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Belarusian National Ideology: Contemporary Utopia

The Belarusian political system is defined by political scientists as authoritarianism with a tendency towards totalitarianism. This system has survived, almost without alteration, for twelve years and there is nothing to suggest its demise in nearest few years. Isolation on the part of Europe, and regular conflicts with Russia, do not pose significant threats to Łukašenka's government. This strength of the Belarusian regime on one hand fills one with dread, and on the other challenges analysts and political scientists to give a satisfactory answer to the question: what is the strength of the Belarusian regime?

An exhaustive answer to this question would require taking into consideration various aspects of this issue: geopolitics, economics, sociological, cultural, psychological, and historical, among others. Clearly it is not possible to analyse the phenomenon considering all possible aspects of the Belarusian political system within the scope of a single article. Consequently, we shall concentrate on a single feature,

the 'ideological strength' of Belarusian authoritarianism.

The departure points for the proposed analysis are two hypotheses: 1) *the Belarusian regime is sustainable due to the support of public opinion*, based on a certain consensus between the authorities and the people, and is sanctioned by a significant proportion of society. Authoritarianism in Belarus is significantly conditioned by 'support from below'. It would however be naïve to draw the conclusion from the above hypothesis that Lukashenka only passively carries out the will of the people. There exists a 'feedback' mechanism: the Belarusian regime is very *active* when it comes to maintaining and promoting an authoritarian outlook in society. Consequently, the first hypothesis should be considered in tight relation with the second: 2) the people are incessantly 'moulded', 'shaped' in such a manner as to above all value a strong state, whose might is guaranteed by a charismatic leader.

The development of these hypotheses will constitute the primary aim of

this work. It will consist of two parts: in the first we shall try to diagnose the aforementioned mentality, which legitimises Łukašenka's government as well as inhibits (impedes) the emergence of an alternative, antiauthoritarian culture in Belarus. In the second part we concentrate on the 'feedback' mechanism, in other words – we will delineate the characteristics of Belarusian state ideology.

I
The 'demand for authoritarianism', rooted in the Soviet era, was significantly strengthened by the 'kingless' period (1991-1994), which was a period of democratisation and 'Belarusianisation', but – unfortunately – also a period of economic crisis and political instability. At the time, regular people as well as elites longed for the return of a strong authority.

Rudimentary Soviet mentality and painful experiences from the 'kingless' period formed a certain cultural model that may be called Spartan culture. The 'Spartan ideal' of social life consists of the unconditional subordination of all aspects of life under a single, per-

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manent, principle. The overriding value here is not freedom or human dignity but a cohesive society, whose keystone is a strong state and strong leader. Society must be hierarchical and disciplined, and such 'free spaces' as art, literature and academia must be limited and tightly controlled, with their merit measured in terms of their functionality – the degree to which they do, or do not serve the state.

Alaksandr Łukašenka, who came to power in July 1994, became an excellent expression of this then dominant cultural model in Belarus. 'The Belarusian leader's distinguishing catchphrase,' says philosopher Anatol Łysiuk, 'is as follows: I am the only one who truly understands and is concerned with the people, is part of the people and leads it, not heeding enemies, along the proper path.'¹

If someone is 'the only one' then 'others' can function in relation to this 'one' either as absolute subordinates or as enemies and destructive elements. From almost his first day in power the Belarusian president began an intensive process of building political unity (establishing the power 'vertical': completely liquidating local autonomy), economic integrity (strong centralisation as well as total control over private enterprise), and integrality of mass media (establishing complete unanimity in state media and harassment of independent media). The peak of this process was the famous 'constitutional reform' of November 1996. Łukašenka then announced his 'new theory of division of power' according to which all three branches (legislative, administrative and judiciary) grow unassisted from a single tree. According to Siarhiej Laušunou Alaksandr Łukašenka, 'during a closed meeting, according to eyewitnesses, declared to members of parliament, that the principle of division of power, under existing conditions,

constitutes a threat to the Belarusian state.'²

The amendment of the Constitution in 1996, from democratic to authoritarian, was a natural move by the 'Spartan' camp, in whose name only one well-known person has remained active since 1994. This 'reform' as it were 'sealed' and consolidated the grounds of Belarusian 'unity' for a longer term.

Somewhere on the peripheries of this 'Unity' an alternative culture exists, which can be termed 'Athenian'. It is characterised by an ethos of liberty, sensitivity to human dignity and autonomy, recognition of political pluralism and free market principles. During the 2006 (presidential) elections, this culture produced its candidate – Alaksandr Milinkievič – who, despite adverse conditions, managed to gain respect both from Europe as well as rightist democrats in Russia, and relative recognition within the country. For some time Belarusian analysts and intellectuals have been discussing what the position supporters of the individualistic-freedom ethos should be towards authoritarian culture.

From time to time, as a result of these discussions, there arises the proposition for *dialogue*. This idea is as noble as it is problematic. First of all, dialogue as such requires the assumption of a certain axiology, a requisite element of which is the willingness to permit one's opponent to speak and the ability to hear him out. If one side does not accept such an axiology then chances for dialogue are nil. This is the case with Spartan culture: this culture is *monologic*, it does not consider public discussion as a means of finding optimal solutions to problems or attaining compromises. The second factor making dialogue difficult is the existence of an unwritten (though perhaps written) rule that can be expressed as: 'Keep your distance'. This imperative concerns state repre-

sentatives: state workers must bear serious consequences if they enter into dialogue with someone considered by the state as a 'destructive element.' As such even if there is a will for dialogue among members of the Spartan camp it is paralysed by the aforementioned imperative. Thirdly, the problem of *dialogue forum* remains: where should it be held? The opposition has never had, nor will have, access to state media, while the potential outreach of independent media is very limited, to the point where it excludes any real possibility of shaping the cultural dialogue in Belarus. Moreover, for understandable reasons, representatives of the authorities prefer to keep their distance from independent media.

These three reasons due to which dialogue between the two cultures is difficult (if not impossible) can be termed only 'formal'. There also exist other kinds of obstacles to dialogue. Belarus has found itself in a rather dramatic situation, caused by the fact that there is almost a *complete absence of points of reference* for a dialogue between these two cultures. In the case of Spartan cultures one can indicate an *axiological void*, the lack of a defined value system.

Post-Soviet Belarus has three referendums under its belt. All three were held during Łukašenka's rule, all three were initiated by him and all three were 'won' by him. The first (1995) concerned the change of state symbols (national, or modified Soviet symbols), the second (1996), concerned changes in the constitution (democratic or authoritarian), and the third (2004) – concerned allowing Łukašenka to run for a third presidential term despite constitutional prohibition. These three referenda can be regarded as three symbolic 'waves', which, like ocean waves, washed away the most important axiological layers: referendum '95 'washed-away' national symbols, referendum '96 annihilated the classic division of power, and referendum '04 removed the limits on the authorities' tenure. National values and democratic ethos could constitute a certain backdrop for dialogue between

¹ Анатолий Лысюк, 'О культурологических основаниях политического лидерства в Республике Беларусь', *Беларусь: на пути в третье тысячелетие*. – Мн.: ФилСерв плюс 2001, – с. 43.

² Сергей Левшунов, 'Конституционная система: алгоритм белорусской трансформации', *Беларусь: на пути в третье тысячелетие*. – Мн.: ФилСерв плюс 2001, – с. 171.

various groups and political options, but both were destroyed. The referendums were on issues that should not be subject to voting since they are values that form the basis for democracy, and not merely its 'superstructure'.

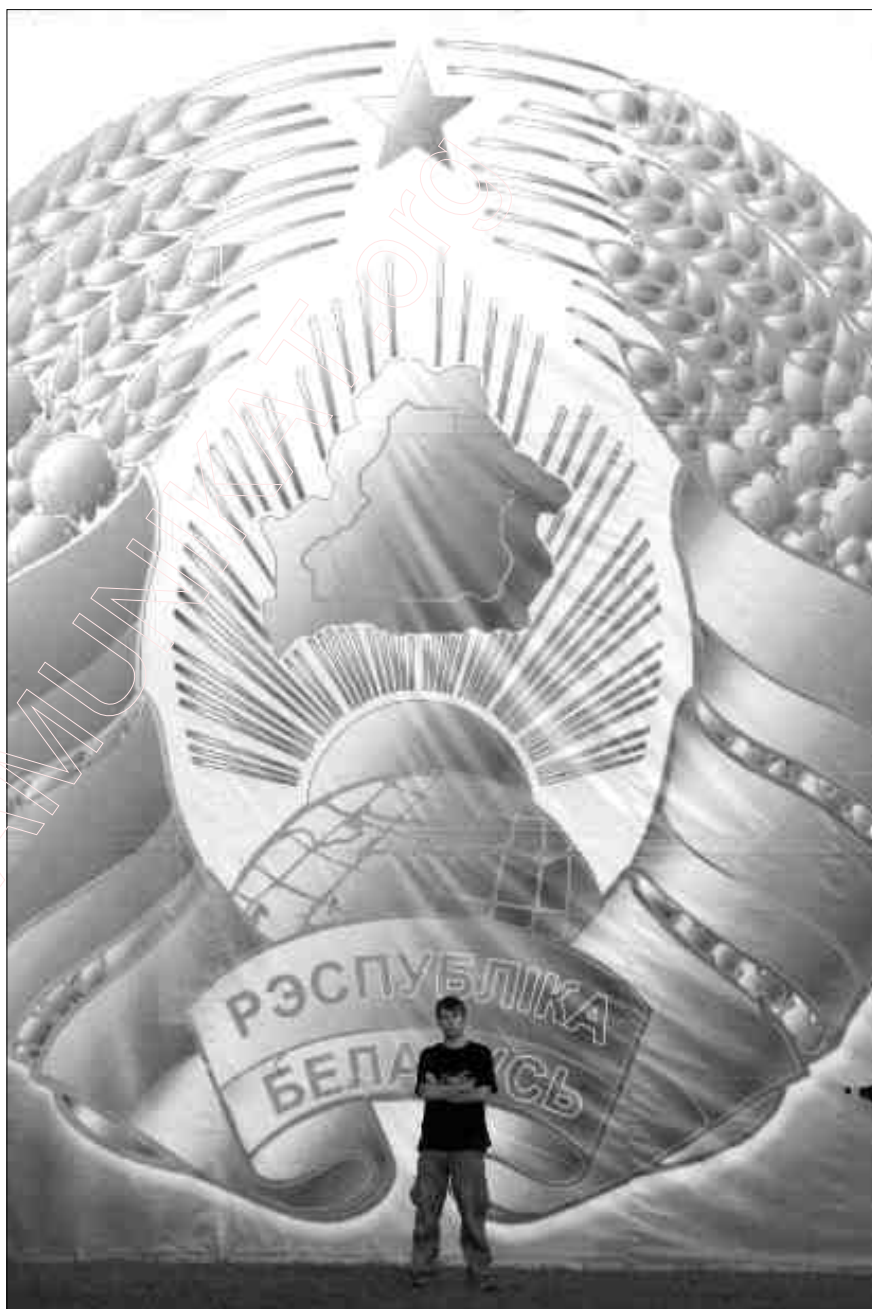
'Public opinion' has long ceased to be a 'grassroots' phenomenon. It is created from above by means of manipulation, meticulous control over information and methodical indoctrination, conducted by the mass media and educational institutions. Plebiscites and controlled elections, by turn, make the emergence of an alternative, democratic culture, impossible. Loyalty to the leader, political monism, irrationalism, subordination, and caste-based hierarchy – are the axiological pillars of 'Lukashism'. Every regime is aware that a *system of enforcement*, professing the aforementioned catalogue of 'values', does not suffice to ensure its sustainability, a *system of persuasion* is also needed. This function is fulfilled by Belarusian state ideology.

II

Belarusian state ideology (BSI) is a multifaceted phenomenon. It has several versions and harkens on different traditions, therefore BSI ought to be considered as a certain collection, elements of which are various socio-political concepts with varying degrees of 'ideological saturation'. State ideology in Belarus functions on different levels and in various 'social sectors' depending on which level and in which sector it appears we have to deal with a different type of ideology. State ideology is manifested differently in President Łukašenka's ideological addresses, than in the words of TV presenters, in propaganda films, ideology handbooks, and different again in the consciousness of state bureaucrats appointed to guard the observance of state orthodoxy. The differences are so marked that the expression 'State ideology' ought to be considered polysemous: in different contexts and spheres

of social life it has different meanings. Consequently, this often results in paradoxes, when for example the director of some local library bans – in the name of state ideology – the displaying of a 'religious' book, while in official ideology handbooks Christianity constitutes almost the foundation of Belarusian state ideology! For many local bureaucrats,

who often, in terms of spirit and mentality, belong to the category of *homo sovieticus*, the very word 'ideology' is associated with the materialist-atheistic communist doctrine, and for this reason they believe that their fidelity to Łukašenka's ideology depends on their consistent opposition to any sort of manifestation of religiosity.



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The State and an individual.

Even on the most official level BSI is very diverse. If we thoroughly read the 'canonical' ideological handbooks,³ the internal contradictions are striking. These consist of, for example, Slavophilistic and pro-Russian elements side by side with nationalism and national revival; liberal-democratic beside authoritarian; collectivistic together with individualistic.

Despite such significant differences I believe we can attempt to define its general characteristics. I would argue that there exist *constituent characteristics* of BSI, which are important for *each* of its forms. However, it should be noted that our characteristics concern only documented versions of BSI, we will not address subjective responses to, or subjective interpretations of, BSI by different local-level bureaucrats. In other words, we shall address the 'third world', in the Popperian sense, meaning an objectivized discourse.

The first thesis, which I advance in regard to BSI, is that this ideology constitutes a sort of replica of Russian national-Bolshevism – Alexander Dugin's imperialist ideology. The Belarusian political scientist Uladzimir Rouda also uses the definition 'national-Bolshevism' in relation to BSI, but interprets it as an 'Eastern Slav version of National-Socialism',⁴ therefore not tying it to A. Dugin's social theory. Let us try to compare Dugin and Łukašenka's ideology.

³ The 'canon' (meaning books approved and promoted by the State) includes: *Основы идеологии белорусского государства*, Mińsk: Академия Управления при Президенте 2004; *Основы идеологии белорусского государства: Учебн.-метод. пособие* / В.В. Шинкарев, В.А. Вартанова, В.А. Зенченко и др.; под ред. В.В. Шинкарева. – Мн.: БГПУ, 2004; Владимир Мельник, *Государственная идеология Республики Беларусь: концептуальные основы*. – Мн.: ТЕСЕЙ 2004; Ядвига Яскевич, *Основы идеологии белорусского государства: мировоззренческие ценности и стратегические приоритеты*. – Мн.: РИВШ БГУ 2003; Надежда Канашевич, *Политика. Идеология. Менталитет: курс лекций*, Могилёв: МГУ им. А. А. Кулешова 2003; Александр Борушко, *О национальной идее. Очерк*, Mińsk: УП «Технопринт» 2004.

⁴ Vide: 'Łukashenka's State Ideology', *Belarusian Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2.

Dugin: 'The goal of Russian expansion is totally soteriological science... We are not one of the nations, but possess a mission – to reveal the whole truth to the world... We, Russians, are destined for this.'⁵

Łukašenka: 'Belarus, by history, fate and location, was clearly chosen to fulfil the great role of leader of East Slav civilisation... Realising this predestination can impel our nation to great feats. Many people in Russian, in Ukraine, as well as other countries look at Belarus as an example of consistent and independent policy... Belarus must draw patriotic forces from the entire post-Soviet space. It is here that people find a platform for expressing themselves, free from neo-liberal terror and persecution.'⁶

Dugin: '[We] exclude individualism, the individual, free market, tolerance of outlook...'⁷

Łukašenka: 'The need to possess high ideals and noble goals, mutual aid and collectivism, we juxtapose against Western individualism.'⁸

That which links both ideologies is also the specific bond with the Soviet past:

Dugin: 'I clearly see the pulse of our historical existence also in communism.'⁹

State Ideology of the Republic of Belarus (handbook): 'The Soviet period became the pinnacle of the history of our Homeland.'¹⁰

The attitude of both – Dugin and Łukašenka – to the Orthodox faith begs particular attention. It is well known that both almost make Orthodoxy a constituent element of their ideology. The real meaning of the inclusion of

Orthodoxy in the context of these ideologies becomes clear when considering Łukašenka's public declaration of being an 'Orthodox Atheist' (it is hard to imagine a more scornful description for Orthodoxy), and national-Bolshevism's ideologue who praises the persecution of the Orthodox Church during Stalinism (*sic!*): 'First of all, the Orthodoxy that Stalin destroyed, was overmuch Occidentalised, steeped in the spirit of the West, and second of all, the messianic dream could exist also outside of Orthodoxy.'¹¹

And so, the first characteristic of BSI would be its ideological relation to Dugin's national-Bolshevism.

The second characteristic of Łukašenka's ideology is the promotion of the dogmatism that the *president and the people, the people and the president form a single, indivisible, whole*, constituting, so to speak, a 'holy symbiosis'. One can belong to a number of doctrinal options (liberalism, conservatism, Marxism, Slavophilism, Nationalism), but this communion – people-president – is unquestionable. Another dogma is tied to this one, which simultaneously constitutes the third characteristic feature of BSI: the existence of a Gnostic hierarchy, meaning that (only) the true Leader knows the truth and others are enlightened only according to the degree of their obedience. In the bibliographies of ideological handbooks Łukašenka's name almost always appears out of alphabetical order (unlike all other authors), in first place, and not only before all other authors but also ahead of the Constitution and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The semantics are quite transparent: the Leader sets the standard for truth.

Łukašenka's dogma, the core of which are three 'truths' – the status of the Belarusian nation as the chosen leader of the eastern Slavs, the holy symbiosis of the president and people and the Gnostic hierarchy – is intensively 'implanted' into mass consciousness by means of state newspapers, radio and tel-

⁵ 'Czekam na Iwana Groźnego', interview with Alexandr Dugin, *FRONDA*, 11/12, summer 1998, pp. 140-141.

⁶ 'Доклад Президента А. Г. Лукашенко на постоянно действующем семинаре руководящих работников республиканских и местных государственных органов по вопросам совершенствования идеологической работы', *Советская Белоруссия*, 28.03.2003.

⁷ 'Czekam na Iwana...'; p. 141.

⁸ 'Доклад Президента...'

⁹ 'Czekam na Iwana...'; p. 141.

¹⁰ Владимир Мельник, p. 195.

¹¹ *Czekam na Iwana... op.cit.*, s. 141.

evision. In this process of indoctrination (which consumes massive financial resources) propaganda films play a special role. Among numerous propagandistic film projects *Дорога в никуда*¹² (*Road to Nowhere*), as well as the seven-part series *Конспирология*¹³ (*Conspirology*) are examples of political Manichaeism in its purest form (the line between Good and Evil runs exactly parallel to the division of president – opposition). Insofar as these two films can be described as ‘warring Lukashism’, the series *Новейшая история*¹⁴ (*Contemporary History*) is better defined as restrained Lukashism.

All these films contain the same message: oppositionists are bourgeois-freeloaders, dangerous fascists and puppets of the West/America. The national white-red-white flag (which, thanks to Łukašenka’s efforts, was replaced by the Soviet-era red and green flag) is presented as an unambiguously fascist symbol, the Soviet Union as a ‘paradise lost’, and the fall of the USSR is like the original sin, the responsibility of which lies with the then-leaders, with Šuškievič and his heirs – meaning the current opposition – at the head. By contrast, Łukašenka appears as someone who came to remove if not the ‘sin’ itself then at least its consequences. He allowed Belarusians to once again feel like a Soviet man.

* * *

Therefore, in the case of Belarusian state ideology we are dealing with a sort of utopia: Belarus is this ‘good place’, where stability, peace and prosperity reign. There is a noble and intelligent ruler, extremely close to the people (hence the moniker ‘бацька’ – or dad-

¹² Authors: Grigorij Kozyrev, Aleksandr Vjugin, Viktor Nikolskij, Vladimir Zhavoronok, Nadiezhda Byvalova, Agafija Krasachka, Siergiej Usatov, show on *Першы канал*; 13.05.2004.

¹³ Authors: Jurij Azaronok, Vladislav Jarovich, Vadim Gigantov, Nina Eromina, show on *BT*; end of September/beginning October 2004.

¹⁴ Authors: Yuriy Koziyatko, Grigorij Kisiel, Viktor Shevelevich, Viktor Chamkovskij, Aleksandr Ridvan, show on *ANT*; end of November/beginning of December 2004.



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TV is the only source of information for most Belarusian citizens.

dy), there is a grateful and happy people, concentrated around this good leader-messiah and there is the ungrateful and unhappy opposition that in this cosmos of Belarusian order are structures of evil and lies. The utopia of the Belarusian state can be defined as *revolutionary*: it creates a state of ‘permanent revolution’ but no longer in the name of *what is to be*, yet in the name of *what is*. Despite the fact that this state of bliss has already been achieved, one must remain in a state of permanent battle with enemy forces, in order that *what is* remain.

Belarusian state ideology constitutes a specific type of utopia. Utopias are always divided between ‘retrospective’ and ‘prospective’, or ‘retro-utopia’ and ‘future-utopia’, ‘utopia of the past’ or ‘utopia of the future’. The first appear as narratives of ‘paradise lost’, and the second as ‘paradise anticipated’. **BSI is neither a retro nor future utopia, it is a utopia of the present.** Belarusian ideology, supported by audio-visual propaganda, was created in order to enable survival of the current state of affairs as though it were a particularly *blessed state*. This ideology foresees not only political mobilisation, but also interpretations of everyday experiences by so-

ciety. The essence of this type of ideology is producing certain paths of interpretation, by means of which members of a given society identify that which in their experiences appears unpleasant, sad and unfair as a consequence of the hidden or overt actions of the *opposition forces*. Paradise, a state of bliss and prosperity *already* exist in the *here and now*, the problem is that it is constantly threatened by foreign and enemy forces.

How long the Łukašenka regime will last depends to a significant extent on the vitality of the Belarusian utopia.

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