

Political Sphere in Belarus: from Marxism-Leninism to Political Science

Like its native country, the discipline of political science in Belarus will take decades to outgrow its Soviet past. After all, most of the country's contemporary social science luminaries were brought up on the volumes of scientific communism, memorizing the blessings of the socialist revolution and the proletarian dictatorship, and today force-feed their own students with courses like the "Ideology of the Belarusian State." As a result, the spectre of communist past still haunts the Belarusian academia.

Overcoming that "spectre" is what inspired five young researchers at the Belarusian State University to found *Palitychnaja Sfera* (*Political Sphere*), the only professional journal of political studies in Belarus. Since its inception in 2001, the journal has evolved into a dynamic and professional research institute geared toward acquiring new knowledge and presenting it at the academic and political levels, as well as to the public at large. Today, *Political Sphere* is, first and foremost, a community of political and social scientists.

"Our main focus is the gradual formation of a Belarusian school of political studies," explained Andrei Kazakevich, director of the Institute, in a Feb. 15 interview. *Political Sphere* aims to represent achievements of Belarusian political science without political and ideological limitations, overcome negative consequences of authoritarian rule for the Belarusian academic community and society, and maintain a dialogue between political scientists, the public, and the

private institutions. *Political Sphere* also hopes to encourage the study of Belarusian politics, stimulate research and analytical activities in Belarus, and integrate Belarusian scientists in the international academic community, according to the "Concept note" on the Institute's web site.

This spring, *Political Sphere* is completing a research project on the evolution of Belarusian national identity in 1990-2008. Nation, national project, concept of nation, and ethnic conflicts are the focus for the upcoming issue of the journal. "The topic is very important for Belarus, which is undergoing the process of nation-building, and where the national identity is fragmented," said Kazakevich.

The journal *Political Sphere* receives submissions from the researchers in Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, and the United States, but most of its contents comes from Belarusian authors, according to Kazakevich. All articles pass an anonymous review. Sometimes the institute publishes the so-called "English issues," compiled from the most interesting articles translated into English, said the Institute's researcher and board member Siarhei Kuzniatsou in a Feb. 16 e-mail. The publication's primary audience is political scientists, students, analysts, and observers. While *Political Sphere* may also be of interest for politicians and government officials, "they feel themselves smart enough without such readings," noted Dzianis Melyantsou, a researcher and board member of the Institute, in a Feb. 15 e-mail.

Having experienced the "idiosyncrasies" of Belarusian academia firsthand, members of the Institute identify the absence of empirical research and the isolation from international academia as the main obstacles to the growth of political science in Belarus. These obstacles have been both the main reason for the journal's existence and the primary concern of the founders of *Political Sphere*, who in 2005 moved the journal to the European Humanities University in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania, due to the increasing suppression at home.

According to Kazakevich, the move is partial, and Minsk remains the center for the scientific community associated with the journal. In 2009, Political Sphere became independent from EHU, but remains registered in Lithuania.

The *Political Sphere* team consists of 12-15 permanent authors and researchers, all of whom are political scientists and sociologists between the ages of 25 and 35. Some of them are associated with Belarusian State University and National Academy of Sciences, while others received their MA and PhD degrees abroad, according to Melyantsou. Andrei Yahorau, a researcher and a board member at the Institute, said in a Feb. 16 e-mail the team's age corresponds to the age of the Belarusian political science, which started developing only in the recent 15-20 years. According to Yahorau, the team's interest in political science emerged as a result of the necessity to understand the political contradictions of the 90s. With contemporary Belarus being a "barely known state from the scientific view point," we are excited about discovering and describing every piece of Belarus' political reality," he said.

The difficult conditions of Belarus' social sciences have affected the career trajectories of all members of Institute. "It is very difficult (and often impossible) to defend a dissertation, get a job at the university that will correspond to one's qualification and career plans, undertake independent research, or officially publish one's work," said Yahorau.

"For the authoritarian regime in Belarus, research on politics is a taboo," Kazakevich said. "Political science is squeezed out by ideology, and 'politics' is considered as an undesirable and risky research subject. Belarus' conservative and patronizing academic community is isolated from its western equivalents, and there is no dynamic or incentives for creative work." Kazakevich said the discipline of political science has never become quite legitimate in Belarus. "Its main difference with the West is the orientation on

translating current knowledge and speculative musings. Empirical research and attention to details is lacking," he added.

Despite the difficulties the team faces, *Political Sphere* aspires to take the place it deserves in the Belarusian academic community as well as integrate into the international academic field. Yahorau also said, "To be accepted as researchers and professors, to prepare the next generations of Belarusian political scientists, to form a vibrant scholarly community, and to discover the political reality in Belarus for ourselves, our country and the world, is our greatest ambition."

VC

The article originally appeared in Spring 2010 Belarusian Review (Vol. 22, No. 1).