

Abstract of the doctoral dissertation entitled “Advancing Authoritarianism” and Social Attitudes of Belarusians in 2020–2024 as a Challenge for Polish Foreign Policy.

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The subject of the doctoral dissertation is an analysis of the attitude of citizens of the Republic of Belarus toward the Polish state and Poles in the context of transformations in the Belarusian political system following the election crisis of August 2020, as well as the response of the authorities of the Republic of Poland to these processes.

The aim of the dissertation is a comprehensive assessment of the conditions, directions, and limitations of Polish policy toward the Republic of Belarus, with particular emphasis on the impact of the evolution of the authoritarian political regime, propaganda and disinformation mechanisms, and the social reception of Polish involvement on the possibility of initiating democratization processes. Specifically, the dissertation seeks to examine whether and to what extent actions undertaken by the Polish state, both at the institutional and non-governmental levels, contribute to shaping a positive image of Poland in Belarusian society and whether they can constitute a real instrument of political influence under conditions of deepening authoritarianism and increasing dependence of Belarus on the Russian Federation.

Achieving the research objective required the adoption of specific theoretical assumptions and the formulation of four working hypotheses. The first concerns the evolution of the Belarusian political system from a sultanistic form to stable authoritarianism after 2020, in which coercive apparatuses, administrative structures, and the media-propaganda system play a key role. Second, it is assumed that Polish engagement in support of the Belarusian opposition and civil society is instrumentalized by Alexander Lukashenko’s regime to portray Poland as a threat to Belarusian state sovereignty. Third, it is posited that the assessment of Poland and Poles among Belarusian citizens is varied and determined both by the level of repression and by individual migration experiences and affiliation with particular social groups. Fourth, it is assumed that an effective Polish policy toward Belarus requires the simultaneous implementation of measures supporting pro-democratic environments and long-term image-building efforts, taking into account the realities of functioning within an authoritarian state.

The conceptualization of the problem adopted in the dissertation is directly reflected in its structure, which combines theoretical and systemic analysis with extensive empirical research. The dissertation consists of six chapters, forming a coherent analytical whole in which the evolution of

the political regime, external factors, and social attitudes are considered in terms of their mutual interactions.

The first chapter provides a detailed analysis of the evolution of the political system of the Republic of Belarus, with particular attention to the period following the 2020 election crisis. Belarus is interpreted as a stably non-democratic state, drawing on contemporary theories of authoritarian, personalist, and sultanistic regimes. The functioning of the coercive apparatus, the role of security structures and special services, administrative control mechanisms, and the significance of propaganda and information policy in legitimizing power and suppressing social resistance are analyzed. Particular attention is paid to institutional changes after 2020, including the creation of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly as a tool for further consolidation of authoritarianism.

The second chapter focuses on an analysis of external factors affecting Belarus, primarily the growing political, economic, and military dependence on the Russian Federation. The consequences of international sanctions imposed after 2020 and expanded following Russia's aggression against Ukraine are discussed, highlighting both their limited effectiveness in destabilizing the regime and their indirect impact on Belarusian society. Separate attention is given to the role of the Belarusian diaspora, the political opposition, and the international information environment, analyzing media control mechanisms as a key element of regime stability.

Chapters three, four, and five are empirical in nature and present the results of original public opinion research conducted among Belarusian citizens over the age of 18, using the CATI technique supplemented by interviews and surveys. The research covered three main groups: individuals remaining in the territory of the Republic of Belarus, refugees, and members of opposition circles. The analysis examined the perception of the political regime, assessment of international sanctions, attitudes toward neighboring countries, and the image of Poland, Poles, and Polish policy toward Belarus. Social attitudes were interpreted as a structural factor significantly limiting the effectiveness of soft power instruments and external support for democratization.

The sixth chapter formulates original recommendations regarding the directions of Polish policy toward the Republic of Belarus. Based on scenario analysis, possible variants of further development in Polish-Belarusian relations are presented, identifying barriers and risks associated with the democratization process, escalation of repression, and further integration of Belarus into the Russian sphere of influence. These recommendations are problem-strategic in nature and take

into account constraints arising from internal Belarusian conditions and the variable geopolitical situation in the region.

The conducted research allows the conclusion that the effectiveness of Polish policy toward Belarus is largely determined by the structure of social attitudes in Belarusian society, shaped under conditions of repression, fear, and systemic disinformation. The dissertation fills a research gap, offering an empirically grounded analysis of the relationships between the evolution of the authoritarian regime, social perceptions of Poland, and the real possibilities of political influence. At the same time, it contributes to further reflection on Polish eastern policy and the limitations of external support for democratization processes under conditions of persistent regional instability.

