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“Ideology of Belarusian State” Propaganda Mechanisms

It is difficult to grasp the concept of the Belarusian government’s ideology. The authors of ideology guidebooks often confuse it with the national idea or outlook (Šymava), or interpret it as a universal civilization concept (Mielnik). Some authors went as far as to equate the ideology with the constitution. Hančarenka, a young Belarusian author, says, “The political ideology of the Republic of Belarus is the system of foundations of the constitutional system.”¹ Anatol Rubinau, deputy chief of the Presidential Administration, suggests a more expanded definition of the government’s ideology. “This is a totality of phenomena generated by the vital interests of the people and assimilated, accumulated, creatively processed and advanced by the state leadership. Such cooperation of the people and the state produces a common state ideology, a common understanding of our goals and tasks and ways to achieve them....”² His definition is very similar to the definition of the Soviet ideology, the only difference being that the vital interests of the people were assimilated and ad-

vanced by the Communist Party that led the Soviet people into the bright future. In Belarus, people are not led by the Communist Party, but they are led by the state with the wise and farsighted president at its head who acts in line with expectations of the people.

“An ideology” may be inaccurate word used for describing the product created by the government’s propaganda machine. The product is a compilation of reflections on political realities and the functioning of the regime intended to substantiate the existence of the political system. In other words, this is an official opinion that the government imposes on the nation.

The purpose of the government’s ideology is to provide psychological security for the regime and shape the public’s mentality and political outlook accordingly. The government’s political doctrine is very simple. It is based on traditional views that had been implanted in a majority of Belarusians during the Soviet era. First of all, the new ideology is based on manipulations of the concepts of “good and evil,” the identification of “friends and foes” or “good guys and bad guys,” and also on the image of “a good and kind tsar.” The above-mentioned elements, as well as the empha-

sis of “the political system’s uniqueness” and its “messianic” role suggest that the Belarusian government’s ideology does not differ from totalitarian ideologies or religious doctrines that are used to bend public mentality in the will of the ruler and to control society.

Says Anatol Rubinau: “In daily life, people who have little to do with science find most theoretical explorations unclear and uninteresting. People need simple and clear ideas that stem from practical life, as the President likes to say — from the down-to-earth level.”³ Indeed, do down-to-earth people need to focus their attention on the principles of democracy and freedom? Do they need to have an opportunity to choose the government? Do they really care to go into detail of the constitution and law?

Day-to-day life tells them to mind their own business and stop paying attention to what is going on in the country because *Bačka* guarantees justice and takes care of state matters.

Limited awareness and people’s attachment to the traditional social and political way of life make it easy for the government to sell its ideology. Alaksandr Łukašenka, the leader of Belarus, acknowledged, “Our people are not used to

¹ Гончаренко Р.М. Политическая и правовая идеология государства. — Мн.: УП «Технопринт». 2005. С. — 41.

² Рубинов А. «Еще раз об идеологии», — «Беларусь Сегодня». 28 июля 2006.

³ *ibid*

live on their own. They got used to someone always giving them something. They got used to live under socialism. They believe that many functions that must be performed by people and families are in fact the functions of the state.”⁴

Despite the questionable ideals, the political doctrine creates new political and social myths, changes views on the national history, helps rally voters around the president and constructs a cult of personality.

Łukašenka is the pivot of the ideology, which makes no distinction between the president and the state. The president, government and state are merged into one whole. The ideology makes no sense without the president. The Belarusian government’s ideology is more personified than the ideology of the communist regime. Although it also constructed cults of personality, the government did not alter that ideology after the leader’s death. The Belarusian government’s ideology will cease to exist after Łukašenka is gone.

The ideology’s main purpose is to promote and refine the image of Łukašenka. Although ideology guidebooks do not directly praise Łukašenka, they abound in references to the Belarusian leader. Every conclusion or idea is substantiated with Łukašenka’s statements introduced by parentheses like “as the president noted,” “according to the president,” “under the president’s decision” or “as the president put it.” The authors believe that Łukašenka’s quotes guarantee their remarks and conclusions “credibility and weight.”

All propaganda means are employed to emphasize an alleged great role of the president in the country’s history and stress that modern Belarus would not exist without him. The ideology is based on the absurd premise that the state, the people and society would not be able to function properly without the “strong arm” or



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A veteran and a pioneer.

the guiding light of the president. “Let us admit frankly that only efforts by the President prompt us to rise from the gutter and backwardness and develop our daily life, cities, villages, houses, yards and roads in a civilized way,”⁵ says Rubinau.

Some authors do not only play up the role of the president, but attribute to him supernatural, godly features. Many Belarusians naively perceive Łukašenka as “a good daddy” (*Bačka*) and the defender of ordinary people from injustice. But Łukašenka likes the role of a messiah. Public trust in Łukašenka’s exceptional leadership ability is largely to blame for the erosion of public institutions of all levels. Initiatives and independent decisions have been replaced with permissions and orders from higher authorities.

In addition to lauding the president, the new political doctrine creates an image of Belarus and its role in the world. Suffering, misfortunes and tragedies that hit the Belarusians throughout their history are exploited to create a myth of national victimhood and emphasize the messianic role of the Belarusian people in saving the Eastern Slavic civilization. According to official history and ideolo-

gy textbooks, Belarus has been a buffer for a long period in its history, protecting the Eastern Russian Slavic civilization from aggression and attacks from the West. To date, Belarus remains Russia’s only ally that has not resigned itself to the West’s control and retains its unique political system. Belarus is portrayed as the only nation that has not betrayed the ideals of Slavic unity and seeks to restore a powerful Slavic state.

The idea of uniting brotherly nations was for a long time the key motive in politics and later in the government’s ideology. But later ideals of inter-Slavism gave way to ideals of state nationalism because of growing tensions with Russia. Łukašenka and other officials blamed Russia for allegedly compromising its civilization mission. “Multiple processes suggest that Russia today, regrettably, is no longer a spiritual and cultural pillar of the Eastern Eurasian civilization” (Łukašenka 2003)⁶. “Russia today is not the same

⁴ Лукашенко А.Г. О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по ее совершенствованию // Материалы, постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов. Минск. 2003 - с. 29.

⁵ Рубинов А. «Еще раз об идеологии», - «Беларусь Сегодня». 28 июля 2006.

⁶ Лукашенко А.Г. О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по ее совершенствованию // Материалы, постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов. Минск. 2003 - с. 19.

kind of country with which we used to live together. Russia today is a very contradictory state. It has self-centered financial interests and takes interest in Belarus from pragmatic positions” (Rubinau 2006)⁷.

Thus, a civilization union of Belarus and Russia is falling apart (a sign of that was a dispute at the end of 2006 over prices of gas and oil supplied to Belarus). As Russia loses its civilization positions, Belarus consolidates its stance, according to ideology theorists. Belarus ostensibly preserved all the good left from Slavic unity and the Soviet Union and is becoming the spiritual center of the Slavic civilization. It should be added that the government’s new ideology exaggerates the role of the Soviet Union and almost ignores national history and the concept of “a national state.” This ideology tends to be universal and international, while national elements are almost completely ignored, and nationalism is equated with fascism. According to ideology guidebooks, Belarus would not have emerged and developed as an independent state if it had not been part of the Soviet Union. As if the nation has no history beyond the Soviet period. For instance, Mielnik says, “From our point of view, civilization identity of Belarusian society established in the process of the state development of the Belarusian people as part of the USSR. That state emerged on the basis of the Slavic-Russian civilization and the Belarusian masses have never felt themselves strangers in it. The state in general went down the same road as the whole Soviet nation in its formation process.”⁸

The role of the Soviet Union has been hyperbolized and promoted in many spheres from state symbols to movies. With this purpose in mind, the authorities rebuilt the “Stalin Line” of World War II fortifications and celebrate

⁷ Рубинов А. «Тупики крестового похода за демократию» // «Беларусь сегодня» 27 октября 2006 г.

⁸ Мельник В.А. Цивилизационные основания идеологии Белорусского государства. – Мн.: ООО «БИП-С Плюс». – 2005. – С. 24.



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“Za Bielaruś!” – “For Belarus!” was the main slogan of Łukaśenka’s campaign.

the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution as a state holiday on November 7. The government’s political beliefs, social and economic policies, and its political relations with society prove that it sought to establish a pseudo-Soviet state within Belarus’ boundaries.

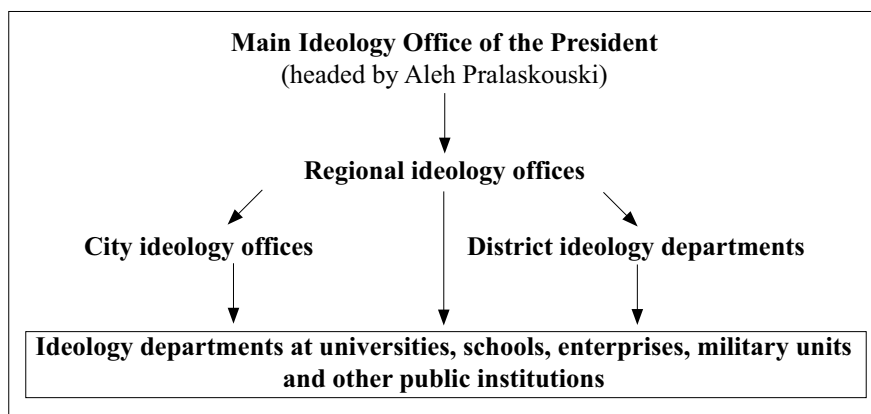
The authorities persistently created an image of enemy, politicizing the

idea of Belarusian statehood. The government found it easy to sell the enemy image to the masses because the Soviet authorities also permanently confronted “enemies of the Soviet country.” State ideology theorists admit that the notion “enemy” is very useful. “The technique of creating ‘an enemy image’ performs a positive function if it is used for ral-

lying the masses round the idea of defending the Fatherland from foreign aggression, something that is sacred to any nation.”⁹

The enemy image projection technique has become one of the main elements of internal and foreign policies. The notion “enemy” proved helpful in manipulating the public opinion and behavior of the people. Those whose views conflict with the official ideology can be turned into an enemy. This helps the authorities to justify the persecution of opponents. Naturally, opponents of the Łukašenka regime are Internal Enemy number one.

One of the main goals of the government’s ideology is to marginalize the opposition and alternative ideas. Nationalism, liberalism, conservatism, social democracy and other ideas are represented in an extremely negative light as destructive for the Belarusian people. Łukašenka, for instance, defines “liberalism” as “an ideology of social inequality of people, profiteering and individualism.”¹⁰ The role of the opposition is boiled down by government propaganda to advancing foreign ideals and values alien to the Belarusian people. “The main purpose of the opposition is to sell the country and destroy the nation,” say government ideology architects. Opposition politicians are usually portrayed as puppets of Western countries seen as the enemies of Belarus. The Western civilization is depicted as a culture spiritually hostile to the Eastern Slavism that seeks to eliminate the Slavs. The West is often associated with the Nazis and sufferings that they caused to the Belarusian people. For instance, NATO is portrayed as a radical hostile alliance, a tool used by the United States to attain its imperi-



al ambitions. Some ideology propagandists draw parallels with Hitler saying the alliance seeks to control the world. To evoke hostile feelings towards the United States and other Western countries and discredit democratic and liberal values, propagandists invented the notion of “liberal terror,” a phenomenon that spreads but meets with resistance from Belarus, and a few other countries like Cuba, Venezuela and China.

Sometimes Russia is seen as “an enemy” too, especially after it moved to phase out subsidies that propped up Belarus’ economy. Not surprisingly, Belarus found itself in a political isolation surrounded by “enemies.”

Freedom restrictions are intended to guarantee Łukašenka political immunity. But official ideologues say that society is immature and unprepared to embrace democratic values. The lack of public instruments to influence government policies enables the authorities to block alternative ideas and direct the mental process. For this purpose, the government has established a propaganda and ideology system that penetrates society from the top to grass-roots. The system is often referred to as “ideological vertical.”

The ideology offices and departments are headed by so-called “ideology workers” (who may be renamed commissars in the near future). Authorities organize regular lectures, seminars and workshops in Minsk and on the ground to train ideology workers and keep them

updated on changes in the official position. The Management Academy of the President, the major training center for ideology workers, is led by Kniazieu, author of ideology textbooks. Ideology workers’ responsibilities include brainwashing personnel at regular political briefings; gathering and analyzing information on political views and sentiments of workers and employees; and reporting their conclusions to agencies concerned. In the run up to elections, ideology workers instruct people when they should vote (usually during the five-day early voting period criticized by domestic and international observers as vulnerable to abuse) and who they should support.

Indoctrination has been particularly intensive at schools, colleges and universities. Education, especially humanities, has been gradually transformed into a mechanism for brainwashing students and discouraging them from taking a critical and independent approach to the world around them. The State Ideology course was introduced into school curriculum at the beginning of the 2003 academic year. The ideology syllabus developed by the Belarusian State University says, “The aim of the [ideology] course is to help students form ideals, values, ideas, convictions and intentions that are vital to Belarusian society and are supported by power of the state and by all of its institutions.”¹¹ The political sci-

⁹ Гончаренко Р.М. Политическая и правовая идеология государства. – Мн.: УП «Технопринт», 2005. – С. 126.

¹⁰ Лукашенко А.Г. О состоянии идеологической работы и мерах по ее совершенствованию // Материалы, постоянно действующего семинара руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов. Минск. 2003. – с. 28.

¹¹ Основы идеологии белорусского государства // Учебное пособие. – Мн., 2003.

ence, sociology, philosophy and history departments conduct training in ideology and write and publish textbooks on the subject. The ideology has become the major humanity subject in the country. Students are required to pass ideology tests and exams. In addition to the ideology, the education ministry introduced a course on “The Great Patriotic War” aimed to emphasize the role of the Soviet people and Belarus in the victory over the Nazi in World War II and implant “patriotic” views on the 20th century history of Belarus.

Additional ideology sessions, also called political briefings, are conducted at schools on a regular basis. Political briefings – the practice that originated in the Soviet Union – are aimed to “propagandize socioeconomic achievements and explain the most topical socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues.”¹²

In addition to academic functions, ideology departments are employed to suppress dissent. Most universities have adopted plans of “proactive measures to prevent students from participating in activities of unregistered youth groups.” Under these plans, ideology department employees and instructors must study sociopolitical views of students, identify students leaning toward unregistered youth groups and prevent students from criticizing the government during classes. KGB agents often hold what they call “preventive discussions” with students face to face.

Apart from “the ideology vertical” involved in spreading the government’s ideology are government-sponsored associations and pro-government political parties such as the Communist Party of Belarus, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Agrarian Party. The Belarusian National Youth Union (BRSM), the largest government-supported youth organization, plays the leading role in promoting the government’s ideology. The or-

ganization, which, in fact, functions as part of the ideology vertical, has cells in all education establishments, military units and law enforcement agencies. It has nearly 500,000 members. It performs basically the same functions as the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (*Komsomol*) performed in the Soviet Union. BRSM membership is almost obligatory for students, young state sector employees and workers and is crucial for one’s career. The BRSM is a monopoly through which the government implements its youth policies. The organization is at the forefront of ideological war against dissent.

The BRSM has wings functioning at schools — the Pioneer Organization and *Naščadki* — which work with small children and students up to the age of 16. To complete the formation of a Soviet-style model of political control of society, the government needs to establish a pro-government party patterned after the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The formation of the socio-ideological system has been completed. It fully satisfies the government’s need for controlling society and suppressing dissent through the dissemination of its ideology to all groups of the population.

The state-controlled media play the key role in promoting the government’s ideology to the masses. Poor access to independent or alternative sources of information makes Belarusians especially vulnerable to pro-government propaganda. All Belarusian television channels — *ANT*, *LAD*, *NTV*, *Belarus* and *STV* are controlled by the government. Programs like “Around the Globe,” “Panorama” and “Human Rights” persistently and systematically shape people’s outlook and help the authorities point out “the enemies” of Belarus to the masses. Naturally, the TV networks extol the merits of President Lukashenka and belittle and blacken his opponents. The broadcasters conduct massive pro-government propaganda campaigns during elections to rally support for Łukašenka. For this purpose, TV networks launch special political programs like “15,” “The New History of Belarus” and “Special Opinion” designed to show advantages of Belarus over other former Soviet republics allegedly hit by social crises caused by attempts to establish democracy, while Belarus managed to raise from the ashes thank to its leader. The opposition, the West and some-



photo.bymedia.net

Łukašenka uses Dažynki, the fest celebrating the end of harvest, to flirt his rural electoral base.

¹² Вытрымка з плану мерапрыемстваў ідэалагічнага забяспячэння выбараў прэзідэнта рэспублікі Беларусь. – Магілёўскі дзяржаўны хіміка-тэхналагічны тэхнікум, 2006.



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“Za Bielaruś!” – “For Belarus!” again and again.

times Russia are portrayed as enemies. Simplistic comments are used to put ideas across to the viewers.

The government also controls the major print media. *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, *Respublika* and *Zvezda* hold a monopoly on information and strongly influence the public opinion. *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* alone had a circulation of more than 500,000 copies in 2006. State sector employees are often forced to subscribe to the newspaper.

The ideological, informational, political and social control significantly limits opportunities for civic activity in Belarus. A lack of access to information from independent sources and pro-government propaganda make the formation

of a new authoritarian mentality a feasible objective for the government. The authorities successfully implement their ideological policies at all levels relying on fear and irrationalism.

In general, the Belarusian leader has established a neo-totalitarian political model based on the government ideology, tight control of the economy and the main spheres of life, and the administrative repressive apparatus.

The Belarusian government’s ideology will never be a cultural challenge to existing ideologies. The Łukašenka regime needs it for internal consumption. The ideology will become useless after the fall of the regime, but it will leave a deep scar in the public mentality.