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CONSTRUCTING PARALLEL WORLDS: COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF  
THE UNION STATE OF RUSSIA AND BELARUS

MA Thesis

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### ***Authorship declaration***

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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## **Abstract**

The sphere of integration in the post-Soviet space, especially between Russian and Belarus, has always been viewed and studied through the practical prism, making an emphasis on the sides' instrumental motives. Despite several attempts (Klinke 2008; Słowikowski 2022), the discursive side of post-Soviet integration efforts remains largely under-researched, whereas European integration remains one of the most prolific areas of poststructuralist discourse analysis application to IR discipline. The study applies Laclau's poststructuralist discourse theory with its related ontology to the case of Minsk and Moscow's attempt to unify within the Union State in the early 2000s. The thesis delves into the ways the sides were articulating their understandings of the Union State, as well as into the final products of such discursive practices. The study finds that in the early 2000s Minsk and Moscow discursively formed completely different, and often mutually exclusive, visions of unification within the Union State along all four of its axes: political, economic, energy, and monetary. Each other's discursive structures were viewed as a radical 'Other,' threatening the 'Self's' identity within the (future) Union State. Neither side's discourse did not manage to hegemonize the social sphere, and become universally valid, thus foredooming the project's chances of success. This study is important as one of the first (if not the first) attempts to apply poststructuralist discourse analysis to the sphere of post-Soviet integration, thus opening up many other possibilities in this field of study.

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## Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Belarus and Russia agreed on the necessity of new modes of cooperation and integration. This need for closer integration with Russia was further amplified in Alexander Lukashenka's first election campaign in 1994 and continued during his presidencies. Supported by Russian president Boris Yeltsin, they became the main ideologists of the Union State. On 8 December 1999, their efforts culminated in signing the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State. The project set the highest integration bar among the other integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space. Its provisions envisaged the creation of a common economic space, phased adoption of a common currency, establishment of supranational bodies, and even left open the possibility of a joint Constitution. During the first years after the signing of the Treaty, the issue of integration within the Union State was a priority in the Minsk-Moscow relations agenda. Four main axes of integration were defined, with both sides expressing the rhetorical commitment to their necessity: political unification, economic unification, energy unification and monetary unification.

There is wide agreement among the post-Soviet integration scholarship that integration in the military sphere was a success of the Union State (Deyermond 2004, 1192-1193; Pugačiauskas 2020, 184). However, military integration predates not only the decision, but also the idea of the Union State, as it started shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, therefore, its successes can be considered as an 'inheritance' of the pre-Union State times. At the same time, the aforementioned ambitious unification goals between Russia - the legal successor of the Soviet Union - and Belarus - the most 'Soviet' of the post-Soviet states - were not achieved. Regardless of the rhetorical consent of the sides, the Union State substantially turned out as an 'ink-on-paper organization' with "little prospect for consensual institutionalization" (Marin 2020, 3). For this reason, the dissertation takes an analytical look at the Belarusian and Russian discourses on integration within the Union State (unification) during its first years (2000-2004), when the issue maintained a top-priority status in Minsk-Moscow relations.

The issue of the Union State (especially in its first years) has generally stayed out of the spotlight of the post-Soviet integration scholarship, which is mainly concentrated on the more successful projects, e.g. the Eurasian Economic Union. At the same time, a major part of the available studies, which at least to some degree touch upon the Union State, views the

project's eventual inefficacy through the instrumentalist prism. For Deyermond (2004, 1200) the Union State was "a populist move by an unpopular leader [Yeltsin]" with a subsequent decline in importance once he had been replaced by a leader with higher domestic support (Putin). According to Marin (2020, 3), Belarus feared that Russia's neo-imperialistic views of the Union State as a geopolitical actor with supranational bodies (which it could dominate) and integrated capacities in all fields would further re-integration of other post-Soviet states and, as a result, would limit Minsk's privileged status vis-à-vis Moscow. Marples (2008, 33) sees the reason in the evolution of public opinion in independent Belarus and fading of Soviet nostalgia, which ultimately resulted in "little support for unification, let alone integration in the form of a merger."

Some researchers argued that it was Belarus' "increasingly instrumental approach" (Nice 2012, 1) that jeopardized the implementation of the Union State's provisions, with Trenin (2005, 67) directly naming Lukashenka "[an] obstacle to its realization," while others saw the reason in "pragmatization" of Russian foreign policy of the early 2000s (Vieira 2016, 5-7). Lukashenka's initial push for the creation of the Union State has been broadly interpreted as a desire to expand his political influence eastwards - by replacing Yeltsin or by heading the newly-created union (Potocki 2002, 144; Usov 2020, 99; Deen et al. 2021, 12) and/or as a way to secure energy supplies at preferential prices (Balmaceda 2014, 41; Czerewacz-Filipowicz and Konopelko 2017, 52). At the same time, others argue that, instead, at some point, pursuance of closer and 'truer' integration with Russia started to create threats to Lukashenka's own political power (Allison 2005, 495; Lobatch 2005, 161; Frear 2019, 238), ultimately forcing him to stall the process.

However, such analyses fail to grasp the Russian and Belarusian official discourses on integration within the Union State, which existed during the project's first and most active years. While heavily focusing on material relations (energy prices, free trade, customs) and possible instrumental incentives behind the sides' decision to establish the Union State, the discursive and, arguably, verbal side of the issue remains majorly overlooked by the scholarship. Even despite the fact that the ambiguity and vagueness of the Union State Treaty's provisions created a fertile ground for opposing discourses to emerge in Minsk and Moscow shortly after signing the document.

The objective of this thesis is to find out why the initiative of the Union State was unsuccessful in the early 2000s, virtually remaining as a 'paper organization', despite the

sides' agreement on the necessity of its creation. In purely linguistic terms, Minsk and Moscow were talking about exactly similar needs and objectives. Both sides were stressing the need for a *Union State*, for *political unification*, for *economic unification*, for *energy unification*, and for *monetary unification*. However, as stated above, the project of the Union State remained highly dysfunctional, for more than two decades since its establishment serving only as a cheap tool for propaganda purposes. For these reasons, the dissertation looks beyond the aforementioned shared rhetorical stamps and analyzes *how* those points were elaborated in Minsk and Moscow, and what meanings they were filled up with. The thesis looks into the sides' images of the Union State and its key elements (political unification, economic unification, energy unification, and monetary unification), which were articulated and conveyed by Russia and Belarus in 2000-2004 through their discursive practices. The aim of the study is to find out how Belarus and Russia saw the Union State and themselves within it, how they articulated their discourses on this integration initiative, its prime elements, and obstacles preventing unification. After that, the dissertation looks into the subject positions of the uncovered discourse structures to find out whether there was any common ground between them.

For these reasons, the following interrelated research questions are asked: (a) *What were the official Russian and Belarusian discourses on integration within the Union State in 2000-2004?*, and (b) *How were they positioned with respect to each other, in particular, were there any points of intersection between them?* In order to provide thorough answers to the aforementioned questions, the thesis applies a qualitative method of discourse analysis based on post-structuralist discourse theory mainly developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and its concepts are of central importance for the research. In particular, post-structuralism argues that discourses are the result of hegemonic struggles (also described as hegemonic articulations) (Torfing 2002, 54; Townshend 2004, 270). At the same time, "hegemonization" happens when one particular discourse manages to establish itself as universally valid, when "one particular understanding of the world (one particular discourse) establishes itself as the only valid understanding of the world" (Stengel and Nabers 2019, 255). The main theoretical expectation of the thesis can be built upon the quote provided by Stengel and Nabers - neither one understanding of the Union State (neither Russian, nor Belarusian) did not manage to establish itself as the only valid understanding of the Union State. The sides' official discourses enjoyed hegemonic status only within their respective countries, with neither of them managing to achieve dominance 'across the border'. Rather,

Minsk and Moscow created opposing, mutually exclusive, non-intersecting discourses on the Union State and its main areas of integration, which were often perceived by the other side as threatening, sometimes even to their very existence.

The thesis applies a post-structuralist method of discourse analysis (utilizing its respective tools and concepts) to find out the Russian and Belarusian discourses on the Union State during the period from 2000 up until 2004 and analyze the (dis)connections between them. Therefore, statements made by high-ranking officials from Minsk or Moscow regarding the Union State, as well as political, economic, energy, and/or monetary unification within it, represent the primary source of empirical data for the research. They are extracted from all sorts of speeches, public commentaries, press conferences, and even debates. Unsurprisingly, the absolute majority of the statements are the ones made by President Lukashenka and President Putin, representing their respective countries' positions on the issue. In their turn, these statements are retrieved from a combination of primary and secondary sources, for example, official transcripts available at the presidents' official websites, news articles and reports, a video of debates, as well as previous studies which at least partially cover Russia-Belarus relations during that period.

Structure-wise, the thesis is divided into an introductory part, a theoretical chapter, two empirical chapters (with five sub-chapters per each, presenting the main findings), and a conclusion.

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the study in detail. The chapter describes the main terms and concepts of the Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory (PSDT), such as articulation, nodal point, antagonism, empty signifier, hegemony, etc. The empirical data of the research is analyzed through the prism of these key concepts, which allows us not only to comprehend the Russian and Belarusian discourses but also to schematize their discursive structures. The second chapter is dedicated to methodology, data finding, and data analysis methods.

The third and fourth chapters present the ultimate findings of the thesis - Belarusian and Russian discourses on integration within the Union State. Each sub-chapter is dedicated to a respective country's position on one of the areas of unification (4 in total), with the fifth one concluding the empirical findings, for example: "Belarusian discourse on political unification", "Russian discourse on energy unification" and so on. The concluding part of the

thesis compares Minsk's and Moscow's understandings of unification, in particular, their images (discursive structures) of the Union State.

## 1. Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory in International Relation

### 1.1 Historical context

Created as a result of the combination and modification of Marxism and structuralism, the groundworks of Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory (PSDT) are outlined and presented by Laclau and Mouffe in their foundational work *Hegemony and Social Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). One of their main reasons for moving 'past Marx' was due to the disagreement over the Gramscian (and generally Marxist) pre-deterministic nature, including its understanding of the concept of *hegemony*. To paraphrase Jacobs (2018, 4): "Why do we need a theory of hegemony if society is already organized through determinative economic principles?"

In PSDT the existing groups are always created as a result of political, discursive processes (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 33). For Laclau and Mouffe, the concept of hegemony automatically implies the existence of an open social field, where different discourses engage in discursive (hegemonic) struggles trying to hegemonize it, hence, gain dominance. At the same time, in discourse theory, the social field can never be completely fixed or completely closed, nevertheless different actors still try to fill this 'lack of closure' through discursive (political) practices (Laclau 1996a, 53; Howarth 1998, 12). As a result, according to PSDT, "[t]o hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function" (Laclau 1996a, 44). That does not mean that social identities, created through discursive articulations, cannot enjoy some degree of integrity or stability, however, these very identities are organized around the idea of their fullness and complete closure, which is just simply unachievable (Howarth 1998, 22).

PSDT does not limit itself to linguistic phenomena and does make a distinction between the so-called discursive and non-discursive practices, which served as a reason to criticize more 'traditional' approaches to discourse, for example, that of Foucault (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 107). "By discourse, [...], I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role" (Laclau 2005, 68; emphasis in original). Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe asserted that discursive structures have a *material* character, instead of the mental one. That means that

discourses have their manifestations in a physical space in terms of institutions and physical features (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 108; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 35). Poststructuralist discourse analysis does not disregard material facts, but rather attempts to ‘incorporate’ material and ideational factors, instead of privileging one over the other. Thus, the analysis does not measure and compare the importance of ideas and materiality, but views them as constructed through a discourse, which gives a certain materiality meaning by utilizing a certain set of identity constructions (Hansen 2013, 20). In our case, for example, regarding the Russian and Belarusian discourses on monetary unification, money (in particular, its currency) and a money-issuing institution (its location) would be such physical manifestations of the discourse.

Regarding the arrival of post-structuralism (and discourse analysis in general) into the discipline of international relations, Hansen (2012, 95) argues that particular representations of countries, places, as well as representation of ‘the Self’ and ‘the Other’ determine foreign policies, therefore, analysts should look into values, norms, and identities created through discursive practices. According to Neumann (2008, 62), discourse analysis proves its usefulness in IR as it “says something about why state Y was considered an enemy in state X,” and gives insights into why certain political options gain dominance, while others are being put aside. What should be noted is that European integration has been one of the most prolific spheres of research in discourse analysis since its introduction to IR (Diez 1999; Diez 2001; Hansen and Wæver 2002; Wodak 2018), while post-Soviet integration (or, at least, its attempts) remains majorly overlooked by discourse scholarship.

The dissertation adheres to four themes of discourse analysis defined by Gill (2000, 174-176), which partially intersect with three theoretical commitments previously outlined by Milliken (1999). The first theme is that discourse is a topic in itself. That means that discourse analysis is not just one of the tools to look for material or social ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ behind the texts, but rather, discourse analysis is interested in texts and language themselves. As Torfing (2005, 13) describes it, ‘truth’ is a feature of language determined by a discursive truth regime, hence “there is no extra-discursive instance, in terms of empirical facts, methodological rules, or privileged scientific criteria.” Therefore, scholars of discourse should not be invested in determining whether statements are true or not, but rather focus on values, norms, and identities which are being created and transmitted through discursive practices (Hansen 2012, 95).

Gill's second theme is that language is constructive. This notion follows the logic of the previous assumption, that language (discourse) is a device for generating a particular view of social reality, and not just "[a] path to 'real' beliefs or events, or a reflection of the way things really are" (Gill 2000, 175). As Shapiro (1989, 11) outlines: "meaning is always imposed, not discovered," regardless of how discourse perceives a particular aspect of social reality in question (as antagonistic, or neutral and non-threatening). Based on a constructivist logic, things themselves do not convey meaning, but rather people, through different instruments (mainly, but not limited to linguistics), construct their meaning (Milliken 1999, 229). Those particular views of social reality require continuous interpretation and reproduction, which takes place through 'ready-to-hand language practices' (such as grammars, rhetorics, and narrative structures) (Shapiro 1989, 11). Therefore, discourse, especially in the sense of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, is *constitutive*, instead of being *constituted* (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 19-20).

The third theme outlines discourse as a form of action. That means that discourses have a functional purpose, "people use discourse to *do* things" (Gill 2000, 175; emphasis in original), such as to present a particular account of an event, to put the blame, to justify a course of action, to expound an argument. At the same time, Gill notes that discourses do not appear in a social vacuum, therefore the construction and adjustment of discourses occur taking into consideration the *interpretive context* they emerge in, hence they try to fit that context. For example, a state official's discourses regarding the same issue/event might significantly differ depending on whether they are presented before local or foreign audiences. Apart from that, discourses designate subjects, who are authorized to articulate and maintain them (those might be state officials, intellectuals, or foreign policy experts), and also define and sustain a certain common sense, at the same time excluding other meanings (Milliken 1999, 229).

Gill's fourth point is that discourse is rhetorically organized. Essentially that means that discourses emerge in a competitive environment, where they have to present a particular version of events in opposition to other competitive versions. Apart from that, discourses are mainly formed in terms of binary oppositions, which in its very notion creates some kind of a power relation, privileging one element of the division over the other (Lyons 1977, 271; Doty 1996, 2-3; Milliken 1999, 229). Democratic/authoritarian, liberal economy/paternalistic economy, socially-oriented economy/oligarchic capitalism, and equality/dominance are just a few examples of such discursive binaries in some way connected to the thesis's topic. As

Laclau (1990, 31-32) explains, social relations “are always power relations,” and any objectivity (that is discourse) is contingent and permanently threatened by those oppositions. Hence, a discourse can partially assert itself only by suppressing these threatening elements. Due to this competitive setting, discourses articulate a specific ‘regime of truth’, at the same time disqualifying other possible identities and actions (Milliken 1999, 229). However, due to the very nature of discourse, those types of encounters are an essential part of their formation: “[A] discourse is inherently open-ended and incomplete. Its exterior limits are constituted by other discourses that are themselves also open, inherently unstable, and always in the process of being articulated” (Doty 1996, 6).

## **1.2 Ontology of Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory**

“Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112). To understand these discursive formations, the theory’s key concepts and terms need to be explained. Post-structuralist discursive formations presented by Laclau (2000, 303) in the form of a diagram were further elaborated by him in 2005 (Laclau 2005, 130) and by Thomassen (2005a, 293), and serve as a foundation to present the Russian and Belarusian discourses on integration within the Union State.

### **1.2.1 Articulation, elements and moments**

As previously noted, discourses emerge as a result of articulatory practices, therefore “*articulation* [is] any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105; emphasis in original). All signs in a discourse, whose meanings have been fixed as a part of a discourse are called *moments*. In contrast, any signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed and, therefore, have several potential meanings, are called *elements* (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 26-27). The transformation from elements into moments (i.e. fixation) happens as a result of articulation. A discursive moment gains a particular meaning within a specific context, at the same time excluding all other potential meanings, which are both threatening (because they make the fixation of meaning unstable) and constitutive (because the specific understanding is only possible when the other meanings are ruled out) (Stengel and Nabers 2019, 254). Those alternative meanings of signs a given discourse has discarded in order to achieve a coherent structure make up a *field of discursivity*, also described as a ‘surplus of meaning’

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 111; Dallmayr 2004, 39). In its turn, the term of the discursive *sign* (which unites both elements and moments) is explained by Laclau (1993, 542) in Saussurian terms, as the relation between the *signifier* (an acoustic image) and the *signified* (a concept).

The conversion from elements into moments can never be complete, because PSDT rejects the idea of complete fixation of the social field, otherwise there could not be competing discourses and hegemonic struggles. Nevertheless, when repeated, those combinations of words, terms, concepts, and ideas start forming a stable formation of some degree, with room for deviations and alterations, while in the case of completely fixed meanings it would be “a machinery [...], not a social sphere” (Marchart, 2014; Jacobs, 2018). In fact, the non-fixity and incompleteness of the social sphere is exactly what allows political articulations to emerge and “retroactively create the interests they claim to represent” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, xi; Naber 2015, 106). However, such inability of social agents to fully attain their identity inevitably leads to the emergence of antagonisms - forces, which are blamed for preventing such attainment.

### **1.2.2 Antagonism**

The *antagonism* represents an ultimate ‘Other’ in post-structuralist discourse theory, however, due to the concept’s particular importance for the thesis, it needs further elaboration. “[I]n the case of antagonism, [...] the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. [...] Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 125). Laclau further develops the concept of antagonism making an emphasis on its ‘outside’ positioning, which indicates a change compared to the concept’s early developments. For instance, the Hegelian concept of contradiction was devised as an ‘internal’ moment. Laclau underlines the radical character of antagonism, ultimately making it an irreconcilable side having no common ground with the ‘Self’. “With antagonism, denial does not originate from the ‘inside’ of identity itself but, in its most radical sense, *from outside*; [...] The antagonizing force *denies* my identity in the strictest sense of the term” (Laclau 1990, 17-18; emphasis in original). Stengel and Nabers (2019, 257) further elaborate on this thought and define antagonism as the construction of a particular type of Self/Other relationship in which the radical and antagonistic Other is blamed for the unfulfillment of certain demands and the incompleteness of the Self’s identity, what ultimately leads to division and dichotomization of social world into two antagonistic camps, where two large discursive structures stand opposite each other. In sum, antagonisms

represent a radical and threatening ‘Other,’ which enables the unification and stabilization of discourses and, at the same time, prevents their closure (Torfing 2002, 55).

Subsequently, the existence of antagonisms leads to the emergence of *antagonistic frontiers* within society, which essentially represent the “limits” of acceptability of the discourse in question, the line separating ‘Us’ from ‘Them’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 126-127; Howarth 1998, 5). Discourses modify over time and antagonistic frontiers modify with them, therefore the frontiers’ formations should not be perceived as static and unchangeable (Laclau 1990, 151). As Norval (1997, 61) sums up, “frontiers serve not only to individuate identity but also to organize political space through the simultaneous operation of the logics of equivalence and difference,” which brings us to the following concepts of nodal points and master signifiers.

### **1.2.3 The master signifier and nodal points**

‘Traditional’ discursive structures, for instance, Saussurian ones, have been compared to fishing nets, with balanced and even relations between signs (nodes). On the other hand, post-structuralist discursive networks, due to their unbalanced and uneven nature, have been compared to spider webs, where distal signifiers are connected to more central ones and all of them eventually link with the heart of the network. A *nodal point* represents the signifier occupying that heart (Jacobs 2018, 10). Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 112-113) describe nodal points as privileged discursive points constructed as a result of articulation, which partially fix meaning. Every discourse consists of one, but usually, several nodal points that “bind together a particular system of meaning” (Howarth 1998, 11). While it is argued whether nodal points are completely empty of any particular meaning (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 28) or just “less meaningful than other signifiers” (Jacobs 2018, 10), the PSDT scholarship agrees that nodal points signify and give meaning to other signs connected to them.

If we imagine a spider web, to which post-structuralist discursive networks have been compared, we can notice that its very heart, its very center can be occupied by only one nodal point (i.e. demand). That is when a concept of the *master signifier* (or empty signifier) emerges and has to be introduced. While the PSDT literature uses both terms as synonyms, in the following work, the dissertation utilizes the term master signifier to avoid confusion and, at the same time, underline its very central and privileged position.

*“[I]n a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is present as that which is absent; it becomes an*

*empty signifier, as a signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack” (Laclau 1996a, 44).*

Among other things, if we replace the word “disorder” with the word “disintegration” (and subsequently, the word “order” with the word “integration”), the quote will present a general objective of the thesis.

The hegemonic (political) nature of discursive practices and the presence of antagonistic force on the other side of the antagonistic frontier causes one of the nodal points to move up the discursive formation and occupy its very central position, thus becoming a master signifier (Howarth 1998, 12; Wullweber 2015, 4-5). Now all other meanings within the discursive structure are crystallized around it, and the master signifier starts to represent the entire discursive chain while being completely empty of any particular meaning itself (thus ‘empty’ signifier) (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 26; Jacobs 2018, 12). A master signifier is a product of a political process - its temporary signifieds (nodal points), hence a master signifier itself, are “the result of a political competition” (Laclau 1996a, 35), therefore, after its institutionalization within a particular discursive formation, the latter attains a hierarchical top-down structure (Laclau 2000, 303).

After a long-existing disconnection between global politics and the concept of master signifiers (as well as PSDT in general), Wullweber (2015, 3) explains the concept in terms close to IR: “[master] signifier can give meaning and hence identity to a policy field, a political process, or a socio-economic program while at the same time being shaped by ongoing politics.” Thomassen (2005a, 297; 2005b, 635) elaborates on the type of relations between master signifier and antagonism, stating that they go hand-in-hand - the emptiness of the master signifier signifies the fullness of identity, while the antagonistic ‘Other’ is supposed to threaten that fullness. Therefore, the antagonistic ‘Other,’ even if represented as a threat, helps to constitute and sustain (rather than threaten) the identity of the community.

To underline its voidness from any particular meaning, a master signifier has been described as “a signifier without a signified” (Laclau 1996a, 36), as well as a “surface of inscription” (Laclau 1990, 63-64). The latter description is further elaborated by Howarth (2000a, 173), who notes that “a surface of inscription” is usually able to include and reflect a broader spectrum of demands and interests than at the initial stages of discourse formation. Overall, the master signifier can be considered the “face” of the discourse, the amalgam of its

promises. Taken separately, it does not carry any particular meaning, while within a discursive structure, it represents all signifiers connected to it, that is, all meanings it has been filled with.

PSDT defines two ways of constructing discourses (or, as Laclau calls it, the social): through the *logic of difference* and the *logic of equivalence*. The former emphasizes differences between signifiers (demands) within a discourse, pointing out discrepancies and even contradictions between them, or as Laclau (2005, 78) puts it: “no positive terms, only differences.” On the other hand, the latter method seeks to simplify the social by partially surrendering particularities, stressing commonalities between different demands and thus creating an equivalential connection between them (Laclau 2005, 77-78). The nature of discursive struggles requires the overcoming of internal heterogeneity within a discourse. This essentially means that various, often unrelated heterogeneous elements within a discourse have to be united and placed as moments into a chain of equivalence against the radical ‘Other.’ Now they are homogenous in their exclusion and inadmissibility of the opposing camp (Nabers 2015, 122-123).

While equivalence, established between different demands within a discourse, can ultimately lead to the creation of non-fixed collective identities, the term itself should not be interpreted as an identity, since differences between demands do not disappear. Rather, equivalential links between unfulfilled demands vis-à-vis a negative outside (antagonistic force) are established only due to their unfulfilled nature, as a sign of “a certain solidarity” (Naber 2015, 113-114). Counterintuitively, there is a non-zero-sum relation between the aforementioned modes, and neither one of them can be fully dominant in a discourse. However, what is important for the research, the logic of equivalence involves drawing an antagonistic frontier and the subsequent introduction of antagonism.

Equivalence existing between signifiers allows certain discourses to give a real existence to negativity (that is, to antagonism) as such, by annulling all positivity of the object (Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 128-129). “[V]is-à-vis the excluded element, all other differences are equivalent to each other - equivalent in their common rejection of the excluded identity” (Laclau 2005, 70; emphasis in original). Based on the works of Laclau and Mouffe, Hansen (2013, 17-18) introduces a positive *process of linking* and a negative *process of differentiation*. He gives an example of a definition of ‘Woman’ as emotional, motherly, reliant, and simple (defined through a positive process of linking), which is, at the same time,

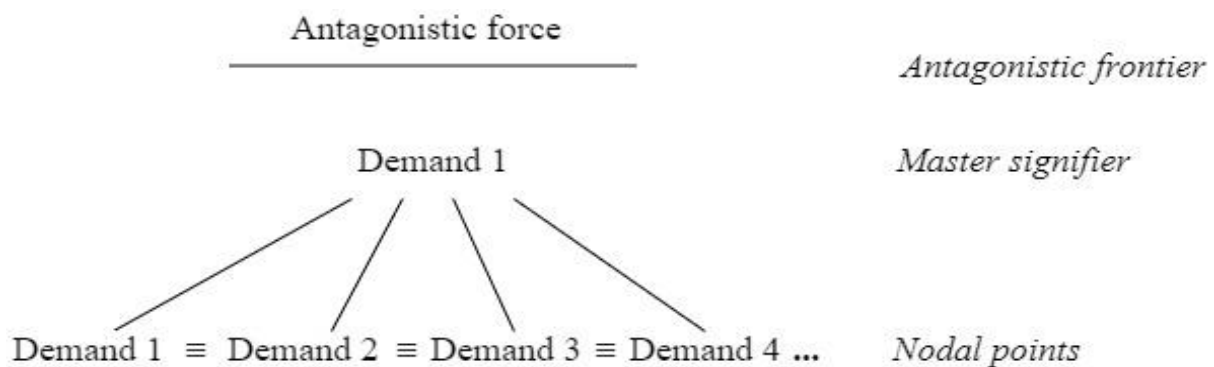
through the process of differentiation contrasted to a definition of ‘Man’ as rational, intellectual, independent, and complex, respectively. The only difference between the concepts of Laclau and Mouffe, and Hansen, is that in the former’s case, the ‘Other’ is radicalized, while in the latter’s case, they are just separated.

“The subjective will only acquire a content by alienating itself in an objectivity which is its opposite” (Laclau 1994, 13). According to Laclau, this process is closely associated with the concept of *identification*, which in his ontology is different from *identity*. The individual cannot completely identify with the discourse’s positions, but is compelled to fill “the structural gaps through identification,” which is exactly a political process as it concerns the individual’s self-constitution (Anderson 2003, 52). A master signifier (or empty signifier) kick-starts the processes of identifications, albeit without (at least yet) the construction of a common identity (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 130). Laclau (1990, 60) also agrees that an identity can ultimately be constructed through the acts of identification, however Nabers (2015, 108; emphasis added) specifies, that identification can be considered as “the subject’s always ultimately futile effort to gain a *full* identity,” as poststructuralism rejects the possibility of a full fixity (or completeness) of the social field. However, the repetitive nature of the process of identification ultimately creates the illusion of an objective identity.

*“As society changes over time this process of identification will be always precarious and reversible and, as the identification is no longer automatic, different projects or wills will try to hegemonize the empty signifiers of the absent community”* (Laclau 1996a, 46).

Overall, to base our example on Glynos and Howarth’s example (2007, 131) - What does ‘Union State’ *mean*? - it is precisely such an enigmatic nature of a master signifier that creates a space for political struggle and, at the same time, alludes to how a specific signifier can be divided between several, often mutually exclusive meanings. In our case, Union State has been designed and articulated in pro-Russian, as well as in pro-Belarusian terms. Based on the works of Laclau (2000, 303; 2005, 130), and further elaborated by Thomassen (2005a, 292-293), and Walton and Boon (2014, 355), a post-structuralist discursive formation looks as follows (Figure 1). As we can see, one of the nodal points (Demand 1) managed to level up and become a master signifier, now representing the whole chain of equivalence, that is, the whole discourse. Thomassen (2005a, 293) points out that Laclau uses the equality signs (=) to outline connections between nodal points, while it should be more appropriate to use the

equivalence sign ( $\equiv$ ) as nodal points establish a *chain of equivalence* (not a chain of equality) as they stand vis-à-vis an antagonistic force.



**Figure 1.**

### 1.2.4 Floating signifiers

As described above, for Laclau, ‘hegemonization’ happens when one of the sides manages to articulate any particular *element* into a *moment*, thus fixing its meaning. In this connection, Laclau (1990, 28) compares the social field to a trench war “in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of social signifiers around themselves.” He gives an example of the signifier ‘democracy,’ which acquires completely different meanings depending on whether it is articulated with ‘anti-communism’ or ‘anti-fascism.’ The impossibility of a complete fixation loosens the connection between signifier and signified, thus enabling *floating signifiers* to emerge and proliferate in the social field. Thereby, political competition for the fixation of meanings of certain signifiers appears as well (Laclau 1993, 545). Therefore, a floating signifier appears when a sign is differently articulated to opposed discursive structures (Laclau 1996b, 208).

“[Floating] signifiers mean different things to different people [...]; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean” (Chandler, 2007: 78). Thus, the meaning of a floating signifier is non-fixed, ambiguous, and contested, with its eventual fixation depending on the result of a hegemonic struggle between alternative discourses (Laclau 2005, 131-132). Considering the thesis’s nature, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, 28) make an extremely important remark that floating signifiers, at the same time, are nodal points. The difference is that the term ‘nodal point’ has an ‘inward’ outlook, referring to a privileged discursive point *within* a particular discourse, while the term ‘floating signifier’ has an ‘outward’ direction,

gaining its importance in ongoing hegemonic struggles *between* opposed discourses for fixing the meaning of important signs.

The term floating signifier was first introduced by Lévi-Strauss when he drew parallels between the concept and the notion of *mana* - “in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all” (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 55). While most of the discursive scholarship uses the concepts of empty (master) signifier and floating signifier interchangeably, Laclau separates them for analytical purposes. A master signifier’s purpose lies *within* a given discourse - it gives up its particular meaning to represent the whole discourse, while a floating signifier has an *outside* purpose - it is contested between different competing discourses. “A floating signifier is one that can link up with a variety of concrete projects. Then, because it moves between projects, it is not empty: it is floating” (Moraes 2014, 30). As Norval (2000, 331) outlines, the difference between those two concepts is that floating signifiers are subject to a great amount of competition over their meaning, as a result of which, ironically, they have no clearly established meaning, while master signifiers eventually have no signifieds.

At the same time, Laclau agrees that both concepts are not that much distinct from each other and they “largely overlap,” because situations of pure floating without any fixation, or situations of pure fixation without any floating, are hard to imagine (Laclau 2005, 133). As we can see, a specific signifier can simultaneously occupy a central position within a particular discourse as a master signifier, and be contested between different discourses as a floating signifier. In the case of our research, such a role is taken up by ‘*unification*,’ which is contested between the Belarusian and Russian models of the Union State (master signifiers), and, therefore, remains ambiguous, unspecifiable, and highly contested between those very discursive projects.

### **1.3 Hegemony and hegemonic struggles**

For PSDT, discursive formations are, essentially, hegemonic formations. Master signifiers’ emptiness and representation of an ‘unachievable fullness,’ as well as the existence of antagonisms, create a space for the emergence of rival discourses and, subsequently, of hegemonic struggles between them (Laclau 2005, 70-71; Stengel and Nabers 2019, 255). Based on the case of populism, Laclau (2005, 74) lists three preconditions for the establishment of a hegemonic (discursive) formation: (1) the formation of an antagonistic frontier separating the ‘people’ from their goal (in the case of our research, unification), (2)

equivalential articulation of a broad spectrum of demands (nodal points), which allows the ‘people’ to emerge, and (3) the unification of those demands (nodal points) into a ‘stable system of signification,’ hence, their crystallization around the master signifier. Laclau (1985, 107, as cited in Anderson 2003, 55-56) compares hegemony to writing in water, as “something impossible, unstable, and vulnerable, but to a certain extent still something that can be accomplished.”

While poststructuralists do not exclude coercion as one of the means of achieving hegemony, their understanding of the concept follows the Gramscian tradition, thus significantly differing from ‘traditional’ Realism interpretations of the concept. In particular, for PSDT, this process is primarily based on social consensus: “[a] discourse which has become hegemonic has succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of many people” (Wullweber 2015, 4). Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, xviii) see hegemonic articulations (struggles) between different discursive structures as a necessary precondition for any consensus and not as an undermining factor.

According to Nabers (2019, 13-14), hegemonic struggles (with a possible hegemonization of a particular discourse) arise as a result of the *dislocation* of a dominant discursive order. As a consequence of dislocation, signifiers of a dominant (hegemonic) discourse are being uprooted and, therefore, become floating signifiers, with their meanings now being contested between rival discourses as they “may represent whatever their authors want them to represent.” For Laclau (1990, 60; 1996, 18-19), dislocation is the source of freedom, as such structural fault unleashes the freedom to build up an identity through acts of identification. In our case, the appearance of the idea of (re)unification and its formalization with the signing of the Union State Treaty might be considered a dislocation of a hegemonic discursive order. Signifiers, such as political system, economic system, energy system, and monetary system, have been partially fixed and had their particular meanings within the respective dominant Russian and Belarusian discursive structures within their respective borders. However, since the formalization of the Union State initiative, they became highly contested between those two post-Soviet states attempting (re)unification on the ‘still steaming’ ruins of the Soviet Union.

A structural dislocation often leads to the emergence of *myth*. Therefore, myth is not a part of the dominant discursive structure, and its terms are external to those represented and articulated in the given discourse (Laclau 1990, 61). It is almost always constructed in pure

and idealistic terms, in an environment of ‘voidness of meaning,’ as any concrete details or action plans would relocate it to the sphere of everyday politics, thus taking away its mythical status (Nabers 2015, 154). “The ‘work’ of myth is to suture that dislocated space through the constitution of a new space of representation. [...] [I]t involves forming a new objectivity by means of the rearticulation of the dislocated elements” (Laclau 1990, 61). Myth essentially is a floating signifier that refers to a totality. That totality can never be completely fixed or final, however, it is still imagined as such by actors for two reasons: to give a meaning to their acts (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 39) and because “[t]he desire for fullness [...] is constitutive for any nation’s development plan” (Nabers 2015, 154).

Stengel and Nabers (2019, 255-256) outline five steps of what they call “an ideal-typical process” of hegemonization: (1) dislocation of dominant discourse, (2) discursive struggles between competing discourses, (3) identification with specific discourse, (4) hegemony, and (5) institutionalization of a new discursive order. Since the thesis argues that at the beginning of the 2000s, neither the Belarusian nor the Russian discourses went past the second point, that is, discursive struggles, it needs further elaboration.

In the view of discourse analysis, social life consists of different kinds of conflicts, and subsequently, “[a] discourse is involved in establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions” (Gill 2000, 176). In this case, the words “conflict” and “struggle” do not necessarily contain negative connotations, as discursive dynamics and struggles are essentially what brings social change (Larsen 2018, 67). Discursive struggle, also described as “hegemonic struggle” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 168), “dialogical struggle” (Keenoy et al. 1997, 150) and “discursive battle” (Anderson 2003, 53), essentially represents a competition between different discourses for hegemony, “for dominance and survival” (Boje 1995, 1001). Which signifiers (meanings) would be bound to which signified ultimately depends on the outcome of this struggle, as opposing discourses mainly strive to fix *particular* meanings in such a way as to make them appear like *universal* ones (Anderson 2003, 53; Nabers 2015, 104). As Laclau (2000, 56) explains, “there is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded; [...] no particularity can become political [hegemonic] without becoming the locus of universalizing effects.” That essentially means that hegemony is achieved when a particular vision of social reality (discourse) manages to establish its meanings as universal ones, and master signifiers are utilized for such purposes, as they represent particularities as universality.

## 2. Research design, Data and Methods

*“The first and main criticism is that I have concentrated on the ontological dimension of social theory rather than on ontical research. Now, this is a charge to which I plead happily guilty, except that I do not see it as a criticism at all”* (Laclau 2004, 321).

In a memorandum to his PhD students Laclau argued that the straightforward application of an inflexible methodology to a body of empirical material (set of data) may be sufficient at Masters level, while a PhD study can only be successful “if it manages to overcome the relation of exteriority between ‘theoretical approach’ and ‘case study’” (Laclau 1991, as cited in Salter 2018,127). In the same memorandum he spoke of “the myth of the case study” and “the myth of methodology,” disputing the very need of something like a methodology (Laclau 1991, as cited in Jacobs 2018, 17). Later Laclau (2004, 321) agreed that a bridge between the ontological and the ontic should be established, albeit noting that it is not necessary and should not be done only by him. However, this lack of applicability or ‘methodological deficit’ (Howarth and Torfing 2004, 316) of post-structuralist discourse theory started to fill up even before his statement.

First described by McLennan (1996, 54-56) as a ‘thin’ or ‘minor key’ versions of post-structuralist discourse theory especially proliferated while being applied to IR discipline, for example to the issues of the EU foreign policy and European integration (the examples of such works have been listed above). Such ‘thin’ variations of PSDT often reduce ontological, normative, epistemological and explanatory consistency in order to achieve a more solid understanding of the investigated phenomena (Townshend 2003, 130; Jacobs 2018, 17). In a discourse theory-styled research strategies there are no algorithmic methods and procedures of conducting research, there is no set-in-stone applicable framework, and there is no ‘operationalization’ of concepts and logics, all of which are an integral part of positivist studies. And instead of inducing ‘methodological anarchism’ as some critics argued, Howarth (2000, 133) explains that, in turn, discourse theorists have to modulate and formulate their sets of concepts to suit the particular issues they are addressing in each particular case. ‘Thin’ discourse theorists recognize and even invite a greater role of socio-economic factors and preformed interests in the process of discourse formation and shaping, which essentially makes them more accessible and increases methodological pluralism. On the other hand, due to the “overdetermining, performative and affective importance of political discourse,” the ‘thick’ versions deny the value of institutional and socio-economic factors in discourse

formation, as well as the role of interests in interpreting political motivation (Townshend 2003, 133).

Howarth and Torfing (2004, 317-318) differentiate discourse theory and discourse analysis, arguing that there is not much overlap between the former and the different kinds of 'discourse analysis' (for example, Gill (2000, 173) counted 57 varieties of it). According to them, discourse analysis provides a toolkit, a certain set of techniques that help practitioners to analyze 'language in use' and subsequently explain an empirical phenomena in question, however, "they do not exhaust the concept of discourse theory itself." Moreover, Howarth and Torfing (2004, 318-319) argue that discourse theory is a version of 'problem-driven' research, rather than 'method-' or 'theory-driven.' Thus, it is not driven by methods of data-gathering and analysis, and it does not aim to defend a particular theory. Rather, it is mainly focused on the empirical data of the research, in particular, on "the interrogation of a specific problematized phenomenon" under investigation. A 'thin' variation of PSDT was further elaborated by Howarth (2000b, 128-129), who argues that instead of looking for objective causal explanations, 'thin discourse theory' approach aims to understand and interpret socially constructed meanings, and as a result of such studies discourse theorists can explore how systems of discursive practice were constituted, how they were functioning and transforming.

*"[W]hile discourse theory does seek to provide novel interpretations of events and practices by elucidating their meaning, it does so by analyzing the way in which political forces and social actors construct meanings within incomplete and undecidable social structures. This is achieved by examining the particular structures within which social agents take decisions and articulate hegemonic projects and discursive formations"* (Howarth 2000, 129).

As mentioned in the name of the thesis, the dissertation employs the comparative method, studying how at first sight similar logics of the necessity of unification produced two completely different logics of it - the Belarusian and the Russian ones. Howarth and Torfing (2004, 332) outline two conditions to be met for comparative research in discourse theory. First, the questions and problems which are going to be addressed have to be specified, as in contrast to method-driven research, in discourse theory the comparison is always relative to the specific issues approached and analyzed. The second condition outlines that comparative research in discourse theory cannot ignore or disregard historical context and specific peculiarities. Therefore, the foundation for comparison must contain a broad descriptive

interpretations of empirical phenomena in question. The first condition is met in the introductory part of the thesis by raising the research questions and describing their context, the second condition is met in the empirical part of the dissertation below.

Since the thesis adopts a poststructuralist approach to identity, discourse, foreign policy, and relations between these concepts, the issue labeled by Hansen (2013, 22-25) as “the impossibility of causality,” and challenges associated with it need to be addressed. First of all, as outlined above, poststructuralism argues that there is no materiality outside discourse, meaning that all materiality is discursively constituted and mediated. Therefore, there are no non-discursive alternative explanations to test a discourse analysis against. The second challenge arises from the poststructuralist assumption of ontological inseparability of identity and policy, which in a causal research would have been separated and identified as an independent variable, and a dependent variable. “[I]dentities are produced, and reproduced, through foreign policy discourse, and there is thus no identity existing prior to and independently of foreign policy” (Hansen 2013, 23). He argues that such assumption does not mean that a publicly declared policy is always followed or implemented by politicians, however, the access to non-public materials (classified documents, private conversations) is often very limited. Thus, discourse analysts work on *public* texts, and focus on codes utilized by actors when *relating* to each other, without being interested neither in ‘real’ beliefs of decision makers, nor in shared views among a population (Wæver 2002, 26-27).

The thesis determines and analyzes the official Belarusian and Russian discourses on unification within the Union State along the four axes (political, economic, energy, and monetary), the representations of the Self and the Other, as well as the forces denominated by the sides as obstacles disturbing and preventing the unification. The dissertation defines particular key signs which are enunciated and emphasized by Minsk and Moscow while speaking regarding a specific issue, and around which the identities of the Self and the Other take shape. Finally, the Belarusian and the Russian discourses are presented in the hierarchical form of poststructuralist discourse diagrams, and compared to each other. Our main objective is to find out *how* the above-mentioned axes of unification were articulated in Minsk and Moscow, and what meanings were given to them. First of all, this will allow us to compare the Russian and Belarusian understandings of specific unification components. However, it will also enable us to find out the respective views on the Union State *in general*, by compiling all these seemingly unrelated elements within the respective discursive formations and establishing certain connections between them.

The empirical data of the research mainly consists of relevant statements made by Belarusian and Russian officials regarding the Union State and unification during speeches, press conferences, separate press comments and even debates. The sheer majority of such statements belong to President Lukashenka and President Putin, however, the statements of other top-level officials are also included (mainly prime ministers, and individual ministers). Several non-statement quotes from the press are also included, however their sole purpose is to briefly outline a specific context. The absolute majority of these statements have been retrieved from press articles and reports, as well as from official reports published and accessible on the websites of the President of Belarus ([president.gov.by](http://president.gov.by)) and the website of the President of the Russian Federation ([kremlin.ru](http://kremlin.ru)). Such sources represent, as labeled by Neumann (2008, 67), the so-called ‘monuments’ - central texts, “that [are] generally cited in the secondary literature.” Certain types of such ‘monuments,’ for example, official transcripts of press conferences, due to their vast contents, provide useful references to other relevant events and texts. The empirical material from press sources mainly come from the online archive of newspaper *Kommersant* ([kommersant.ru/archive](http://kommersant.ru/archive)), which allows search by keywords and date, and from the online archive of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* ([rferl.org/newsline](http://rferl.org/newsline)), which only allows search by date. Several secondary sources, which provide a certain amount of references and links to relevant primary sources, have also been utilized, however, as discourses during (early) post-Soviet integration attempts are extremely underresearched, such sources are not many. Those include the chapter on Belarus-Russia relations in Bertil Nygren’s (2007, 66-81) book “The Rebuilding of Greater Russia,” and Ian Klinke’s (2008) article “Geopolitical Narratives on Belarus in Contemporary Russia.”

The analysis of the collected empirical data follows three steps outlined by Howarth (2000b, 141). The first step requires the ‘translation’ of information into textual form, as discourse analysis treats both linguistic and non-linguistic data as ‘texts.’ In the second step, a previously constructed theoretical framework, which includes the above-mentioned modifications of certain concepts to a specific case, is applied to the problematized object of research. The third operation consists of the deployment of discourse analysis techniques to the researched problem.

Overall, 281 ‘statements’ have been analyzed in the empirical part of the thesis (175 from the Belarusian side, and 106 from the Russian side). In the Belarusian part the distribution is as follows: political unification (54), economic unification (44), energy unification (35), and monetary unification (42). In the Russian part the ‘statements’ are distributed the following

way: political unification (32), economic unification (24), energy unification (23), and monetary unification (27). Empirical data on the Belarusian side has been collected from Lukashenka's 6 press conferences, 5 interviews, 4 speeches, 3 meetings, 2 TV appearances, and 1 press conference of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (20 in total). On the Russian part, the empirical data has been collected from Putin's 11 press conferences, 5 speeches, and 2 letters. Apart from that, 63 media sources have been utilized, mainly Kommersant (38), and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (18).

### 3. Analysis of the official Belarusian discourse

#### 3.1 Belarusian discourse on political unification

*“[I]f Moscow is trying in every possible way to prevent situations in which little Belarus can dictate its will to big Russia, then Minsk, on the contrary, really wants to at least occasionally command the “elder brother” (Kommersant, 20 February 2003).*

The axis of political unification within the Union State arguably has been the most polarizing and the most articulated issue between Belarus and Russia in the beginning of the 2000s. A wide range of concepts and signs had been specifically incorporated by the sides into their respective discourses, including sovereignty, equality, supra-national bodies and range of their authority, power sharing, veto powers, general principles of unification, joint Constitution, exemplar unifications, etc. Below we will outline the Belarusian official vision of political unification within the Union State and its prominent signs and signifiers.

In August 2000, Lukashenka told one of his main allies in Russia, the leader of the Russian Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov, that he was witnessing a “slackening” in relations between Minsk and Moscow. *“I have the impression that those who once fiercely obstructed the signing [of the 1999 Union State Treaty] are now ruining what has been created, [taking advantage of the fact] that President Putin is absorbed in some way or other by events of recent months” (RFE/RL Newslines, 31 August 2000).* In December 2001, upon his arrival to Russia, he repeated the same notion, stating that “deceleration is still very big” in the process of Russia-Belarus integration (Kommersant, 26 December 2001, p. 11). Following his talks with Putin and the latter’s rejection to discuss the adoption of the so-called Constitutional Act, he told reporters that the time has come to decide “whether we consistently implement the earlier agreements [...] or make serious changes and clearly say it” (RFE/RL Newslines, 28 December 2001).

In February 2002, Lukashenka stated that he is ready for compromises “on the principles of equality and fraternity,” saying that he will never make Belarusians “secondary people” in the Union with Russia and promising that “[t]here will be no unequal union” (RFE/RL Newslines, 13 February 2002). As reported by Kommersant (15 February 2002, p. 2), the Russian-Belarusian working group, dedicated to the preparation of a draft constitutional act of the Union State, convened for the first time in February 2002 in Moscow, and it made discrepancies existing between the sides even more visible. For example, one of the proposed

projects talked about the creation of “a *confederate* presidential-parliamentary state led by a president” (as later confirmed, proposed by Minsk), while other projects included the “*federation*” term (proposed by Moscow). On 12 April 2002, on *Svoboda Slova* (“Freedom of Speech”) talk show on Russian NTV channel, one of the guests of the show asked Lukashenka - the main guest of the show - whether Belarus is ready to become part of Russia on the same rights as Tatarstan. Lukashenka responded that “no one will enter or join anything, we are talking about a *union*, [and] union is built on generally recognized international principles” (*Svoboda Slova*, 12 April 2002, 12:17-12:29; emphasis in original). He further stated that the Union State is “a litmus test” for Russia, describing such a formula of integration - “you have to join us” - as an example of “imperial thinking” (Ibid., 14:33-14:43).

The tensions reached their peak at the summer 2002 *debacle* (to borrow Nygren’s (2007, 73) definition), following Putin’s (in)famous ‘cutlets and flies speech,’ in which he offered the Belarusian side to “finally decide” what they want, indirectly accusing Minsk of wanting to restore the Soviet Union “at the expense of Russia’s economic interests,” and describing the Belarusian economy as “3% of the Russian economy” (Belarus Today, 19 June 2002). This speech, as arguably the most significant milestone of Russia-Belarus integration processes of the early 2000s, will be analyzed in greater detail in Russia's part of empirical analysis. Putin’s remarks caused Lukashenka’s reaction.

*“[I]t was clearly stated - you are 3 percent, we are 97 [percent]. [...] We are being offered a federal structure of our union, in other words, to become a new, 90th governorate of the Russian Federation. To which we clearly say: we will not be any northwestern or northeastern edge of any state. We are a sovereign, independent state with all the attributes of this state. We are ready to build an alliance, but only on an equal footing”* (Lukashenka, 19 June 2002).

He further noted that Belarusian propositions are based on the principles of confederation with the preservation of sovereignty of both Belarus and Russia. According to Lukashenka, the Russian side tries “to disembowel” the existing 1999 Union State Treaty, weaken the powers of a common Parliament, then hold its elections, make it develop a Constitution of the Union, and put it to a referendum. Lukashenka opposed any attempts of making changes in the existing 1999 Treaty, saying that Moscow tries to turn it into “an empty piece of paper,” and adding that both countries already have necessary mechanisms for putting a common

Constitution to a referendum. As outlined by him, a joint Constitution should be adopted *first*, and only then a common Parliament should be elected and other supra-national bodies formed. Lukashenka also rejected a possibility of EU-like integration, saying that Russia and Belarus have an experience of “close cooperation” within the Soviet Union and, therefore, this experience has to be utilized (Ibid.).

*“We would not like to radically change it [the 1999 Treaty], and our President told the President of Russia about this. We allow for possible minor amendments that need to be made to the treaty from the point of view of today, but there should not be any fundamental revisions of the treaty”* (Khvostov, 21 June 2002).

In August 2002, returning from his visit to Moscow, Lukashenka explained three models of unification that have been discussed with Putin. The first model proposed by Moscow was to divide Belarus into seven parts and then incorporate them into Russia on equal rights with the latter’s other regions, which was completely unacceptable for Minsk. The second Russian-proposed model was a EU-like unification, however, this time Lukashenka did not completely oppose it, saying that some positive practices can be taken from the EU experience, but generally unification should follow the principles and provisions of the existing Treaty. The third model, proposed by him, envisaged the preservation of the 1999 Union State Treaty and of the current bodies of the Union State.

*“[T]he conditions have not ripened, probably, we are probably not ready for this, politicians, elites and so on - to carry out something acceptable for both sides, let’s not destroy what is in the normative framework of our relations, let’s not break the Union Treaty, [let’s] not destroy the structures that have been created, that is the Supreme State Council - the highest body of our power in the Union, the Parliamentary Assembly - the legislative body, [and] the Union government - the executive body”* (Lukashenka, 15 August 2002; Kommersant, 16 August 2002).

Later Lukashenka went as far as saying that even Lenin and Stalin did not think of splitting up Belarus and incorporating it into the USSR, adding that “no one will agree to cut Belarus into pieces and incorporate it into any state, even into a fraternal one” (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 22 August 2002). In September 2002, Putin sent Lukashenka a letter offering him to create a joint Russian-Belarusian commission, which would define the most perspective integration model out of the aforementioned ones. In turn, Lukashenka pointed out that there already exists a joint Russian-Belarusian commission working on the project of a joint Union

Constitution and work should be focused on it. As Lukashenka described, “there is nothing new” in Putin's letter - Belarus is offered either to be incorporated into Russia piece-by-piece, or to unify following the EU model. However, in the case of the EU-like unification Russia wants to destroy the existing 1999 Union State Treaty, that “cost us dearly” to achieve (meaning himself and Yeltsin) (Lukashenka, 7 September 2002). He explained his opposition to the destruction of the Treaty, saying that he is sure that “we will not create anything at all with those who are engaged in union-building from the Russian side,” while the Treaty would already be annulled (Lukashenka, 10 September 2002).

*“[T]he leadership of Russia has demonstrated today that it does not want an equal Union with Belarus. Well, don't you remember? “We feed them, 3 percent (now they say 5 percent - our economy of theirs), they are small, we are big. What is it for? This is to the fact that people do not want to build this Union” (Lukashenka, 7 September 2002).*

In his own words, the Belarusian president did not want to weaken the existing Treaty, so not to get another Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), or “CIS-2,” in which despite of meetings, negotiations, and decisions, there is “no movement forward” (Lukashenka, 10 September 2002). According to the Belarusian president, Belarus “will not be a gubernia,” adding that “if we will be joining the Union, [...] then only on an equal footing” (Lukashenka, 18 September 2002, 6:52-7:27).

*“I never spoke of anything other than union. So if you dismember and incorporate, then what kind of union is it? Therefore, it was always about a union - a civilized one, on an equal footing. Well, at least like the European Union” (Ibid., 12:38-12:56).*

He stated that back in June, “aides from the Russian president’s administration unexpectedly offered [him and Putin] to amend the [1999] Treaty” (Kommersant, 19 September 2002). Lukashenka did not want to annul or even substantially alter the existing Treaty, and offered Putin to follow the steps outlined in its provision: (1) development of a constitutional act, (2) adoption of a Constitution by referendum (both in Belarus and Russia), (3) parliamentary elections, and then (4) the formation of governing bodies and authorities (Ibid.). According to him, Belarus had other options than “crawling into Russia” or “remaining under Russia’s foot,” saying that the Russian leadership is profoundly mistaken if they think otherwise (RFE/RL Newline, 27 March 2003). In April 2003, Lukashenka once again advocated for “serious powers” to be delegated to supranational bodies of the Union State. Despite his previous opposition to EU-like integration, he described the EU model of integration as

*“successfully combining the sovereign equality of its participants with the delegation of authority to integration structures”* (Lukashenka, 16 April 2003).

In July 2003 Lukashenka once again praised the EU model of integration, stating that in the Union-building both Russia and Belarus have to take similar steps towards each other “as in the European Union,” where “[t]here are no small and large ones, all voices are heard,” claiming, however, that the Russian side does not want this (Lukashenka, 2 July 2003). After Lukashenka attended the meeting of the Union State’s Supreme State Council in Moscow in October 2003, the Russian NTV channel, citing an anonymous source in the Russian leadership, described the situation in the Union State as “a stalemate.” Lukashenka directly blamed the Presidential Administration of Russia for this incident, in particular its Chief Aleksandr Voloshin (whom he called “the director” of this TV program), and his deputy Sergey Prikhodko (Lukashenka, 24 October 2003). Regarding a joint Constitution, Lukashenka did not want to make it weaker than the existing 1999 Union State Treaty, while also advocating for “transferring rather wide powers from the national bodies [...] to the bodies of the Union State” (Ibid.).

*“If we do not give the Union bodies the powers to solve the problems of the Union State, we will never come to a full-fledged union. It is necessary to consolidate the legal status of the Union bodies and this must be done in the Constitution”* (Ibid.).

During his another appearance on *Svoboda Slova* talk show, Belarusian president once again underlined that Moscow and Minsk already have the 1999 Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State and its provisions should be followed whether “someone likes it [or] does not like it,” and according to it both states should have put a Constitutional Act to a referendum “long time ago” (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 2:43-3:03). He also noted that while some practices can be taken from the EU model, Belarus and Russia should follow the USSR experience as it achieved a higher level of integration than the EU (Ibid., 7:07-7:22).

*“We can go even further [than the EU] from the beginning, but we were not talking about Russia absorbing Belarus and there to be a unitary or federal state in which we will be a subject. We were always saying that we are for the Union on the principles which have been developed long ago - equality, first of all. [...] That is what we were saying about, not about a bigger state absorbing a smaller one,”* (Ibid., 7:28-7:52).

According to him, the Russians knew that it was an unacceptable option for him, but still proposed it, because “they do not want any union.” (Ibid., 7:55-8:10). In April 2004, Lukashenka described the Russian proposal to incorporate Belarus into Russia as “insulting,” stating that Belarus’s sovereignty “has never been and cannot be negotiated” (Lukashenka, 14 April 2004). He declared that Belarus opposes any Russian-proposed amendments which “emasculate” the existing agreements and turn the Union State “into something like CIS” (Ibid.). According to Lukashenka, the adoption of a Constitutional Act makes sense only if it “contains constitutional norms and is much stronger than the [1999] Treaty.” On the other hand, if a proposed Constitutional Act is weak, then it is necessary “to fight for the preservation of the current [1999] Treaty” (Ibid.).

*“If we move forward, we must adopt a [Union] Constitution and build a normal [union] state, which we have announced. Russia does not want to go in this direction. They even propose the Treaty that exists, but is only half-fulfilled, to be practically denounced, to make it amorphous”* (Lukashenka, 13 October 2004).

### **3.2 Belarusian discourse on economic unification**

*“Integration is not [about] similar starting positions and values. [...] Integration is an interwovenness of economies - they can be different, they can be intercomplementary”* (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 30:44-30:57).

The economic aspect of unification became another major divisive issue between Minsk and Moscow, due to completely different structures of their economies in the beginning of 2000s. The Belarusian Soviet-era paternalistic model of economy sharply contrasted with the Russian liberal model of economy of the early 2000s. Thus, the fact of the existence of such differences was incorporated in their respective official discourses on economic unification within the Union State, creating two mutually exclusive visions of this sphere. What makes the Russian and Belarusian discourses on this particular axis of integration distinct from others, is that they have been mainly criticizing the other side’s economic model and defending their own, instead of creating a vision of economic unification. However, such criticisms and endorsements are also a part of discourse on their own, and certain conclusions still can be drawn. For example, the Belarusian discourse of the early 2000s described the Russian economic model mainly in negative terms such as ‘oligarchs,’ ‘crime,’ ‘squander,’

etc. To a lesser degree, the issue of customs barriers has been incorporated in the Belarusian discourse.

*“I am not against privatization, I am absolutely not against market methods. But I am for market [methods], not criminal methods. We can even sell an oil refinery. But we have to really estimate it. At a market price, it is worth \$2 billion. Please, buy it for this sum, and not for 300 million, as they offer me today”* (Lukashenka, 18 May 2001).

According to the Belarusian president, the Union State, among other things, is also “a free access to the huge Russian market without any barriers and restrictions” (Lukashenka, 18 May 2001). Previously, while answering the question about the possible privatization of Belarusian enterprises by Russian capital, Lukashenka replied that he had not sold and will not sell a share of sovereignty (Radio Svoboda, 11 April 2001). In June 2001, Lukashenka harshly criticized Moscow for introducing customs controls on the Belarusian border over products from third countries, calling the decision “the ruination of the union” (RFE/RL Newline, 6 June 2001). Furthermore, regarding a foreign trade liberalization bill, then being drafted by Moscow, Lukashenka said that the adoption of this bill “without coordination with our side [...] will spell the end to our union” (Ibid.).

Amidst his tensions with Baltika, Russian leading beer producer, Lukashenka stated that “[i]f Russian businessmen want to participate in the liberalization and privatization of [Belarusian] enterprises, they will have to do it the Belarusian way” (RFE/RL Newline, 13 February 2002). In April 2002, Lukashenka said regarding the Belarusian economy and non-privatization of its enterprises, that he “cannot throw it away, sell it, give it away, and squander it” (Svoboda Slova, 12 April 2002, 42:02-42:06). He further claimed that if he had conducted the Russian-style privatization, the Belarusian economy would be in the hands of the USA, Germany, France, and England, but not Russia’s, as the latter wanted (Ibid., 42:35-42:48). According to the Belarusian president, “foreign advisers” have been offering all post-Soviet states, including Belarus, a single model of economic development - “unlimited liberalization, [and] radical shock therapy,” but Belarus chose its own path, becoming a “benchmark of socio-economic development” (Kommersant, 4 July 2002). In September 2002, while speaking about the reasons for the Union State’s unsuccessfulness, Lukashenka, among other things, blamed “[Russian] rich people who would like to “grab” Belarus today and criminalize [its] economy” (Lukashenka, 7 September 2002). In his interview with the Russian NTV channel, answering the question whether he could

specifically name someone preventing the unification of Russia and Belarus, Lukashenka named the Russian Minister of Finance Alexei Kudrin (as he did not meet his Belarusian counterpart, who arrived to Moscow to discuss indirect taxes), adding that the process “is being torpedoed” from the Russian side (Lukashenka, 10 September 2002).

*“Today, the economy of Belarus is not squandered or sold out. We have preserved all the potential, the Belarusian potential, and increased it. [...] We honestly, frankly, at my level, held meeting with everyone who wanted to and said: these are the conditions under which we will conduct privatization, the main thing is that crime should not break into the Belarusian economy, and our economy, our enterprises cost that much money, who is ready today, please come”* (Ibid.).

Later in September 2002, during his interview with BBC, the correspondent asked Lukashenka why he still seeks a union with Russia, when, according to the Belarusian president, he managed to protect the country from mafia clans, prevented criminals from becoming a political force and coming to power, did not squander the national property, did not pick up foreign loans, and did not get into debt, while Russia suffers from all these issues. Lukashenka answered with the example of the EU, as, according to him, among member states there are countries suffering from vices, while others “saved their countries from these vices,” but nevertheless all of them still are “members of certain unions” (Lukashenka, 25 September 2002). In October 2002, Gazprom informed Belarus of the need to reduce gas consumption by 50% from November 1 in connection with the completion of scheduled fuel supplies to the republic. Gazprom’s decision, which can be described as the beginning of the first ‘gas half-war’ between Russia and Belarus, has been described as “economic pressure on Belarus” by the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, and as “Kremlin’s political decision” by Lukashenka (Kommersant, 4 November 2002; Lukashenka, 6 November 2002). The latter connected this decision with the Russian pressure to privatize the Belarusian energy enterprises, in particular Beltransgaz - the company operating the main natural gas transit pipelines in the country.

*“The pressure has been incredible lately, including on me. It was directly stated: if you do not give up your property, there will be a different conversation. And they demanded: to immediately privatize Beltransgaz, that is, the pipes that remained in Belarus from the Soviet Union; to immediately corporatize [it] and transfer the shares to Gazprom”* (Lukashenka, 6 November 2002).

According to him, Belarus will not make hasty decisions, and will corporatize and privatize its objects “in accordance with our legislation” (Lukashenka, 6 November 2002). Lukashenka contraposed the Russian “neoliberal economic model” (with its oligarchs) and the Belarusian “socially oriented market economy,” claiming, however, that the existing differences are not an obstacle for unification.

*“First of all, the thesis that the difference in economic structures hinders the creation of a single economic space does not correspond to reality. China and Hong Kong, united according to the principle of “one country - two systems,” is a convincing proof of this”* (Lukashenka, 16 April 2003).

In June 2003, Lukashenka declared that he will not sell Beltransgaz, while also backing away from Minsk’s previous pledge to establish a joint-stock company with Gazprom to run Beltransgaz. When explaining his decision, Lukashenka said that shares in Beltransgaz will be sold only at “market prices set by Belarusian experts,” at the same time underlining that “crooks will not take our property for nothing” (RFE/RL Newline, 25 June 2003; Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 4 July 2003). Lukashenka compared customs barriers erected by Russia to “thrombi” (blood clots), which have to be removed for the economic system to function properly (Lukashenka, 16 September 2003). In October 2003, Lukashenka complained that Belarus trades with Russia “in a situation worse than Latvia,” advocating for customs barriers to be removed and the issue of a mechanism for collecting indirect taxes on mutual trade to be resolved (Lukashenka, 24 October 2003).

*“No “sharks” are going to privatize enterprises in Belarus, just because they are “sharks.” [...] [O]ur policy supposes that if we privatize something, some enterprises, we will keep a controlling stake. [...] [T]he main thing for me is not privatization, but its result. And no one will be allowed to throw people out of an enterprise”* (Ibid.).

Later in October 2003, during the debate with Anatoly Chubais, the Chairman of the board of RAO Unified Energy System of Russia (RAO UES) and the main ideologists behind privatization in Russia, Lukashenka stated that Belarus cannot afford to “experiment” with market reforms as, unlike Russia, it does not have gas and oil revenues to “patch up a hole,” in case something goes wrong (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 20:18-20:31). He further claimed that learning from Russian mistakes, Belarus does not privatize “everything at once,” but rather conducts a “selective privatization,” in the cases when the state cannot handle an enterprise itself (Ibid., 35:00-35:12; 51:00-51:14). The Belarusian side’s articulation of

superiority of its economic model to the Russian one was summarized by the Belarusian Acting Deputy Prime Minister, Vladimir Semashko. While participating in this debate on Lukashenka's side, he told Chubais that Minsk Tractor Works is still operating and is going to produce 30 thousand tractors by the end of year, at the same time rhetorically asking the latter "where is Vladimir Tractor Plant, where is Volgograd Tractor Plant?" (Ibid., 47:50-48:00).

*"Do not say "give away the property." To whom? To whom should the property be given? Give Anatoly Borisovich [Chubais] the grids, the power generating capacities? Please, let's sit down at the table, think about how much it will cost, if he wants, if he can meet our conditions. [...] And you say "give away the property." To whom? Give Miller [CEO of Gazprom] the property? To Khodorkovsky [CEO of Yukos oil company]? But they put him in jail, so who will the property be left to?"* (Ibid., 19:02-19:58).

Lukashenka claimed that Beltransgaz and other Belarusian enterprises are open to Russian capital, "but at [their] real cost," further describing any attempts to pressure Belarus to sell them "at a giveaway prices" as "harmful" (Lukashenka, 14 April 2004). In October 2004, Lukashenka once again reiterated that in terms of privatization Belarus rejects 'the Russian way,' as Minsk refuses to sell "everything at once," instead preferring a "selective privatization." He underlined that he does not give away anything for free, but is ready to sell enterprises if investors are ready to pay the price and meet Minsk's conditions.

*"If an investor is ready to comply with 20-25 conditions that we set during the privatization of an enterprise - please, come. [...] We do not need privatization to create one oligarch and small oligarchs around him. We do not need such enterprises"* (Lukashenka, 13 October 2004).

### **3.3 Belarusian discourse on energy unification**

Energy unification has been one of the most important issues for Belarus within the Union-building process with Russia. Several points, such as natural gas prices for Belarus, natural gas transit fees, ownership of Beltransgaz (Belarusian pipeline operator company), and possibilities for Belarusian companies to extract natural gas in Russia have been specifically articulated by Minsk and represented an important part of the Belarusian discourse on the Union State of the early 2000s. Energy sphere has been one of the most divisive issues between the sides, resulting in the aforementioned 'gas half-war' in 2002 and the first full-scale 'gas war' in February 2004.

Despite the reports that Lukashenka has been trying to achieve intra-Russian prices on natural gas at least from February 2000 (Kommersant, 19 February 2000), energy unification had not had a significant part in Minsk's discourse until 2002. In particular, Minsk wanted to have the same gas prices as Russia's Smolensk Oblast bordering Belarus. As explained by the Belarusian Prime Minister Gennady Novitsky, this would equalize conditions for Belarusian and Russian business entities, as it was planned within the Union State's framework (Kommersant, 21 January 2002).

The main points of the Belarusian discourse on energy unification have been voiced by Lukashenka in his November 2002 speech, made after Gazprom's notification to Belarus that the latter had to cut gas consumption by 50%. In this speech Lukashenka declared that Russia has to comply with agreements on equal conditions for business entities of the two countries and thus introduce equal gas prices (Lukashenka, 6 November 2002). He even reminded Gazprom of benefits provided by Belarus during the construction of the Yamal-Europe pipeline on the country's territory, and demanded them to be returned (Ibid.).

*"If the Russian Federation does not want to comply with the agreements reached, [then] we must charge for transit from the Russian Federation as much as it pays Poland, Austria, Slovakia, and so on. Today, the transit of Russian gas through Belarus to Europe is 4-5 times cheaper than through Ukraine. I am not even talking about Western countries"* (Ibid.).

Despite the April 2002 agreement to create a joint-stock company between Beltransgaz and Gazprom (in exchange for gas deliveries to Belarus at intra-Russian prices), in June 2003 Lukashenka refused to do so, arguing that price named by Gazprom and their desire to have a controlling stock in the company, were unacceptable for him (Kommersant, 25 June 2003). At that time Belarus had already accumulated a significant debt to Gazprom, and, according to the latter's representatives, Minsk was not able to pay for natural gas even at intra-Russian prices (RBC, 12 November 2002). However, Lukashenka did not want to include this debt in a possible privatization deal between Beltransgaz and Gazprom, stating that Beltransgaz shares will not be sold *"neither for any debts, nor for any nominal value"* (Kommersant, 25 June 2003). As outlined by Valentin Matskevich, the deputy head of the Belarusian Energy Ministry's investment department (responsible for negotiations with Gazprom), *"if we sold control of Beltransgaz, we would sell control of the country"* (RFE/RL Newswire, 31 July 2003).

In turn, the Russian side threatened to revoke subsidized natural gas prices (Kommersant, 5 September 2003; Kommersant, 9 September 2003), but Lukashenka responded that Belarus “*will not allow either the West or the East to put us on a leash*” (RFE/RL Newline, 15 September 2003). Similar notion has been expressed by the Chairman of the Commission on International Affairs and National Security of the Council of the Republic (Belarusian upper chamber of parliament), Nikolay Cherginets, who said regarding this issue that “*Belarusians can compromise in politics and economy, but in matters of sovereignty and territorial integrity - never*” (Kommersant, 5 September 2003). While the Russian side has been appealing to the 2002 agreement, Lukashenka focused on the 1998 agreement, which among other things envisaged “equal rights, obligations and guarantees to business entities” of the sides. This provision was later incorporated into the 1999 Treaty of the Establishment of the Union State. He specifically named the Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, saying that the latter refused to comply with the provision regarding equal rights (that is equal gas prices) for Belarusian and Russian business entities (Lukashenka, 24 October 2003).

*“But what kind of equal economic policy will be there if, for example, Zhdanovichi, our greenhouse facility, consumes gas, for example, buying it for \$50, but somewhere in Bashkortostan [...] [it is sold] for \$12. [...] We will just not be able to compete in the common market”* (Ibid.).

Lukashenka also appealed to the Russian side to allow Belarus to extract natural gas (10 billion cubic meters annually) and oil (unspecified amount) in Russia. Regarding the former, he was ready to sell a controlling stock of Beltransgaz to Gazprom in exchange and, in his own words, had Putin’s preliminary approval, but none of the initiatives managed to advance (Ibid.). He further accused the Russian side of “strangling” independent suppliers of natural gas, so that they do not provide it to Belarus cheaper than Gazprom (Ibid.). Lukashenka once again emphasized during his debate with Chubais that he had appealed to the Russian side to allow Belarus to extract natural gas in Russia “[on the same terms] as Americans, not as brothers,” but received a negative response (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 19:32-19:51). During the aforementioned debate, Belarusian Acting Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko said that while Russia, and personally Chubais, appeal to market methods, they do not follow these same market methods in Belarus-Russia energy relations.

*“If you are so ‘advocating’ for our economy, then, please, say, why can’t we buy very cheap electricity in Kazakhstan and you do not allow us to transit it through Russia, so that we have*

*cheap electricity here? Why don't you allow us to buy cheap electricity directly in Lithuania? Why don't you allow us to buy cheap energy from the Smolensk Nuclear Power Plant?"* (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 48:04-48:37).

On 1 January 2004, Gazprom ceased gas supplies to Belarus, as the sides did not manage to agree on prices, however Belarus continued to import Russian gas from other suppliers, such as Itera and TransNafta (RFE/RL Newslines, 12 January 2004). In February 2004, Lukashenka said that Belarus is being offered \$300 million or \$400 million by Gazprom for a controlling stake in Beltransgaz, while international auditors estimate its value at \$5 billion, adding that agreeing to such a deal would constitute a "crime," and accusing the Russian side of blackmailing by "gas valve" not only Belarus, but also Western Europe (RFE/RL Newslines, 19 February 2004). On 18 February 2004, Gazprom completely halted all gas supplies through the territory of Belarus, accusing Minsk of siphoning off transit gas (Kommersant, 19 February 2004). The next day Lukashenka called Russia's decision "an act of terrorism on the highest level," adding that Russia-Belarus relations "will be poisoned by gas for a long time" (Lukashenka, 19 February 2004). He added that Gazprom and the Russian leadership have been pressuring Belarus to pay the same price for natural gas as Ukraine (\$50 for a cubic meter), but wanted gas transit fees to remain low. According to Lukashenka, in this case Belarus should be allowed to re-export Russian gas as Ukraine. He once again underlined that Moscow's desire to make gas prices for Belarus almost twice as high as intra-Russian prices results in Belarusian products "becoming uncompetitive in the Russian market" (Ibid.).

*"We do not mind paying \$50. [...] But Russia pays Ukraine for gas transit to Europe 1 dollar 9 cents. We are told [by Russia]: we will not pay you so much for transit - only 50 cents. [...] Can we agree to this? And where are Ukraine-like conditions then?"* (Ibid.).

However, the Belarusian president greenlighted a new agreement to be made "on Putin's terms," but requested all agreements with the Russian Federation to be "inventorized" (Ibid.). According to Lukashenka, if Russia wants to sell its goods at a higher price, then Belarus should also offer Moscow the provided services at a higher price (Lukashenka, 23 February 2004). In April 2004, Lukashenka said that a solution to all existing problems can be found "if our ally [Russia] stops looking at Belarus through the "sight" of the gas pipe" (Lukashenka, 14 April 2004). While Minsk and Moscow have ultimately managed to agree on gas supply prices (much higher than intra-Russian, but less than initially requested by Gazprom) and gas transit prices (less than initially requested by Minsk) in June (RFE/RL

Newsline, 9 June 2004), the issue of Beltransgaz's privatization by Gazprom remained unresolved, as the sides' proposed prices differed almost by 10 times.

*"This is to the issue of disputes around Beltransgaz, which Gazprom would like to "seize," I cannot say otherwise, practically for free. For what costs \$5 billion, we are being offered \$600 million. But this is a state property, and since we do not want to, this has to be accepted"* (Lukashenka, 13 October 2004).

### **3.4 Belarusian discourse on monetary unification**

The 13th Article of the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State envisaged an introduction of a single (common) currency. It said that participating states shall continue to use their national currencies before the introduction of a common one, thus at least partially implying that a common currency will be neither the Belarusian ruble nor the Russian ruble but a completely new one. At the same time, the Treaty did not specify the location of an emission center (central bank) for a common currency, saying that it shall be determined "based on agreement between the participating states." The Program of Actions on the Implementation of the Provisions of the Agreement on the Establishment of the Union State set the deadline saying that work on the introduction of a single monetary unit (currency) should be completed by 2005. In November 2000, Putin and Lukashenka signed the document postponing the introduction of a new single currency (to January 1, 2008), at the same time agreeing to use the Russian ruble as a common currency from January 1, 2005. Despite Lukashenka's compromise, the existing discrepancies regarding a single currency and the location of an emission center started to get bigger and more visible. During the joint press conference with Putin, Lukashenka stated that Belarus has always been for the Russian ruble to be a single means of payment, adding that a type of a common currency does not really matter, but "*[w]hat matters is the emission center and the principles of its functioning*" (Lukashenko, 30 November 2000).

*"Belarusian chief bankers have been constantly offering Moscow to issue a single currency, whether it be the Russian or the Union ruble, simultaneously in two banks - the [Russian] Central Bank and the National Bank of Belarus. Moscow has been instantly rejecting this proposal"* (Kommersant, 28 December 2000, p. 11).

In February 2000, the Chairman of the National Bank of Belarus Pyotr Prokopovich proposed the Russian Central Bank to be a single emission center, but on the territory of Belarus the Russian ruble to be issued by the Belarusian central bank (Kommersant, 17 February 2000). During his May 2001 report, Lukashenka stated that work on the introduction of a single currency and the creation of a single emission center of the Union State will continue (Lukashenka, 18 May 2001).

*“At the same time, I declare in principle, [that] the sovereign rights of the Belarusian state will be fully ensured. [...] An unequal union is a short-lived union, no one needs it. Even in Soviet times, it never accrued to anyone to put Belarus in unequal conditions in relation to other republics”* (Lukashenka, 18 May 2001).

Lukashenka stated that if proposed, he will accept the Russian ruble as a common currency, but will never agree “[i]f they propose to print [it] in the Kremlin” (RFE/RL Newline, 13 February 2002). At the press conference held in June 2002, Belarusian Foreign Minister Mikhail Khvostov said that the Russian side made several proposals for amendments to be adopted in the Union State Treaty. “[T]he proposals made to us by the Russian side, the proposals for amendments, do not mention among the issues the implementation of a common monetary, credit and currency policy of the Union State” (Khvostov, 21 June 2002).

*“We are not opposed to the Russian ruble being the single payment instrument. The important thing is what role the states will play in this single emission center. I think there should be complete equality. The rights of the party must be balanced”* (Lukashenka, 27 November 2002).

In August 2002, Putin proposed Lukashenka to introduce the Russian ruble one year earlier than planned, to which the latter did not refuse, but stated that the process should develop in “a civilized manner and exclusively on an equal footing” (Lukashenka, 15 August 2002b). He added that such unequal approaches are unacceptable - “that the National Bank [of Belarus] becomes a branch of the Central Bank [of Russia] and in connection with this we lose sovereignty.” According to him, Belarus is ready to adopt the Russian ruble even from 1 January 2003 (two years earlier than planned), as long as “the sovereignty of the two states is unshakable in this part” (Lukashenka, 15 August 2002a).

*“[I]f there is a desire to introduce a single currency from January 1 of the next year on an equal basis, as this is the world practice today, please, we are ready. [...] We have already*

*once been in the Soviet Union in a single [currency] zone, and then we were “duped” - and we almost choked on all the Soviet rubles that were dumped into Belarus as in a cesspit”* (Lukashenka, 7 September 2002).

In September 2002, at the meeting with their Russian counterparts, Belarusian ministers outlined that in the case of adoption of the Russian ruble, the National Bank of Belarus should also be allowed to issue it, while in the case of adoption of the Union ruble, it should be issued by a common central bank (Kommersant, 18 September 2002, p.2). In the words of the Prime Minister of Belarus Gennady Novitsky, the process of introduction of a common currency is connected “with the depth of understanding of unification of economies of the two countries,” underlining that such understanding (therefore, unification of economies) does not exist (Kommersant, 11 December 2002, p. 2). Minsk insisted that common currency should be the last step of unification, the ultimate sign of its successful completion or, as expressed by the Belarusian Prime Minister Novitsky, “the peak of integration of our countries” (Kommersant, 3 April 2003, p. 2). Lukashenka stated that Minsk agreed to the Russian ruble and a single emission center, but, according to him, these processes should be managed by “an interbank monetary union with equal rights of two [central] banks” (Lukashenka, 16 April 2003).

In June 2003, Lukashenka said that Belarus “does not insist that money be printed in Belarus - they will be printed in Russia,” at the same time insisting that decisions on *how* to carry out money emission should be made by the supra-banking council, in which representatives of Belarusian and Russian central banks will be in equal position. He further explained that the Russian ruble can be introduced in Belarus only after all other agreements between Belarus and Russia in the field of economy are fulfilled, as “it should become the crown of all processes, not the other way around” (Kommersant, 19 June 2003, p. 2). On 30 June 2003, Lukashenka once again demanded financial guarantees and guarantees of Belarus’s sovereignty to enter a currency union with Russia, asking Russia a rhetorical question: “[w]hat is independence without money?” (RFE/RL Newline, 1 July 2003).

On the first day of July 2003, Lukashenka did not sign the decree on the introduction of parallel circulation of the Russian ruble in non-cash payments in Belarus. In an interview with Belarusian journalists, held the very next day, while answering the question on a common currency, the Belarusian president blamed Russian oligarchs, stressing once again that a common currency should be the *final* point of unification.

*“The so-called [Russian] oligarchs are especially active. They are already setting conditions: if you give up the economy of Belarus, then we will go for a union, if you do not give up - [then] we do not need a union. [...] I have already said that a single currency had to be the final step of this movement”* (Lukashenka, 2 July 2003).

In August 2003, Lukashenka said that if Russian conditions on the introduction of the Russian ruble are followed, it would put Belarus in “secondary” and “subordinate” position, having to “beg for money to pay wages” (RFE/RL Newline, 28 August 2003). According to him, the provisions of the 1999 Union State Treaty should be met *before* the introduction of the Russian ruble (RFE/RL Newline, 29 August 2003). Lukashenka continued his crusade, claiming that the Russian side pushes the issue of the Russian ruble ahead of all other issues, such as equal treatment of Belarusian companies and unrestricted access to Russian markets. He claimed that if Minsk follows the path offered by the Russian side, “we might be left without money, wages, and pensions” (RFE/RL Newline, 2 September 2003). Belarus saw the introduction of the Russian ruble as the *last stage* of creating a common economic space with Russia, *after* a constitutional act (RFE/RL Newline, 15 September 2003).

*“[W]hen we speak of currency, we must not forget that it is an element of statehood, it is an element of independence, the most important element. Therefore, [when] introducing the currency of another state, foreign currency, Belarus must have guarantees. [...] We are often told, and Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] told me about this in Sochi: well, if we are deceiving you once again, you will return to your currency. I say: we have already returned once after the collapse of the Soviet Union, [and] were left not only without pants”* (Lukashenka, 24 October 2003; syllables in original).

At the same press conference, Lukashenka further elaborated his fear stating that by adopting the Russian ruble, Belarus will find itself dependent on the process going on in Russia. Therefore, he demanded political, diplomatic, foreign, and military-political guarantees, as well as the issue of a common currency to be fixed within the (future) Constitution of the Union State. Lukashenka also stated that economic issues should be resolved *before* the introduction of any common currency, making an emphasis on customs barriers still existing in Russia for Belarusian products.

*“We are not against [common currency], but we need guarantees so that, [...], when this money tap will be turned off for us, we do not have to crawl somewhere to the Mint [Monetny*

Dvor] or to the Kremlin and click our teeth, begging for what is ours” (Lukashenka, 24 October 2003).

Lukashenka complained that Moscow is “*forcibly pushing the currency agreement through,*” without giving Minsk any guarantees, and not willing to talk about the Constitutional Act (Ekonomicheskaya Gazeta, 28 October 2003). Minsk described the adoption of the Russian ruble as “the upper crown” of union-building, which cannot be laid “until the underlying crowns are laid on the foundation” (Lukashenka, 14 April 2004). In August 2004, during his meeting with Putin in Sochi, Lukashenka admitted that the sides turned out to be politically unprepared to introduce the Russian ruble as a common currency (Kommersant, 24 August 2004, p. 10). In October 2004, while underlining Minsk’s “technical” readiness to adopt the Russian ruble, Lukashenka expressed his distrust in Russia’s readiness to later introduce a new common currency (planned for 2008), stating that “*Russia will never abandon the Russian ruble for some common currency*” (Lukashenka, 13 October 2004).

### **3.5 The Belarusian discursive structure**

To summarize the Belarusian discourse, we can see that it was formed around four nodal points: political unification, economic unification, energy unification, and monetary unification. All of them were specifically articulated, having their own signs and signifiers, but together signified the Belarusian vision of the Union State and its place within this structure. Moreover, the Belarusian specific articulations of the aforementioned nodal points filled with a particular meaning the master signifier - the Union State - which otherwise, on its own, is completely void of any meaning.

In particular, the Belarusian discourse on political unification within the Union State was formed around several signifiers, specifically: equality, preservation of sovereignty, strong supra-national bodies, strong joint Constitution, and adherence to the 1999 Treaty. The last two points are especially visible in the Belarusian discourse, as Minsk was satisfied by the 1999 Treaty, opposing Moscow’s any attempts to reverse it or significantly alter its provisions turning it into an ineffective ‘piece of paper.’ In accordance with the Treaty, Belarus was also trying to speed up the adoption of a joint Constitutional Act, considering it one of the very first necessary steps of Union-building, at the same time resisting Moscow’s attempts to weaken the prospective document. Consequently, the Belarusian side had been rejecting the

Russian-proposed models of political integration, such as incorporation, EU-like model, and German-like model, instead proposing a rather vague ‘Soviet way’ of unification, in which the ultimate result is not the Soviet Union. Overall, in the official Belarusian discourse the nodal point of political unification is signified by the following signs: (1) equality, (2) adherence to the 1999 Treaty, (3) preservation of sovereignty, (4) strong supra-national bodies, and (5) strong joint Constitution.

Regarding economic unification within the Union State, the Belarusian discourse has been projecting it as following the “one country - two systems” principle. The Russian “neoliberal” economic model and the Russian experience of privatization “of everything at once” have been articulated as inferior in contrast to the Belarusian “socially oriented” economic model and “selective privatization.” Heavily negative terms, such as ‘crime,’ ‘oligarchs,’ ‘crooks,’ and ‘squander’ have been actively utilized by Lukashenka to describe the economic situation in another member state of the Union. The Russian ‘hawkish’ economic elites have been repeatedly accused of wanting to bring their ‘rules of the game’ to Belarus by any means, including economic pressure, and pressure on Lukashenka himself. Nevertheless, Minsk has not been categorically opposed to privatization of its enterprises (especially those perceived as of a strategic importance) by Russian capital, underlining, however, that such cases should be conducted purely on *Belarusian terms and conditions*. The necessity to remove customs barriers to have free access to the Russian market has also been underlined by Lukashenka. Overall, within the Belarusian discourse the nodal point of economic unification has been signified by the following signs: (1) ‘one country - two systems’ principle, (2) selective privatization (of Belarusian assets), (3) privatization (of Belarusian assets) on Belarusian terms, and (4) free access to the Russian market.

According to the Belarusian discourse, energy unification with Russia should have envisaged similar prices on natural gas, thus allowing Belarusian products to be competitive in the Russian market. Therefore, in contrast to economic unification, in energy unification Belarus wanted to pursue ‘one country - one system’ principle, enjoying the same gas prices as one of the Russian oblasts. However, in the case of ‘Ukrainization’ of Belarus-Russia energy relations, that is the increase of gas prices, Minsk demanded the same ‘Ukrainization’ in terms of gas transit fees (to be also increased) and as Kyiv to be allowed to re-export Russian gas, thus making gas prices and gas transit fees interdependent. Minsk had also called on Moscow to be allowed to extract natural gas in Russia, but its requests were never considered on a serious level. As Minsk unwillingly, but accepted (or had to accept) non-intra-Russian

gas prices, especially after the first ‘gas war,’ the issue of the ownership of the Belarusian gas monopoly - Beltransgaz - remained the most polarizing between the sides. Minsk wanted the company either to remain under its own control, or to be sold to Gazprom, but only *on its own terms*, in particular for the Minsk-set price (\$5 billion), and not including the Belarusian debt to Gazprom into the deal. To conclude, in Minsk’s discourse the nodal point of energy unification is signified by the following: (1) sale of Beltransgaz on Belarusian terms, (2) equal gas prices, and (3) correlation/interdependence between gas prices and gas transit fees.

The Belarusian discourse on monetary unification evolved around three signs: a common currency, the location of a money-issuing institution (central bank), and its place in the order of unification priorities. In Minsk's vision, the (eventual) Union State has a completely new common currency (nominal union ruble), a central bank’s location and/or functions are split between Belarus and Russia, and all this takes place at the final stage of unification after political and economic unification (perceived by Belarus as guarantees). Unsurprisingly, Minsk never advocated for Belarusian-only options - the Belarusian ruble as a common currency or an exclusively Belarus-based central bank. And over time, the Belarusian discourse has undergone a certain transformation, later agreeing to the Russian ruble and a Russia-based central bank. In turn, it placed monetary unification at the last stage of the unification process and made it dependent on two other nodal points - political unification and economic unification - now demanding guarantees (in the form of a joint Constitution) and economic integration *before* any monetary unification. To summarize, in Minsk’s discourse the following signs signify and outline monetary unification : (1) happening at the last stage of Union-building, (2) eventual introduction a completely new common currency, (3) a central bank has split locations and/or functions, and (4) guarantees provided in case of the adoption of the Russian ruble.

As noted in the theoretical part of the dissertation, social identities created through discursive articulations cannot achieve fullness and complete closure due to antagonisms - a radical and threatening ‘Other’ - which unify and stabilize a discourse, but at the same time prevent its closure. In the Belarusian discourse the Russian political and economic elites were blamed for the incompleteness and non-fixity of the Union State. In particular, in the case of political unification the blame was put on the Russian political elites (albeit not Putin), in the cases of economic and monetary unification - on the Russian economic elites (especially oligarchs), and in the case of energy unification - on Gazprom and even Putin himself. As seen in the empirical part of the dissertation, Lukashenka was constantly blaming the Russian side -

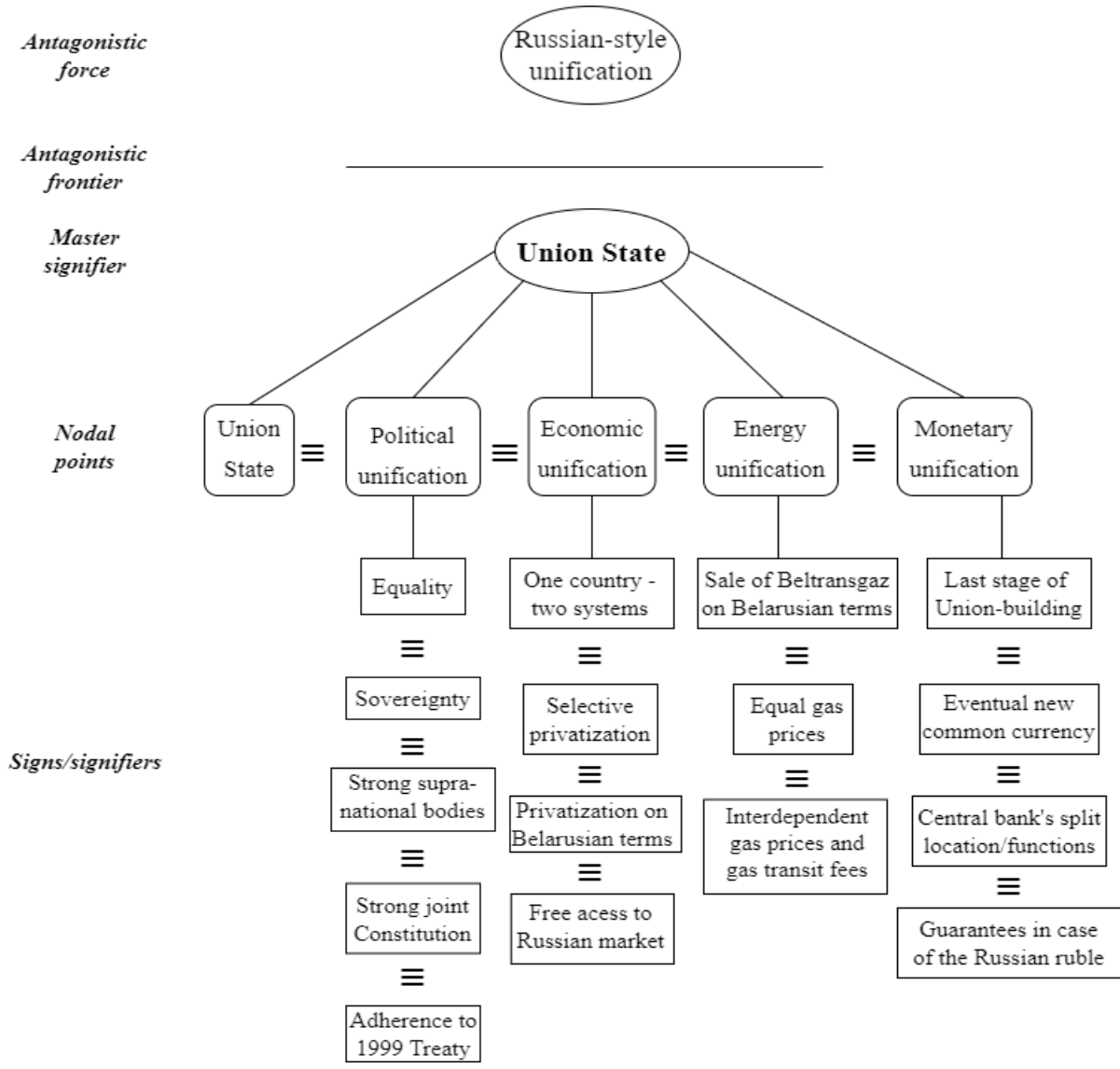
mainly the Russian leadership and oligarchs - for “sabotaging” and “torpedoing” the Union State, sometimes even naming ‘the opponents of unification,’ as in the cases of Kasyanov, Kudrin, Prikhodko, and Voloshin.

“Unfortunately, there are certain forces in Russia that are trying to make the Russian president forget about the existence of the [1999] treaty, about the path that we have already traveled, and are pushing him to divide Belarus into seven parts or incorporate it entirely into the Russian Federation” (Kommer

It should be noted that in spite of constantly accusing ‘Russia,’ ‘the Russian leadership,’ ‘the Kremlin,’ and even ‘Russian President’s milieu’ (Lukashenka, 19 June 2002) for sabotaging the Union-building efforts, Lukashenka has been avoiding blaming Putin directly. Rather, he has been trying to separate the Russian president from the aforementioned terms, speaking of “certain forces in Russia” that try to make Putin “forget about the [1999] Treaty,” and “pushing him to divide Belarus into seven parts” (Kommersant, 12 March 2003). Thus the problems and obstacles appearing in the Union-building have been presented by Lukashenka not as a result of ‘Putin’s decisions,’ but rather as “bad processes” going on behind their backs (RFE/RL Newline, 16 September 2003). As another example, Lukashenko even presented Moscow’s desire to alter the 1999 Treaty as a result of pressure on Putin from his milieu. In particular, as Lukashenka retold the words of his Russian colleague: “[i]f we do not change the norms [of the 1999 Treaty], you know what kind of mess they will create for you and me” (Kommersant, 19 September 2002). Personally Putin has been negatively portrayed by Lukashenka only once, in February 2004, after Gazprom completely halted its gas supplies to Belarus, and Lukashenka spoke of the need to reach a new agreement on gas prices.

*“It is necessary to conclude an agreement on Putin’s terms. Putin wants us to pay this money, let’s collect [it]: from medicines, from Chernobyl victims, from those who were rotting in the trenches, apparently they are very rich here. Indeed, can’t we collect these \$200 million? Let’s collect! And I think we will remove this problem. They will simply stop manipulating and blackmailing us”* (Lukashenka, 19 February 2004).

To collect the empirical findings, and base them on the works of Laclau (2000, 303; 2005, 130), Thomassen (2005a, 292-293), and Walton and Boon (2014, 355), the Belarusian discourse as a post-structuralist discursive formation (diagram) looks as follows (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Structure of the Belarusian discourse on the Union State

## 4. Analysis of the official Russian discourse

### 4.1 Russian discourse on political unification

*“Moscow [...], without questioning the need to create a union state with a fraternal republic, wants to build it on a new, more realistic bases”* (Kommersant, 26 December 2001).

As in the case of their Belarusian counterparts, the issue of political unification within the Union State has been one of the nodal points of Moscow’s discourse. However, probably due to early Putin’s ‘pragmatization’ policy, and a heavy emphasis on economic issues, political unification remained on the periphery of the Russian discourse on the Union State (with the attention shifted to economic and monetary unification) until June 2002, when Putin made the ‘cutlets and flies speech.’

*“We are going to ensure that the bodies of the Union State have [real] powers, this will require the renunciation of part of the sovereignty. [...] We must look a hundred, maybe a thousand times at the decisions being made. But they should not be dragged out either”* (Putin, 30 November 2000; Kommersant, 1 December 2000).

In December 2001, Putin rejected Lukashenka’s proposal to discuss the approval of a joint Constitutional Act, which would put the creation of the Union State to a referendum in both countries, stating that “[i]t is important not to lose the momentum and not to try to jump over the objective steps” (Putin, 26 December 2001; RFE/RL Newline, 28 December 2001). The tensions between the sides regarding political unification escalated in summer 2002, started by Putin’s ‘cutlets and flies speech’ made on 13 June 2002. In particular, Putin spoke against the attempts of restoration of the Soviet Union “including at the expense of Russia’s economic interests,” hinting that in such a case it might lead to Russia’s dissolution, as “in this case centrifugal forces will only increase,” and “everyone [meaning Russia’s regions and/or neighbors] will be [...] falling off somewhere” (Belarus Today, 19 June 2002).

*“We often hear that [they] would like, say, something like the Soviet Union. But if [they want] something like the Soviet Union, then why write in the draft Constitutional Act that it will be a sovereign state, territorial integrity with the right to veto all decisions, etc.? [...] Perhaps there is a right [of veto]. [...] But then we should also have this right of veto. [...] But then it is no longer something like the Soviet Union, it is [something] completely different. And we*

*need to understand what we want, what our partners want: cutlets separately, flies separately should be” (Ibid.).*

Putin also spoke against the creation of “some supranational body with unclear functions,” giving the example of the Soviet Union, where there were “Parliament of the USSR, the Supreme Soviet [of the USSR], and the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR,” and “tug of war” started between them, as “no specific competences were defined” (Ibid., RFE/RL Newswire, 14 June 2002). Later in June, Putin criticized the existing 1999 Union State Treaty for envisaging the establishment of “a union parliament with very broad powers and an unclear mechanism for their realization” (Putin, 24 June 2002). Instead, he proposed to adopt the same mechanism and “rules as in the European Union,” where a decision is made by the European Parliament, then *approved* by the national parliament of a member state, signed by the head of state, and then becomes a national law (Ibid.; emphasis added).

*“I am just afraid that this union parliament, if we elect it in this form, in this capacity on the basis of these documents [1999 Treaty], it will pass laws that will not be implemented sometimes in Belarus, if they do not like it, sometimes in Russia, if they are not liked in Russia” (Ibid.).*

While Putin’s ‘cutlets and flies speech’ made in June 2002 is important as an ‘accelerating point’ of the Russian discourse on political unification (bringing the issue which have not been actively articulated before to the very center of the Russian general discourse on the Union State), Putin’s August 2002 joint press conference with Lukashenka laid out the main signs of Moscow’s vision and understanding of political unification. In particular, Putin proposed to hold a referendum on “ultimate unification” in May 2003, and then hold elections to a joint parliament in December 2003, and elections of a head of the Union State in March 2004 (Putin, 14 August 2002). The dates of elections proposed by Putin coincided with the dates of the scheduled Russian Duma elections, and presidential elections, respectively. While Lukashenko mentioned that three models of unification have been discussed with Putin - incorporation, EU-like model, and preservation of the Union State 1999 Treaty and its bodies, Putin mentioned only the first two.

*“[C]reation of union bodies [should be] in accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation. I want to pay attention to this. [...] Belarus, unlike Russia, is a unitary state. Russia, and also the future joint state, can only be federal (federative), like Russia. So, of course, I cannot imagine it any other way” (Ibid.).*

The EU-like unification was proposed by Putin as an alternative to the previous option. He underlined the need “to make current [Union State] structures capable,” once again voicing the idea of a union parliament (on the basis of the European Parliament), which makes decisions that “*have to be approved by national procedures*” (Ibid.; emphasis added). In line with his previous criticisms of the Soviet-like model of unification, Putin stated that Belarus and Russia will build “a unique state that has no analogue in history” (RFE/RL Newswire, 14 August 2002). In contrast to the aforementioned press conference, in his September 2002 letter to Lukashenka, Putin named three main options of Union-building: full integration into a single state, establishment of a supranational body (as in the EU), and “work on unification” on the basis of the 1999 Treaty (Putin, 4 September 2002). He offered the Belarusian counterpart to create a joint group “to determine the most promising” option (Ibid.). In November 2002, the Chairman of State Duma Gennadiy Seleznyov arrived in Minsk and conveyed to Lukashenko the wish of the Russian president “to fill the Union Treaty with concrete content” (Kommersant, 19 November 2002).

In January 2003, Putin confirmed that following the Lukashenka’s recommendation, the level of the joint commission for the preparation of the Constitutional Act has been increased, now being headed by the chairmen of the parliaments of the two countries (Putin, 20 January 2003a). In February, Chairman Seleznyov stated that the type of state structure of the future Union State remains a point of contention, as one part of the working group (commission) defends the federal structure, while another part wants to preserve the confederation (Kommersant, 4 February 2003). In September 2003, Putin proposed Lukashenka a German-like model of unification, where East Germany was incorporated into West Germany (in contrast to a merger of equals, so much demanded by Minsk), and once again offered him unification (a joint Constitution) to be based on the Russian Constitution (Vieira 2016, 6).

*“I can only repeat what I told him [Lukashenka], and I have already spoken publicly on this matter. Russia is a federal state, a state with a federal structure, and our Constitution is made for a federal state, while Belarus is a unitary state and, accordingly, has a constitution of a unitary state. It is easier for us, we do not see the need for any adjustments to the Constitution”* (Putin, 15 September 2003).

As the work on the Constitutional Act bogged down, due to the existing differences in the sides’ positions (Kommersant, 12 March 2003; Kommersant, 27 March 2004), the issue of political unification with Belarus started to disappear from the rhetoric of the Russian

officials, especially those of the highest level. Against this background, in December 2003, Putin stated that Russia was “*ready to accept Belarus in any capacity: either as a whole or as separate regions,*” but a such a method turned out to be unacceptable for Minsk, and the Russian side “[is] not going to impose its will” (Putin, 18 December 2003).

## **4.2 Russian discourse on economic unification**

Unlike political unification, the issue of economic unification has always been of utmost importance in the Russian overall discourse on the Union State, having been articulated more regularly, but with lesser details. Economic unification has been described by Putin as a “good basis for the development of all other processes” (Putin, 26 January 2000), as a “basis of unification” (Putin, 30 November 2000), and as a “core of integration” (Putin, 12 April 2002a).

In January 2000, while answering the question regarding unification against the background of different economic models of Belarus and Russia, Putin noted that the sides “have a whole program of practical actions” to achieve the set goals, without specifying ‘practical actions’ (Putin, 26 January 2000). From the very beginning Putin has been emphasizing the necessity to harmonize the economic legislation of Russia and Belarus, specifically pointing to customs law, and tax law (Putin, 15 February 2000). According to Putin, the plans of unification (including the political ones) cannot be built on a “shaky economic foundation,” thus describing the economic direction as the main one in the unification process (Putin, 16 April 2000). In October 2000, Putin stated that Russia plans to introduce unified rates of customs taxation, and expected “joint efforts” from Belarus on this issue (Putin, 19 October 2000). It should be noted that the issues of taxation and customs tariffs have been the most articulated (especially at the highest level) in the *linguistic* part of the Russian discourse on economic unification. The existing differences in Minsk’s and Moscow’s customs policies were sometimes leading to a low-intensity ‘customs conflicts’ between the sides. For example, in January 2001 Moscow restored customs inspection of goods on the border with Belarus to fight gray import (Kommersant, 28 March 2001). Unification of (customs) tariffs and tax system was described by Putin as the “key issues” of the Union State (Putin, 26 December 2001).

*“Today, one of our priority tasks is the development of a common economic policy. And above all, the formation of a common economic and customs space” (Ibid.).*

In April 2002, Putin once again underlined the “work on the unification of tax, customs, civil, [and] economic legal acts,” stressing the importance of “harmonization of the legislative framework” (Putin, 12 April 2002a). Vladimir Ryzhkov, a member of the State Duma, while debating Lukashenka on *Svoboda Slova* TV show, named the differences between the Russian and Belarusian economic models as one of the main obstacles of unification.

*“The economies are very different. The share of state regulation, the share of state ownership, the share of [state] ownership and regulation in agriculture in our economy and in your economy [are] still fundamentally different. How to integrate in such conditions, on what basis?” (Svoboda Slova, 12 April 2002, 32:39-32:54).*

In June 2002, Putin (in)famously stated that “*the Belarusian economy is 3% of the Russian economy,*” adding that any attempt to restore the Soviet Union, including “at the expense of Russia’s economic interests,” are not acceptable (Belarus Today, 19 June 2002). In contrast to Minsk’s “one country - two systems” approach to economic unification, Putin deemed that the common economic space, which the sides tried to create, “cannot exist other than by functioning according to *uniform* economic law adopted by both sides” (Putin, 20 January 2003b; emphasis added). During his debates with Lukashenka in October 2003, the main architect of privatization in Russia, Anatoly Chubais (then also the Chairman of the board of RAO UES of Russia) also pointed out the differences between the Belarusian and the Russian economies. However, unlike Putin in his ‘cutlets and flies speech,’ Chubais made an emphasis on qualitative differences, instead of quantitative ones. In particular, he criticized the Belarusian state-controlled economy, saying that “the President of Belarus appoints directors of enterprises,” and even a “market director in Minsk is appointed by the President” (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 32:22-32:33).

*“This gap [between Russia and Belarus] both in the economy and in the political system is the most serious obstacle for us to unite. This [sic] is really holding us back. This gap needs to be overcome. And in order to overcome it, [...] Belarus has to start moving in the direction where the whole world is moving, except for North Korea and Cuba. Give property to the people, remove the influence of the state on the economy” (Ibid.).*

Chubais further stated that “the basis [of unification] is the convergence of economies” (Ibid.). In November 2003, the Russian Ambassador to Belarus Alexander Blokhin accused Minsk of large-scale confiscations of goods transported through Belarus to Russia. As Blokhin described, the confiscations are justified by the fact that Russian importers are allegedly registered in Russia illegally, but “this is not the local customs business” (Kommersant, 27 November 2003). Two weeks prior to that, Blokhin accused Belarus of “suppress[ing] transit business by threat of confiscation” (Ibid.).

### **4.3 Russian discourse on energy unification**

In April 2002, Putin announced the decision to extend the internal Russian prices on energy resources to Belarus. He also added that he and Lukashenka agreed to create a joint stock company “that would unite property in the gas pipeline system” in Belarus (Putin, 12 April 2002b). In August 2002, Putin emphasized that Belarus is the only country which enjoys intra-Russian prices on Russian natural gas, which are “loss-making prices, below their cost for Gazprom,” and thus Moscow has to subsidize Gazprom (Putin, 14 August 2002). Already in October 2002, Alexander Ryazanov, the First Deputy Chairman of the Board of Directors of Gazprom, who was usually heading the Russian delegation in talks with Beltransgaz, announced that the company is not going to give Belarus additional volumes of gas, complaining that “*the price they pay is too low*” (Kommersant, 26 October 2002).

As negotiations on privatization of Beltransgaz bogged down, Gazprom informed Minsk of the need to reduce gas consumption by 50% from November 1, 2002 in connection with the completion of scheduled fuel supplies to the republic (Kommersant, 4 November 2002). After the meeting with his Belarusian counterpart, Russian Prime Minister Kasyanov declared that Beltransgaz owed \$80-85 million for Russian gas supplies in 2002, which was the reason for Gazprom to reduce supply to the republic (Kommersant, 12 November 2002). According to him, the Belarusian Prime Minister assured him that the process of establishment of a joint stock company between Beltransgaz and Gazprom would be completed by July 1, 2003 (Ibid.). However, apart from discrepancies between the sides regarding the cost of Beltransgaz’s controlling stock, Gazprom had offered the company to convert its debt into its shares, which was unacceptable for Minsk (Kommersant, 2 April 2003, p. 16).

*“Belarus intends to sell its assets at the market price. A debatable position, since the pipeline is worth nothing without our gas. [...] We must have at least 50% of the Belarusian gas transit system”* (Ryazanov, as cited in Kommersant, 6 May 2003).

Ryazanov described the Belarusian-proposed price (around \$5 billion) as an “astronomical sum,” saying that Gazprom is ready to buy a controlling stock in Beltransgaz for its nominal value (around \$300 million for 50% of shares), adding that even such price will be “quite expensive” (Kommersant, 28 July 2003). In September 2003, Putin announced that he and Lukashenka agreed that *“it is necessary to switch to market relations”* in energy relations, “without stopping the negotiation process on the creation of a joint-stock company on a joint pipeline system” (Putin, 15 September 2003). The sides did not manage to agree on terms of Beltransgaz’s privatization, as Gazprom’s terms (to buy a controlling stock for a Gazprom-determined price) were unacceptable for Minsk. Furthermore, by the end of 2003 the sides did not manage to agree on gas prices for 2004 either, thus on January 1, 2003 Gazprom halted its gas supplies to Belarus (RFE/RL Newslines, 12 January 2004).

*“We do not understand why Russia should be a “milking cow” for our partners, even very good ones. Gazprom has been subsidizing the Belarusian economy and budget for years, supplying gas at a loss and having nothing in return. The Belarusian side openly sabotages the signing of the gas supply contract in 2004 on market conditions [...]. We need to start working on common, market conditions accepted in the civilized world”* (Ryazanov, as cited in RBC, 22 January 2004).

On February 12, 2004, Putin outlined Moscow’s new, more pragmatic, approach to other post-Soviet states, repeating after Ryazanov almost word-for-word (albeit without mentioning Belarus directly), and saying that *“Russia should stop being a milking cow for each and everyone”* (Putin, 12 February 2004). Gazprom completely ceased gas transit through Belarus (RFE/RL Newslines, 18 February 2004). According to Putin, Belarus buys gas from Russian business entities, not from the Russian state, thus such problems should not be interpreted as “interstate” ones (Putin, 5 June 2004). Soon afterwards, the sides agreed on gas prices and gas transit fees, and Gazprom restored gas supply to Belarus (Kommersant, 9 June 2004). According to Putin, negotiations regarding the creation of a joint-stock company were still going on, and the sides agreed to “involve an independent expert in the assessment of Beltransgaz” (Putin, 23 August 2004).

#### 4.4 Russian discourse on monetary unification

*“After Alexander Lukashenka’s visit to Moscow, Minsk agreed for the Russian ruble to become the currency of the new formation. [...] In the CB [Central Bank of Russia] they believe that the [money] emission should be under Moscow’s full control”* (Kommersant, 26 June 2000, p. 11; emphasis added).

Despite the preliminary agreement to introduce a new common currency from 2008, Russian Prime Minister Kasyanov did not rule out the Russian ruble to remain the only means of payment even from 2008 (Kommersant, 15 November 2000). During the meeting on 14 August 2002 in Moscow, Putin proposed Lukashenka to introduce the Russian ruble as a common currency from 1 January 2004, that is, one year earlier than planned, at the same time noting that it “requires a certain amount of exertion, effort on the part of Belarusian colleagues” (Putin, 14 August 2002). The same notion was voiced by the Russian Prime Minister Kasyanov (RFE/RL Newline, 18 September 2002).

In response to Minsk’s idea of a joint central bank, the Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin answered that the monetary base in Russia is 60 times larger than in Belarus, while foreign exchange reserves are 104 times larger. According to him, the National Bank of Belarus does not need its own monetary policy, as inflation and the exchange rate will be determined in Russia (Kommersant, 18 September 2002, p. 2). Kudrin’s statement followed the lines of Putin’s (in)famous ‘cutlets and flies speech’ made in June 2002, when he, among other things, noted that *“the Belarusian economy is 3% of the Russian economy,”* while speaking about possible veto power in the Union State (Belarus Today, 19 June 2002). At the opening of a summit in January 2003, Putin noted that the Joint Action Plan for the introduction of a single currency of the Union State is “somewhat lagging,” warning that if not sped up *“the ‘package’ may slow down or fall apart completely”* (Putin, 20 January 2003a).

At the joint press conference after the summit, Putin admitted that his proposal for Belarus to introduce the Russian ruble one year earlier than planned, turned out to be unrealistic, as “the period was, of course, very short” (Putin, 20 January 2003b). In February 2003, Kudrin announced that the positions on the emission center have been brought closer, saying that “[i]t will be a single center created on the basis of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation” (Kommersant, 8 February 2003, p. 6). He also added that the location of the center does not matter, as long as it is created on the basis of the Russian Central Bank. In

August 2003, Putin sent Lukashenka a letter in which he called him to advance the integration process, in particular, to adopt the Russian ruble as a common currency, noting that the work on the respective agreement is practically completed.

*“Now it is fundamentally important to take further steps to reach a qualitatively new level of integration interaction. The implementation of our agreement on the transition to the ruble of the Russian Federation as the single currency of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus is of key importance in this regard”* (Putin, 28 August 2003).

In September 2003 the possibility of monetary unification was de facto proclaimed dead by the Russian Prime Minister Kasyanov, as he declared that no agreement on adoption of the Russian ruble in Belarus from 2005 will be signed in the near future. He named the Belarusian side’s insistence to adopt a constitutional act *before* a common currency as the main reason (RFE/RL Newslines, 8 September 2003). In October 2003, Kasyanov stated that if no agreement on common currency is signed by the end of the year, then the planned date - 1 January 2005 - could be forgotten. He also responded to his Belarusian counterpart’s request for compensation.

*“What compensation for the introduction of the [common] currency can be, I do not know! The introduction of the Russian ruble is a boon for the Belarusian economy. This should not be paid for”* (Kommersant, 2 October 2003, p. 1).

However, for Putin the issue was not dead (at least yet). While Lukashenka closely tied the issue of the adoption of the Russian ruble with sovereignty and, therefore, demanded guarantees, for Putin such connection did not exist. He even compared Belarus and Russia with Luxembourg and Belgium, respectively, saying that in the pre-euro period the former had been using the latter’s currency, and it did not damage its sovereignty, rather it was a very economically stable and respected country. Putin elaborated that it is planned to introduce a representative of the National Bank of Belarus into the banking council of the Central Bank of Russia. He also stated that the Belarusian side will itself determine the limit of money supply its economy needs, and *agree on* it with the Russian side.

*“With the introduction of the [Russian] ruble on the territory of the Belarusian Republic as a single means of payment, no guarantees are needed, because this has nothing to do with sovereignty. As you know, a common currency functions in the euro area, and this did not diminish the sovereignty of France, Germany and other countries, but on the contrary, it*

*became stronger, more solid because the economies of these countries benefited from the introduction of a common currency” (Putin, 15 September 2003).*

In June 2004, Putin declared that it is “unlikely” for the sides to introduce the Russian ruble in Belarus from January 1, 2005, despite the issues connected to monetary unification being “fully worked out” considering the economic interests of Minsk and Moscow (Putin, 5 June 2004). In August 2004, Putin declared that Belarus had to make the decision on introduction of the Russian ruble “independently,” adding that Moscow was not going to “insist and pressure” Minsk (Putin, 23 August 2004). He also proposed a new deadline - January 1, 2006 (Ibid.).

#### **4.5 The Russian discursive structure**

To summarize the empirical findings, we can see that the Russian discourse on the Union State has signified and developed the same master signifier as the Belarusian one - the Union State - and the same four nodal points: political unification, economic unification, energy unification, and monetary unification. However, their articulations, the meaning they have been filled with, and signifiers connected to them made the final product of discursive practices differing strikingly from the Belarusian variant, retaining only the linguistic similarities.

In particular, Moscow made clear that it did not seek political unification on the principles of equality by underlining the federal nature of the future Union, proposing a German-like model, proposing to hold Union elections on dates coinciding with the dates of the Russian elections, and directly offering Minsk the option of incorporation into Russia (either as a whole or in parts). The vague Soviet-like models of unification were rejected by the Kremlin. The EU-like model was offered by Moscow as some kind of an alternative, and Putin’s frequent appeals for the Union parliament to be based on the model of the European Parliament are notable in this case. In his understanding, such a Union parliament (most probably Russian-dominated one) makes legally binding decisions, while the national parliaments, having no veto powers, just approve them. Putin also clearly articulated that the joint Constitution (Constitutional Act) has to be based on the Russian Constitution, explaining this by the federal structure of the future Union State. Dissatisfaction with the existing 1999 Treaty (at least with some parts of it), which had been inherited by Putin from

Yeltsin, was also a prominent sign in the Russian discourse of the early 2000s. Thus, Putin wanted to replace ‘unclear’ structures envisaged by its provisions with the ones having more clearly defined competences. In sum, the Russian discourse on political unification within the Union State was formed around the following signifiers: (1) Russian dominance, (2) EU-like model of unification, (3) joint Constitution based on the Russian Constitution, and (4) revision of the 1999 Treaty.

While constantly emphasizing the utmost importance of economic unification, this part of the discourse has not been filled with much meaning by Putin himself. He only underlined (although frequently) the importance of uniform economic legislations, particularly highlighting tax and customs laws. In his ‘cutlets and flies speech’ Putin made clear that the Union State will not be built against Russian economic interests. While the Russian president outlined the quantitative differences between the Russian and Belarusian economies (“3% of the Russian economy”), Chubais and Ryzhkov outlined the qualitative ones, pointing out that the Belarusian system has to change (to liberalize), thus virtually rejecting the Lukashenka-proposed unification following the principle of ‘one country - two systems.’ In sum, signifiers of economic unification in the Russian discourse are: (1) ‘one country - one system’ principle, and (2) uniform economic law. Such scarce articulation of economic unification by Russia is not surprising, as Moscow’s discursive attention was drawn to the possible adoption of the Russian ruble in Belarus.

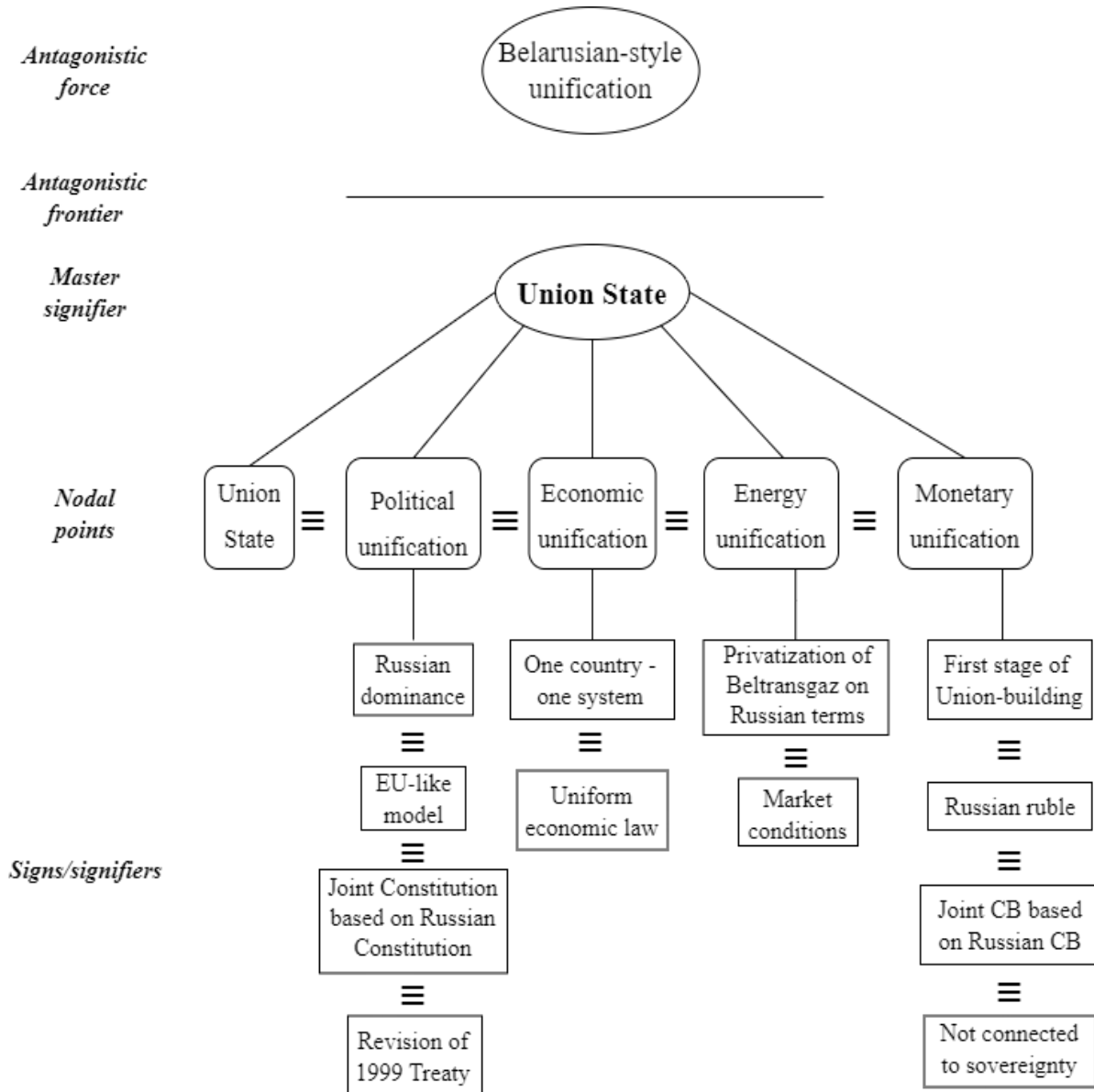
The nodal point of energy unification was signified by: (1) privatization of Beltransgaz on Russian terms, and (2) switch to market conditions. Regarding the first sign, Gazprom wanted to acquire Beltransgaz on their own terms: to buy it for \$300 million (deeming it worthless without their gas), and to have a controlling stock (or at least 50%). Regarding the second sign, the connection between the linguistic and non-linguistic parts of the discourse is especially notable. At the end of January (when gas supplies to Belarus are halted, but transit through still continues), the main representative of Gazprom in talks with Belarus called for a switch to market conditions in energy relations with Minsk, saying that Russia should not be a “milking cow” anymore. Twenty days later Putin repeats the same notion about a “milking cow” word-for-word. Six days later Gazprom halts transit of gas through Belarus starting the first ‘gas war,’ which albeit lasted only for almost 19 hours (Kommersant, 20 February 2004), was an unprecedented move at that time.

As in the other areas of unification, in monetary unification the Russian side has been less vocal than their Belarusian counterparts at articulating their vision, however certain patterns still can be noticed to outline the Russian discourse around them. First of all, what catches the eye are Moscow's attempts to maximally speed up Minsk's adoption of the Russian ruble, as well as its rejection of a connection between monetary unification and sovereignty. Thus, in sharp contrast to the Belarusian position, Russia understood the monetary side of unification as one of the very first steps of overall unification, with no guarantees required as transition to the Russian ruble "is a boon for the Belarusian economy." Secondly, we can see that Moscow always emphasized the adoption of the *Russian ruble* by Minsk, rarely mentioning the planned (at least on paper) transition to a completely new union currency from January 1, 2008. Thirdly, the Russian side has always been firmly rejecting any more or less *equal* possibilities of a joint central bank or supra-banking bodies, constantly reminding Belarus of the *unequal* size of their economies. Overall, it is noticeable that signifiers of the Russian discourse on monetary unification, as well as on energy unification, fall under Moscow's general 'parasitism narrative' on Belarus of the early 2000s, as defined by Klinke (2008, 118-120). To sum up, the nodal point of monetary unification was built around the following signs: (1) Russian ruble, (2) joint central bank on the basis of Russian Central Bank, (3) one of the first steps of unification, and (4) not connected to sovereignty.

Unlike Lukashenka, Putin never spoke of any 'enemies of integration,' however, as we can see by comparing the two discursive structures, the Belarusian understanding of unification (and its areas) was perceived as the main threat (the 'Other') to the Russian understanding of its identity within the future Union State. Thus Lukashenka, as the sole author and proprietor of the Belarusian discourse, and the creator of the current Belarusian system (e.g. of Soviet-era paternalistic economy), was almost unspokenly chosen by Moscow as the threat to its own understanding of unification. The main principles of the sides' selection and articulation of antagonistic forces were summarized by Chubais at the end of his debates with Lukashenka.

*"[T]he main thing that was heard, at least from the people who sit behind me [the Russian side of the debates], was distrust. Distrust of you [sic] personally. It is a fact. Just like you, Alexander Grigoryevich [Lukashenka], when you say that "the Russians do not understand what is going on here [in Belarus], the Russians do not know the truth, you are not really saying that. You are saying that what we understand about Belarus - you do not like it, you do*

not agree with it, you have a different understanding” (Svoboda Slova, 31 October 2003, 1:01:56-1:02:22).



**Figure 3.** Structure of the Russian discourse on the Union State

## Conclusion

The main goal of this thesis was to create an understanding of the Russian and Belarusian discourses on the Union State. By applying Ernesto Laclau's poststructuralist ontology and discourse theory, the dissertation managed to outline Minsk and Moscow's official discourses and reveal discrepancies existing between them. The time frame chosen by the dissertation covers the most discursively active period of the Union State initiative, between its ratification (already by Putin in the beginning of 2000), until 2005, when the sides (especially Russia) started to lose interest, and shift their attention to other integration projects, as virtually nothing has been achieved in first five years of the existence of the Union State.

In particular, both sides had linguistically identical master signifier and nodal points, however, the way they had been articulated, and the meanings they had been filled with, created two opposite, often mutually exclusive, non-intersecting (thus parallel) 'worlds.' For example, in the Belarusian 'world,' Minsk imagined itself in the (future) Union State built on the principles of equality, preservation of sovereignty, and adherence to the original 1999 Treaty. Thus, the 'world' of another member state of the Union, built on the principles of Russian domination and revision of the 1999 Treaty, was perceived, and actively articulated by Minsk, as the radical 'Other' threatening the vision of the 'Self' in the future union.

As the sides provided different articulations, and different understandings of the four areas of unification, those areas were simultaneously nodal points (in their respective discourses), and floating signifiers, as their meanings were debated, and highly contested between Minsk and Moscow. Discourses of both sides enjoyed a hegemonic status in their respective countries, however neither of them managed to achieve hegemony, and become universally accepted 'on the other side of the border,' thus in the beginning of the 2000s Belarus and Russia were bogged down in discursive struggles over the meanings of the Union State.

It should be noted that there were intersections between the discourses on some issues (for example, Minsk was not actively opposing unified economic laws with Moscow), however in general all four areas were articulated by the sides in such a way that made their positions irreconcilable (at least for some period). Not only the sides attempting unification were consistently presenting each other's visions as the main threat to unification, they were depicting the other side's political and economic elites as the main antagonistic force, endangering 'Our' vision of the Union State, and our place and identity within it. For

example, it was the Russian leadership, Putin's milieu, oligarchs, and even Putin himself in the case of the Belarusian discourse, or personally Lukashenko, as it was the case in the Russian discourse.

The thesis shows that while attempting the most ambitious integration project in the post-Soviet space, Minsk and Moscow had completely different understandings of the Union State, and their place within it. While 'the Union State,' on its own, lacks any particular meaning, the sides rushed to carry out this filling option. Both sides utilized this term as a master signifier - being completely void of any particular meaning in itself, it represented the whole chain of their respective demands. As a result, through discursive practices the sides established two non-intersecting, and mutually exclusive versions of the Union State, fighting discursive battles over the meanings of the Union State, and its components, trying to fix them within their discursive structures. As neither side managed to hegemonize the social sphere, and make its meaning universally accepted and valid, the relevance of the issue died off in course of time.

The study opens up many possibilities for further research. For example, 'the old' Russian and Belarusian discourses on unification of the early 2000s can be compared to 'the new' ones, which emerged after the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev brought the issue of the Union State back to life at the end of 2018. A comparison of the Belarusian discourses pre- and post-summer 2020 might also be an interesting sphere of research, as the 2020 Belarusian protests significantly changed the dynamics of Russia-Belarus relations, including over the Union State. The Russian and Belarusian discourses on unification also provided an overall outlook on general narratives existing in Minsk and Moscow of the early 2000s, some of which have not changed to this day.

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