Soft Belarusization: A New Shift in Lukashenka’s Domestic Policy?

Russian pro-government media outlet Lifenews has recently criticised Lukashenka's decision to not participate in the 9 May Victory Day Parade in Moscow. Many in Russia think that Minsk's integration rhetoric has been replaced with a form of soft Belarusianisation. Following the events in Crimea, Lukashenka has begun to demonstrate more support and concern for the Belarusian language and national history.

Still, he is trying to maintain some balance and good relations with Russia for the sake of its economic support. The last time the political scale shifted in this direction, increased rhetoric about independence and more engagement with Europe followed.

In addition to the state's renewed interest in Belarusisation and cultural initiatives, support for these changes in society is also on the rise. The 'soft' Belarusisation policy and the activity of the organisations such as Art Siadziba are in growing demand in Belarus.

Soft Belarusization as a Response to Russian Aggression

The term 'soft Belarusisation' was employed by Lukashenka publicly for the first time during his open dialogue with the media in January 2015. Judging by his words, it appears that Lukashenka regards Belarusisation as means of countering Russian influence. “Some in Russia are bothered by some soft Belarusisation ... while in Russia they are accustomed to using terms like 'the Russian World', 'soft power'. We have promoted 'soft Belarusisation' [at home],” said Lukashenka.
However, the reality after Crimea's annexation has discounted popular opinion (especially among opponents of the regime) that Lukashenka is an ideological supporter of Russia and is willing to sacrifice Belarusian independence, if need be.

On the contrary, after following the events in Crimea, Lukashenka has solidified his role as a mediator and peacekeeper on the Ukrainian issue and has started moving slowly towards promoting a Belarusian national revival. Lukashenka explained his new position by stating, “I support the Belarusian language, because it distinguishes us from the Russians. This is a feature of our nation”.

**Language, History and Political Balance**

The Belarusian head of state explained his new policy in a simple and straightforward manner in April 2014 when he declared, "we are not Russians, we are Belarusians", a mere month after the occupation of Crimea began. In the past, he has freely spouted off slogans like "Belarus and Russia are one nation" and other similar phrases indicating their oneness.

As of late, he has turned towards employing the Belarusian language in his speeches. The Ministry of Education's own policies also appear to be following Lukashenka's lead. For example, according to Minister of Education Mikhail Zhuravkov, “we will soon come to understand that we need to have more than half of all academic subjects in the Belarusian language”.

Official attitudes towards history have also changed. Previously, the authorities mainly focused their energies on the Great Patriotic War (World War II), but now their opinions have shifted towards early periods of time in Belarus's history. The installation of a monument in honour of Algerd, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, is just one such example, erected in Vitebsk, near the border with Russia, on 27 June 2014.
The Grand Duke Algerd doubled the domain he reigned over through wars with Moscow at a time when Belarusian lands were an essential region in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It is plain for anyone to see how this historical figure does not suit Lukashenka's prior rhetoric about the "historical friendship and unity" of Belarus and Russia.

The Vitebsk Cossacks and the Communists have made an appeal to Minsk, asking Lukashenka not to erect the Algerd monument. Historical memory, as it turns out, is much more important to the authorities than local pro-Russian social movements' support – and the monument was solemnly unveiled as officials from Vitebsk looked on.

Lukashenka justified this move, saying, “At one point in Vitebsk ... some people started saying that because of the [process] 'soft Belarusisation', Belarus will lose out on its Russian interests, and so I asked the question: where are our interests? Everything that is on Belarusian territory is our vital interest”.

Altogether this form of Belarusisation, i.e. the gradual, largely voluntary extension of the use of the Belarusian language, support for the development and dissemination of Belarusian culture, historical and cultural heritage via the creation of cultural policy, is slowly beginning to take hold.

**Not Only State: Public Belarusization**

Of course, this policy of Belarusisation is not simply the domain of the Belarusian authorities. In society, demand is growing for the promotion of the Belarusian language and the nation's history and culture. The events in Ukraine have increased these types of initiatives' popularity and stimulated manifestations of patriotism and national identity.

Consider the recent Festival of Belarusian Culture “Sniezhan”
(31 January 2015) or a Belarusian language pub-quiz game “Varta” about Belarusian history (held three times from February-April 2015) that recently sprung up. There is also the independent cultural initiative Art Siadziba (Art Headquarters) that organises a variety of popular events to promote Belarusian culture and the arts and manufactures clothes with traditional Belarusian ornamentation.

Last, but not least, is the “Mother Language Festival”, organised by Art Siadziba 22 February 2015 (International Mother Language Day by UNESCO). Thousands of Belarusians attended free open courses in the Belarusian language called Mova Ci Kava & Mova Nanova in Minsk and many regional towns thanks to growing popular demand.

**What Will Belarusisation Lead To?**

Lukashenka, however, has to seek a balance between both sides. On the one hand, he has to use his traditional fraternal rhetoric and alliances with Russia to get it to provide Belarus with loans and discounted energy. On the other hand, Lukashenka needs to guide Belarus away from Russia, be it through a policy of 'soft Belarusisation' or improving ties with the West in order to minimise potential threats to Belarusian sovereignty and to his own power.

All of these initiatives aimed at promoting Belarusisation – sponsored by the state and civil society – are extremely popular and relevant. To some extent, it reflects a new national-oriented period in Lukashenka’s policy. New possibilities are slowly emerging for Belarusian political and civil actors. Leading up to the presidential election in November this year, one can only view from afar how they use this window of opportunity.

*Vadim Mojeiko*