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FROM THE RHETORIC OF BROTHERLY UNITY TO THE RHETORIC OF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION. ARTEFACTS FROM CONTEMPORARY OFFICIAL BELARUSIAN IDEOLOGY

1.

The list of Belarusian media containing elements of official ideology is both limitless and limited at the same time. In reality, every issue of hundreds of state newspapers, bulletins and magazines is a mouth-piece for directives programmed by the current regime in Belarus, and state radio and television are



"The March of Freedom – 3," Minsk, Oct. 1st, 2000.
Photo: IREX/ProMedia

also sweating over the same task. Not all the printed media are able to provide reports of equal value, however. One gets the feeling there is a kind of *kitchen* somewhere, where dishes heavily spiced with ideology are being prepared for widespread public consumption.

The real name of this kitchen is the Belarusian presidential administration. Work to ideologically indoctrinate the masses is constantly underway within certain sub-departments of this administration's numerous branches. This is where the country's "information security" is deployed as an invisible shield against invisible enemies.

The almighty presidential administration is only co-founder of a mere handful of publications. How-

ever, they differ from the rest of the press since they are allowed to cover politically and ideologically important topics and problematic issues on their own. They are the ones who generate the "politically correct" examples and stereotypes that lower level administrative units (*i.e.* the regional and workers' press) can go on to implant into the mass consciousness with varying degrees of devotion. Under Lukashism there are actually not so many of these publications, which include the liberal daily *Sovietskaya Byelorussia*, the Belarusian-language, Belarus-centric daily *Zvyazda*, and the very presentable magazine *Belaruskaya Dumka*. We will start there.

2.

Whatever Lukashenka and his Lukashites might say, the breakdown of "decades of hard-earned contacts" came as a relief for them in 1991. This was the last year of Moscow's active presence in Belarusian cultural issues and, to some extent, media. How that annoyed representatives of the traditional Belarusian elite! Previously, Moscow was the cultural medium between Belarus and the Western world. The potentially dangerous ideas of political and cultural pluralism, building a civil society, multiculturalism, and religious freedom (which endangered the very essence of the political regime) used to make their way to Belarus after transiting via Moscow. Traditionally, the West was still Public Enemy No.1, while Moscow (*i.e.* its liberal and pro-Western elite) gradually turned into Public Enemy No.2.

This specifically colonial type of *enlightenment* disappeared from Belarus together with the collapse of the USSR. Previously, the world's leading intellectual, cultural, artistic and other knowledge was never transmitted to Belarus directly, but in a roundabout way via the imperial centre. Objectively, the loss of this cultural communication channel was convenient for some of the conservative and revanchist-minded Belarusian power elite. Since Minsk did not possess anything like the intellectual potential that Moscow did, education came to a near standstill. A cultural

vacuum formed, thus creating a situation where new, culturally-relevant ideas and practices from abroad became inaccessible, while the old ones had already lost their relevance. This vacuum has allowed a nihilist-reactionary return to the deceased spiritual heritage of the recent Soviet past.

We are faced with a paradoxical situation — once it had gained its independence, Belarus only managed to grow even more distant from Europe. How long this communication breakdown will last depends not only on political, but also on cultural factors. As long as serious Western politicians remain unaware of this, one should not expect any serious change in Belarus.

This lack or shortage of intensive cultural communication with the West morally legitimises the ruling group of people who pose as guardians of supposedly pristine Soviet values in Belarus today. Strictly speaking, however, there is nothing left for them to do but exist as social parasites in this respect, since they are simply unable to come up with any radically different ideas for their own survival. Apart from this, the Belarusian regime is also fairly successful at using the ideology of integration with Russia in order to have a more effective influence on public opinion, and reap its political dividends. These two points (the nihilist-reactionary return to the Soviet system of values, plus the persistent promotion of pro-integrationist ideology) are vital for one to start understanding the main traits of contemporary Belarusian ideology. That is, of course, if one does not mention social-populist rhetoric.

3.

Despite all the official statements and reassurances, the integration of Russia and Belarus has never been "all-inclusive." It has always been limited to clearly-marked economic and military domains, and one cannot speak of any serious integration in, for example, cultural, educational or information policy. There are several explanations for this:

Firstly, for president Lukashenka, the concept of "Russia" implies something different to the usual symbolic interpretation. For the Belarusian president, "Russia" is not so much a geopolitical reality or a real country with its own problems, but rather a tradition of despotic rule. In other words, because Lukashenka has opted for "Russia," he has chosen despotism and uncontrolled power. The kind of Russia Lukashenka prefers is associated with crude, uncouth masters who seem completely uneducable; a "Russia" where the political will of its leader, who represents the state and its interests, is everything, whereas the will of the individual is meaningless. The fact that such a picture of "Russia" can only exist in a fantasy world is a constant source of disappointment to Lukashenka. However, no matter how hard you fight it, Russian despotism is unbeatable, and its appearance in contemporary Russian politics has allowed Lukashenka to raise his hopes that his imagination and objective reality will actually coincide someday.

Secondly, the Belarusian regime's main objective is currently to survive politically, not just to unite and become a subject of the Russian Federation. Official Minsk is integrating with official Moscow selectively, only in areas which guarantee relative stability to permit its continued existence.



"The Chain of Not Indifferent People" in frames of a campaign "We Want to Know the Truth!",

Minsk, June 6th, 2001.

Photo: IREX/ProMedia

Thirdly, as far as the present-day situation and psychology of political leaders is concerned, the Muscovite recentralisation process accelerated by our Eastern neighbour's power elite has dealt a powerful blow to any "all-inclusive" integration between the two countries. This process will probably lead to Russia becoming a unitary state.

Increasing the strength of the centre while weakening the authority of the regions (including by redistributing the tax payments system and other financial sources to benefit the metropolis as one can see in Russia today) makes the political integration of our two countries rather problematic. This is because the Belarusian leader could once have aspired to the sta-

tus of a major regional leader with gleaming prospects of making a career for himself in the "centre" (if one imagines hypothetically that Belarus were to join Russia). Nowadays, however, he can only count on a provincial governor's post, with his authority under the constant control of newly-appointed "presidential deputies". One should also not forget that Lukashenka has had the taste of power for a long time. He has grown accustomed to trips abroad and meetings with foreign guests, being the "supreme commander-in-chief", and extending his power into the agricultural sector, heavy industry and construction projects. Lukashenka might experience psychological trauma were he to move to a new position, so he would never agree to it voluntarily.

Consequently, the current Belarusian regime is using the epithet of integration "between two brotherly nations" to its own ends — it is greeted and welcomed whenever it corresponds to the regime's underlying interests and, vice versa, is ignored or neglected whenever it threatens the existing power structure.

4.

Lukashenka is a truly nationalistic politician, but it is another matter that his nationalism is specifically Eastern European, yet not at all Eurasian, and he certainly has no opposite number in the West. At first sight, Lukashenka's nationalism lacks dominant national features. It would be wrong to say that Lukashenka is a Russian nationalist, for example. In reality, Lukashenka's nationalism dates back to the time when Russia had yet to become a nation state with a specific national identity, and its starting point is so-called "Soviet patriotism."

Lukashenka is promoting a specific form of nationalism known as *gosudarstvennichestvo* (= "state control") in Russian. Additionally, he has a particular soft spot for his "little homeland" (the Shklov district), and Belarus as a whole. Lukashenka's national pride awoke in the far from nationalistically-structured Soviet society, and is therefore based on two ideological concepts: the "greater homeland," which is to be understood as the "state," and the "little homeland," which implies a certain living environment. In this case, the "greater homeland" sets the highest level of (crypto)national identity responsible for rational activity, while the "little homeland" represents its lowest echelon that is responsible for direct emotional reactions.

Therefore, it should be emphasised that the main inspiration for Lukashenka's nationalism should be seen as "pride" for a "state" in which national feelings have always been suppressed. This "state" should be perceived in the broadest sense, as a huge territory, an extensive state apparatus, and an unusually strong military capability that includes a hypertrophically efficient army and airforce. It is also a social security system designed to ensure a poverty-free existence, plus international peace and order. It goes without saying that the prototype for this "state" was in fact the far less attractive Soviet state. Once the latter had passed away, it only grew even more alluring to its sympathisers.

In turn, the "little homeland" probably only evokes recollections of the family home, herds of cattle at dawn, the first snows at *Dziady* (a day of remembrance for the dead), morning mist over the fields at harvest time, and a stork flying overhead. In short — pleasant, ordinary things.

In his uncommonly profound and searching analysis *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that the transition into post-communism would be accompanied by a nationalist dictatorship phase for certain Eastern European countries. The disappearance of communism from highly-Sovietised societies with a "totalitarian social organisation model" would lead to a vacuum that could be filled by nationalistic ideology. "... Stirring up nationalism undoubtedly reinforces authoritarian tendencies. It strengthens the institutions of power that are most capable of making effective use of nationalistic symbols for a dictatorial regime, thus halting the development of democracy."

Unfortunately, we have to admit that this forecast has come true in Belarus. The seven years of Lukashenka's rule have been spent not on building up a civil society, but a power-pyramid type of nationalistic dictatorship, i.e. an authoritarian mechanism of rule. More proof that Lukashenka's regime is a nationalistic dictatorship is its aggressively intolerant attitude towards cultural, political, and other differences. Independent Belarusian culture, the Polish national minority, and sexual minorities alike are being persecuted (along with organisations representing them), but the regime turns a blind eye to militarised semi-fascist groups like Russian National Unity, whose members used to meet and train at a stadium near the water sports palace in downtown Minsk. No doubt the regime feels closer to them ideologically.

This nationalistic dictatorship is not afraid to employ barbaric methods in order to neutralise nonconformity. Shedding the blood of protesters at peaceful opposition rallies has become common practice in Belarus, and the recent disappearances of prominent politicians and businessmen have shown that the country is developing according to the Latin American "Pinochet" model. The Belarusian political leaders have definitely crossed the line that makes them criminally liable for their decisions and actions.

5.

President Alaksandar Lukashenka is always proud of how close he is to "the people." He constantly emphasises that his policies are supported and praised "by the people." The advertising slogan "*Alaksandar Lukashenka is with the people*" figured in his election campaign back in 1994. The official media are also forever proclaiming Lukashenka's unbreakable bond with "the people."

However, in a nationally-underdeveloped society, the concept of "the people" is rather specific. Content-wise, it does not correspond to the concept of a "nation" or a "civil society." In a pre-national society, "the people" is a community that emerges in a terri-



tory over a period of time, and is united by a certain level of consumption and ideological indoctrination. Furthermore, not all social groups or strata are part of "the people." The Lukashenka era has shown that one cannot count the anti-collaborationist section of the Belarusian intelligentsia as being with "the people" ("since it is always distant from the people," as the saying goes), just like the business elite is not controlled by the Lukashenka administration. In short, "the people" does not include independent journalists and opposition party activists, but rather steel-smelters, bobbin-winders, wool-spinners, manual labourers, agricultural workers, militiamen, border guards, and Belarusian servicemen.

This vulgar concept of "the people" is employed as a means of political manipulation and extends to segments of Belarusian society which depend directly on the state. "The people" implies workers from the state system, state industrial sector, and organisations funded by the state budget, *i.e.* areas which used to be the backbone of the totalitarian Soviet state. This kind of "people" has no common cultural or religious identity, let alone a national identity. It is united in its general, subservient dependence on a totalitarian state it hopes will guarantee its well-being.

Lukashenka is not a protŭgŭ of "the people," but of those forces which stand behind this so-called "people" that so obediently voices their interests. In reality, Lukashenka is both the protŭgŭ and the hostage of Belarusian state elites that formed back in Soviet times, and are still a force to be reckoned with today. Once he had achieved the full extent of his political power, he mostly began to serve the interests of the Belarusian military-industrial complex and agro-industrial lobby.

The fight over which candidate would be most capable of consistently maintaining these interests was the main intrigue behind the 1994 presidential elections. By using aggressive pre-electoral slogans, it was Lukashenka, not Vyacheslav Kebich, who managed to mobilise widespread support from Belarusian society. Independent politicians didn't even have the slightest chance at those elections, since they were standing for nothing but phantom expectations of being able to provoke a sudden explosion of national consciousness among the masses.

It is no coincidence that even after Vyacheslav Kebich was no longer actively involved in politics, Alaksandar Lukashenka still saw him as his most threatening competitor in the struggle for power.

Lukashenka's main political capital is that he is trusted by lobbyists from the military-industrial complex and other mainstay branches of the economy, and enjoys strict control over senior armed forces, militia and secret service officers. His impetuous, unrestricted social populism only comes second but, contrary to what certain analysts have stated, actually assists him. To all intents and purposes Lukashenka, being a pragmatic politician, has concluded an obscure "non-aggression pact" with these lobbyists, allowing them a certain degree of economic freedom in exchange for loyalty to him. There-

fore, one can say the Belarusian economic and power elites are in a state of *fusion*.

Since he is interested in his own political survival, the Belarusian president has recently begun sending out cautious feelers into new business elites to try and woo their support. In this respect, the results of the autumn 2000 elections to Lukashenka's "house of representatives" were highly indicative, because several dozen loyal businessmen and entrepreneurs were voted in as deputies. Having sensed the increasing potential of this relatively new social group and economic force, the Belarusian president will be striving to procure a mutually-beneficial compromise with them in the future. In the Belarusian situation, such a compromise might be restricted to satisfying a few of their economic demands, as long as they remain politically loyal to the authorities.

I would also like to say a little about the economic reasons behind policies that have been designed specifically to escalate Belarus' political isolation during Lukashenka's term of office. The fact is that the stability and sustainability of the current regime can only be guaranteed by maintaining the current economic structure. In Belarus, military-industrial enterprises set up under Soviet rule have never undergone any serious reforms. Like other major branches of the Belarusian economy, they concentrate mostly on the Russian market. On the one hand, this orientation suits Lukashenka perfectly, since he is essentially offering political cover for this one-track economy. On the other hand, the Belarusian economic elite (heads of state or state-controlled factories, plants and other industries) are eternally indebted to Lukashenka who is, *de facto*, providing for them. Politics and economics are on an equal footing when any significant change in the economy leads to political change, and vice versa.

Belarus' international isolation is beneficial to Lukashenka because it ensures the economic *status quo*. After all, a large influx of foreign capital would mean a complete rupture of the existing economic order in Belarus, with fatal consequences for the political leaders and the political line they have been following. The aforementioned political and economic equality would be destroyed once and for all, and Belarus would be drawn into Europe and the European economic community by the iron hand of market mechanisms.

This is what the first Belarusian president fears more than anything else. His political statements and actions designed to escalate Belarus' international isolation are increasingly strained, deliberate, and artificial, like a mandatory political ritual.

Belarus' political leaders are only satisfied by a purely cosmetic presence of foreign capital in the country. The fast-food chain *McDonalds*, *Siemens* & *Bosch*'s own-brand domestic appliance shops, and a small *Coca-Cola* factory in Minsk are just necessary concessions the regime has to agree to. In actual fact, Belarus is a black hole on the world trade map.

Consequently, true power for Lukashenka means having total or near-total control over the Belarusian economy. Understanding this helps in devising

methods to counter Lukashist policies in Belarus. Basically, in order to assure the cultural and economic "Europeanisation" of Belarus, one must augment the private sector and support independent cultural institutions, as well as guarantee the political conditions necessary to obtain large-scale investments of foreign capital.

6.

President Lukashenka's likes and dislikes, particularly in politics, clearly point to the type of culture in which he was brought up and developed as a person. Lukashenka's political priorities show a devotion to vulgar, functional approaches. "Vulgar functionalism" is a specific product of Russian cultural circles. Proponents of "vulgar functionalism" are marked by their focus on the socially-valuable attributes of strength and power. He is excited by volitional, suggestive decisions, even if they are completely imprudent politically or economically. He actually treats culture as if it were a social institution designed to gloss over the existing social order. Culture and literature are one and the same to him — a waste of time, a fruitless occupation. For him, real creativity is to be found on the construction site or by the fireside at home, for that is where true values are created. According to this logic, cultural products are ephemeral and vaguely suspicious. If things are left to go on "haphazardly" the way they are, however, they might cause social disturbances in future which the authorities did not anticipate.

In the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Belarus, it has been the Ministry of Culture's task to prevent this from happening. This institution has always had a predominantly controlling function, including through its exclusive support of cultural projects, initiatives and institutions which are beneficial to the regime. Cultural events organised by the current Belarusian Ministry of Culture clearly show that the "vulgar functionalist" approaches are alive and well among the power elite. The Ministry's sphere of influence includes the *Belarusfilm* studios, several dozen state theatres, museums and galleries, a network of libraries and cultural centres, youth centres, and a variety of clubs and societies — that's almost everything.

In its present form, the Ministry of Culture is attempting to preserve the past instead of supporting the contemporary cultural experience. A more fitting title for this body would be the "Ministry for the Conservation of Soviet Cultural Heritage."

The issue of Russian culture deserves a separate mention. Now, more than ever before, there is a distinct cultural dichotomy in modern-day Russia. One Russian cultural tradition is very positive. At its roots lie the colossal, spiritual works of Aleksandr Radishchev, Aleksandr Herzen, Lev Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kazimir Malevich, Andrey Bely, Daniil Khams, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrey Sakharov. This tradition is characterised by its spiritual searches and insights, progressive artistic experience, European intellectual context, and world-acclaimed cultural achievements.

However, a negative Russian cultural tradition had already been outlined by literary figures like Smerdyakov and Sharikov. It incorporates the dark side of Russian society, with its qualities like spiritual indigence, obscurantism, vindictiveness, pettiness and treachery. This tradition was directly encouraged by the long-term communist experiment performed in the country, in which whole social groups and classes perished along with their unique cultural heritage. In the West, socially-relevant cultural values and practices have traditionally been shaped by the *higher echelons* of society, whereas in the Soviet Union the opposite happened. The dominant culture came from the *lower reaches* of society — whether it be the working class that led the proletarian revolution, or the poverty-stricken rural population. The domination of this type of culture essentially signalled the triumph of the unenlightened mind.

A few words must also be said about the Soviet "army" and "prison camps." These institutions have traditionally had a major influence on Soviet society. Under Soviet totalitarianism, a great number of people went through the "camps," and practically all of the male population served in the "army." The negative type of Russian culture began to take on particularly nasty, anti-humanist forms in the "army" and "camps." Very few people were able to withstand its intrinsic amorality, depravity, degeneration and depression. You will understand what I mean if you listen carefully to the Russian spoken by unskilled middle-aged or older workers. Here, language is an infallible indicator of the mental traumas and cultural influences they were exposed to.

The criminal regime of "nomenclaturist capitalism" built by Alaksandar Lukashenka again shows just how habits and routines picked up in the "camps" have become rooted in people's minds. Apparently, Lukashenka has still not gone beyond the psychology of a "godfather" with his politics, offering "protection" in exchange for servitude and obedience.

7.

Lukashenka himself established the style for official Belarusian ideologists with his incomparable linguistic outpourings, such as "*Russian Orthodox atheist*" and "*lousy fleas*" (N.B. said when referring to businessmen). Compared to this, quotes like "*Gorbachev's pseudo-perestroika*," "*adventurist jokers*" and "*backroom conductors*" (as uttered by Vladimir Velichko, a "Meritorious Cultural Figure of the Republic of Belarus, Academician of the International Academy of Organisational and Management Sciences," editor-in-chief of *Belaruskaya Dumka* magazine, and one of the main Belarusian ideologists to boot); or Igor Akshevskiy's "*political shapeshifters slicing into a single, living organism*," "*small-town guardsmen who have already tried on the emperor's robes in secret*," "*well-wishers from abroad*" and "*the market maelstrom*" just seem like truisms. Here are a few more examples of similar creativity — "*The logical crash of democratic illusions*" (from Vsevolod Yanchevskiy, "First Secretary of the Central Commit-

tee of the Byelorussian Patriotic Youth Union"); *"Western thought offers us no alternative, forcing us to wear its worn-out raincoat covered in holes"* (from Vitaliy Smirnov, "Professor and Dean of the Foreign Policy Department of the Belarusian Presidential Management Academy"); *"The abyss of the rampant market and the anarchy of independence"* (from "Kandidat of Philosophy" Vasiliy Novikov); *"Oedipus, Freud, and other complexes"* (from another "Kandidat of Philosophy", Boris Lepyoshka).

Vsevolod Yanchevskiy is right in saying that *"We have become very nasty and aggressive over the last fifteen years (since the beginning of perestroika)"*.¹

Belarusian ideologists do not conceal the fact that their job is aimed at "ideological hardening of the masses." The aforementioned Velichko writes *"We need general values for development which can then become part of a strong internal ideology."*² He emphasises not "new," but "general values," implying traditional Soviet ones which have only been partially reinterpreted and supplemented, then reassembled into one system.

With rare exceptions, these linguistic constructions from Belarusian ideologists tend to be based not on rational arguments, but on emotional impulses and affective mobilisation of "simple people's" subconscious fears, using tried-and-tested KGB methods. Essentially, these ideologists are mere minstrels of Soviet people's frustrations, although their songs are more like collective hysteria overloaded with nationalistic phraseology.

8.

Nothing characterises Belarusian ideology better than its orientation towards the Russian cultural context. In *Belaruskaya Dumka*, one can find countless references to various authoritative Russian figures (Dmitriy Mendeleyev, Fyodor Abramov, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin) but next to nothing about Belarusians. Sometimes, some of our homespun ideological operatives simply identify themselves with Russians, and Belarus with Russia — *"For instance, tell me how I am supposed to call my own brother a foreigner just because he lives in Nizhnevartovsk and is a citizen of another country? And what about my eldest son and grandson, also Russian citizens who recently settled down in the beautiful Russian city of Kostroma?"*, asks Igor Akshevskiy.³

Russia is also a strong argument in the controversy with the West (as the Belarusian ideologists imagine or would like to imagine it). They understand perfectly well how comical and incomparable it is to place Belarus and the West into sharp ideological opposition to one another. However, if one makes

Belarus and Russia appear to be one and the same, then this contrast starts to seem more credible.

Spurious reasons are thrust upon us in order to justify the contrast, but the quality of arguments used in this controversy wouldn't stand up to any kind of positive evaluation. *"For example, where does the rallying cry of 'Let's Join Europe!' come from?"* exclaims Boris Lepyoshka, a philosophy teacher from Berastsye. *"It comes from the mythologisation of history because, after all, 'Europe' has crushed and burned the Belarusians, baptised them into its faiths, quashed any protests, and snatched or bought up all our best intellectuals."*⁴

This same Lepyoshka, conditioned by neo-Slavophilic dogma, goes yet further in his falsifications of history — *"Looking at our historical experience, we have often been forced into a pro-Western position, but let's examine what Westernism has brought the Slavs. Take the 17th century for example — Princess Sofia and Grand Duke Golitsyn were fascinated by the Catholic Europe of Austria and Poland, whereas Peter the Great was captivated by Protestant Holland. Neither one of them ever brought us anything good, however."*⁵

Basically, this is the tenacious nationalist in Lepyoshka talking, since he only associates Slavism with the Slavonic nations that did not yield to Western influence. The next step would be to identify Slavonic traditions with Russian traditions.

The longer the Russification of Belarus goes on, the closer Russia will become for us. This is the gist of the argument proffered by *Belaruskaya Dumka* writer Larisa Yakovenko — *"It is difficult to understand people who are fighting for a union with anyone, whether it be America or Europe. But this is not the case with Russia, which is close to us in spirit, with blood ties and a common history which one cannot dismiss or rewrite."*⁶

Belarusian ideologists would simply be unable to survive without Russia. They need it most of all in order to disguise their own futility. Without it, they would just be a band of paranoiacs but, with it, they can be a united family capable of intimidating the whole world with nuclear weapons again.

Belarus' true economic interests do not always coincide with Russia's. It is appropriate that this is understood better by people who directly define the country's economic policy. Ivan Shakola, president of a state-owned national food concern, writes that *"Russia has also been implementing a package of defensive measures since 1998. In spite of our common customs zone, it has taken steps to defend its own market from products manufactured in Belarusian sweet factories using imported raw materials. We can also expect more of this kind of exclusionist policies in the near future."*⁷ Then he adds — *"Is it better to*

¹ *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 7 (2000), p. 13.

² *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 6 (2000), p. 5.

³ *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 6 (2000), p. 188.

⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 7 (2000), p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

support our own domestic sugar production, or imports from Poland, Russia or Lithuania?.”⁸

One must assume that this Manichean split personality will also be defining the Belarusian leadership's policies in future. On the one hand, Belarusians will feel what they want to feel – political *rapprochement* with Russia will continue, ending in complete unification of the political systems. On the other hand, all future behaviour will be dictated by Belarusian economic interests (and the regime's own economic interests).

9.

In the minds of Belarusian ideologists, “The West” stands for the complete opposite of “Russia.” “Russia” is familiar, but “The West” is alien. “Russia” brings good and enlightenment, but “The West” brings evil and hopelessness. “Russia” will give the world a future, but “The West” is preparing global destruction. Thus, these ideologists' inability to see the world the way it really is, not just in black-and-white, is reaching its climax.

Moreover, these home-grown Velichko and Lepyoshka types have very little idea what “The West” means. To them, the concept usually signifies the active prohibition of the Soviet system of values in all areas of society, plus a complete rejection of the Soviet way of life. Of course, this concept is not taken geographically, but in a purely ideological sense. “The West” is a collective aggressor composed not of separate countries, but one hostile political bloc.

The fact is that Belarusian ideological workers are also under-informed because “The West” is a unified concept to them as well. None of them ever states directly that Germany, Holland or Spain are the West. The USA, however, is an exception to this rule, and is really seen as a separate partner [of the West].

In the eyes of the Belarusian ideologists, the frontline countries of “The West” are Ukraine and Poland. To them, each of these countries represents a highly undesirable development model in its own way, and all appropriate means are used to discredit them. Therefore, Vladimir Velichko casts doubts on how democratic the last Ukrainian elections were, saying “*During the recent Ukrainian elections, Leonid Kuchma's team successfully applied Yeltsin's sure-fire 'reformist president versus red revenge' scheme*”; Igor Akshevskiy criticises Ukrainian agricultural policy — “*Thank God our fields aren't overgrown with weeds like in neighbouring Ukraine, but are bountiful and bear rewards for the diligent hands of the peasants*”;⁹ and Bronislav Sprynchan, a poet of Ukrainian descent, wants to change the country's name from “Ukraine” to “Malorussia” (= “*Little Russia*”):

*And yet, a 20-year old Malorussian,
Heeding the wisdom of your testaments,
Has bound his soul to thee, Belarus,
And fallen in love with thy people and land.*

10

Belarusian State University lecturer Mecheslav Chasnovskiy specialises in unusually tendentious coverage of Polish economic reforms. His invective is also directed against “Polish reformers” (“*Polish reformers have failed to grasp that liberal market economies operate differently in the USA and Western European countries*”) and “liberal platforms” in general (“*... liberal platforms have not even justified themselves economically, despite the fact that those in favour of maintaining the liberal status quo claim them to be a success*”).¹¹

Chasnovskiy claims his point of view is based on his “concern for simple people.” He writes — “*The ones who lost the most due to the reforms are people who were guaranteed social security and employment by the previous system, particularly workers and peasants*.”¹² But this was not enough for him, and by the end of his article he had expanded his arguments to state — “*During the reforms, workers and peasants were the first to lose out. The interesting thing is that craftsmen and entrepreneurs also felt they had suffered when they started finding it hard to buy groceries. All these losses negated the great hopes of society. Practically everyone who thought the transition from totalitarianism to democracy was positive ended up losing out*.”¹³

So there you have it. People “*who thought the transition from totalitarianism to democracy was positive*” lost out. This loss, Chasnovskiy feels, was accompanied by a whole nightmare in which “*About two-thirds of the adult population were forced to try and make ends meet — their consumption of electricity, hot water and heating went down, they had to deny themselves any luxuries, repair old things instead of buying new ones (or buy only discount goods), turn to their relatives for support, spend their savings on food, and refuse hire-purchase or other benefits. They lost their aims and plans in life, and began living more modestly from day to day*.”¹⁴

Chasnovskiy sees the reduced role of the state in the national economy as the reason behind the Polish “economic disaster” — “*... The Poles... have lost their buying power because the state has refused to offer them security and guaranteed employment*.” Chasnovskiy's reasoning is that — “*As a result, market mechanisms actually made it harder to achieve a high degree of social solidarity and consolidation. If anything, they probably contributed to increased insecurity and [social] differentiation*.”¹⁵

⁷ Ibid., No. 7 (2000), p. 26.

⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹ Ibid., No. 6 (2000), p. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

¹¹ Ibid., No. 6 (2000), p. 104.

¹² Ibid., No. 6, p. 105.

¹³ Ibid., No. 6, p. 109.

¹⁴ Ibid., No. 6, p. 106.

¹⁵ Ibid., No. 6, pp. 105–108.

However, Chasnovskiy's strained falsifications cannot compare to the things Belarusians think and say about the United States of America. Here, "economic arguments" fade into the background, and nationalist rhetoric and psychoses take over. Prof. Yuriy Kharin, PhD, head of the Belarusian State University of Radio and Computer Engineering's philosophy department, informs us in alarm that — *"Violence has become a model in their daily lives of some school-children. In the USA, there have been numerous cases where adolescents have shot their own classmates."* To Prof. Vitaliy Smirnov, head of the Belarusian Presidential Management Academy's foreign policy department, there is no difference between fascist Germany and the USA today, which he considers to be "neo-fascist" — *"National ideas are born out of the development of society, become a mass phenomenon, and are then put into practice. This is how fascism and the fascist ideology appeared in Germany, and how the USA's current neo-fascism and world dictatorship ideology emerged."*¹⁶

Vitaliy Smirnov's verdict is clear — *"... Western thought offers us no alternative, but dictates and imposes its templates and notions of 'progressive development' onto us with no heed for concepts like national sovereignty, statehood, love for one's homeland, patriotism, national pride, etc. Behind all this lies the triumph and craftiness of the victors. It is in their interests to give us inferiority and historical guilt complexes, and turn us into the outcasts of modern civilisation."*¹⁷

Vasiliy Novikov, PhD, suspects that "The West" is guilty for the slowing of social progress in post-Soviet republics — *"... A small group of Western countries is currently defending its egotistical interests left, right, and centre; creeping in disguised as new concepts, and attempting to force its system of values onto the rest of mankind."* Then he expresses his hope that *"... crossing the threshold into the third millennium, mankind will say goodbye forever to the Western European mentality paradigm which has been forming throughout the entire existence of bourgeois Western society. This is essential if true human values are to develop and replace the limited illusions and interests of class and civilisation."*¹⁸

The Belarusian ideologists' claims against "The West" vary greatly. For example, Prof. Valentin Akulov, PhD, is concerned by the "superfluous" law-abiding nature of Western citizens — *"In the past, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union created 'new men,' but modern Western democracy produces 'new citizens' — robot men who live according to the program they call their legislative system."* Without stating his sources, Kandidat of Philosophy Fyodor Prikhodko, head of the political science and philosophy department of the

Belarusian Agricultural Academy, attributes the following statement to one famous American politician — *"Responsible Western politicians are coming to the conclusion that they must change their countries' strategies. For example, US vice-president Albert Gore admitted that 'Consumerist market civilisation has not only exhausted itself but, what's more, it has driven American society into a dead end, and is leading our planet towards its destruction.'"*¹⁹ Surely this is a falsification?

Heightened international isolation always causes increased paranoia inside a country. Undoubtedly, the unofficial leader of "paranoid tendencies" in official Belarusian ideology must be *Belaruskaya Dumka's* editor Vladimir Velichko. According to him, "The West" has launched an "undeclared war" against Belarus — *"An undeclared war which has entered the public consciousness, and is being waged on several fronts at once. These include the destructive economic reforms they are imposing, the flood of sects, youth drug abuse, the prevention of childbirth under the naive pretext of 'family planning', etc..."*²⁰

This statement clearly shows that Belarusian ideologists are trying to blame the country's internal problems on external influences. The saddest thing is that this kind of interpretative model still finds its sup-



Happening of journalists, 1996.

porters in Belarusian society. It is most convenient to offload one's entire burden of responsibilities onto someone else. On a personal level, this is nothing more than a return to infanthood, but if it is on a national level, this kind of attitude tends to get marred by xenophobia and nationalism. The quasi-logical syllogisms in support of this read approximately as follows: a) the country's economic, cultural, political and other systems are near-perfect; b) system break-

¹⁶ Ibid., No. 7–8.

¹⁷ Ibid., No. 7, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., No. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., No. 6.

²⁰ Ibid., No. 6, p. 10.

downs occur exclusively due to outside forces; c) it is therefore only possible to stabilise the system once those forces have been neutralised. Only a fool would be able to find any signs of perfection in the Belarusian state system, however. Like all authoritarian regimes based on a pyramidal control system, it is in a constant state of crisis, but overcoming this crisis would mean destroying the state model.

10.

Belarusian ideologists also loathe "The West" because it supports the independent press and opposition in a variety of ways. Vladimir Velichko confirms this, saying — "... Western countries are not mean when it comes to the electronic and printed media. In the past, our press was looked after by the CPSU, but today the "independent" publications are completely dependent on Oligarch Oligarchson, and have turned into a collective disinformers, manipulators and agent provocateurs."²¹

Belarusian political reality is unique because, from the ruling regime's point of view, independent media are equally or perhaps even more of a threat than conventional political opposition. They are the main target for Lukashist propaganda, and every reasonably important Belarusian ideologist feels it their duty to drag the independent media's name through the mud.

For example, the aforementioned Yuriy Kharin stresses the spiritual damage caused by the opposition media — "*The mass media (especially television) are cultivating an atmosphere in the society of the CIS which is giving rise to reduced moral standards, irrational thinking, and the dehumanisation of culture.*"²² Belarusian State University tutor and Kandidat of Philosophy Yegor Konyev is convinced that the media are also subverting the Belarusian economy — "*As you know, the lack of foreign investment in our economy is the most damaging consequence of the "information vacuum" which the foreign media have created around Belarus.*"²³ Vsevolod Yanchevskiy, chairman of the Byelorussian Patriotic Youth Union, almost puts the non-state media on a par with the political opposition — "... *In Belarus, the combined strength of the anti-presidential media is much greater than that of the state media. The most popular Russian TV channels and more than ten Belarusian opposition publications have been denigrating Belarus and its authorities with painful regularity for several years now... The opposition periodically organises small demonstrations in Minsk, but they are never broken up unless someone starts throwing sticks and stones at the militia.*"²⁴ Newly-hatched "House of Representatives" deputy Yanchevskiy is obviously lying when he says

"in Belarus, the combined strength of the anti-presidential media is much greater than that of the state media," and this can be put down to his personal devotion to the president.

These remarks by Belarusian ideologists are supposed to make you think the independent media are just foreign bodies in our society, inspired artificially by "The West," not objective social processes. In so doing, they exaggerate "The West's" role in all kinds of ways. Not only is it maintaining its presence on the Russo-Belarusian Union State's information market, but it is also expanding. "*Isn't this why those Babitsky types who criticise the Russian troops in Chechnya have been multiplying like Colorado beetles recently?*", exclaims Vladimir Velichko poetically. One can sense his KGB training by the way he speaks about the Belarusian opposition — "*This method... is being used so blatantly by our noisy opposition. Out of their minds with freedom, these people create permanent confrontations, duping any journalists with a pathological penchant for "hot stories," inflaming anti-Belarusian feelings in the former Soviet Union and abroad, provoking the isolation of their own country, and mocking its recent history. Seemingly harmless political propagandist events are in fact immoral, because they ruin friendships with other nations and spread delirium.*"²⁵

It is revealing that the ideological machine sees the "Belarusian opposition" as a fairly homogenous mass or "dark force" (like "The West"). Belarusian ideologists use the same tools for the "Belarusian opposition" as they do for the "The West." Valentin Akulov states — "*Who could doubt, for example, that the people and the people alone have the right to decide how to organise their own home, how to live in it, who to make friends with, and who they should just stay on good terms with. I don't even think the Shushkevich/Grib/Sharetskiy trio of former parliamentary speakers would argue with that. But when it came down to a referendum on vital issues for the people, it turned out that the people were "sick" and "dumb." Not people at all, just a "herd of cattle."*"²⁶

It is very difficult to read *Belaruskaya Dumka* and similar publications without feeling disgusted. The world has changed, but Belarusian ideologists have remained exactly the way they used to be — brutal, incorrigible, bloodthirsty, and low on intellect. Since they are more like common ignoramuses than social scientists, they have never managed to surpass their ideological predecessors or those who inspired them, e.g. Black Hundred members like Salanevich. Moreover, it sometimes seems as if Lukashenka is playing a devilishly subtle game — by giving the ideologists *carte blanche* for their extremist displays of

²¹ Ibid., No. 6, p. 9.

²² Ibid., No. 8, p. 42.

²³ Ibid., No. 8, p. 142.

²⁴ Ibid., No. 7, p. 15.

²⁵ Ibid., No. 6, p. 9. N.B. Andrey Babitsky is a *Radio Liberty* journalist who was arrested by Russians in Chechnya in January 2000 for "participating in an illegal armed formation," but the real motive was presumably the anti-war tone of his reports on the events.

²⁶ *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 6, p. 123.



xenophobia and nationalism, he appears to be a "moderate," "rational" politician in comparison.

11.

Whatever they might say, the Soviet Union has been gone for a long time, but the independent Republic of Belarus is still alive in spite of all its woes. Belarusian ideologists will still need to re-evaluate the Soviet legacy one day in order to come up with promising methods for developing the country.

It turns out that Vsevolod Yanchevskiy, who has yet to turn 25, likes to dwell on the "Brezhnevian-Andropovian Soviet Union" — *"Life wasn't so bad in the Brezhnevian-Andropovian Soviet Union, just fairly boring. We discovered later that it wasn't so bad compared to the perestroika and post-perestroika periods, but we were already annoyed by the boredom before that."*²⁷

Belarusian ideologists are also faced with the task of showing the current political regime in a positive light. They are prepared to contrast it with the Soviet regime in order to make it seem a little better — *"We should not evaluate our political regime according to whether it is liked or corresponds to someone's ideas about democracy, but should concentrate on its newer components instead, since they are more progressive than those of the previous regime."* The author of this remark, Fyodor Prikhodko, adds — *"... Here, we will never have communism and the plenty it promised, or capitalism like in the West."*²⁸

The new "more progressive" system that is being built in Belarus could be described not just as "market socialism,"²⁹ but also as "social-capitalism." This was hinted at by Nikolay Yegorenkov, head of the international relations department at Gomseimash (the Gomel state agricultural machinery plant) — *"Social-capitalism is the same social system that Lenin described as the 'civilised cooperatives' system, that is to say socialism."*³⁰

Belarusian ideologists obviously fail to comprehend that they are discrediting the regime when they write that the political order being built in Belarus does not conform to generally-accepted "ideas about democracy" or "foreign stereotypes" of "human rights, democracy and sovereignty."³¹ History has seen a great number of regimes which did not conform to generally-accepted "ideas about democracy," including German nazism, Italian fascism, and Soviet communism. Every single one of them rejected "foreign stereotypes" of "human rights, democracy and sovereignty," but we all know how they ended up.

Naturally, "social-capitalist" Belarus ought to have its own "national idea." Fyodor Prikhodko puts it this way — *"... Belarus is currently going through a*

period in its history where it needs a national idea just like a lost traveller needs a path. The Belarusian idea is something both the right and the left, believers and atheists could agree on; something that would be supported by Belarusians, Russians, Jews and Poles alike — citizens of all nationalities living in the republic." Note that, strictly speaking, this is not so much "Belarusian" or a "national idea," but some third kind of "subnational" concept designed to unite "the multinational Belarusian people" in social solidarity and material prosperity — *"... The basis for the Belarusian idea should be a desire to strengthen human potential... Our basic values should be a healthy way of life, decent education, effective health care services, and reasonable [personal] requirements."*³²

In order to achieve social, political and national harmony, a few more decisive measures must be applied: banning all political parties, cutting ourselves off from Europe (Larisa Yakovenko writes — *"So far, we are poor relatives, if not simply strangers to Europe — Our Common Home," and this will be the case for a long time to come. This is because we were raised in different circumstances and live in different conditions, with our Belarusian Slavonic mentality and Russian Orthodox religion"*), and making Russian Orthodoxy the state religion (in Boris Lepyoshka's view — *"... Russian Orthodoxy is the choice of many centuries, like the orientation towards Eastern values in the civilised sense"*)).

Just what kind of future are the Belarusian ideologists preparing? One where Belarus would be Russian-speaking and Russian Orthodox, free from political parties and independent media; one where Belarusian society would not transform into a civil society, but stay just the way it is — as a conglomerate of internally- and externally-dependent people.

It depends on us alone as to whether Belarus will really develop along these lines or not.

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²⁷ *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 7, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 6, pp. 38–40.

²⁹ A famous quote from Lukashenka, circa 1997.

³⁰ *Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 6, p. 44.

³¹ Cf. Vitaliy Smirnov — *"... We should not fear false accusations of violating human rights, democracy and sovereignty. We should have our own attitudes towards these concepts, and they should not depend on imposed foreign stereotypes"* (*Belaruskaya Dumka*, No. 7, p. 24).

³² *Ibid.*, No. 6, pp. 38–40.