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**THE CONTESTATION OF
HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE THROUGH
NEW MEDIA
THE 2020 BELARUSIAN PROTESTS**

MA thesis

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The Contestation of Hegemonic Discourse through New Media. The 2020 Belarusian Protests

(title of thesis)

supervised by **Prof. Andrey Makarychev, Prof. Aliaksei Kazharski**

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Abstract

The study examines how the Belarusian opposition challenges the official discourse of Lukashenka in Telegram and simultaneously analyzes the role of new media in this process. It argues that the discourse of Lukashenka has achieved hegemony by appealing to the population through the adaptation of the Soviet ideology and through coercion, which has led to the emergence of unsatisfied societal demands, which have been analyzed in the first part of the thesis within the context of Lukashenka's discourse. Unsatisfied demands become obvious as a result of a crisis, which, in this study is the 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent protests. In the absence of platforms through which those demands can be articulated, contestation of any hegemony becomes problematic. This was the reason for focusing on virtual environment, as, apart from high-technology solutions circumventing the governmental restrictions, it offers the opposition the much-needed freedom for articulating its demands and for displacing the existing hegemony. Apart from examining the role of new media, the main research question of the thesis is: How the contestation of hegemonic discourse of Lukashenka is being articulated and organized in new media? One of the main findings is the documentation of the demand for the reestablishment of the national identity and reconciliation with European roots. This has also led to discreditation of the elements of the Soviet legacy propagated by the official discourse. Apart from challenging the Soviet ideology, the opposition has also contested the disciplinary function of the regime, which streamlines the conduct of individuals and serves as a regime legitimizer. The second part of the analysis has focused on this aspect from the perspective of contesting brutalities committed by law enforcement officers. The last part of the thesis has examined whether the disciplinary function of the regime, manifesting itself in the form of patriarchal rhetoric in respect to women, has been challenged. Despite the initial expectations to find the elements of female empowerment, it has been found out that the patriarchal values propagated by the regime have largely remained unchallenged and that articulation of elements of female emancipation falls under the general logic of fighting against violence and oppression of the nation's will for self-determination. This, nevertheless, significantly undermines the propagated image of the "caring state" and the masculine Sovereign praising women, although, within the context of communal attributes ascribed to them.

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the legacy of the Soviet totalitarianism has chased some counties of the post-Soviet space and has affected political developments in terms of undermining their capacity to develop a modern democratic state with reasonable levels of rule of law. Despite the fact that after the collapse of the USSR, some countries, including the three Baltic-States have undergone the process of relatively rapid democratization, others, such as Belarus have opted for the post-Soviet patterns of personalized politics, where one-man-rule is simultaneously legitimized through repression and adaptation of the Soviet ideology to the post-Cold War realities. This corresponds to the strain of literature, which acknowledges that authoritarian regimes do not entirely base their rule on repression, but they also seek to make the regime acceptable to the majority of population (Göbel, 2010; Gerschewski, 2013; Grauvogel, von Soest, 2014). Dingxin Zao (2010) argues that authoritarian states, which are unable to benefit from the procedure-based legitimacy enjoyed by the democratic governments legitimize themselves by ideology or /and performance. As a result, the political regime, on the hand, manages to appeal to the population, and, on the other hand, silences the potential opposition through the suppression of civil liberties.

The case of Belarus is not an exception to the aforementioned argument. Scholars generally agree that it was the combination of repression and ideology that has contributed to the survival of Lukashenka's political regime (Leshchenko, 2008; Lysyuk, 2020; Marples, 2006; Yakouchyk, 2018; Zeller, 2013). This ideology, based on amalgamation of Soviet collectivist principles applied to Belarusian national sovereignty and statehood in combination with identity beliefs, some elements of which were universalized and were made appealing to adherents of various identities existing in Belarus, have granted Lukashneka's regime a hegemony. However, ideologies, especially non-institutionalized ones, can be a matter of contestation. There is no pre-determined principle, which can lead to their contestation but it can rather be a result of "the crisis" or collapse of what would have been a "normal" historical development (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001).

The 2020 Belarusian presidential election is the robust example of the aforementioned “crisis” or “collapse”, which have shattered the existing hegemony. It is true that the protests against the Belarusian government are not a new phenomenon. In fact, mass-scale protests against the presidential elections happened in 2006 and 2010. However, the absence of new media platforms, which can evade the governmental control and motivate people for mobilization, affected the short duration of those protests. Approaching the contestation of the hegemonic discourse through new media from the perspective of hegemony analysis sketched out by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), as well as by engaging with the concepts of the sovereign power and governmentality introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, will help to understand how under the authoritarian leadership the alternative world description, which has been dormant or non-existent can turn into the dominant one.

By alternative world description, I mean the one that stands in opposition to the hegemonic discourse of Lukashenka. However, this opposition is not binary, i.e. it can accommodate some elements, such as the notion of stability and the necessity to preserve the territorial sovereignty of the country from the official discourse, as well as combine various elements from other discourses that were perceived as oppositional by the official discourse. These discourses have previously been articulated by multiple identities existing in Belarus, which emerged as the result of the discursive split. Discursive split emerged due to failed attempts of national movement activists to appeal to people born and shaped in the Soviet years with a pre-Soviet history and the subsequent opportunism of Alexander Lukashenka to utilize national-self-identity as a political tool aimed at protecting his power and interests. Although the official discourse has achieved hegemony, it has not managed to supplant this split. With the opportunities granted by new media, alternative discourses have managed to articulate elements that are largely supported by all segments of the opposition. The aim of the thesis is to analyze the articulation of those elements in the virtual space, as well as to examine the societal demands which had led to the emergence of the new oppositional discourse. This will lead to discovering the role of new media, more specifically, Telegram, in the Belarusian protests. In order to achieve the aim of the thesis, I

intend to answer the following research questions: How the contestation of hegemonic discourse of Lukashenka is being articulated and organized in new media? What is the role of new media in the Belarusian protests?

In order to achieve the aim of the thesis, first, I will provide a theoretical chapter, which will elaborate on the theoretical frameworks selected for my analysis. Sections 2.1. (Discourse and hegemony) and 2.2. (Dislocation and emerging demands) will discuss the hegemony analysis based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Section 2.3. (Governmentality and ‘Sovereign Power’) will explain the main concepts elaborated by the French philosopher Michel Foucault and explain why they were chosen for the analysis. Section 3 will focus on methods used for my research. It will elaborate on the overall methodological approach and details of the data collection methods. Section 4 will discuss the official discourse of Lukashenka. By engaging with the already existing literature, it will apply the hegemony analysis of Laclau and Mouffe, as well as Foucauldian concepts of ‘Sovereign Power’ and governmentality to the official discourse. This will be done with the purpose to identify what elements (further referred to as ‘demands’) the official discourse articulates in respect to the notion (further referred to as an ‘empty signifier’) of sovereignty, which is the object contestation, and how the negation of other demands existing in the Belarusian society has created the ground for the emergence of the oppositional discourse. This chapter will help to provide a transition to the analytical part, which will focus on the discourse of the Belarusian opposition in Telegram

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Discourse and hegemony

With their book ‘Hegemony and Socialist Strategy’ (1985) Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe laid the foundation for the Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory. Their theory draws upon other post-structuralist philosophers, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and argues that contrary to economic essentialism propagated by Marxism and to a much lesser degree by Gramsci, movements need a non-determinist strategy to contest hegemonic regimes and practices.

Laclau and Mouffe do not differentiate between discursive and non-discursive practices, arguing that any human action or worldview can be located within the discourse and acquire a hegemonic predominance (Biglieri & Perelló, 2011). However, to compete for the hegemony, these actions and worldviews must be discursively linked to certain norms, values and prescriptions related to human self-understanding and the accepted form of conduct that is produced by this understanding. This self-understanding can be qualified as a common sense or consciousness (Mouffe, 1979/2014), which emerges from the spread of ideology. In contrast to Gramscian understanding of hegemony, which emphasized either the formation of collective will or the exercise of political leadership, Mouffe has argued that incorporation of the two is possible through the concept of ideology (Bertram, 1995). This is crucial for the thesis as the offensive-hegemonic (the discourse of protesters) and defensive-hegemonic (the official discourse of Lukashenka) discourses will be understood as an exercise of leadership that produces a common sense. In other words, common sense or what Gramsci refers to as organic ideologies (Mouffe, 1979/2014, p. 186) is a product of ideology which materializes in practice and which determines subjects and their actions. Bursevich defines Mouffe and Laclau’s interpretation of ideology as “an aggregate of static concepts, the source of production of which is forgotten and should be understood not as a violent instrument, but as an instrument constructing the society” (Bursevich, 2010). On the other hand, Mouffe and Laclau argue that society is impossible and discourses, which by relying on Foucault, they define as a “structured totality resulting from the articulatory

practice” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 105) are always contested. This means that any world description, which is prevailing at the moment, will be inevitably challenged by alternative accounts, which can destabilize the existing power relations. It can therefore be argued that ideology and a common sense are equally unstable.

Although Laclau and Mouffe argue that there is a constant battle between discourses, the crisis alleviates the essence of those that are in opposition to a hegemonic discourse. In the situation of the crisis, alternative discourses through new articulations, start to reinterpret a common sense, and those which are performatively supported by majority, turn into offensive-hegemonic discourses the role of which is to fill the space of an empty signifier. Considering that the discourse of protestors has been performatively supported, it will be referred to as the offensive-hegemonic discourse.

Laclau has extended his and Mouffe’s analysis of ideology to the operation of what he calls “empty signifiers” (Freedon et al., 2013/2015, p. 203). The role of an empty signifier is to subsume different demands of a community and to create the illusion that they are met. In other words, empty signifier is ‘not more than a particular demand that is more or less universalized, that is to say, partially emptied of its content-never completely – so that it can represent the remaining demands’ (Conde Soto, 2020, p. 203). In case of Belarus, ‘sovereignty’ acts as an empty signifier under which Lukashenka’s discourse attempted to subsume demands, which emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It represents his vision of the Belarusian state as the one, which has been shattered by the great dislocation, understood as the collapse of the Soviet Union. To ensure the stability, which, according to Lukashenka’s discourse, was guaranteed during the Soviet past, the country needs the Sovereign, understood as the absolute bearer of power. The role of the Sovereign is to prevent further dislocations and protect sovereignty of the country from all possible threats. The following section will elaborate on the concepts of dislocation and demands, as well as on their employment by authoritarian discourses.

2.2 Dislocation and emerging demands

‘The concept of dislocation plays a fundamental role in a crisis-prone society’ (Nabers, 2016, p. 422). Dislocation represents a disruption within a discursive field. In the event of dislocation, contingency of social structures becomes obvious for subjects and they start to articulate alternative discourses to resolve the ‘lack’ triggered by the crisis (Nabers, 2016). Crisis creates the opportunity to conjure the ‘whole’ through new articulations. The main concern of authoritarian regimes, however, is to present the existing reality as something that cannot be changed, i.e. the temporarily occupied space of an empty signifier is presented as the achievement of an eternal totality. However, since the offensive-hegemonic discourses struggle to ‘close’ emptiness of the signifier, the propagated totality contributes to the creation of antagonism, which emerges as the necessity for identity formation. These discourses start to draw the border between the “Self” and the “Other”. The “Other” for Laclau and Mouffe can be a ruling regime (Devenney et al., 2016). Without the antagonistic ‘Other’, the emergence of the Self with its strong identity is impossible. The “Self” emerges through signification with regard to the relation it establishes with the “Other”. The ‘Self’ articulates certain elements, which Laclau refers to as “demands” (Laclau, 2005, pp.72–77). These demands are arranged within the discourse by discursively linking to one another. It is important to mention that not only future-oriented demands are of importance for analyzing a discourse, but as will be demonstrated in the chapters discussing Lukashenka’s discourse, and in the analysis section, references to the past worth analyzing as well. Demands are crucial for my analysis because they can be raised ‘for the leadership of a person or a group but also for the need to follow a certain ideology or establish government according to a certain paradigm’ (Marttila, 2019, pp.75).

What is peculiar for authoritarian regimes is that in order to accommodate a broader range of demands, they tend to rely on broader concepts, which can subsume as many demands as possible and make those demands that are unmet or excluded appear considered. This overdetermination or underdetermination of demands make the empty signifier ambiguous and unfixed (Biglieri and Perelló, 2016). However, it is equally argued that the impossibility of fixed signification is what makes an empty signifier possible (Laclau,

1990). In other words, if a signifier can accommodate multiple demands and part of them is unmet or unfixed, it does make them excluded from the discourse. This is precisely why Laclau refers to discourse as to the 'system of difference' (Laclau, 1990, p. 200). The ambivalence of each demand within the system is what makes it distinct from other elements within the same system and what prescribes this element a certain identity, as Laclau puts it 'difference=identity' (Laclau, 1996/2007, p. 38).

On the other hand, were the elements completely antagonistic, they would not have been a part of the same system. The complete non-binary antagonism according to Laclau, constitutes 'true' or 'exclusionary' limits (Laclau, 1996/2007). Within the discourse however, there is logic of equivalence which connects demands to one another and reduces a discourse to a limited number of differences. Neither the logic of difference nor the logic of equivalence can be dominant (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001). Discourses, however, try to create an equivalent chain and make a homogenous society. This is precisely the reason why in regards to a certain empty signifier there will always be unmet demands, which brings us to the point that a complete and finished subject is impossible. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing societies that happened to be divided as a result of a 'dislocation', (collapse of the USSR in the case of Belarus) and a political leadership which has largely ignored certain demands and has therefore not contributed to reconciling polarities. As a result, in these type of societies, the full actualization of the 'Self' has not been possible.

However, dislocations, as argued by Laclau, can simultaneously be traumatic and productive. 'They are traumatic in a sense that they 'threaten identities', but they are also productive in a sense that they serve as 'the foundation on which new identities are constituted' (Laclau, 1990, p. 39). Authoritarian leaders oftentimes take responsibility for the latter and, by working out a "nodal point" that would fix the meaning of an empty signifier, counteract the means that would render "the Self" the right of shaping its own identity. When this counteraction is circumvented, "the Self" takes the lead in articulating demands, which create a different nodal point temporarily fixing the meaning of an empty signifier and contributing to actualization of "the Self".

2.3. Governmentality and the ‘Sovereign Power’

The concepts of governmentality and sovereign power introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault are important for the thesis, as they help to unpack the meaning attributed to the empty signifier of sovereignty by the defensive-hegemonic discourse of Lukashenka and the offensive-hegemonic discourse of protestors. These concepts are also a good complementary to the hegemony analysis of Laclau and Mouffe as both recognize the existence of a counter-hegemony, which Foucault terms as resistance, contestation, transgression, struggle and agonism (Pickett, 1996). For Foucault, resistance is linked to power, which in his account, is diffuse and ubiquitous, which “works under the conjunction to maximize the forces of subjects it works upon, while simultaneously decreasing their political and resistive forces” (Pickett, 1996, p. 458). Similarly to Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault recognizes inequality as an essential element of power, arguing that resistance is a counter-power, which stands for equality and “revolt against intolerables” (Pickett, 2005, p. 46). Resistance, according to Foucault, “is what eludes power, and power targets resistance as its adversary” (Pickett, 1996, p. 458). The notions Foucault attaches to resistance are roughly liberal, which makes the term compatible with the Belarusian resistance, considering that they struggle over liberal principles understood as limited government, freedom of speech and press and the right to participate in political life of the society and the state.

However, this does not mean that Foucauldian concepts are incompatible with illiberal or authoritarian projects. Andrew Zimmerman (2014), for instance, claims that characterizing Foucault at any point as a liberal is incorrect, quoting Foucault himself who described freedom as ‘[...] nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security’ (Foucault, 1977-1978, as cited in Zimmerman, 2014) and interpreting his approach to liberalism as a “strategy of control”(ZIMMERMAN, 2014, p. 228). He views Stephen Kotkin’s “Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization”, a study of the Soviet Union emphasizing the productive features of Stalinism and insisting on the importance of their success, as the study challenging the Foucauldian liberalism.

Elizaveta Gaufman (2017) equally argues that some of the Foucauldian concepts can be applied to authoritarian regimes that emerged in the post-Soviet space. She claims that it can be done through the concept of pastoral power, ‘which is not exercised over a territory – it is a flock, rather than the land, it is a beneficent power, “power of care” toward salvation; it is an individualizing power; and it is a dutiful and devotional power’ (Gaufman, 2017, p. 76). In this thesis, however, I will engage with the concept of governmentality, which as Foucault mentions in ‘Security, Territory, Population’ (1978) has originated from the concept of pastoral power, and with the concept of sovereign power. I believe that in combination with traditional conceptualizations of sovereignty, they can provide a more holistic view on how Lukashenka perceives sovereignty and uses this perception as a regime legitimizer, by simultaneous a repression and appease to populist demands.

Foucault argues that sovereign power operates according to the law and is backed by juridical frameworks provided by the sovereign’s power (Lemke, 2016). The Sovereign plays a crucial role here. Foucault’s Sovereign aligns with Jean Bodin’s monarch, the exclusive bearer of sovereignty at the state level, the one who enjoys absolute power within a certain territory (Hanes, 1997). Paradoxically, this power is not absolute in the strict sense: on the one hand, it is limited by divine and natural law, and on the other hand, by the norms guiding people who are subject to this law and by their inalienable rights. The force of law is backed up by physical force, which is deemed legitimate as it “punishes” those who do not comply with the law. On the one hand, that which corresponds to breach of the law is carefully stipulated by the law, but on the other hand, there is the expected conduct, deviance from which requires extralegal prescriptions (Lemke, 2016). The expected conduct stipulates obeying the will of the sovereign. The law represents this will and its violation is simultaneously viewed as an attack on the sovereign. As a result, those who break the law not only ought to be punished for their misconduct, but they must be prosecuted as enemies of the state who challenge the authority and existence of the sovereign. From this perspective, punishment is an act of war waged in defence of the sovereign (Foucault, 1995).

Punishment and the subsequent correction can be explained through disciplinary power. Disciplinary power is explained through descriptions of penal system, the role of which is to decide whether the convict is guilty and to impose appropriate penalties; and through the penitentiary regime, the goal of which is to ensure that the convict abides the appropriate daily routine, which implies the certain type of behavior. Penitentiary regime employs surveillance to keep track of the convict's progress and aims at "transforming, that is correcting the conduct and dispositions of the convict (Foucault 1995, 179-80, 250-55; 2015b, 99-100, 139-40, 161-62)." (Braeckman, 2019, p. 17).

In other words, as disciplinary power is a system of knowledge that collects information about the individual in relation to other individuals (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014), who as mentioned above, are expected to demonstrate the expected conduct. i.e. to obey the will of the sovereign. Deviating from the conduct is defined as "abnormal, which should be subject to corrective or therapeutic techniques that aim to reform, fix or rehabilitate it (Johnston 1991: 149-69; Lilja 2008)." (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2014, p.3). The idea is that non-obedience is the indication of being different and is therefore punishable. To be different is to be inferior.

Governmentality equally presupposes the full knowledge of the subject and it does not intend to supplant the notions of state authority. However, it suggests that power should be exercised not just by state, but also by groups and individuals. Foucault argues that 'governmentality', which is aimed at the well-being of each individual should lead to salvation "on the condition of complete obedience from the side of believers, which in turn, presupposes full knowledge of who they are, what they do, and how they think" (Braeckman, 2019, p. 9). This, as argued by Foucault, is one of the differences between sovereign power and governmentality. For Foucault, sovereign power has a negative connotation as "it forbids, it censors, it restricts and it suppresses; in addition it levies, charges services and so on in exchange for protection (Foucault 2006, 42-43)" (Braeckman, 2019), while governmentality is "salutary, beneficial and caring power, dedicated to serving the flock" (Braeckman, 2019, p.7), it sets norms and standards that a certain behavior should meet and arranges 'things so that people , following only their own self-

interest, will do as they ought' (Li, 2007, p.1). In other words, the expected conduct in governmentality goes beyond the governmental control and the scope of law and gives individuals the opportunity of self-governance. It is similar to Rousseau's understanding of sovereignty where the will of people appears as an internal limiter of the sovereign's power (Canivez, 2004), and to Bodin's doctrine of natural law, which recognizes that a person has a number of inalienable rights that belong to him / her on the basis of the very fact of his belonging to humanity (Muniz-Fraticelli, 2010).

Governmentality, which has originated from pastoral power, is salvation oriented (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983/2016) Despite the fact that pastoral power originated from Christian institutions, the modern state can be seen as a new form of pastoral power, the aim of which is to ensure everyday worldly salvation (Gaufman, 2017, p. 80). In the official discourse of Lukashenka, salvation can be achieved by the absolute paternalistic power, which is responsible for protecting the nation from the wrongdoings and the state from external threat. It is meant to prevent further dislocations, which may infringe unity and territorial integrity of the country.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Case selection

The case selection was motivated by several reasons. Firstly, it is important to mention the role of new media, which provided a crucial infrastructure for the protests. New media, more specifically, Telegram channels have indeed become one of the indispensable tools in coordinating mass protests, which started on 9 August, 2020. It has played a mobilizing role not just in terms of providing logistical information, but also in terms of allowing people to exchange messages of anger and disdain in regards to the incumbent regime.

One of the reasons of selecting new media platforms as the source of analysis is to contribute to the strain of literature focusing on the role of new media in protests. The surge of interest in political processes in online environment has sparked after the “Arab Spring” – a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions in Arab countries in 2011, organized among other factors, with the help of online platforms (Anduiza, Cristancho, Sabucedo, 2013; Bakker, de Vreese, 2011; Seib, 2012; Wall, El Zahed, 2011). Some authors consider new media an important tool in organizing protests. They agree that various social networking sites allow their users to communicate and interact in new ways that can potentially disrupt the official mainstream media. They argue that through the internet people are not only able to express their individual ideas, but they can also create a diverse and cohesive virtual environment to facilitate agency and reform (Wheeler, 1997). This aligns with Benedict Anderson’s concept Imagined Communities (1985), through which he discusses the ways certain forms of media give rise to certain types of political community. Lysenko and Desouza (2012) suggested that Twitter was especially helpful in internationalizing the Moldovan protests and broadcasting information about protests.

Next to this literature that sees an important role of new media in sparking protests, there are other authors who are critical of this. For example, Morozov (2009) has argued that there were too few Twitter users at that time to produce such effects. Generally, sceptics point to the lack of concrete behavioral evidence demonstrating that citizens’ online

involvement directly shapes offline events and conclude that the employment of new media is neither necessary nor a sufficient cause of protests (Aday 2010; Gladwell 2010). However, the aim of this thesis is not to study the causal relationship between online involvement and behavioral patterns, but to approach new media as an arena capable of producing and reviving alternative interpretations and opinions, those that stand in opposition to the mainstream ones propagated by the official discourse. Approaching new media from this perspective is relevant since some authors agree that the use of new media may be especially pronounced in states that lack civil liberties (Diamond & Platner, 2012; McGarty et al, 2013; Shirky, 2010), insofar as online communication creates opportunities that are otherwise lacking for citizens to air grievances and gauge public opinion (Jost et al, 2018). Adeline Koh (2016) also argues that new media ‘creates a political space for different communities to be imagined into existence’. This claim is supported by the analysis of protest movements in the United States, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine, which arrives at a conclusion that, among other factors, new media facilitates emotional exchange based on the messages of anger, social identification, concerns about fairness, justice and deprivation, as well as explicitly ideological themes. This approach, considering the political environment of the country, is particularly relevant for the ongoing protests against the Belarusian government.

New media can be regarded as one of the factors, which makes the 2020 Belarusian protests different from the previous most massive protests of 2010. During massive post-election repressions of 2010, authorities raided media outlets and detained at least 20 journalists covering protests against violations in the December 19 presidential elections (*Belarus urged to stop clampdown on opposition*, 2010), which left Alexander Lukashenka in power for another term. Moreover, throughout the year after the 2010 elections, President Lukashenka's government has taken drastic measures to control the Internet, including enacting a new restrictive law and giving regulators broad powers to control information published on the Internet and the actions of individual users (Richter, 2010). This, has negatively affected mobilization capacities of protestors and the duration of protests

The case of Belarus was selected due to the possibility to observe how new media has contributed to the manifestation of the idea of reestablishing national identity which, in contrast to the official discourse, is not viewed as “a belief shared between the governing powers and the government”(Burkhardt, 2015, p.148), but is a matter of choice of Belarusian people. As it was mentioned earlier, the Belarusian society is divided into multiple identities, which stems from the official discourse and its cultural educational and mass media policies. Nelly Bekus (2013), explains this division by what information sources people use and how they consume it. She argues that both state media and independent mass media present various subject matters as completely oppositional and provide information, which does not consider the differences existing in the society and therefore preserves the existing split. Since the state media has more power, “the whole political opposition and its supporters are symbolically pushed out of the space of “the integral wholeness” of the Belarusian nation” (Bekus, 2013, p. 171). New media challenges this arrangement in terms of bringing equivalences, i.e. the matters on which the opposition largely agrees on, to the forefront. This approach to new media can be extrapolated to other societies where multiple identities struggle over representing the nation

3.2. Selection of a new media platform and data collection

The selection of the Telegram channels as texts for analysis was based on several criteria. First and foremost, in the condition when traditional media has been repeatedly targeted by censorship, Telegram as a decentralized media platform has offered new-tech solutions to circumvent censorship. Throughout the protests, particularly from August 9 to August 12, Belarus has faced a severe internet blackout, which only left 2G networks accessible, permitting text messages and voice calls (Human Rights Watch, 2020). On the Election Day, problems occurred with access to a number of sites that were suspected in disloyalty to the government. Consequently, failures were found even in the work of some Internet services that were not connected to the elections. It was not possible to access the websites even with the help of VPN. In addition, the websites of the newspaper “Nasha Niva”, independent media portal “TUT.BY” and the online platform for observing the elections “Zubr” were deliberately blocked (Kolomychenko, 2020). According to Human Rights

Watch (2020), internet blackout was an attempt to silence information about protests and severe police brutality against their participants, while the Belarusian government has explained the incident by denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on governmental sources (Auseyushkin, 2020). Used in combination with another application called Psiphon, Telegram is capable of circumventing the governmental attacks. Telegram, the messaging application created by Russian exile Pavel Durov, is suited for running protests for number of reasons. Firstly, it allows huge encrypted chat groups, which makes mobilization of people easier. Telegram channels allow moderators to disseminate information quickly to large numbers of followers in a way that other messaging applications do not (Telegram, n.d.). According to Stepan Putilo, a founder of the most popular Russian-language Telegram channel “NEXTA” during the peak, there were 200 messages coming every minute. (Korelina, 2020).

Secondly, because the messenger cannot provide encryption keys at anyone's disposal, the blockage of Telegram channels by anyone other than the owner of the channel is almost impossible (Burgess, 2018). For security purposes, the Telegram infrastructure has a distributed architecture and includes subsystems located on the territory of various states and managed by various legal entities. That is, the messenger runs on a decentralized platform. Telegram provides its users with the opportunity to use two types of messaging channels: "cloud chats" and "secret chats". Messages sent through "secret chats" are never stored on Telegram servers. The correspondence of users of "cloud chats" is stored in encrypted form, distributed between different subsystems and is never stored in one place. Creation of secret chats begins with the generation of an authorization key. In this case, asymmetric Diffie-Hellman encryption is used, in which one of the two generated key parts never leaves the user device and is not transmitted over communication channels. At the same time, encryption keys are regularly updated, irrelevant keys are destroyed automatically. That is, the administration of the service simply does not have access to information that makes it possible to decode the received, transmitted and delivered messages. In other words, the possible way to block Telegram channels is to block the

application itself, which, according to Lukashenka, the Belarusian government faces difficulties with.

Do you have the ability to block telegram channels? No one does. Not even Americans who invented this whole web. You can see what is going on there. And telegram channels play a leading role there. They started it, and they started it a long time ago. It was not Russia or Belarus who started this - they have always been doing this and now they got it. And we are reaping the fruits of all this. Even if the Internet is removed today, telegram channels from Poland will work (Lukashenko rasskazal, pochemu ne mozhet blokirovat' Telegram, 2020, Deutsche Welle)

Moreover, since 2019, Telegram channels in Belarus has not only become more popular, but has also been politicized. The steady growth of Belarusians using Telegram channels, which was observed in 2019, as well as the simultaneous politicization of the content, is associated with protests against deepening integration with Russia. According to the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (DW, 2020), in 2019, Telegram was included in the five most popular instant messengers in Belarus, ranking 4th. Despite the fact that no studies have been done on the characteristics of the Belarusian telegram audience for the year 2020, it is argued that in mid-August 2020 there were about 2.4 million messenger users, which is characterized as an explosive growth (Shelest et al., 2020). The popularity of Telegram as a medium of information, communication and self-organization of Belarusians during the 2020 protest movement was prepared by the events of 2019 and the situation around the Covid-19 epidemic. With the deepening political crisis, the use of various possibilities of Telegram - both as a messenger and as a full-fledged media - is constantly increasing. According to the Center of European Transformations (2020), although, it is impossible to exactly estimate the growth in numbers of Telegram users in 2020, it might account for 60 % of urban internet audience. Repressive measures imposed by the regime do not affect the intensity of its use, but lead to the emergence of new methods of protection and anonymization, to the development of new rules of communication and interaction. The interaction of telegram channel

administrators and other activists acquires additional importance in this process, which is expressed in the adoption of joint statements, mutual support, assistance during attacks on individual channels, the creation of special services, tools and infrastructure elements, both for the development of the telegram community and for increasing the level of user security.

The following Telegram channels have been selected for the analysis due to their high ratings as of August, 2020, i.e. the beginning of the revolutionary events in Belarus. According to Telegram Statistics, in August 2020, the following channels had more than 100 thousand subscribers each.

Table 1. Selected Telegram channels

Name of the channel		Link	Specificity
1.	NEXTA	https://t.me/nexta_tv	Social media
2.	NEXTA Live	https://t.me/nexta_live	
3.	Belarus Golovnogo Mozga	https://t.me/belamova	
4.	Basta	https://t.me/bnkbel	
5.	MAJA KRAINA BELARUS	https://t.me/mkbelarus	
6.	Chay z malinavim varennem	https://t.me/belteanews	
7.	Belarus seychas	https://t.me/belarusseichas	
8.	MotolkoPomogi		
9.	Tipichnaya Belarus	https://t.me/tpbela	
10.	TUT.BY novosti	https://t.me/tutby_official	Non-governmental media/social media
11.	Nasha Niva	https://t.me/nasha_niva	
12.	Onliner	https://t.me/onlinerby	
13.	Kiber-partizani	https://t.me/cpartisans	Social media (exists only in Telegram)
14.	Busly laciac	https://t.me/cpartisans	

The telegram channels “Kiber-partizani” and “Busly laciac” have been included to the analysis on the later stages, due to the their appearance in many reposts made by the previously selected channels and particular suitability for the research.

Materials for the analysis were selected based on their thematic relevance using Telegram’s search engine. Since the focus of the section 5.1. was brutalities committed by the security officers, on the initial stage, key words for selecting the data included: OMON (ОМОН), Ministry of Internal Affairs (МВД), militia (милиция) and violence (насилие). The initial selection for this section included 223 posts relevant posts, many of which were reoccurring in the selected channels. These posts helped to set the general outline of the analysis and to explore the more specific themes, i.e. activities of de-anonymization, activities of cyber-partisans and coordinated resistance groups. Having narrowed down the focus, two more Telegram channels, i.e. “Kiber-partizani” and Busly laciac have been selected for the analysis. The selected timeframe (9 August 2020 – 31 December 2020) allowed to examine all materials provided by the two Telegram channels without using the search engine. Eventually 76 posts were selected for a thorough examination and the samples included to the analysis were the most representative of the general picture.

Since the focus of section 5.2. was two-fold (Soviet legacy and national revivalist sentiments), the search for data was done in two directions. In order to find the elements of the Soviet legacy and see how it was contested, I searched for key words USSR (СССР), BSSR (БССР), Soviet Union (Советский Союз). Having analyzed the gist of the given results, I selected 30 posts for a though analysis. Similarly to the previous part, they were selected based on the logic of their recurrence. The second step was to analyze the manifestation of national revivalist sentiments. For this purpose, I was searching for key words “nation” (нация), “Belarusians” (белорусы), revival (возрождение). Since in case of the Belarusian protests, national revivalist sentiments were manifested in national symbols, this word “symbols” (символы) has further been included in the search. Eventually, I selected 27 posts for this part of analysis. This number included the reoccurring posts selected for analyzing the contestation of the Soviet legacy. This helped me to create the link between the two parts.

The focus of the last section of the analysis was the manifestation of female discourse and the challenge of the patriarchal rhetoric of Lukashenka’s discourse. Despite the initial expectations that the female discourse would challenge the patriarchal values propagated

by the regime in respect to women's role in society, these sentiments have not been documented in Telegram. Initially, I was searching for key words "female empowerment", (права и возможности женщин, расширение права и возможностей), "women for" (женщины за), women against (женщины против), feminism (феминизм), emancipation (эмансипация). Having found an ample amount of references to mothers and maternity, I included this key word as well. To ensure that the important points are not missing, I broadened the focus toward the end included the broader term "women". Once I had a deeper understanding of the female discourse manifested in Telegram, I selected 23 posts for the analysis.

The timeframe of the analysis will cover the period from 9 August, the day of the announcement of the election results, to 31 of December, the last day of 2020 protests. The ninth of August was selected as the start date, because it can be qualified as a 'dislocatory' event. The thirty-first of December was selected as the end date because marks the last day of 2020, which allows to make conclusions for the year. Moreover, starting from December the protest activity started to decrease (Russian News Agency Tass, 2020), which allows to analyze the most intense mobilizations.

3.3. Research Method and application of theories

The research method selected for the analysis is Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis. Since the focus of the thesis is how the world descriptions of the opposition turn into dominant ones, hegemony analysis based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) theory of discourse and hegemony was considered as a more suitable instrument. In order to apply the theory, I referred to methodological tools offered by Martin Nonhoff (2019). Methodology tools offered by Nonhoff are particularly relevant because research objects of this type of discourse analysis are nearly inexhaustible. In this master thesis, I will focus on the text understood as linguistic articulations, images and videos, which will be complemented by what Nonhoff refers to "practical meaning production in the course of political interaction, for example the act of passing a law" (Nonhoff, 2019, p.7). In other words, the elements of the context in which texts are placed play the guiding role in analyzing the data.

The hegemony analysis based on Nonhoff provides terms, such as “empty signifier”, “demands”, “nodal point” which are appropriate for analyzing the political regime of Belarus in a broad sense. The concept of ‘empty signifier’ is relevant, because it can be applied to analyze non-institutionalized ideology, which serves as a regime legitimizer. The concept of ‘demands’ allows unpacking the function of the “empty signifier” in terms of making it clear what the hegemonic discourse of Lukashenka includes to his understanding of the selected empty signifier, and what are the demands articulated by the oppositional discourse in respect to the empty signifier. In this thesis, I will focus on two types of demands: subsuming and encompassing. Subsuming demand, according to Nonhoff, “formulates a necessary condition for remedying the lacking universal but at the same time entails the assumption that its fulfillment is a sufficient condition for the fulfillment of other demands that are oriented toward the common good” (Nonhoff, 2019, p.75). In other words, the ultimate goal cannot be achieved if these demands are not met. Encompassing demand is a maximization of a subsuming demand, and once it is met, all other demands in regards to the universal will be met as well. In other words, accomplishment of the encompassing demand implies accomplishment of the ultimate goal.

The two discourses examined in this master thesis are the discourse of the opposition and the discourse of Lukashenka. After the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, the discourse of Lukashenka will be referred to as the defensive-hegemonic discourse, because it tries to defend its hegemonic position. Since the goal of the discourse of the opposition is to overcome the perceived hegemony, it will be referred to as the offensive-hegemonic discourse. These terms will not be applied to the two discourses when they are described within the context of events prior to the 2020 presidential elections. Nonhoff mentions the two types of discursive relations: the logics of equivalence and difference. They are particularly relevant for the analysis for the reason that the discourse of the opposition and the discourse of Lukashenka are not completely antagonistic to each other. However, in order to amplify antagonism and acquire distinctiveness, discourses will attempt to make the logic of difference prevail

The empty signifier of sovereignty, which is the main focus of the thesis will be described and analyzed through demands articulated by the two discourses. However, throughout the work, other empty signifiers (ex: the Enemy) will be mentioned as well. Since they are of a narrower scope and do not subsume demands articulated by the two discourses, but are discussed within the context of the meanings ascribed to them, they will be explained through the concept “signified”, which Laclau discusses in “Contingency, Hegemony, Universality” (2011). Laclau argues that it is not possible to maintain a necessary distinction between a signifier and a signified and that the connection between the two is “a displacement of signification determined by a system of structural positions in which each element (conceptual or phonic) functions as a signifier”(Butler et al., 2011, p.70). This will allow to analyze how the two discourses attach different meanings to the same empty signifier through resignification and how this resignification blurs the line between the signifier and the signified

The theoretical framework based on hegemony analysis of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe was used in combination with the Foucauldian notions of “governmentality” and “sovereign power” because they can be simultaneously applied to liberal and illiberal discourses, both of which are the intrinsic part of the Belarusian discursive field. Authoritarian regimes, however, attempt to present their discourses as fixed thus making any potential contestation, i.e. emergence of liberal demands in the discursive field unlikely. A crisis, or what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as “dislocation” must happen in order to disrupt the discursive field and give rise to alternative discourses. This is one of the reasons for selecting particular theoretical framework. The rigged elections of 2020 served as a dislocatory event, which provoked the rise of alternative discourses. This theoretical framework can be applied for conducting the discourse analysis of both oppositional and official discourses in countries with similar a political situation.

4. THE HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE OF LUKASHENKA

4.1. Introduction to the discourse of Lukashenka

The official discourse of Lukashenka is tied to the empty signifier of sovereignty. Lukashenka considers that within the Soviet Union, Belarus has truly been sovereign (Ioffe, 2014). The official discourse presents the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a dislocation, which ruptured people's ontological security i.e. sense of order and continuity in regard to their experiences (Kazharski, 2019). In fact, almost 83 % of Belarusians voted in favor of the preservation of the USSR, which is above the Soviet Union average 76 % (Yakouchyk, 2018, p. 6). This dislocation created a constitutive lack, which the regime undertook to fill through new articulations. Those articulations were based on references to the Soviet past. Initially, as many post-Soviet countries, Belarus has attempted to adjust to the post-Cold War realities and open up to new self-identification forms through introducing white-red-white flag, efforts to declare Belarusian as the only state language, replacing the old Soviet emblem with Pahonia coat of arms. However, as argued by Leshchenko (2008), this nation-building projects failed because they were ignoring the recent history of the society. The official discourse has preferred continuity over change, which was supposed to be ensured through a non-institutionalized ideology. This ideology was shaped based on the notions determined by communist ideology. It nevertheless lacks substance and is defined by Katsiarina Yakouchyk (2018) who adopted the definition of ideology from von Soest and Grauvogel as "general narratives regarding the righteousness of a given political order" (Yakouchyk, 2018, p. 5) that may include "references to nationalism, societal models and religion" (Yakouchyk, 2018, p. 5). This ideology, on the one hand, serves the needs of the regime and on the other hand, echoes the needs of the society, which are reflected in the Soviet nostalgia. It is prone to modifications depending on what is perceived as a threat to political regime and the sovereignty of the state, which this regime undertakes to protect. It attempts to do so by demonstrating that the empty signifier, i.e. sovereignty, which is supposed to stay partially emptied is filled through the articulation of the following demands. 1. Suppression of freedom of expression and national revivalist sentiments

perceived as threats to stability and sovereignty. 2. Promotion of collective values as opposed to individual ones 3. Promotion of patriarchal rhetoric in respect to women's role in the society.

4.2. Suppression of freedom of expression and national revivalist sentiments perceived as threats to stability and sovereignty

As mentioned above, one of the major differences between Foucault's sovereign power and governmentality is that the former is bound with norms while the latter is legitimized by law. Foucault also argues that sovereignty's bond with law has a reverse side as the legal framework and the idea of sovereignty itself can be used against the sovereign power. This, however, has been made extremely difficult in Belarus by the state's intervention into personal rights and freedoms, growing reliance on police and special forces, censorship and tight control of the media. These tactics have been implemented to allow the regime to maintain the status quo, which corresponds to one of the many conceptualizations of Lukashenka's regime called 'Lukashenkism' (Bekus, 2010, p. 21), which also disgraces and disregards democratic institutions. The state intervention has been made possible by reinterpreting old and introducing new concepts, such as the concept of information sovereignty, which was adopted by the Decree of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus dated May 18, 2019 (*National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, 2019*). The information sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus is the inalienable and exclusive rule of law of the state to independently determine the rules of ownership, use and disposal of national information resources, to carry out an independent external and internal state information policy, to form a national information infrastructure, to ensure information security (*National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, 2019, p.3*). In fact, this implies censorship and other methods of suppressing inconvenient voices. This, obviously, contradicts the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which enshrines guarantees of freedom of expression and the retrieval, storage, dissemination of information and prohibits censorship. However, this censorship is believed to serve the national interests of the country, same as it was serving the interests of Soviet authorities. According to the independent monitoring Media IQ ("Media v Belarusi 2020," 2020),

Belarusian media continues to operate in accordance with the Soviet lines, presenting nearly Soviet narratives about “caring state”, “nation incapable of self-regulation” and promoting certain agenda. Despite the fact that Belarus’ modern media landscape has started to form in the beginning of 1990s, the processes of denationalization and privatization of media have not occurred. According to the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, 44 out of 98 TV programs registered in Belarus are state-owned, whereas all TV channels in Belarus are de-facto state-owned (“Media v Belarusi 2020,” 2020). Considering the fact that 88% of the Belarusian population aged 50 and above claim that TV is the main information source and that 50% of people between the age of 18 and 34 watch TV (“Media v Belarusi 2020,” 2020), it is possible to argue that the state exerts the maximum social control with the minimum expenditure of force. This control presupposes severe limitations on information sovereignty, which are believed to be necessary as they prevent the rise of alternative voices, i.e., deviance from the “normal”. At the same time, it does not mean a complete suppression of freedom of thought and expression, Control and power, in the Foucauldian sense, may result in an empowerment of subjects, forcing them to free decision-making. The freedom is welcomed by the Lukashenka’s discourse as long as it does not disrupt, reverse and consequently translate into power ambitions.

In view of the foregoing, since the previous report ‘For mass media reforms in Belarus’ from 2014, there have been indeed some positive developments, such as non-mandatory registration of online media outlets as mass media, the right of owners of internet outlets to appeal against access restrictions to their websites, the return of private traditional media outlets to the state system of subscription and retail distribution etc. However, these developments are complemented by restrictive legislative changes in the sphere of freedom of expression. Although registration of online media outlets is voluntary the process is complex, expensive and requires authorization. Moreover, non-registered media outlets do not enjoy media rights, but are nonetheless subject to sanctions for non-compliance with responsibilities imposed on registered media outlets. Considering that online platforms can contribute to the rise of opinions different from what the state believes is appropriate,

online outlets are vested with the responsibility for the commentaries posted on their websites, i.e. identification of commentaries has been made mandatory. In practice, this means either pre-moderation of commentaries or suspension of the commentary function.

Since 2014 Courts have been prosecuting freelance journalists for cooperation with non-accredited foreign media outlets on the basis of police reports (“Media v Belarusi 2020,” 2020). Journalists are fined regardless of the nature of a publication simply for the mere fact of their appearance in foreign media. This happens despite the fact that the Code of Administrative Offences does not constitute these types of offenses and despite Belarus’ international obligations in the sphere of freedom of expression. Loose interpretation of international agreements and international obligations, including those related to ensuring human rights and legal guarantees of investors' rights, is another characteristic of the incumbent regime This aligns with Foucault’s understanding of governmentality where law is not necessarily “juridical” nor that the only way in which juridical power manifests itself is legal (Tadros, 1998). In fact, any appeal to external regulations, albeit voluntarily imposed on itself by Belarus, within the local understanding of independence is often interpreted as interference in internal affairs.

National revivalist sentiments are not completely disregarded by the official discourse, but they nevertheless are mostly associated with opposition, which, according to the official discourse, may undermine stability of the state. There have been many initiatives, such as “Budzma Belarusami”, (Let’ be Belarusians), “Mova ci kava” (Language or Coffee), “Mova Nanova” (Language again) etc. that have been approved by the government. These initiatives have mostly been related to the promotion of the Belarusian language. The so-called soft-Belarusization can be explained by the shift in foreign policy preferences. The year 2014 is indeed characteristic for the change of Lukashenka’s discourse to moderately nationalistic. The first signs of the so-called ‘soft Belarusization’ were noticed when in 2014, president Lukashenka for the first time delivered the Independence Day speech in Belarusian, which was associated with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the perceived threat to Belarusian sovereignty. The image of the “Soviet” Belarus and its brotherly relations with Russia were undermined.

It can be argued that appearance of nationalistic sentiments in Lukashenka's discourse can be tied to his opportunism in foreign policy preferences. This pattern can be seen in Lukashenka's 2003 inaugural speech where he stated: "We are not someone's province, not Europe's eastern outskirts or Russia's western outskirts (Lukashenko, 2003)" (Yakouchyk, 2018, p. 9). This happened after Putin had offered to integrate Belarus into the Russian Federation as its region in August 2002. Moreover, as argued by V. Bobrovych (2003), after 2003, Lukashenka started to seek a 'new ideological orientation', which would imply the unique 'messianic' role that Belarus would play among eastern Slavic nations. Lukashenka was stressing that Russia was losing its cultural and spiritual superiority in the Eastern-Euro-Asiatic civilizations by stating:

... In the entire world only Belarus remains a country which proclaims fidelity to our national values (...) in addition, we could work not only for a profit but for the others, for community, for the good of collective. Liberal ideology is deeply strange for Belarusian mentality. In the contradiction to the western liberalism we would base on "collectivism", mutual aid, social care and respect state for the nation (Maszkiewicz, 2012, p. 9).

The doubling of gas prices and suspension of oil supplies in January 2007 were also interpreted as pressure on Belarusian sovereignty and was therefore turned to Lukashenka's advantage, considering that popular support for integration with Russia decreased from 46.4 % in November 2006 to 35.1 % in January 2007 (Leshchenko, 2008). This is also known as "momentokracia", which is a 'based system of justifications of political decision using all necessary political instruments that ruling power have at hands' (Maszkiewicz, 2012, p. 7) or 'adaptive authoritarianism', which among other features is characterized as 'continuity through change' in so far as Lukashenka has been able to maintain his hold on power by allowing the regime to change and adapt when and where expedient' (Frear, 2020, p. 3).

In addition, the official discourse disregards the demands of part of Belarusian society, which seeks to reconcile with its Western roots. As argued by Kalinin (2005), mechanical

reception of alien Western elements could result in global conflict, which he also applies to Belarusian self-identity. Moreover, they assume participation of wider group of people in the process of formulation of priorities within politics and threaten the sovereign power.

4.3. Promotion of collective values as opposed to individual ones

With the reintroduction of the Soviet symbols in 1995, the official discourse started to reintroduce the Soviet ideas of collectivism (Maszkiewicz, 2012) reflected in subordination of individual interests to those of the state. The Western model based on the protection of human rights and promotion of individualism is believed not to suit specific national and social condition of post-Soviet Belarus., insofar as individualism is associated with the Foucauldian idea of “cutting off the king’s head” (Ringer, 2020, p. 8), which challenges the idea of the monarch being the sole bearer of power. Collectivism, on the other hand, is believed to breed state paternalism. This is another distinction Foucault draws between sovereignty and governmentality, which aims at directing individual conduct. Collective values employed by the regime are reflected in various forms such as glorification of the Second World War, streamlining the conduct of the youth, collective work in farms, and the Soviet idea of “full employment”.

In the official discourse, glorification of the Second World War represents the collective fight of partisans against the external threat. Every year Belarus confirms financial support for the organization of parades to commemorate the Victory day. As argued by Rohava “analysis of celebrations in non-democratic political settings have shown that symbolic performances can be used to reaffirm existing political hierarchies and provide visible affirmations of popular consent” (Rohava, 2020, p. 884). The high symbolization of the Second World War is not limited by major parades, but is also a part of various major events. In September 2020, for instance, at the time when protests were at their pick, the Second World War was the main theme of the annual Forum of Regions of Belarus and Russia, where Lukashenka emphasized how Belarus and Russia, alongside with other republics of the USSR contributed to the victory over fascism and mentioned that falsification of history is unacceptable. Lukashenka said:

‘[...]Our efforts will be in vain if we do not pass on the torch of remembrance to the youth. Using the most modern technologies, they are trying to impose false values on the younger generation: the cult of consumption, individualism, social irresponsibility. This is alien to the traditions and worldview of our peoples, which are based on unity, solidarity and willingness to help each other’ (Vystuplenie Lukashenko na plenarnom zasedanii VII Foruma regionov Belarusi i Rossii, 2020).

Lukashenka believes that the youth is supposed to act and think beyond democracy, pluralism and freedom. He tries to present his peculiar way of thinking as a common sense, in a familiar fashion and a simplified language. In his description of the modern day Belarusian youth, he said that instead of appreciating the bread that is grown by young people working in the fields, we ‘keep ranting about democracy’ (*‘razglogolstvuem o demokratii’*) and suggested that those who think otherwise should be sent ‘to the farms for reeducation’ (*‘v pole na perevospitanie’*) (*Lukashenko o stolichnoj molodezhi: “V pole! Na perevospitanie!,”* 2020).

Hard work in farms is another association Lukashenka makes with the Soviet Union and consequently promotes as a signified of social and national unity, which subordinates individual interests to the collective will and interest (Leshchenko, 2008). According to Lukashenka, the agricultural work does not just hold “disciplinary function” but is also the basis of the of Belarus’ independence and is a guarantor of stability. The stability, as was mentioned earlier, can be achieved by employing neo-sovietism, i.e. reviving specific aspects of Soviet life based on the nostalgia of the Soviet Union (Ševcova, 2007, p. 200). Lukashenka therefore argues that developments in agriculture have been achieved due to the combination of traditional approach to nature and modern scientific and technological developments.

Lukashenka’s admiration of hard work is based on the premises of the Soviet era’s “full employment”. The cult of labor in the USSR was instilled from childhood. May Day (Pervomay) was one of the main public holidays, which was also considered the Day of Workers’ Solidarity. It is no coincidence that one of the slogans of the holiday, ‘Peace!

Labor! May!’ (‘Mir! Trud! May) has put the three words together by making a reference to the victory in the Great Patriotic War, a historical event once more uniting all Soviet people.

The official discourse, same as it was in the USSR, views labor as a guarantor of the confidence in the future. Unemployment, in its turn, is associated with loitering and the tumultuous 1980s when the principle of universal employment started to weaken. The unemployed man is associated with parasitism, crimes and protests. “An idle, a staggering person is not just a protester (‘pretestun’) in the street, he is a future criminal who ‘throws us’ (‘podkidivaet nam’) crimes every day, every week, every month”(Lukashenko nazval predprinimatelej “puzatymi burzhujami,” 2020). A working man, on the contrary, is a simple man, far from entrepreneurship, which Lukashenka associates with ‘pot-bellied bourgeois’ (‘puzatyi burjuy’), the ones who “hurt a simple man”, “who opted for destroying the state and the statehood” (Lukashenko prigrozil likvidirovat’ ves’ chastnyj biznes v Belorussii, 2020).

To prevent the dangerous sentiments of unemployment, on 2 April 2015, President Lukashenka signed Decree No.3 “On prevention of dependency on social aid”, which stipulates that citizens who have not worked for at least 183 days, and thus have not paid taxes are required to pay a special fee to finance governmental expenditures, and non-compliance with which stipulates administrative responsibility (*Dekret N3 “O Preduprezhdenii Socialnogo Izdivenchestva,”* 2017). The decree does not just contradict international human right law, but also contradicts the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which establishes the civil right to work as the most worthy way of self-affirmation and provides a very limited number of cases where forced labor is allowed – following a court ruling or in accordance with a state emergency or martial law. The Decree has sparked a lot of protests and was in fact cancelled by Decree No.1 ‘On the promotion of employment’ signed on 25 January 2018 (*Nalog na tunejadstvo v Belarusi (2021) - izmenenija po dekretu, novosti,* 2020). The new Decree, however, stipulated the creation of commissions responsible for defining the employment status of citizens and deciding on how to proceed with people who ended up in difficult circumstances.

According to the decree, individuals who have antisocial way of life should be subject to confinement in correctional facilities (“lechebno-trudovie profilaktorii”). This demonstrates another feature of Foucault’s sovereign, which exercises punishment instead of control in order to “normalize” individuals. The official discourse attempts to create a society without crime, the definition of which remains fluid, deviance and differences. According to Foucault, however, “society does not have a limitless need for compliance. Society does not need to conform to an exhaustive disciplinary system. A society finds that it has a certain level of illegality and it would find it very difficult to have this rate reduced indefinitely.” (De Lagasnerie & Maclellan, 2020).

Despite Lukashenka’s admiration of collective labor and national and social unity which it entails, not all kinds of collective actions and initiatives are welcomed and some, such as civil society, are considered dangerous to the statehood as it reflects ‘the ability of a society to control and apply pressure to the government to ensure basic human rights and freedoms’ (Lenzi, 2002, p. 401). However, the fear of democracy promotion does not make the sphere of civil society non-existent. Instead, it transforms civil society into the tool of state ideology. Those parts that are incompatible with the state ideology, as argued by Nelly Bekus (2010), are ousted from the official public scene into a peculiar parallel world due to their counter-political nature.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities tolerate the existence of some civil society organizations as long as they do not pose a threat to stability. Generally, the government supports activities related to Belarusian culture, language and heritage. Depoliticization, i.e. removal of political connotations from culture, language and heritage, is one important premise on which these activities can be approved. However, cultural initiatives are often perceived by the government as oppositional, which increases self-censorship and which is extremely difficult when it comes to themes related to national revival and Belarusization.

Moreover, the government disregards anything unfamiliar, that, which may require a sustainable development because it may instill some alien values in the society. For this reason, its dialogue with civil society organizations is limited by short-term events and

lacks institutional mechanisms. The “familiar” is usually promoted by equally familiar institutions, such as trade unions, the operation of which has not changed much from the Soviet times. Trade unions, according to Lukashenka, are ‘conductors’ (provodniki) of the government and ‘should be involved in everything’ (do vsego doljno bit delo) (*Lukashenko: profsojuzy byli i ostajutsja odnoj iz osnovnyh opor grazhdanskogo obshhestva*, 2015). Activities which do not comply with the state agenda are labeled as oppositional and those who perform them are the fifth column.

Considering that demands for freedom of expression and for exercise of civil liberties are largely disregarded by the official discourse, the constitutive lack, which it engenders, is artificially filled with governmental initiatives aimed at subsuming those demands and creating the illusion that they are met. “Governmental non-governmental organizations” (GONGO) aimed at creating the illusion of civil society and furthering the regime’s political interests are among those initiatives.

Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), the largest youth group in Belarus, according to Lukashenka, is a backbone of the government (*Lukashenko: profsojuzy byli i ostajutsja odnoj iz osnovnyh opor grazhdanskogo obshhestva*, 2015). As the successor of Leninist Communist Youth Union it promotes patriotism and instills moral values into the Belarusian youth through various activities, such as camping, sporting events and visiting memorials. The organization, alongside with educational institutions is vested with responsibility to participate in the formation of student’s groups and to oversee their activities alongside with the special operational staff (*Presidential decree of the Republic of Belarus “About the organization of activities of student’s groups in the territory of the Republic of Belarus,”* 2020). Any kind of activity directed toward promotion of students’ rights, development of students’ self-governance, which does not fulfill assignments that are deemed to be significant to the state, are automatically labeled as “oppositional”. This is one of the reasons why, as for 2018, the majority of the youth was generally apathetic to any political or nearly political agenda (Shelest et al., 2018). On the one hand, there is a risk of being labeled as oppositional, and on the other hand, they will lack the support of their respective target audiences. Therefore, one of the main problems of the youth

organization and Belarusian civil society in general is the avoidance of any political matters and inability to be a mobilizing force of public to control the state.

4.4. Promotion of patriarchal rhetoric in respect to women's role in the society

The hegemonic discourse in Belarus is characterized by patriarchal rhetoric about the role of women in the society. This rhetoric is based on certain normative expectations, which 'describe qualities or behavioral tendencies believed to be desirable for each sex'. (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 574). Cialdini and Trost (1998) explain this through what they call injunctive norms, which are 'consensual expectations about what group of people ought to do or ideally would do'. These expectations are based on communal and agentic attributes (Bakan, 1996; Eagly 1987). Communal attributes describe a concern with the welfare of other people and are ascribed more strongly to women, while agentic attributes of assertiveness, dominance and control are ascribed more strongly to man. This construct of a gender role, according to Elena Gapova, is used 'by those participating in the discourse over nation's political future and in search of its destiny (Gapova, 1998, p. 477). She argues that the official discourse prompts women to surrender their destiny to men, loss of individuality and results in denial of their agency.

On the other hand, the Gender Inequality Index and Global Gender Gap Report demonstrate quite the opposite. According to Global Gender Gap Report 2020 (Szmigiera, 2021), Belarus is ranked 29th place, which is higher than Lithuania, Austria, Portugal and several other EU countries. The Gender Inequality Index 2019 (UNDP, 2019) indicates similar pattern: Belarus is ranked 53rd and is listed among countries demonstrating 'high human development' index. The Global Gender Gap Report Index has been measuring the extent of gender-based gaps among four key dimensions: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. The fact that Belarus scores high in these rankings is linked to the imbalance of the weight of these dimensions in forming the final results. Therefore, despite the fact that according to ODHR and OSCE Report from 2016, women's share in Parliament comprises 27.3%, which places it to a higher position than France, Lithuania and several other EU countries, Political Empowerment dimension demonstrates the lowest score among three other

dimensions. This can be explained by the fact the official discourse approves of women's traditional role of a homemaker needful of dominative control by men, whose role is to 'promote a certain understanding of national security and traditional values through reproduction' (Shchurko, 2017, p. 46).

The aforementioned argument can be supported by national policy on reproductive health, which is highly politicized. Tatsiana Shchurko (2017) has examined how the Belarusian government exercise control by manipulating women's body. She mentions the 2010 Concept of National Security, which views the aging of the nation and decline of the birth rates as a threat to the national security. She argues that expectations about women's status and occupancy of homemaker are instrumentalized not just on a legislative level, such as Article 24 of the Law on Public Health, determining 'motherhood as an especially important direction of state policy'(Zakon Respubliki Belarus' o zdravoohranenii, 1993), but also through introduction of national holidays. By making women to comply with injunctive norms, i.e. the ideal way of living, which is fostered by certain incentives women receive in advance; the incumbent regime 'constructs new identities that are worthy of state support or, conversely, unworthy and hence subject to regulation' (Shchurko, 2017, p. 60).

Alexandra Hrycak (2010) makes the similar argument claiming that the government oppresses all types of female civic activities that may be incongruent with the state agenda, prevents the external aid that may cultivate feminist sentiments and promotes the Soviet-era women's activism staging events allowing women 'to praise the government, for instance, for its "generous" support of "mother heroes" who have given birth to more than five children.' She argues that women are discouraged from becoming active in public life. This may sound controversial looking at Lukashenka's speeches where he claims that women candidates are encouraged to run for parliament. However, he implies that even in the politics the role of women is to exercise their communal attributes, i.e. to be concerned with the welfare of men, who in their turn, provide for the welfare of the state.. At the meeting with the chairman of the House of Representatives (lower house of parliament) Vladimir Andreichenko, Alexander Lukashenka made the following statement:

We have already seen that one third of women in parliament means a stable parliament. Men do not make a fool there, do not jump around, do not run - it is a shame in front of women. This is a very strong stabilizing factor in any society (Lukashenko rasskazal, zachem v parlamente Belorussii nuzhny zhenshhiny, 2019, Ria Novosti)

From this statement, it can be seen that men should also comply with certain norms in the presence of women. In other words, despite the existing prejudice against women of not being able to fulfill leadership roles, it can be argued that discrimination against men exists as well. For instance, women, in contrast to men, are allowed to receive a special treatment for committing a serious crime. Death penalty, the most serious punishment, does not apply to women. According to the law, women under 18 and above 50 cannot be sentenced to public service or imprisonment (*Zakon Respubliki Belarus' o zdravoohranenii*, 1993), 1999). In general, women, unlike men can only serve the term in prisons with milder conditions, which implies protection of women's rights in regards to motherhood (Shchuka, 2018).

The official discourse has inherited this perception of women from the Soviet legacy, which on the one hand supported women's rights and on the other hand, "encouraged protective legislation that restricted women from participating in certain jobs and provided them with the social benefits of paid maternity leave- reinforcing rather than challenging essentialist views of gender" (Shchurko, 2017, p. 55) Despite the fact that according to the Law on Demographic Security (2002), reproductive rights and the choice to have children are women's decision, it is also stated that "the system of public beliefs and values should be reoriented toward the model of the family with several children and both parents in their first legal marriage"(Shchurko, 2017, p. 58). In other words, the incumbent regime exercises Foucault's disciplinary power, which views the individual body as a subject through which the population can be regulated. As argued by Elena Gapova (1998), women in Belarus became simultaneously sexualized and domesticated. They are the "face" of the nation and are praised by Lukashenka, who appoints attractive women to different positions at President Protocol Service, who accompany him during foreign and domestic visits.

Although they are allowed to take part in politics, such as the aforementioned encouragement to run for the Parliament, their own independent political wills are disregarded, especially when they do not comply with the state agenda. The last section of the analysis will examine whether the emergence of Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya and the further mobilization of Belarusian women have challenged the existing prejudice.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. Contestation of disciplinary power

‘It seems to me that the real political task in society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them’ (Chomsky & Foucault, 1971/2006, p. 41).

On August 9 and 10, 2020, Belarusian security forces severely beat and detained mostly peaceful demonstrators protesting against the official results of the presidential elections. Brutalities and acts of violence committed by security forces have forced Belarusians to contest the hegemonic discourse through the collective fight for the “European choice”, understood as a struggle against oppression and coercion. The offensive-hegemonic discourse started to articulate the cumulative demands of justice legitimacy and order, which have been disregarded by the official discourse, and were made obvious with the August events, understood as a dislocation. These demands are cumulative, as they represent a necessary condition for remedying the constitutive lack. In other words, ousting Lukashenka, which represents an encompassing demand, can be possible once demands of justice, legitimacy and order are met. This, as a result, would resolve a lack triggered by the dislocation. The examined Telegram channels assumed this task by elaborating memos (pamyatki), activities of de-anonymization and creation of coordinated resistance groups.

The following samples are important for the analysis because through them we can see the features of contesting the disciplinary power, which is represented by the violent law enforcement officers and the regime. As it was mentioned earlier, disciplinary power attempts to discipline and normalize individuals through the penitentiary system. What is peculiar for the offensive-hegemonic discourse is that it undertook the task of resignifying the disciplinary power. In other words, the practices of ‘normalization’ and

‘transformation’, which have been employed by the defensive-hegemonic discourse, are now employed by the offensive-hegemonic discourse in an online environment.

For instance, Nexta Live and Belarus Golovnogo Mozga elaborated a memo named “Your personal sanctions against the dictator, his security services (siloviki) and accomplices (posobniki)” (2020, September 3). The memo was describing the regime as the ‘fired old management’, which considers itself the ‘owner’ of the country and keeps imposing violence by relying on its repressive forces (karatelnie organi), accomplices in courts and executive committees (ispolkom), ideologists and TV propaganda. The memo was claiming that the war against the nation is waged through its taxes and was therefore calling the nation to stop financing this war. It provided the instructions on how to legally avoid paying fines for administrative offences, communal expenses and entrepreneurial taxes. According to the post, people should protest within ‘conditional resistance fronts’. The measures described above are the part of the so-called ‘economic front’. It was argued that taxes should be paid in a law-based state, which can be established once Lukashenka is ousted. In the existing conditions, taxes were interpreted as forced labor (barshina) and levies (pobori). In other, words, the offensive-hegemonic discourse has clearly established that the regime deviates from what is normal and from the idealized norm of conduct. It therefore, imposes the appropriate penalties in the form of evading from taxes and views punishment as an act of war waged in defense of the people, not the Sovereign.

Memos about consequences of avoiding taxes. legal actions aimed at prosecuting law enforcement officers committing violence, were posted by channel “Motolkopomogi”, “Belarus Golovnogo Mozga” and “Nasha Niva” (2020, September 4). “Belarus Golovnogo Mozga”, jointly with BYPOL, Belarusian initiative created by former security officials to oppose the Belarusian authorities, has also created a memo on how to minimize negative consequences of interacting with law enforcement agencies. It provided instructions on ‘how to properly leave the house’ before visiting law enforcement agencies and how to deal with electronic devices and mobile applications once they have been returned to an owner after the seizure. Basta has provided a leaflet with similar instructions, but was putting more emphasis on how to act in case of the internet blackout, which VPNs should be used

in order to prevent the leakage of personal data, how to use bridgefy, the application, which makes mobile applications work using mesh networks instead of internet and how to be technically prepared during mass protests (2020, August 8).

There have been many memo initiatives calling the protestors for the labor strikes. In fact, many of them have also been implemented. Lukashenka's cult of labor, as it was mentioned earlier, stems from the Soviet legacy. The defensive-hegemonic discourse extends the disciplinary apparatuses of government to discipline individuals in the labor market. The unemployed, according to the defensive-hegemonic discourse are associated with parasitism and crime. On the one hand, this arrangement has been challenged in the online environment in terms of encouraging people to participate in labor strikes, but on the other hand, has been used against the defensive-hegemonic discourse based on the logic of equivalence. In other words, since the defensive-hegemonic discourse perceives labor as productive and as a guarantor of the country's stability, protestors have actually adopted this rhetoric in the form of 'Work-to-rule reversed' ("Italyanskaya zabastovka naoborot") (2020, September 17) memo. 'Work-to-rule', is a job action in which employees, with the purpose to protest against low pay or bad working conditions, do no more than minimum required by the rules of their contract, and precisely follow all safety and other regulations, which results in a slowdown and decrease of productivity. The idea of the Telegram channel's initiative was to use this action in reverse and to 'overdo' the responsibilities, which would in fact create legal grounds for employees of various organizations to protest against the government in the form of labor strike based on a sick leave. In fact, despite their will to protest, medical workers were encouraged to not leave their jobs and to issue sick leaves to all those willing to support popular ultimatum in the form of a labor strike.

Another tactics used by Telegram channels with the purpose to contest brutality of the political regime can be defined as 'de-anonymization'. Originally, the term describes a data-mining technique, which is the opposite of anonymization, "a key block in providing confidentiality in privacy-preserving technologies" (Denezis & Troncoso, 2013, p.49). Although, the attempts to define the term have been vague and inconsistent (Chevrier et al.,

2019), it can be understood as the practice of matching anonymous data with publicly available information with the purpose to discover the person to which data belongs to.

In the context of the Belarusian protests, de-anonymization is used by protesters as a response to refusal of the official discourse to show violence and unwillingness to carry out criminal orders. It is a modernized form of protest, which uses the regime's weapon of mass intimidation against the regime itself. At the same time, de-anonymization of the Belarusian law enforcement officers corresponds to the peaceful nature of the protests. It does not inflict any physical harm, but, in fact, subjects violent law enforcement to public ostracism and contributes to the emergence of the Self in regards to the Other. The Self, due to constant oppressions, realizes the risks of political persecutions and is accustomed to disclosure of its identity. It therefore raises similar demands against the violent law enforcement agencies, which are not ready for publicity. In this regard, IT specialists and Telegram channels started the action of 'de-anonymization'

The driving force 'unmasking' the brutalities of the defensive-hegemonic discourse and making the demands of the population subjected to violence obvious, is cybe-partisans. The term partisan is not new for Belarus. According to Marples (2006), the official discourse often commemorates Soviet partisans struggling against the German occupants. However, it overlooks the pro-German collaborationist structures fighting the Soviet authorities. Cybe-partisans of the 2020 Belarusian protests do not associate themselves with any of the two groups, while they associate the official discourse with "occupiers". They define themselves as "simple Belarusians", who assumed the task of expanding their activities to the level of a nationwide freedom movement and of challenging the official discourse by referring to the unmet demands of justice, legitimacy and order through de-anonymization, organized attacks on governmental and pro-governmental websites, fight against state propaganda, technical support to the protestors and mobilization of people through 'People's Self-Defense Squads' ('Drujini Narodnoy Samooboroni).

The action of de-anonymization and hacker attacks use the disciplinary power's technique of mass surveillance. It generates the information and makes it clear for the defensive-

hegemonic discourse that its actions can be observed, documented and recorded. It uses the defensive-hegemonic discourse's tactic of intervening into individuals' personal freedoms and discloses identities of certain individuals, 'leading them to act as if they were being watched at all times, forcing them to govern their behavior continuously' (Marsden, 2001)

The first reports of hacker attacks on state websites in Belarus appeared in early September. First, the website of the Presidential Property Management Department was attacked: a white-red-white flag which represented the state flag in 1991-95 and which is now used by Lukashenka's opponents appeared on its main page. A photograph of the head of the presidential administration Viktor Sheiman, a longtime associate of Lukashenka, with the star of Verka Serduchka (a Ukrainian comedian and pop and dance singer. The star on the head, according to the singer, was symbolizing the communist legacy until 2007) above his head, was placed next to the flag (2020, September 2).

Later, the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was attacked. Alexander Lukashenka and Interior Minister Yuriy Karaev were added to the "Wanted" section. Claims accusing Lukashenka and Karaev in war crimes against the Belarusian people were published on the website. After the hacker attack, the inspection was carried out within the framework of the criminal procedure legislation under Part 1 of Art. 349 "Unauthorized access to computer information", which a fine or arrest for three months.(2020, September 4)

After that, hackers attacked the website of the Belarusian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. They left a picture of a man behind a laptop in a white hoodie on a red background, and for the first time, identified themselves by leaving a message next to the heading "We are cyber-partisans."

We, like our brave ancestors, started our partisan war against the policemen, the Gestapo, the occupation authorities and other collaborators. We call on all Belarusians, regardless of gender and age, religion and profession, to join the fight. We always thought: "If only there was no war!" But the war has come to us. Our friends and families are being killed, tortured and raped. No one will be able to sit on the sidelines. Only the scorched earth will remain after chasteners!

Belarusian, do you think nothing depends on you? Everything depends on you! You can do more than you think! (“Mi kiber-partizani”, 2020, TJ)

Cyber-partisans undertook the task of performing the disciplinary function by creating the illusion of the all-seeing inspector, an important figure for Foucault’s penitentiary regime. Since their identities and location are not disclosed, they might be considered as representing the Foucauldian Panopticon, the observation tower, which allows a watchman to observe occupants without their knowledge on the exact time when they are being watched. Moreover, the occupants cannot see into the tower. In this regard, initially, cyber-partisans did not have their own Telegram channel and were distributing information through “NEXTA” and other Telegram channels. On 19 September, they created their own Telegram channel. It happened after 18 September 2020, when “NEXTA” referring to its “warning” made a weak earlier, published a Google document with personal data of the 1000 Internal Ministry personnel. The information, according to ‘NEXTA’, was collected through a database created by cyber-partisans. The sentence ‘No one will remain anonymous’ (Nikto ne ostanetsa anonimnim) has further been appropriated by other Telegram channels as well.

Initially, the channel was targeting and attacking various governmental websites. On September 26, after the attack on the website of the Institution “Main Economic Administration”, cyber-partisans attacked the website of the Ministry of Communication and posted the letter from Ministry revealing names of the hotels where participants of 7th Forum of Regions of Belarus and Russia were supposed to stay. On the same day, having accused Belteleradio, National State Television and Radio Company of the Republic of Belarus, of not broadcasting the true events, cyber-partisans attacked the website and started to broadcast videos from protests throughout all Belarusian channels available online. The website of Sustainable Development Goals in Belarus was attacked on 11 October, where the cyber-partisans posted the image of the arrested Belarusian basketball player, Yelena Leuchanka wearing the uniform with the inscription ‘Freedom Belarus’ and holding a ball painted in white-red-white Belarusian flag, which has been extensively used by the protestors.

“Chernaya Kniga Belarusi” (“The Black Book of Belarus”) is another chat which was promoted by most of the Telegram channels as ‘One of the most popular projects in the country for de-anonymization and the search for people in uniform who have committed crimes against their own people’ (2020, September 19). The channel has been unmasking Belarusian law enforcement agencies based on the information sent to its city-based ‘bot channels’ by cyber-partisans and non-affiliated Belarusian citizens. (2020, September 12). According to the post, regime supporter would qualify for de-anonymization if he/she:

1. Deprived "unwanted" employees of salaries or bonuses or increased the workload without overtime payment
2. Is involved in corruptions of state institutions or “saves” on the purchase of the necessary consumables, medicines or equipment, which greatly harms the institution and people;
3. Expelled "objectionable" students or pupils;
4. Threatened people with "sanctions" or removal of children from the family;
5. Fired or threatened to fire employees for their political views;
6. Illegally transferred an employee to another position;
7. Summoned for "conversations" and psychologically pressed or threatened, humiliated honor and dignity (2020, October 2)

City-based de-anonymizations have been further narrowed down to district-based and oblast-based de-anonymizations. District-based de-anonymizations were claimed to be more effective, as it is much easier to disclose someone’s identity within smaller administrative divisions. Residents of Jidinsky district have thereby managed to ‘unmask’ a mayor, responsible for brutalities against peaceful protestors, within two days (2020, September 20).

Later, on 4 October, cyber-partisans referred to the speech Lukashenka had delivered during his visit to a military unit of internal troops, where he promised to prioritize military personnel after families with multiple children in a five-year-plan of granting of flats. (NAVINY.BY, 2020) Residents of Lebajiy district of Minks started collecting personal information about police officers living in the district after their attack on protestors. In this

regard, the following post was left on several Telegram channels. "Before using gas against crowds of people playing the guitar in their yards, think twice about whether you might end up living next to them." (2020, October 4).

Cybe-partisans have also provided extensive technical support to the protestors in the situation of the Internet blackouts. They were providing warnings about KGB surveillances and technical instructions on how to circumvent them (2020, October 25). They launched high-capacity proxy-servers, such as "ultimatum", "luka-v-avtozak", "uhodi-uhodi-uhodi", which provided high level of functionality, security, and privacy. According to their surveys, more than 56 thousand Belarusians have used their proxy servers (2020, December 8).

In addition, they started a program that would allow every Belarusian to 'become a cyber-partisan' ('luboy Belarus mojet stat kiber-partizanom') (2020, October 28) and hack governmental websites. The joint attacks were claimed to be more effective as their blockage is almost impossible. (2020, November 5). The first joint hacker attack was committed on 28 October, and has involved 10 thousand people. Cybe-partisans were making surveys for selecting the target of their attacks. University websites were attacked as a response to dismissal of students due to their political views. Similarly, the police officers participating in beatings of students, such as the case with Belarusian State Technological University students, were subjected to de-anonymization. (2020, October 30). Cyber-partisans have offered the Belarusians the field of possibilities, which the defensive-hegemonic discourse was suppressing through the acts of violence. The "collective", which the defensive-hegemonic discourse was attempting to discipline, has been offered the high-level of security and privacy, allowing it not to just resist against the Sovereign, but also to attack it and hamper its hegemonic status. Fight against state propaganda and fake news was another way of the collective employment of freedoms granted by cyber-partisans. In fact, there was a separate Telegram channel, called Jeltiye Partisani, vested with this responsibility. The channel has blocked fake Instagram and Facebook accounts of Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya and numbers of propaganda posts. They were also calling on every Belarusian to participate in this endeavor and to make mass

complaints against propagandistic posts, after which “a post would be deleted/blocked and many Belarusians will not see a propagandistic garbage” (“Mnogie glaza svobonix Belarusiv ne uvidat propagandiskogo musora”) (2020, December 11)

Creation of coordinated resistance groups working towards ‘moral exhaustion’ (2020, December 5) of the regime was another way of responding to brutalities committed by the regime. The goal was to create ‘Peoples’ Self-defense Squads’ (PSSs) (‘Drujini Narodnoy Samooboroni’). The Telegram channel vested with this responsibility was named ‘Busly laciac’ (‘Storks are flying’). Channel administrators chose the symbol of stork because it represents “A peaceful bird that can stand for itself using the best tactics” (2020, November 18) In their first post the channel administrators introduced themselves as following.

We, ordinary citizens of Belarus, your neighbors, relatives, friends, due to the circumstances that put our country on a par with the worst dictatorships in history, are forced to temporarily forget our peaceful professions and remember the glorious guerrilla traditions of our ancestors. We will prepare and strike blows at various spheres of life of the dictatorship, forcing the regime go on the defense. A number of system errors will cause a critical mode imbalance and when the system falters, we will enter the final battle. It will be a fight according to our rules and our conditions. (2020, November 18)

It was mentioned that initially, the formation of the “Peoples’ Self-defense Squads (PSS)” would not cover all the spectrum of tasks and that this would be achieved in stages. In the very beginning, the process of joining PSSs was implemented through the channel itself, where coordination was made through general instructions. Subsequently, an algorithm was written in the form of a questionnaire, having passed which, people were able to functionally define themselves.

On 20 November, first general instructions regarding mobilization of PSSs for the following weekend were posted by the channel. Those instructions included logistical aspects, such as managing the time of arrival to the destination point, equipment-related issues, movement of protester groups and security issues. Three days later, a post regarding

the observation from the weekend protests was made, saying that in some spots, protestors became more decisive and managed to force the law enforcement officers to retreat. The channel has also provided a “bot” (the main task of the bot is to automatically respond after the command is entered by the user) chat meant for collecting feedbacks from the participants (2020, December 2).

On 2 December, the channel opened application forms meant for the organization of PSSs (2020, December 2) The PSSs members were granted the complete anonymity. They were requested to fill in the application forms with people they are personally acquainted with and to choose a group leader. Once the application is filled out, it is sent to a special bot, which is verified by a coordinator. Coordinator contacts a group leader and clarifies details. After this, coordinator, confirms the group, provides a group name, a password and access to the personal chat of the group, through which a group leader can contact coordinator and edit the group (2020, December 2). All groups are divided into functional areas based on information provided in the application. Each group occupies its own niche in the associated resistance system. To accomplish the tasks, the groups are provided with necessary supply. The group leader, through his personal account, coordinates actions with the coordinator and applies for necessary supplies. The corresponding information regarding supplies appears in the "equipment" section. The personal chat has various other sections, such as ‘my actions’ as well. This section shows activities and tasks of the group. In order for a group to be included as an active unit, it must confirm its status. In the beginning, the group is supposed to conduct a simple verification action based on its functionality. The first tasks would normally include hanging white-red-white Belarusian flags in various public places (2020, December 3). Later, the channel published a post that 47% of the members did not manage to pass the first task and did not pass to the second-level tasks. The reason was non-compliance with standards and de-anonymization of law enforcement officers. Those who passed the first level, proceeded to the second level. In this regard, a group named ‘Indigo’ has been successful in developing access to some security cameras, which enhanced the safety of other groups (2020, December 19)

The channel has mentioned that it will not provide information about all tasks, which does not give the opportunity to analyze the whole spectrum of activities, but it is still possible to observe that it has managed to formulate and articulate demands of rebuilding justice and legitimacy and breaking the cycle of regime's impunity. Violence and a deliberate injection of intimidation into the society are opposed by the peaceful acts of self-defense and exposure of oppressors. Liberation of people from oppression challenges the collectivist mentality of the official discourse, associated with subordination of individual interests, as well as the idea of the Sovereign as the absolute bearer of power. Through Telegram channels, protestors have challenged legitimacy of the Sovereign, which is backed up by physical force, and have derived from the expected conduct stipulating obeying the will of the Sovereign. Instead, they employed the idea of the Foucauldian governmentality, presupposing the full knowledge of the subjects. At the same time, the offensive-hegemonic discourse did not intend to supplant the notion of state authority, but claimed that power should be exercised not solely by state, but also by nation and individuals. Despite the fact that offensive-hegemonic discourse tried to act within the scope of the law, it recognized that protection of peoples' inalienable rights requires extension of this scope, which is also stipulated by Foucauldian governmentality. Protestors have mentioned in several posts that formally, some of their actions might not be stipulated by the law (2020, November 5). However, in the situation when the state violates or abuses the law by the means of extreme control, protestors reinterpreted the legitimacy of their actions, and have resorted to breach of the law as a necessary condition for exercising freedoms. This corresponds to the objective of including the "European political idea" into the content of Belarusianness, which is explained as the right of people to manage their own destiny, "in the revival of its spiritual formations, in the flourishing of national culture, in the formation of prosperous civil society and a democratic rule-of law state, with its ultimate aim to provide citizens with rights and liberties as well as a worthy level of life". (Bekus, 2013, p. 156) It is equally argued that the phenomenon of the "nation" can only be realized only under a democratic rule. In this regard, Nelly Bekus extends the argument by claiming that according to other conceptualizations of "European Belarusianness", "the Belarusian nation can be considered based on European democratic values not due to the category of "nations

in general, but because such is the Belarusian tradition” (Bekus, 2013, p. 156). The second part of the analysis will therefore concern the contestation of neo-Soviet ideology propagated by the official discourse and the renewal of the Belarusian national self-consciousness on the basis of European moral values.

5.2. Reinterpretation of the neo-Soviet ideology and resignification of “The Enemy”

This section analyzes the offensive-hegemonic discourse through the practice of resignification of the Enemy. Through the contestation of the empty signifier of sovereignty and articulation of the demand of reconciling with pre-Soviet European past, the production of antagonism is inevitable. In other words, since the Self, which in this case is the offensive-hegemonic discourse, attempts to ‘close’ the empty signifier of sovereignty, it starts to draw the border with the Other. This happens through the practices of attaching different signifieds to the empty signifier of Enemy.

The enemy is viewed as an empty signifier because it divides the discursive field between the forces of good and evil, while its actual traits are blurred. In other words, the defensive-hegemonic discourse perceives the Enemy as any potential threat to its sovereignty, which also includes the offensive-hegemonic discourse. The offensive-hegemonic discourse, on the other hand, has established that the Enemy is the Sovereign power, represented by the defensive-hegemonic discourse and its elements including the Soviet legacy. This, however, does not mean that the discursive field is divided into two dichotomous camps, since both discourses agree on perceiving Nazis as the Enemy. This is based on the logic of equivalence, which, by weakening the differences between the Self and the Other forms the common identity. Because establishing the common identity based on the two discourses is impossible, the offensive-hegemonic discourse started to detach itself from the Enemy signified by the Nazis and produced articulations aimed at resignifying the signifier of Nazism. To be more precise, Nazism is simultaneously a signified and a signifier. It is a signified because it is the meaning that both discourses attach to the signifier of enemy, and it is a signifier because the two discourses, based on the mutual

accusations, attach different significeds to it. In Telegram channels, the process of resignification occurs through national symbols and articulations discrediting the elements of the Soviet legacy.

The All Belarusian People's Assembly (Vsebelorusskoe Narodnoe Sobranie (VNS)) is one of the objects of this discreditation. References to a two-day congress started to appear in Telegram channels after Lukashenka, against the backdrop of protests, announced his will to convene the sixth assembly. Many Telegram channels have presented the idea of the VNS as a reincarnation of one of the most ridiculous elements of the USSR, aimed at legitimizing Lukashenka's presidency through constitutional reforms (2020, October 27) VNS was reinterpreted by the protestors as the analogue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which was the sole governing party, possessing a monopoly on country's political power and thus contributing to the establishment of an autocratic regime. VNS was placed in the context of Lukashenka's proposals for constitutional reforms (Meyer & Kudrytski, 2020) - the first attempt to create the illusion of his readiness of considering demands of the opposition. Protestors have interpreted the idea of the constitutional reform as an attempt to include VNS to the constitution as a body determining main directions of domestic and foreign policy of the country, and its Presidium (reinterpreted as an analogue of the Political Bureau - the highest policy-making authority within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.) as a leading state body, granting Lukashenka the role of its head. This, according to the opposition, will allow Lukashenka to formally transfer the presidential office with reduced powers to one of his colleagues while maintaining the power with a new constitutional status (2020, December 8).

Protestors have challenged the status of VNS as "a special form of 'government by the people' (narodovlastiye), a democratic institution that allows the citizens of Belarus to more widely exercise the right to participate in the affairs of the state." (2020, December 9), and started to offer alternative ways of "government by the people". One of those initiatives was calls of Telegram channels to organize mass celebrations of the fifth of November, marking the expiration of Lukashenka's presidential term (2020, November 4), which coincides with Guy Fawkes night, the British celebration of the Gunpowder Plot of

1605, known as a failed attempt by group of English Catholics to assassinate King James I. The image, more specifically, a mask of Guy Fawkes, known as a “trigger man” and the enemy who was supposed to detonate the gunpowder, played a role of an empty signifier unifying Belarusian protestors. His image is controversial as originally, it is signified by the crime against the state and the religious extremism, but, on the other hand, is also signified by “resistance to the emerging disciplinary regime [...]” (Call, 2008, p. 155). In the comic book *V for Vendetta*, based on which the same-named movie was released in 2005, the mask signifies the critique of fascism (Call, 2008), which is how it was appropriated by the Belarusian opposition.

After Telegram channels posted the agenda for the fifth of November, people wearing Guy Fawkes masks started to gather and share photos and videos demonstrating the mass burning of Lukasbenka’s effigies. Some protestors have used the famous line, “V for Vendetta” as “Sasha V means leave!” (Sasha V – znachit Vali) (2020, November 5). Protestors were demonstrating national white-red-white flag, which the official discourse, as it was previously mentioned, associates with fascism and Nazi collaborators.

...They hung out white-red-white flags and ribbons. Curtains were everywhere. Even the cables were pulled from house to house to hang these, as we commonly believe, collaborationist pro-fascist flags. This is because under these flags, during the Great Patriotic War, policemen walked with these armbands and shot people. Portraits of Hitler were present at all events. There are footage chronicles, showing that it was happening under these flags. In our country, the country where every third person died. Can you imagine the attitude to this? (2020, November 13)

The defensive-hegemonic discourse disregards the long history of the white-red-white Belarusian flag, and, by associating it with the particular time in history (1941-1944 Nazi occupation), uses it as a signified of the Nazism, i.e. the Enemy. At the same time, because in the late 1980s the flag was used by the opposition as a symbol of democratic and national revivalist changes, the defensive-hegemonic discourse perceives it as a threat to stability. In order to change this signification, Telegram channels started to make posts

revealing the history of the white-and-red flag and articulating the similar signification of “Nazi collaborator” toward the official red-green flag.

Several posts were mentioning Nikolay Gusev, the creator of 1951 sample of the red-green flag, which as the stated in the posts, was also creating the Nazi portraits, for which he was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities. They also mentioned Klavdy Duzh-Dushevsky, the author of the white-red-white flag created in 1917, who refused to collaborate with Nazis for which he ended up in a Nazi concentration camp (2020, December 7). Posts were also mentioning Valentin Volkov, the designer of the two coat of arms used in Belarus between the period of first and second World Wars and the author of the famous painting “Minsk. 3 July 1944” portraying the day of the Soviet liberation of Minsk from the German occupation. Volkov, according to the posts was, similarly to Gusev, collaborating with Nazi Germans. According to the post, initially he was drawing the famous painting for Germans, but changed after Soviet troops entered Minsk (2020, December 14)

Other Telegram posts have linked the history of Belarusian national symbols to the Soviet campaigns of dekulakization (political repressions against prosperous peasants (Maksudov, 1989)), deportations and repressions against the anti-Soviet Liberation underground. They mentioned Mikhail Katsar, head of the ethnography and folklore department at the Academy of Sciences of Belarus, who was included into the commission that was ordered to create a new flag for the Belarusian SSR in 1951 and determined on the flag’s decorative pattern (Sovetskaya Belorussiya, 2015). They brought attention to the fact the ornament selected for the flag was embroidered by his sister, Matrona Markevich, whose family was subjected to dekulakization in 1937, while her husband Aliaksei Markevich was arrested and executed by the Interior Ministry of the Soviet Union (NKVD), known for its role in political repressions and Gulag (a system of forced labor camps established during Stalin’s reign) (2020, December 21).

The offensive-hegemonic discourse has accused the defensive-hegemonic discourse in othering elements of the Belarusian national identity, which trace their roots to a pre-Soviet history. Those elements, including the national symbols from the times of the Great Duchy

of Lithuania, according to the opposition, are the markers of the Belarusian nation (2020, October 12). Because demands for the self-identification with a European pre-Soviet history have not been met by the official discourse, the offensive-hegemonic discourse started to articulate those demands through initiatives, such as “Passport of a citizen” (“Пашпарт грамадзяніна”).

“Passport of a citizen” is a project initiated by the Telegram channel “Onliner” aimed at raising awareness of “national symbols, culture, identity and all the matters related to Belarus and Belarusians” (2020, October 12) The project started with the elaboration of a memo on the Belarusian coat of arms “Pahnonia”, the history of which was traced back to the 13th century Great Duchy of Lithuania, in which it was symbolizing “recovery of the loot (vozvrasheniye nagrablennogo) and release of the abducted from captivity”. The decision to change national symbols in 1994 was explained by the offensive-hegemonic discourse as a desire “to bring Belarusians back to the recent ‘bright past’” and to “emphasize that Belarus did not exist as a historical, political and cultural reality until 1917”.

Similar memo have been made for the Belarusian national anthem. According to the memo, starting from the 20th century anthems serve political ideologies of authoritarian regimes, which they link the USSR and the Nazi Germany. It is stated that the current national anthem of Belarus, which is the adaptation of the Soviet anthem to the current political realities, is alien to the Belarusian nation.

In terms of legislation, it is only possible to consolidate what is already perceived by the majority of people as their own, dear. This is the sacred meaning of the national anthem. The anthem should reflect the centuries-old destiny of the people, their historical path, their struggle for freedom. ‘Custom-made’ anthems, even if considering the opinion of ‘some qualified commissions’, rarely take root and they only hold on to the administrative resource (Korsak, 2020)

National symbols used by protestors, according to them were reflecting their centuries-old history of the nation. They are associated with the Battle of Orsha, portrayed the German

painter Hans Krell in 1524 and with the Battle of Kircholm portrayed by a Flemish painter Pieter Snayersand. Both paintings portraying the various historical times of Great Duchy of Lithuania, were displaying the white-red-white flag, and were posted by several Telegram channels (2020, September 19). Telegram channels have also created various local chats meant for organization of various initiatives related to national symbols, one of which was the creation of national symbols based on images or words that would identify various districts of Minsk. For instance, the flag created for Kamarowka district, would be signified by mosquito (which is the translation), while the flag created for Rakovskoye predmestye would be signified by cancer (2020, September 14). All of these flags, despite their various designs, were signified by red and white colors.

Exhibition of the oppositional national symbols has also been discredited by university administrations. In fact, Belarusian National Technical University banned the usage of flags and banners, while Belarusian State University held a propagandistic lecture on the history of national symbols of Belarus (2020, September 29). Students, in their turn, started to show their political stance by collectively leaving the earlier-mentioned Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), another element of the Soviet legacy (2020, September 1). Telegram channels were providing instructions on how to leave the organization, legal issues concerning the procedure and possible consequences (2020, September 4).

The calls to quit BRSM and the subsequent actions taken upon it demonstrated the will of the offensive-hegemonic discourse to farewell the elements of the Soviet legacy. This, among other reasons, happened because the defensive-hegemonic discourse has not met the offensive-hegemonic discourse's demands of reconciling with the pre-Soviet European past. Negating Lukashenka's non-institutionalized Soviet ideology means the negation of the Enemy's way of life, i.e. a one-man-rule propagating certain national identity beliefs aimed at protecting the Sovereign's power. This is crucial because, as it was previously mentioned, the emergence of the Self with its strong identity is impossible without the antagonistic Other. However, there is a logic of equivalence between the Self and the Other in respect to their identification of Nazism as the common Enemy. In order to weaken the unity between the two struggling discourses, the offensive-hegemonic discourse assumed

the task of shadowing the logic of equivalence through resignifying the signifier of Nazism. This resignification has been implemented through the pro-European interpretation of the past and has demonstrated the will of building the national identity on the basis of the European legacy.

5.3. Contesting the defensive-hegemonic discourse through the female prism

This section is going to look at the contestation of the defensive-hegemonic discourse through the female prism. Analyzing the female discourse is crucial, considering that the Belarusian protests are known for the active female involvement, which manifests itself through female-led marches, emergence of the feminist groups, such as a feminist working group operating within the Coordination Council, a project about ‘fearless women of Belarus’ (News from the Coordination Council working groups, 2020) , ‘Daughters of Eva’ and more. However, the female discourse in Telegram platform largely differs from the overall assumption that the Belarusian protests have shattered gender stereotypes and patriarchal rhetoric of the defensive-hegemonic discourse. In other words, references to the patriarchal values and stereotypes have certainly played a pivotal role in bringing the female discourse to the forefront and have cultivated the elements of female emancipation, but the articulation of the demand for the female empowerment, despite the initial expectations, is largely absent.

Belarusian protests affirm the priority of delegitimizing Lukashenka's regime over any other demands. It plays the role of an encompassing demand, because it articulates the sufficient condition for overcoming the lack of the universal. In the context of the Belarusian protests, all other demands, including the demand for the female emancipation are subsumed under it and are therefore secondary. This means that they serve the purposes of the encompassing demand and lack their peculiar features. For instance, the posts made to call the ‘women in white’ to participate in ‘solidarity chains’, has featured ‘stop the violence!’ (‘СПЫНІЦЕ ГВАЛІТ!’) as the first priority. The following demands were mentioned in most of the posts related to female’s protest activities:

- To stop the arbitrariness of the security forces and release all political prisoners

- Investigate the disappearances, murders, and torture of people in prisons and paddy wagons
- To punish the all guilty, to dismiss the management of the involved special services and the ministries (2020, August 22)

What is obvious from these posts is that women contest the disciplinary function of the defensive-hegemonic discourse in the form of resisting the coercive use of power against the whole nation, not against women specifically. In other words, although the struggle for the self-determination is articulated through the female prism, it does not challenge the patriarchal rhetoric of subordinating female interests to the goals of man, but implies that subversion of the nation's expressed desire for self-determination is overall unacceptable. The fact that the defensive-hegemonic discourse has used femininity as a discipline operating as an effective form of social control has not only remained unchallenged, but has, although not openly, continued to be articulated in Telegram. This can be observed from various posts featuring women chanting "You better protect us" (2020, August 29) to OMON troops, or messages condemning men for "hiding behind women", and for "sending girls who do not know how to 'make a chain' (stoyat' v stsepki) to face OMON.", while their job is "to raise children, to plant flowers, to knit socks and to cook borsch" (2020, September 9). Despite the attempts to create the image of the Belarusian women possessing the argentic attributes, including assertiveness, dominance and control, demands articulated in respect to the defensive-hegemonic discourse's way of conduct, demonstrate that in Telegram, women are still presented as a vulnerable gender, ascribing more to communal characteristics, which describe a concern with the welfare of others.

This can be seen from the video message of Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya, which she recorded to announce about her departure to Lithuania.

'I thought that this whole campaign hardened me a lot and gave me so much strength that I could withstand everything. But I guess I still remained the weak woman who I was originally...Our children are the most important thing that we have in our lives.' (2020, August 11).

This message represents the overall image of female's representation in Telegram. Motherhood and taking care of children is still the primary quality attributed to the women, while the leadership ability still remains more stereotypical of man. 'We need to be more organized. There will be leaders in the struggle. Otherwise, everyone decided that these girls would do everything themselves.' – the encrypt from the interview with the Belarusian Nobel prize winner, journalist, Svetlana Alexievich, which was shared by many Telegram channels, is another example of the aforementioned observation. This does not disregard the women's role in the Belarusian protests, but it rather implies the less favorable evaluation of women's potential for leadership.

Motherhood is another perspective of contesting the brutalities of the defensive-hegemonic discourse. The video message made by the Belarusian mothers was condemning the brutalities of the regime through the perspective of a caring mother, whose child associates OMON with 'a bad man who kills'. They stated that they do not want their children to be frightened when they hear the word OMON or police, because "the fear kills personality". They were describing how threatening it is to be a mother, because at any moment they can be detained with their children. They claimed that they want their children to be free and to express themselves freely (2020, October 8).

Through these messages women has challenged the Sovereign power, particularly in respect to women, which presents itself as an inherently productive 'power of care', protecting females from different threats. In fact, the Sovereign himself becomes a threat to the nation and sovereignty of the country, which a woman-mother is ought to protect. These sentiments can be observed in Telegram posts dedicated to the Mother's March, held in Minsk on the occasion of the Mother's Day celebrated in Belarus on 14 October, where women were chanting "Freedom to our children" (2020, October 14). Since politics, according to the defensive-hegemonic discourse is a masculine endeavor and all the female roles are subjugated to that of a mother, women's political demands were articulated through the perspective of a mother, which as a result, personifies the nation. In this regard, Telegram channels posted photos of women with posters featuring "We want grandchildren, not a war", "You did not give birth, you are not a president", "Mothers curse

you and your OMON”, “You gassed me, you stormed with grenades. Come to your senses, Son” (2020, October 14).

The Sovereign is now perceived by the offensive-hegemonic discourse as a threat to women-mothers, because children that women were encouraged to give birth to, are now taken away due to their protest activities (2020, November 11). Guardianship and custody bodies, which should protect children deprived of parental care, are now used as a tool of intimidation for politically active women. Moreover, benefits related to child care are also perceived to be under threat. Changes regarding reducing the maternity leave discussed in The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection were interpreted as a “‘Child Policy’ of the police state”. The state has been interpreted as no longer socially-oriented, while the right to “carry on the family line” and to raise children, as no longer a right, but luxury available to the better-off segments of society.

The offensive-hegemonic discourse has personified the state as the woman and has challenged the idea of masculinization of the Sovereign suggesting that women too can participate in the nation’s destiny. Communal characteristics, which according to the existing stereotypes, women are supposed to demonstrate through her affectionate conduct concerning the welfare of others, have been employed by the offensive-hegemonic discourse to ensure the welfare of the state. This can be seen from many posts, such as the announcement of the Women's Peacekeeping Force Grand Parade, which was addressing man working for security forces and claiming that “not a single housewife will wash the blood of the innocent from the shoulder straps” and that women “take a mission to protect order in the country” (2020, August 29). The video featuring Belarusian words, such as future, faith, dream, country, beauty, language, honesty, mother, dignity, security, truth, strength, kindness, family, hope, freedom, will, victory implied “the most important things in life are feminine nouns” (2020, September 10). Similarly, a video depicting women in white-red dresses and using flowers as a weapon against the attacking smog, was a response to Lukashenka’s claim that “Our constitution is not made for women”¹. The description posted under the video was claiming the following:

“The tyrant said: “The constitution is not for a woman.” But he forgot something. Blue-eyed Belarus is feminine! And it is no surprise that today, it seems, the entire feminine family and even femininity itself rebelled against him - for good, truth and justice! Women are strength, and Belarusian women today are real Warriors of Light! Strength is not in rudeness. Strength is in truth, love and tenderness, against which any evil is powerless. We will win! Long live Belarus!” (2020, September 30)

What is obvious from this statement is that the offensive-hegemonic discourse attempts to globalize the representation of Belarus by making references to a female Belarus, a “Motherland”. This, as argued by Nelly Bekus (2013), implies the wholeness of the nation and therefore means that “the national interest” loses its peculiarity. On the one hand, it may seem that the defensive-hegemonic discourse remains unchallenged, because through the attempts to “close” the empty signifier of sovereignty, it similarly to the offensive-hegemonic discourse, tries to construct the image of Belarus as the unified state representing the internal wholeness. On the other hand, because demands of the opposition are not satisfied, they are located out of the space of this “wholeness”. The offensive-hegemonic discourse assumed the task of subsuming the unmet demands by generalizing the representation of Belarus through the concept of a woman-mother. Although, these articulations bring visibility to the female discourse, which manifests itself as the form of struggle for freedom and human rights, they do not challenge patriarchal values propagated by the defensive-hegemonic discourse in respect to women’s role in the society.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of the thesis was to analyze the articulation of the discourse of the Belarusian opposition in Telegram, to examine how this discourse challenges the hegemonic status of the official discourse by transforming it into a defensive-hegemonic one, and to identify the role of new media, more specifically Telegram in this process. The object of this contestation is different meanings the two discourses ascribe to the ideal way of governing the country and to the limits of power enjoyed by the head of the state. In order to conceptualize the object of contestation, to establish its validity and to ascertain the significance of new media in the 2020 Belarusian protests, it was important to scrutinize Lukashenka's discourse starting from the beginning of his presidency. This task was accomplished in the first part of the thesis, which, by engaging with Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony theory, as well as the Foucauldian concepts of "sovereign power" and "governmentality" allowed to conceptualize the object of the contestation as "sovereignty" and come to the following conclusions, which laid the ground for the analysis:

1. According to the official discourse, unity and territorial integrity of the country can be preserved by the Sovereign, the absolute bearer of power, who can ensure stability of the country, which was lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.
2. The idea of the Sovereign has achieved hegemony, because it was initially resonating with the demands of the society recovering from the collapse of the Soviet Union and due to the coercive use of power, which was conceptualized as a disciplinary system.
3. The role of the disciplinary system is to streamline conduct of individuals, which is implemented through the adaptation of the Soviet ideology to the post-Cold War realities of Belarus.

The above-mentioned aspects have simultaneously led to the emergence of the societal demands and impossibility of their struggle for hegemony due to the lack of platforms through which they could be articulated. This demonstrates that apart from the new-technology solutions, which are discussed in detail throughout the thesis, new media offers

protestors the much-needed freedom for articulating their demands and for contesting the official discourse. This is what constitutes the analytical part of the thesis.

The first part of the analysis has analyzed how the offensive-hegemonic discourse (the discourse of the opposition) has challenged the disciplinary function of the defensive-hegemonic discourse. It was found out that this contestation was happening through resignification of the disciplinary system. In other words, practices of “normalization” and “transformation”, which have previously been employed by the defensive-hegemonic discourse, have now been assumed by the offensive-hegemonic discourse. This has been done based on the following activities:

1. Creation of memos aimed at raising awareness about possible ways of fighting the regime , countering police brutalities and vindicating human rights
2. De-anonymization of representatives of the defensive-hegemonic discourse involved in brutalities committed against the protestors, and their subjection to mass surveillance and the subsequent social ostracism.
3. Cyber attacks on governmental websites and other cyber activities as the way of articulating demands for justice, legitimacy and order and granting the broader group of people the right of fighting against the political regime.
4. Creation of coordinated resistance groups working toward opposing the brutalities committed by the regime and presupposing the involvement of a larger group of people.

The above-mentioned conclusions demonstrate the will of the offensive-hegemonic discourse to incorporate the “European political idea” into content of Belarusianness, which is not characterized by the shift of geopolitical preferences, but is explained as the right of people to manage their own destiny, “in the revival of its spiritual formations, in the flourishing of national culture, in the formation of prosperous civil society and a democratic rule-of law state, with its ultimate aim to provide citizens with rights and liberties as well as a worthy level of life” (Bekus, 2013, p. 156). This idea has also been manifested in the will of people to reconcile with pre-Soviet European past, which was the conclusion of the second part of the analysis. National revivalist

sentiments were manifested through the pro-European revision of cultural memory, which, due to their collision with the elements of the Soviet legacy propagated by the defensive-hegemonic discourse, has led to discreditation of those elements by the offensive-hegemonic discourse.

Despite the fact that the first two parts of the analysis have demonstrated clear elements of challenging the defensive-hegemonic discourse, this has not been so obvious in the last part of the analysis, which focused on the contestation of the defensive-hegemonic discourse through the female prism. Contrary to the initial expectations that the female discourse would challenge the patriarchal rhetoric propagated by the defensive-hegemonic discourse in respect to women's role in the society and would articulate demand for the female empowerment, it has largely remained unchallenged. Elements of female emancipation have been articulated under the broader umbrella of the fight against violence and oppression of the nation's will for self-determination. This, however, is in line with the general logic of challenging the disciplinary function of the regime, because the image of the "caring state" and the masculine Sovereign praising women, although within the context of communal characteristics ascribed to them, has been significantly undermined.

The research recognizes that there is a constant discursive struggle between various world descriptions and that every hegemony will be inevitable challenged by alternative accounts, to which it will convey its hegemonic status. However, in the absence of platforms through which various discourses could struggle for hegemony, the crisis or collapse of what would have been a "normal" historical development (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001) would not be sufficient for making this struggle happen. Considering the growing importance of new media in protest movements, the broader, multiple-case study research can approach intervention of new media to politics as a dislocatory event.

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Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, December 8) v voskresenye boleye 56 tisyach belarusiv vospolzovali nashimi proksi-serverami <https://t.me/cpartisans/101>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, November 11) tri mesyaca nazad terroristami iz almaza bil ubit aleksandr taraikovsky <https://t.me/cpartisans/76>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, November 29) platim za deanon virodkov iz sso https://t.me/nexta_live/12304

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, November 5) nas ochen chasto prosyat vozobnovit ataki <https://t.me/cpartisans/66>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, October 25) borba za svobodnoy internet dlya neveroyatnix belarusov prodoljayetsa! <https://t.me/cpartisans/43>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, October 25) nash istochnik soobshil, chto kgb sledil za polzovatelami zasheshennix serverov <https://t.me/cpartisans/42>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, October 28) izbiyeniye studentov bgtu <https://t.me/cpartisans/61>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, October 28) mi zapustili say, cherez kotoriy luboy belarus mojet stat kiber-partizanom <https://t.me/cpartisans/52>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, October 28) vi neveroyatniye! Segosnya pochti 10 tosyach belarusov pomogli studentam virazit svoyu grajdanskuyu poziciyu <https://t.me/cpartisans/53>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, September 26) kiber partizani vzlomali sayt bt <https://t.me/cpartisans/13>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, September 26) minsvyazi zaverili nas chto, problem s internetom v eti vixodniye ne budet <https://t.me/cpartisans/9>

Kiber-partizani [kiber-partizani] (2020, September 26) publikuem odnu iz bazu dannix gxu <https://t.me/cpartisans/8>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, August 22) Segodnya,, 22 avgusta, subbota, 14.00. Belarus protiv nasilita <https://t.me/mkbelarus/9176>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, December 14) Istoriya o tom, chto avtor krasno-zelyonogo flaga sotrudnichal s gitlerovtsami <https://t.me/mkbelarus/12500>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, December 21) Chem bolshe lukashisti probuyut diskreditirovat' belarusskiye simvoli i propiarit svoi <https://t.me/mkbelarus/12651>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, December 7) Sozdatel krsno-zelyonogo flaga BSSR obrazca 1951 godu <https://t.me/s/mkbelarus/12318>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, October 14) Tak prohodit marsh materey <https://t.me/mkbelarus/11039>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, October 2) deanon prekritnikov <https://t.me/mkbelarus/10784>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, September 12) chernaya kniga belarusi fiksiruyet prestupnikov <https://t.me/mkbelarus/10177>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, September 19) odin iz samix popularneyshix v strane (voobshe ix neskolko) proekt po deanonu <https://t.me/mkbelarus/9087>

Maja kraina belarus [majakrainabelarus] (2020, September 30) Poka mi pomnim proshloye - u nas est' budusheye <https://t.me/mkbelarus/10754>

Motolko pomogi [motolkopomogi] (2020, December 8) Teper tochno: Lukashenko idyot na doljnost glavi Politburo <https://t.me/motolkohelp/18354>

Motolko pomogi [motolkopomogi] (2020, September 2) mest aytishnikov ona takaya <https://t.me/motolkohelp/12467>

Nasha niva [nasha niva] (2020, September 4) cto budet esli otkazatsa platit shtraf https://t.me/nasha_niva/458

Nexta [nexta] (2020, November 13) Bezumny Lukasehnka viskazalsa o dvorax, simvolike belorusov https://t.me/nexta_live/12134

Nexta [nexta] (2020, November 5) “Sasha, V- znachit vali” https://t.me/nexta_tv/8398

Nexta [nexta] (2020, September 19) nedelu nazad mi preduprejdali <https://t.me/belamova/10586>

Nexta [nexta] (2020, September 23) protest – otlichnaya forma samorealizacii! https://t.me/nexta_tv/5017

Nexta live [nexta live] (2020, August 29) 29.08 sostoitsa Grand-Parad Jenskikh Mirotvorcheskikh sil https://t.me/nexta_live/9759

Nexta live [nexta live] (2020, August 8) pamjatka dlja protestujushhego https://t.me/nexta_live/5300

Nexta live [nexta live] (2020, November 4) Anarkhisti iz kollektiva Pramen podderjali karnaval v chest belorusskoy nochi Gaya Foksa https://t.me/nexta_live/12010

Nexta live [nexta live] (2020, October 27) Vsebelorusskoe narodnoe sobranie https://t.me/nexta_live/11900

Nexta live [nexta live] (2020, September 3) vashi personal"nye sankcii protiv diktatora, ego silovikov i posobnikov! https://t.me/nexta_live/10376

Onliner [onliner] (2020, October 12) Zapuskayem proyekt “Pashpart gramadzyanina” <https://t.me/onlinerby/17145>

Onliner [onliner] (2020, September 29) Kak vuzi pitayutsa borotsa s aktivnimi studentami <https://t.me/onlinerby/16568?single>

Tipichnaya Belarus [tipichnayabelarus] (2020, September 4) Yesli vi iskali metodichku po vikhodu iz BRSM <https://t.me/tpbela/2218>

Tut.by novosti [https://t.me/tutby_official] (2020, October 14) Minsk. Masrh materey na Oktyaborskoy ploshadi https://t.me/tutby_official/17205

Tut.by novosti [https://t.me/tutby_official] (2020, August 29) Tak vigladel moment, kogda OMON razdelil jenskuyu kolonnu https://t.me/tutby_official/12674

Tut.by novosti [tut.by novosti] (2020, September 4) po faktu vzloma sayta mvd provoditsa proverka https://t.me/tutby_official/13497