

# Faces of Belarusian politics: political archaeologist Ihar Marzalyuk

Almost everything about Ihar Marzalyuk, a rising star in the [Belarusian establishment](#), contradicts stereotypes held abroad about the Belarusian state. While he is definitely not a liberal democrat, he has even less in common with grey, Soviet-style bureaucrats. With his criticism of Russian chauvinists and love for medieval Belarusian history, he embodies Minsk's ideological evolution over the past decade.

On 28 September, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka in a rare move appointed a Belarusian-speaking official the dean of Mahilyou State University. Some media, like *Nasha Niva*, connected the appointment to Marzalyuk's growing influence. Reportedly, the new head of Mahilyou University has ties to Marzalyuk.

## A standard oppositionist's biography

The beginning of Marzalyuk's biography sounds similar to biographies of leading Belarusian opposition politicians. He was the last generation that came of age under the Soviet Union. He has a strong interest in Belarusian history and comes from Mahilyou province. [A study](#) by the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies shows this region has the strongest Belarusian identity in the country. At the peak of Gorbachev's *Perestroika*, he started speaking Belarusian openly and joined opposition movements.



Image: Arche

After becoming a professional archaeologist, historian and administrator at Mahilyou State University, Marzalyuk rose to prominence following his 2009 book, which criticises nationalist concepts of Belarusian history. He did not return to Soviet-era concepts but expressed views aimed at developing an ideological foundation for an independent Belarus. Even Marzalyuk's son, Alhierd, got his name in honour of a ruler in the [Great Duchy of Litva](#), a medieval state where the ancestors of Belarusians played the leading role.

## **Minsk as a centre of the Russian world**

Marzalyuk's ideas raised interests within Belarusian government. By the late 2000s, it was deemed necessary to fend off Moscow's increasing ideological pressure. An eyewitness told Belarus Digest about a row behind the scene of a conference in Minsk in December 2010 between Marzalyuk and Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian philosopher with links to the Kremlin.

While Dugin reportedly insisted that the so-called Russian

world should have only one pole, i.e., Moscow, Marzalyuk argued that it should be multipolar, reserving a place for Belarus as one of such poles. Moreover, his other writings and speeches imply that Kyiv should be another centre, too. In effect, this turns the concept of the “Russian world” upside down: from a tool of Moscow’s domination in Eastern Europe to a model of coexistence in the region.



Marzalyuk on a parliamentary visit to Oman. Image: [omantourism.gov.om](http://omantourism.gov.om)

Confronting Belarusian nationalists and [Russian imperialists](#), Marzalyuk proved himself as one of the few persons in the [Belarusian political establishment](#) willing and able to level sophisticated responses at opponents. No wonder in 2012 he got elected—or perhaps better to say selected—into the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament. For four years, he served on the prestigious Commission for international affairs and national security.

Despite getting into the parliament, he kept speaking Belarusian and expressing original views. In August 2016 meeting voters in Mahilyou, he commented on Russia’s annexation of Crimea and activities in Eastern Ukraine. “Russia has done a terrible thing. What had existed at the

level of mass consciousness, the feeling of East Slavic commonality, of East Slavic unity was destroyed in one day," he said.

## Ideologue-practitioner

Marzalyuk does not conceal his interest in politics, even in its most basic forms. Two cases illustrate this point. First, he left the Council of the Republic – the upper (and more closed) chamber of Belarusian parliament—essentially a political sinecure. Instead, [in 2016](#), he went on to be elected to the lower chamber, the House of Representatives. It offers more opportunities to publicly articulate one's views and even engage in political debates—as much as it is possible in the existing political system.



Ihar Marzalyuk talking to protesters at a rally in Mahilyou in March 2017. Image: TUT.by.

Secondly, when in spring 2017 the protests broke out over the government's attempt to tax people who were not officially employed, Marzalyuk became the only high-level Belarusian official to meet the protesters to discuss their grievances.

It seems Marzalyuk wishes to profile himself in Belarusian

political establishment as a man of direct political action. After all, he has to compete with other ideologists of the current government, like [Vadzim Hihin](#), who also generate intellectually sophisticated products. Indeed, what makes Marzalyuk's unique in this power game is his willingness to meet people on the street and readily talk to independent media.

Marzalyuk makes a point of his right wing, conservative views. He emphasises his coming to them after participating in activities of Nationalist Belarusian People's Front and Social-Democrat Party.

While articulating his views of a Belarusian national idea in 2014, he openly referred to certain views held by Vyacheslav Lypynsky, a conservative politician active in the short-lived, independent Ukrainian state after WWI known for his criticisms of socialism and ethnic nationalism. In addition, Marzalyuk picked up Lyavon Bushmar, an anti-hero of Belarusian Soviet literature as his human ideal. In Soviet times, this figure represented a negative type of hard-working, yet individualist and a narrow-minded peasant. Bushmar eventually sets fire to a local collective farm.

His views of contemporary Europe follow the same lines. As Marzalyuk said in an interview to the European radio for Belarus in February 2013, "My European ideals are in the past—I prefer the Victorian British Empire. Not because they were colonisers, but they had a more honest position. Europe is sick with socialism in the worst sense of the word. Hence all their [Europeans'] problems."



Internal Minister Shunevich inaugurating a monument to the policeman of Tsarist times in March 2017. Image: Belarus.by

Some other top officials hold similar conservative, statist views. Foreign Minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) chose Bismarck as his ideal statesman. And even while Internal Minister [Ihar Shunevich](#) might throw on the uniform of a Stalin-era police officer for a parade, he can also be found personally designing and inaugurating a monument for Imperial Russian policemen.

## Paving the way for a compromise in society?

To continue the consolidation of an independent Belarusian state, a dialogue between the ruling elites and those who oppose them must develop. Marzalyuk might be the figure to facilitate such dialogue.

Indeed, there are already signs this may be happening. Persons with known affiliations to the opposition have welcomed Marzalyuk's advancement in power. Thus, former opposition politician [Valyantsin Holubeu](#) praised Marzalyuk in an interview published by *Nasha Niva* on 8 December. "I have known Ihar for a long time, back when we both participated in social

initiatives. Marzalyuk is Belarusian historian and proponent of Belarusian statehood [*dziarzhaunik*], with his own vision. All he is doing he does only for the sake of Belarusian independence," said Holubeu.

In a word, most foreign stereotypes about the Belarusian regime hold only until closer examination. Belarusian state officials and their varying ideology are a case in point. Key personalities in Belarusian government profess a conservative, statist ideology with few traces of Soviet socialism. They are also developing original concepts of Belarusian history and visions of a future which avoid unnecessary Russophobia, but also insist on the necessity of Belarusian independence. Marzalyuk rose up in the state hierarchy due to a gradual changing of the the regime's ideology. His ascendancy illustrates just how wrong are those who insist that the Belarusian state has not changed in the last two decades.