

Power and identity in Russian-language political discourse: The case of Belarus

This project attempts to understand how key political concepts, such as “power,” “sovereignty,” “state,” and related cultural terms, such as “people” and “country,” that are used in Russian-language political discourse and everyday interactions about politics using the Russian language, impact the ways people in post-Soviet countries, such as Belarus, make sense of politics.

Eventually, this research project attempts to show how Russian-language political discourse found in everyday interactions and public communication about politics contributes to the construction of meaning about politics and identity in modern-day Belarus.

The proposed research project investigates how the existing political language and the discourse that is formed based on this language become one of the ways of maintaining and challenging the social, cultural, and political realities in Belarus. This research also investigates how ideas about shared activities, relationships, and identities are communicated through everyday interactions about politics.

To understand how the meaning about politics and associated identities is communicated through such political discourse, the research team will perform an in-depth cultural discourse analysis of both regular Belarusians and public officials as they participate in political events and discuss politics and other related activities that are germane to current political events.

This procedure and analytical perspective allow for interpreting the statements made about politics and political events from a local standpoint. For example, what might it mean when Belarusian officials and regular Belarusians say: “We live in two parallel Belaruses.” “The opposition leaders, who ran abroad, have assigned themselves a task to create the conditions for non-recognizing the referendum results by the Western countries.” “They want to dismantle the country.” Or, “We support peace and stability.”

As a result, this approach allows to show how politics and political process are understood on the local level. This knowledge would allow an understanding of how and why the political process in such post-Soviet countries, like Belarus, works the way it does. This approach suggests that before we start evaluating any political process in any place, one has first to understand what the meaning and the nature of this process is based on local cultural logic.

Mainly, this research project will help understand the logic that stands behind the political term “*power*” that is frequently found in the Belarusian political discourse and the ways this logic helps in communicating and maintaining the existing forms of social and political relationships and identities in the Belarusian context.

To locate the cultural key terms about identity and forms of relating in local political discourse, the data from participant observation, public discussions, and media accounts about political topics will be analyzed.

This project has several research goals: 1) To explain how politics is discursively constructed in Belarusian political discourse and everyday interactions about politics; 2) To explain how the understanding of politics may be shaped by the use of Russian-language political terms that are used to make political arguments both by officials and Belarusian citizens at large; 3) To show how the current understanding of politics based on the political discourse and everyday interactions about politics is related to the local historical and cultural context; 4) To propose more comprehensive ways to approach and understand politics in the Belarusian and post-Soviet societies for both the people who live in the country and for those who live outside Belarus; 5) To contribute to the national and international dialogue related to Belarus and, possibly, to other post-Soviet spaces.

To this end, the project examines the political activities that took place in Belarus between May 2020, when the presidential election campaign started, and February 2022, when the referendum that suggested new constitutional changes was held. The main purpose of this research is to provide a detailed account of the modern-day Belarusian political culture as perceived and reflected in communication by both officials and regular Belarusians.

This study is aimed at generating knowledge about modern-day Belarus and could benefit the areas of Intercultural Communication, Cultural Anthropology, and Slavic and Eastern European Studies which are the focus of the Institute of Slavic Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Moreover, this research attempts to contribute to understanding and resolving the existing cultural, social, and political divides in the region. As a result, this is also a scholarly intervention with potential implications for regional policy and decision-making. This project is expected to provide regional activists, social entrepreneurs, policymakers, and decision-makers with important information and recommendations for cross-cultural dialogue and intercultural collaboration in the area.