

CARNIVALESQUE ELEMENTS IN PROTESTS OF BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION

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Abstract: The article analyses such carnivalesque elements as play, grotesque, irony, caricature and the profane, which became an effective way to fight the Belarusian regime. The author interprets the actions of Belarus opposition according to Bachtin's typology, which classifies signs of people's expression. The way of perceiving contemporary political realities through carnivalesque suggests a new interpretation and understanding of political culture. Moreover, it gives a better understanding of the Belarusian opposition.

Keywords: Carnival, Opposition, Political Rivalries, Authoritarianism.

ЭЛЕМЕНТЫ КАРНАВАЛІЗАЦЫІ Ў ПРАТЭСТАХ БЕЛАРУСКАЙ АПАЗІЦЫІ

Анотацыя: У артыкуле аналізуюцца гэтакія элементы карнавалізацыі як гульня, гратэск, іронія, карыкатура і прафанацыя, якія сталі эфектыўным метадам барацьбы з беларускім рэжымам. Аўтар інтэрпрэтуе дзеянні беларускай апазіцыі паводле тыпалогіі Бахціна, якая класіфікуе праявы чалавечага самавыяўлення. Разуменне сучаснай палітычнай рэчаіснасці праз карнавалізацыю з'яўляецца новай інтэрпрэтацыяй палітычнай культуры. Апроч таго, яно дазваляе лепш зразумець дзейнасць беларускай апазіцыі.

Ключавыя словы: карнавал, апазіцыя, палітычная барацьба, аўтарытарызм.

By looking at some of the action taken recently by Belarusian opposition one might advance a thesis that the forms of political protest have become carnivalized. Carnival is a special and completely different time and space from the reality which can be observed on a daily basis. It also acts as a denial of official, ordinary and commonly recognized social norms and rules. Its form is in contradiction with the style and image of the authorities, hence the often caricature of Belarusian regime: half-kolkhoz member, half ice-hockey player portrayed in Banksy's mural style; the Statue of Liberty with the face of Lukashenka holding a nightstick and a shield; or the cartoon images of the Belarusian President in which he resembles Shrek, Dracula or some fantastic superheroes with superpowers. Thus, the carnival is a certain reversal of official norms and customs.

The comedy, which accompanies the political protests, may give the viewer a feeling of oversimplification at first, yet political competition and carnivalesque have much in common. Satire and joke in the carnival style is an ideal tool not only for the political satire, but it is also a way to downplay the advantage which Lukashenka and his propaganda have.

Carnivalization of communication is mainly about parodying official ceremonies and events. It is this specific mixture of the sacred and the profane that conveys the essence of carnivalesque. The aim is to parody the regime, for instance by a grotesque Gillette commercial in which images of Saddam Hussein and Lukashenka are compared. The serious, the official and the authority accepted become ridiculed and negated by the language of the opposition. What is important during this special period of time is lack of orders, bans, obstacles or limits; in a word - freedom. All sorts of behavior fall outside the official rules.

There has been a *trend* among the opposition youth to be actively involved in anti-Lukashenka campaigns. One of those campaigns featured a dozen of young people who walked through one of the main roads of Minsk to sweep it. They wore orange hi-viz vests with "It's cleaning time!" sign on their backs and had brooms in their hands.

Belarusian oppositionists use methods which Polish people used during the famous "Major" Frydrych's *Orange Alternative* of the 1980s, which spoofed the communist regime in Poland.

During an election campaign similar stress is placed on the new beginning (especially by the former oppositionists). The decay and embarrassment, which is supposed to be the outcome of the previous rule, is usually contrasted with a hope for a new, flawless start. What is more – carnival sets one free from mundane matters and worries, lets one forget everything and enjoy the moment. The spectators see a vision of a better future, a hope which triggers joy. The opposition attracts young people with happenings,

e.g. free distribution of condoms with a caricature of Lukashenka, and with an unsophisticated slogan saying “Put it on”. It is clearly visible that whatever the type of communication is (be it verbal or non-verbal), the style is heavily unofficial and broad. What matters is the need to release the stress of everyday life.

By degrading the old order, carnival makes its own, new value system. However, one should note that it is based on being the opposite of its predecessor. Humor and fun are natural ways of coping with serious topics.

Another carnivalesque campaign was scattering a number of teddy bears over Belarus by Swedish pilots. The teddy bears had an appeal for freedom of speech on them. The European press tried to outdo one another in inventing funny headlines (e.g. *parabear drop*). This campaign ridiculed Lukashenka’s military regime in the same way as young German Cessna pilot did in 1987 when he landed near Red Square and the Kremlin.

Comedy is an immanent part of carnivalesque. Grotesque, caricature, comedy and mockery, so much present in carnivalesque, are in the lead in political struggles, especially in their unofficial way of communicating with citizens. Therefore, the excesses of look and behavior are nothing special in the carnivalesque style.

The carnivalesque protest partially becomes a safety valve. The public order is overturned and its aim is to restore (even for a short period of time) the ideological social equality. Everybody becomes equal, all limits vanish, each citizen is important according to rules of democracy.

The constant narrowing of the gap between authorities and citizens results in the use of simple and informal phrases and symbolic gestures. The Internet introduced emoticons depicting Lukashenka and those became part of the general rule which is deriding the opponent.

A characteristic feature of expressing one’s views is a spectacular form of demonstration which aims at parodying the political opponents. It is easy to notice that whenever a national holiday, official visit or meeting takes place, demonstrations, protests or strikes are present too, and even though they are considered to be serious, and sometimes even violent events, they are not devoid of elements of comedy, parody and criticism.

Actions which FEMEN holds are a quite popular form of carnivalesque protest. FEMEN organization gathers female activists who fight against women discrimination in Ukraine. The organization is known for its provocative protests (also against Belarusian regime).

Being striking and spectacular is quite important and that is why images count more than words. Both spheres of human activity include the profane blended with corporality. The body plays an important role in carnivalesque culture; the body is the opposite of the spiritual sphere and it appeals to the

media and audience the most. What is more, thanks to the media, privacy and intimacy have gone public.

In 2011 FEMEN activists organized a demonstration in Minsk, near Lukashenka's office. They were holding posters saying "Free political prisoners" and "Long live Belarus". One of the protesters had a portrait of Lukashenka painted on her naked back. It was supposed to be retaliation for "KGBatka" operation, which had been carried out on the anniversary of dispersing an opposition demonstration after the presidential election.

In February, 2012, FEMEN activists protested in front of the headquarters of the International Ice Hockey Federation in Zurich against Belarus hosting of the Hockey World Cup in 2014. The women were holding hockey sticks wrapped in barbed wire and banners saying "Slaves can't play hockey", "Don't encourage dictatorship", "Lukashenka, let's play in Hague". FEMEN organization said: "Lukashenka and his government are criminals. The Hockey World Cup in Minsk would resemble Berlin Olympics in 1936".

In July, 2012, the feminists protested against Lukashenka who was supposed to attend the final UEFA European Championship match between Spain and Italy. Half-naked girls in black balaclavas swung nightsticks during a happening. They had "KGB" (Belarusian security service) and red stars with a football inside painted on their bodies. One of the protesters mimicked Lukashenka and appeared holding a young boy's hand; the boy was supposed to mimic Lukashenka's son, Kola.

The carnivalesque is full of humoristic and taunting gestures and words. The lack of hierarchy of values, images and content taken from other sources, and provocative public behavior are main elements of the carnivalesque language.

Offensive gestures and expressions used in the context of carnivalesque acquire new significance and meaning and can be the spur for many new ideas and messages.

However, the real problem is the fact that the reality is quite complicated and its irreverent interpretation might get out of control. Statements, declarations or slogans can be quite misleading.