

Consolidated Authority
Transitions on Line, 20 June 2003

He may have made Belarus an international pariah, but Lukashenka's ideology--Soviet Belarusian nationalism--is flourishing.

by Taras Kuzio

TORONTO, Canada--With Serbia's former President Slobodan Milosevic in the Hague, there is perhaps only one pariah state left in Europe: Belarus. Since 2000, Ukraine has been in the doghouse, but with a large and active opposition and a split parliament, it maintains a political culture of sorts.

While Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma plots a strategy to take him to a secure retirement, in Belarus, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is on the advance, not on the retreat. It is an advance shown again in recent weeks by fresh pressure on the media and crackdowns in the classroom. And it is a steady advance: Freedom House, which publishes annual assessments of freedom across the world, has found that democratization has been slowing every year since 1997, and the rule of law weakening.

To Freedom House, Belarus now belongs in the same category as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, states where there is a "consolidated autocracy." The similarities with Central Asia should not surprise us. In the Soviet era, the most placid republics, where there was little or no dissent, were Belarus and the Central Asian republics. The largest number of prisoners of conscience in the Brezhnev era were Ukrainians. Belarus, by contrast, produced only one dissident. This perhaps suggests that Belarus can expect a long future of oppression.

But the definition is flawed and, if the nature of the political system is different, so too might be the country's future.

Still, as the phrase "consolidated autocracy" suggests, it is easier to define Belarus as a regime than to try to plot its position on the left-right spectrum. It is not a Communist government, as in Moldova, but it is clearly Sovietophile. There is a difference, as the difference between Belarus's two Communist parties suggests: One supports Luaskenka, the other opposes him.

The Lukashenka regime draws on both the Soviet and the Soviet Belarusian legacies. The Belarusian flag is the same as the Soviet Belarusian banner--minus its Communist symbols. The new Belarusian anthem, adopted last year, is also the Soviet Belarusian "My Belaruttsy" composed in 1955, though without the references to Vladimir Lenin. (The Russian anthem also uses the music of the Soviet anthem with new lyrics.)

The regime also draws its appeal from Soviet Belarusian nationalism. Pride in Belarus' achievements when it was a constituent republic of the USSR is an intrinsic part of the Lukashenka ideology. The association with Soviet power is natural: Soviet Belarus was home to a large part of the Soviet military-industrial complex.

This Soviet Belarusian identity and ideology is rejected by the national democratic and, to a lesser extent, the centrist opposition. To the opposition, Lukashenka is little more than a Soviet Communist because of his preference for the Russian rather than the Belarusian language, his use of a variant of the Soviet Belarusian flag, his re-introduction of Soviet history textbooks, and the homage he pays to Russia as "big brother." Worst of all, Lukashenka refuses to acknowledge any negative aspects of Soviet rule, including the crimes committed against Belarusians in the Stalin era.

In the foreign domain, Lukashenka has shown many of the traditional elements of Soviet xenophobia. The domestic opposition is financed by the West, he says, a claim that was regularly made in the Soviet era. NATO is an aggressive bloc, and Lukashenka continually warns Belarusians to be vigilant against an attack, again a throwback. Belarus offers diplomatic and military support to rogue states--Belarusian arms were found in Lebanon on route to Iraq and in Iraq itself--but accuses the OSCE and other Western organisations in Belarus of being fronts for Western spies and saboteurs.

In November 2002, Belarusian KGB chief Leanid Yeryn said that half of the U.S. Embassy staff in Minsk were "spies." That same month, United Civic Party leader Anatol Lyabedzka was detained leaving the U.S. Embassy and warned that his contacts with "spies" and the receipt of financial assistance could constitute an "illegal activity" and even "treason."

Along with the very evident attachment to the Soviet and Belarusian Soviet past and attitudes is Lukashenka's eastern Slavic ideology. In this ideology, religion and language are critical--and both lead to Russia. As in Russia, the state church in Belarus is the Belarusian (i.e. Russian) Orthodox Church. Its Metropolitan, who answers to the patriarch in Moscow, regularly praises Lukashenka for his Russophile and pan-eastern Slavic ideology. And indeed, in January, Lukashenka described his state ideology not as Communist, but as "Orthodox Christian." He praised the Belarusian Orthodox Church for opposing "destructive forces," cooperating with the authorities, and contributing to stability.

"Numerous benefits" have been conferred on the church, and the state in return enjoys its cooperation. As Prime Minister Gennady Novitsky said after a new agreement with the church was signed on 15 June, "cooperation between the state and the Orthodox Church" has now been placed "on a systematic level."

The Russian language enjoyed a similar elevation in 1996, when, at Lukashenka's suggestion, a referendum turned Russian into an official (i.e. de facto state) language alongside Belarusian. To Lukashenka, like his Ukrainian Communist allies, Russian is the language of modernity, industrialization, and urbanization, which are all, in turn, associated with a positive view of Soviet rule. The opposite is, of course, true for opponents of Lukashenka: They see Soviet rule in a negative light precisely because one of its impacts was Russification.

Three years later, Lukashenka found some fresh justification for championing Russian. The 1999 census indicated that while ethnic Belarusians represented 81.1 percent of the population, for 58.6 percent of the population the language

"normally spoken at home" was Russian. Only one-third used Belarusian, primarily in rural areas.

PHILIAS AND PHOBIAS

The anti-Semitism evident in the Lukashenka regime draws on these two--Soviet and pan-Slavic--traditions. The Soviet authorities in Soviet Belarus were particularly noted for their "anti-Zionist" propaganda crusades, which were little more than thinly veiled anti-Semitism. Lukashenka's support for Arab rogue states is an outgrowth of his anti-Israeli (Zionist) ideology. Belarusian newspapers and publishers have also achieved a reputation for publishing anti-Semitic literature, including the notorious tsarist forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Russian fascist parties, such as Russian National Unity, have been allowed to operate openly in Belarus and have been involved in violence against the opposition. The effect at street level is that the worst desecration of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues and expressions of race hate in the Commonwealth of Independent States have been in Belarus.

Contrast this to neighboring Ukraine, which Jewish organizations have commended as the CIS state that has adopted the most positive policies towards Jews.

The combination of Sovietophilia and Slavophilia have helped Lukashenka find allies in both Ukraine and Russia. But Lukashenka's Russophilia creates tensions with his Ukrainian allies, while his Soviet Belarusian nationalism conflicts with the attitudes of his Russian support. In Ukraine, even the most Russophile of Ukrainian centrist political parties do not support membership of the Russian-Belarusian union. This has meant that the only major political party that admires Lukashenka is the Communist Party. After Lukashenka's re-election in a fraudulent election in September 2001, only the leader of Ukraine's Communists, Piotr Symonenko, sent a congratulatory note.

In Russia, Lukashenka has found supporters more widely dispersed across the political spectrum--though his supporters are particularly vociferous on the extreme left and extreme right. However, most Russian political forces and elites still look upon Belarusians--and Ukrainians--as wayward Russians; in other words, their views have not evolved since the tsarist era.

In contrast, in Belarus and Ukraine, the Soviet era did see an evolution in attitudes. In neither country do Sovietophile or Communist forces see their nationalities as wayward Russians. Instead, they are separate peoples, albeit kin to the Russians.

These competing views provide one explanation for the failure of Belarus and Russia to create a union, though one has been proposed ever since 1995. It also explains Lukashenka's anger and outright rejection of Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposal in summer 2002 to hold a joint referendum for the two states to be merged into one. As Lukashenka said at the time, even Josef Stalin never proposed such a step.

Lukashenka's pan-eastern Slavic ideology therefore contradicts his Soviet Belarusian nationalism. While seeking "union" with Russia, Lukashenka wishes to defend his republic from the very same country. The same contradiction is true of the Orthodox Church. Although it is the state church in Belarus and

Orthodoxy contributes to the state ideology, the Orthodox Church itself has views about Belarusians closer to attitudes in Russia than in Belarus. The Belarusian (Russian) Orthodox Church undoubtedly supported Putin's proposals for a merger of both states because it too believes Belarusians are little more than "White Russians."

This, and many other contradictions (such as the re-introduction of a Communist ideology devoid of Lenin), are a reflection of the contradictions inherent in Lukashenka's regime.

CONSOLIDATED AUTHORITY, NOT AUTOCRACY

A Soviet ideology does not, though, mean that Lukashenka practices Soviet-style totalitarianism.

Instead, he is an authoritarian who seeks control over all institutions. In September 2002, he scored a notable success, gaining control of the Trade Union Federation of Belarus and making the former deputy head of the presidential administration, Leanid Kozik, its head.

Besides the trade unions, Lukashenka has looked to two other "pillars" of support--local Soviets (councils) and a new Komsomol-style organisation, the Belarusian National Youth Organisation, which was created in September 2002 and began to obtain large financial support from the government in January 2003. Activists from the youth organization gain a voice in the ministries of information, culture, education, agriculture, sports and tourism, labor, and social security.

On 19 May, Young Pioneers paraded in Minsk, the traditional Pioneer Friendship Day in the USSR. In the USSR, all children aged 9-14 were forced to be Pioneers. There may not be 900,000 Pioneers as there were in the days of Soviet Belarus, but, with 300,000 members, the Belarusian National Young Pioneer Organization is already a substantial force.

Lukashenka meanwhile has few pillars of independence to contend with. Parliament is already his: Belarus is not "mature" enough for political parties, Lukashenka has said. And when it does mature, "We will do everything to introduce a civilized type of relations among political parties in Belarus."

Members of the judicial system are already screened, through the National Collegium of Lawyers. As Lukashenka has admitted, Belarus has no independent lawyers, something he believes is good because it means less corruption.

The media, meanwhile, are also tightly controlled, especially state television. As Ryhor Kisel, the head of State Channel 2 (and former head of State Channel 1), reportedly explained: "We cannot allow the privatization of ideology, or subjects and objects of ideology. This should remain under the state's influence."

The media are not the only transmitters of ideology. Under a 2002 decree, "information and advisory groups" were set up to conduct ideological work among the population. They are now active in factories, military units, educational institutions and residential neighbourhoods. And once a year, millions of

Belarusians now volunteer their services to spring-clean their country in a subbotnik, a throwback to the Soviet era that still exists elsewhere only in the autonomous Russian republic of Bashkortostan.

Education, meanwhile, has maintained its Soviet-era function, to propagate state policies and "ideology" to pupils and students. In March, new heads took over at the State Pedagogical University and the Presidential Research Institute of Public Administration, briefed to step up "ideological work." And at a seminar in May, Education Minister Pyotr Bryhadzin told educators how to organize their ideological work.

The task of state-run universities, according to the minister, is to inculcate loyalty to President Lukashenka and his policies. University professors who do not agree with those policies should be expelled or resign, Lukashenka has demanded. In June, his demands began to be acted upon, and in the 2003-2004 academic year Soviet-style ideological instructors will be introduced, their task being to supervise students.[LINK to Rapping Teachers' Knuckles, 16 June]

So far, the main points of resistance have been the Academy of Sciences and the Writers Union, which is a hotbed of support for the national democratic opposition.

Though Lukashenka is consolidating his authority, this is not the "consolidated autocracy" of Central Asia. Opposition may be limited in Belarus and control of the media tight, but Lukashenka tolerates a greater degree of public space for opponents and the media than Central Asia's rulers.

What Lukashenka has therefore done is to establish a Soviet-style regime in Belarus, without personally belonging to any political party and without creating a totalitarian system. The contours of this regime are authoritarian, neo-Communist, Russophile, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic.

The challenge for Lukashenka now is how to sustain this politically, socially, and economically, and how to survive as a pariah internationally.