE 2006, 2010, 2015). The 2006 and 2010 elections led to mass protests. The electoral campaign of 2015 with four contending candidates was preceded by the release of all political prisoners and did not generate overt violence (OSCE 2015).

Table 1. Presidential candidates in Belarus in 2006-2015

Elections. Voters' turnout %	Candidate	Program's title and slogan (in Russian and Belarusian in original while both languages were used by candidates)	% of votes
2006 92.9%	S. Gaidukevich	Program: New Belarus – Unity Slogan: Order in the state. Prosperity in the country!	3.5
	A. Kozulin	Program: For the country! For the people! For you!	2.3
	A. Lukashenka	Program: State for the People (za Belarus) Slogan: For the strong and prosperous Belarus!	82.6
	A. Milinkevich	Program: Freedom. Truth. Justice.	6
2010 90.7%	R. Kastusiu	Program: Freedom and responsibility. Economic growth. Independence and Euro-Atlantic Choice. Slogan: Freedom! Prosperity! Security! <sup>Свобода!</sup> <sup>Благополучие!</sup> <sup>Безопасность!</sup>	1.97
	A. Lukashenka	Program: From saving to ever-increasing! Slogan: Future is in our hands! Together we'll gain more!	79.65
	A. Mikhalevich	Program: Strategy of evolutionary modernization Slogan: We can make it work!	1.02
	V. Nekliaev	Program: To live worthily! Slogan: I came for you to win!	1.78
	Y. Romanchuk	Program: A million of jobs for Belarus. Slogan: Let's build new but preserve the best!	1.98
	V. Rymasheuski	Program: Christian Policy for Belarus! Slogan: Christian Belarus – Just authorities!	1.09
	A. Sannikov	Program: Strong Belarus for free people! Slogan: Together we'll win!	2.43
	N. Statkevich	Program: Motherland. Honor. People. Slogan: Light the fire of hope!	1.05
	V. Tereshchenko	Program: Problems of the country, their background and solutions. Slogan: For law, honor and prosperity of Belarusian people!	1.19
D. Uss	-	0.39	
2015 87.2%	S. Gaidukevich	Program: Gaidukevich – Strong Belarus! Slogan: Order in the state. Prosperity in the country!	3.3
	T. Korotkevich	Program: For peaceful changes! Slogan: Peaceful changes – only TaK! (“Tak” in Belarusian means “yes”. TaK is also an abbreviation of the candidate's name).	4.4
	A. Lukashenka	Program and slogan: For the future of independent Belarus!	83.5
	N. Ulakhovich	Program and slogan: For the peace, peacefulness and order!	1.7

Sources: compiled by the authors from the OSCE reports, Central Electoral Commission (CEC) data and Belarusian media.

## Lukashenka's discourse on social security

Since 1994 President Lukashenka appeals to social policy as one of the main pillars of stability in Belarus. He actively uses concepts which previously have been established as Soviet "norms" (*social justice, absence of social inequality and social support*). In all three campaigns, Lukashenka also underlined *stability* of the Belarusian *socially oriented economy* and necessity to *preserve the national model of well-regulated socio-economic development*. His typical statement follows: "*We hadn't squandered the wealth of the nation, we hadn't got into debts, we created our own model of development which is based on the balanced matured evolutionary changes without any privatization and shock therapy, but with the preservation of all the best what was earlier achieved in our economy and traditions*" (Lukashenka 2006). Lukashenka broadly uses the Soviet idea of *full employment* as means of social security. An expedite post-electoral introduction of the presidential decree in 2015 on "social dependents" who should reimburse public social spending is an example of Lukashenka's (post-)Soviet vision of obliging big state.

Since 2006 some neo-liberal innovations have appeared in the presidential discourse. One of them is a notion of *personal responsibility* for citizen's own welfare. The slogans and the titles of Lukashenka's electoral programs (see *Table 1*) also demonstrate certain discursive narrowing of the state's social responsibility. If in 2006 and 2010 he focused on social wellbeing and promises of the more generous state; in the context of the economic crisis of 2015, Lukashenka turned to the utmost political value of the statehood and sovereignty.

In Lukashenka's discourses in 2006, 2010 and 2016 about social security and obligations of different agents we can distinguish four narrative lines:

1. **Paternalistic big state** as a gate-keeper. The state has broad controlling functions and citizens are *obliged* (should be grateful) to it for social security, guarantees and stability. Lukashenka claims: *Before asking question "what the state has given to me?", everybody should ask himself what useful has he done for his Fatherland* (Lukashenka 2010). The narrative of the big state, alongside with a narrowing scope of its social obligations, is evident in all three presidential campaigns. The typical statement says: *The state must, and it will help only there where it is impossible to cope without it. But everything what is within his personal capacities he should do himself* (Lukashenka 2010).
2. **Business and free market** as agents of social security in the presidential rhetoric get varying interpretations. At the beginning of his political career Lukashenka treated private businessmen derogatory as capitalists-exploiters. Yet, in 2006 he appealed to business as potential partner of the state with their common obligation to solve social problems. An exemplary statement says: *the state and business are and should be in the same boat* [in solving social problems] (Lukashenka 2009, 2010). In 2010, a similar pres-



cription of social obligations (here, the social duty not to sack employees) for the private and state-run business was emphasized: full employment was mentioned as *the most effective instrument of social policy* (Lukashenka 2010). In 2015, Lukashenka's attention to private business diminished as he decided to emphasize the duty of enterprises and citizens to diligently pay taxes. In exchange for good tax-morale he promised: *to support the small and middle business and remove all the constraints which interfere with business development* (Lukashenka 2015).

3. **Civil society and CSOs** in Lukashenka's discourse are not autonomous actors, but loyal companions or mere extensions of the omnipresent state. Big loyal organisations get support and positive evaluations. When it comes to the alternative CSOs, in 2006 and 2010 Lukashenka criticized them as a *harmful* destructive opposition. In 2015, he changed his stance and praised social organizations which took over certain obligations (from the state) as performers of social procurement (Lukashenka 2015).
4. **Family** is a very stable element in Lukashenka's discourse. A traditional strong (patriarchic) family with children and practices of intergenerational care occurs in all campaigns. The role of the family is twofold: it is the main source of social protection for young and elderly, and at the same time it is the main target of the social support. For instance, Belarusian President is categorical: *children should be forced to take care of their elderly. If they don't, they should pay for it* (Lukashenka 2013). Meanwhile he prescribes family a conservative pronatalist goal: *every family in Belarus has to have minimum three children... Could our families have three or more children? Of course, yes* (Lukashenka 2006).

The official discourse reflects the vision on the social security policy as it is inherited from the Soviet times. However, statements of 2006-2015 demonstrate neo-liberal shifts which narrow the social obligations of the state and replace the social responsibilities to other actors. Typically for the pragmatic autocracy, some unpopular neoliberal steps were implemented after the elections and were not discussed during the campaigns. The official discourse also refers to the Russian (the case of maternal capital) and European (the case of increase in the pension age) experiences and proposals, advanced by the national CSOs (the case of social procurement).

### Oppositional discourse

For the reconstruction of the oppositional discourse, we aggregate statements of all alternative presidential candidates without separating them into personalities (except when a candidate's rhetoric strongly differs). Such an approach is methodologically valid because Belarusian oppositional candidates discursively concentrate on recognition and political rights rather than on advancing social security issues (Chulitskaya 2014). We also mainly refrain from the analysis of rhetoric of those can-

didates who were not in an overt opposition to Lukashenka (Gaidukevich in 2006, Gaidukevich and Ulakhovich in 2015). In the analysis of the 2015 presidential campaign we focus on one oppositional candidate (Korotkevich), since – untypically for the Belarusian politics until then – she spoke a lot about social policies.

The normative grounds of social security in oppositional discourse are broad and diverse. They range from the conservative vision dominated by traditional family issues (Milinkevich 2006, Neklyaeu 2010, Rymasheuski 2006, 2010) to the liberal focus on equality of opportunities (Milinkevich 2006, Romanchuk 2006, 2010, 2015) and the social-democratic ideals with the extensive social policy engagement of the state (Kozulin 2006, Korotkevich 2015). The appeals to the social security, welfare and social harmony are reflected in the titles of candidates' programs and their slogans (*see Table I*). Meanwhile, unlike the official discourse, oppositional candidates refer to the Soviet past as to the negative experience. Lukashenka's intentions to promote Soviet-style social policy are evaluated as harmful. The oppositional discourse actively uses European (and occasionally Ukrainian and Russian) experiences, ideas from the international organizations and national CSOs.

Among the oppositional statements on social security policies we distinguish four narratives:

1. **The big paternalistic state** is criticised as dysfunctional in social sphere. It should be reformed, and it should provide a smaller (in volume) but better targeted social assistance. Some candidates request to restore the universal social provision system (Sannikov 2010) and special benefits for those affected by Chernobyl (Neklyaeu 2010, Korotkevich 2015). In 2010, Sannikov stressed the necessity to *shift from paternalism to social partnership* (Sannikov 2010) and redistribution of budgetary spending to social needs. Another candidate (Romanchuk 2010) proposed to create additional jobs, which would lead to higher wellbeing.
2. **Business and free market.** Oppositional candidates in 2006 and 2010 avoided mentioning any social obligations of the business and focused on the ideals of the free market as a precondition of welfare. In 2010, Romanchuk claimed that *New Belarus is when you create and produce, and the state doesn't interfere but helps you*. In 2015 Korotkevich changed this neo-liberal line and proposed a novel (for the oppositional but typical for the official discourse) idea of social responsibility of business alongside with restoration of the independent trade-unions. A part of her electoral program was titled "*Business in the service of social policy*" and promoted the ideas of creation of *the system of support of socially responsible business and encouraging employers' investment into the social security system* (Korotkevich 2015).
3. **Civil society and CSOs** are portrayed as partners of the state. Especially in 2010 and 2015 alternative candidates spoke about the necessity of state cooperation with autonomous grass-root organizations and allowing them to complement social security provisions. Korotkevich in 2015 stressed the im-

portance of social procurement order and required *favourable conditions for the development of non-commercial organizations, to provide equal access to the public financing via participation in tenders* (Korotkevich 2015).

4. **The family** – like in Lukashenka's statements – mostly got traditional conservative interpretations, although the oppositional discourse avoids strong inter-generational family obligations and concentrates on more narrowly defined families (in particular, fathers) who should have possibility to earn enough to provide welfare for their dependants. In 2010, Rymasheuski electoral program was called *All forces of the state [should be devoted] to the protection of the [traditional] family*. Necessity of pension reform (Neklyaeв 2010) with possibility of diversification of pension funds (Romanchuk 2010) and without raising pension age (Korotkevich 2015) was also stressed. In 2010 alternative candidates spoke about the demographic crisis in Belarus and promoted the idea of support for the families with children and, in particular, maternal capital. In their articulation of family support and maternal capital oppositional candidates (Nekliaev) referred to the Ukrainian and Russian experience.

During the analyzed elections oppositional candidates criticised the incumbent president and dwelled on the issues of social security policy as much as they provide the grounds to distinguish themselves as innovative (pro-democratic) political actors and multipliers of social problems. We may conclude, that on the one hand, the oppositional candidates express social discontent, stress social problems, while on the other hand, they produce innovative proposals about eventual solutions and instruments of their implementation which might later be appropriated by re-elected president.

### **Comparison of official and oppositional discourses on social security**

The official and oppositional discourses on social security in Belarus refer to the experience of neighbouring countries (Russia, Ukraine and Europe, in general). They also use proposals of the national CSOs. When it comes to the recommendations of the international (financial) organizations, usually the Belarusian President discursively takes an opposing or disinterested position, however, in reality he follows the recommendations (cases of raising utilities costs, increasing the pension age). The main difference between the two discourses is in the usage of the Soviet notions which is positive for the official discourse and negative for the oppositional.

If we analyse the interplay between the elements of the official and alternative discourses in relation to the changes in social security policies, we can see three main modalities: contestation, coincidence and borrowing (see *Table 2*).

**Table 2. Interplay of official and oppositional discourses on social security policy instruments**

N	Case	Discursive sources	Official discourse	Oppositional discourse	Discursive modality
1.	Abolishment of universal social provision (2007)	International organisations Russian experience	Introduction and support of the step	Opposes the change Ideas to restore benefits	Contestation
2.	Social procurement (2013)	International organisations. European experience. National third sector	Introduction and promotion	Promotion	Coincidence
3.	Maternal capital (2015)	Russian, Ukrainian and European experience	Introduction and promotion	Expression of the idea in 2010	Borrowing
5.	“Social dependents” tax (2015)	Soviet past	Introduction and promotion	Opposes to the measure	Contestation
4.	Raise of pension age (2016)	International organisations European experience	Introduction and promotion	Opposes the change Ideas not to increase the pension age	Contestation
6.	Raise of the utility’s costs (2018)	International organisations European experience	Introduction and promotion	Ambiguous, avoid discussing widely and publicly	Tacit contestation

*Source:* authors’ analysis.

Modality of contestation covers 3 out of 6 analysed cases. Coincidence in rhetoric and the borrowing modality occurs also in one case (each). The rhetoric modality of the case addressing the raise of utilities costs is rather unclear, and it might be the sticking points between authorities and opposition during the next elections (in autumn 2020).

## Conclusions

1. The main statements about social security in Belarus in the period 2006-2015 were produced by incumbent President Lukashenka. On some topics the oppositional candidates’ ideas resonated with the perceptions of the authoritarian leader. However, the oppositional actors produced several al-

ternative proposals and innovative social security tools (maternal capital in particular), which were later adopted by the autocratic leader. As a result, the Belarusian opposition is weakened not only by the repressive regime, but also discursively, since their ideas are either appropriated or coincide with those of the incumbent.

2. External factors, the deteriorating internal socio-economic context and demographic crisis in Belarus triggered the transformation of the social security system, first of all, by the adoption of several neo-liberal elements. Typically for the pragmatic autocracy, the Belarusian president presents the changes as well thought decisions, but in practice intending to avoid negative societal reactions.
3. Although official rhetoric continues to use some ideological concepts from the Soviet times, it also includes liberal accents (individual responsibility, tax morale) and conservative values (strong family). The most visible discursive shifts concerned the narrowing of the state's social obligations which in particular resulted in taxing officially unemployed people. This particular case became extremely important as a rare occasion when Belarusian opposition mobilized people to stage protests about social issues and do so not in the framework of electoral campaign.
4. The Belarusian case is an example of how pragmatic autocracy uses Soviet paternalistic legacies, populist promises, experience of other countries, and references to the free market and civil society. Understanding the incumbent authorities' discursive constructions relative to social security policy could be used to promote pro-democratic changes in autocratic Belarus and provide practical clues to how alternative social security projects could be communicated more efficiently. Quantitative studies of discursive elements on the account of social security produced in other sites than the electoral arena and by other actors evidently offer an interesting avenue for further research.

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Tatsiana Chulitskaya, Irmina Matonyte

**Socialinės apsaugos diskursai nedemokratiškoje valstybėje: Baltarusija tarp sovietinio paternalistinio paveldo ir neo-liberalizmo iššūkių**

Anotacija

Straipsnyje analizuojami socialinės apsaugos diskursai, nedemokratinėje Baltarusijoje kuriami konkuruojančių politinių veikėjų. Pirmiausia apibūdiname socialinės apsaugos politikos situaciją šalyje. Vėliau identifikuojame esmines sąvokas, siejamas su socialine apsauga ir stebime kaip jos vartojamos prezidento rinkimų kampanijose 2006, 2010 ir 2015. Toliau susifokusuojame į politinių kandidatų propaguojamas atsakomybės ir pareigų pasiskirstymo tarp skirtingų socialinių veikėjų (valstybės, verslo, visuomenės ir šeimos) sampratas. Prezidentas Lukašenka palaipsniui savo socialinės apsaugos – kurią pirmiausia organizuoja paternalistinė valstybė – diskursą praturtina neo-liberaliais (siejamais su laisvąja rinka) ir konservatyviais (pabrėžiančias šeimos ir tradicijų reikšmę) elementais. Alternatyvūs kandidatai labiau akcentuoja socialines problemas ir siūlo novatoriškų idėjų kaip jas spręsti. Nedemokratinis lyderis ilgainiui perima (pasisavina) opozicijos idėjas. Baltarusijos atvejis yra pragmatinio autoritarizmo pavyzdys, kur socialinės apsaugos diskursas konstruojamas remiantis paternalistiniu paveldu, populistiniais pažadais ir nuorodomis į laisvąją rinką, bet išlaikant arbitrarios valstybės monopolį.

*Tatsiana Chulitskaya* – Europos humanitarinio universiteto (EHU), Socialinių mokslų departamento, lektorė.

E. paštas: tatsiana.chulitskaya@ehu.lt

*Irmina Matonyte* – Generolo Jono Žemaičio Lietuvos karo akademijos Politikos mokslų katedros profesorė.

E. paštas: irmina.matonyte@lka.lt

*Tatsiana Chulitskaya* – lecturer, Department of Social Sciences, European Humanities University (EHU).

E-mail: tatsiana.chulitskaya@ehu.lt

*Irmina Matonyte* - professor at General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania.

E-mail: irmina.matonyte@lka.lt