

# Political Sphere Journal Discusses the Problems of Belarusian Intellectuals

The 21st issue of the Political Sphere journal considers the current intellectual situation in Belarus in the context of its authoritarian political regime, the structural problems of the development of the Belarusian state and nation, and the constantly changing regional and global environment.

Political Sphere is a leading Belarusian academic journal in the social sciences with a special focus on politics. It has been published by the Institute of Political Studies 'Political Sphere' since 2001.□

The issue presents a **history of the formation of Marxist philosophy in early Soviet Belarus**, a review of a doctoral thesis from an official local institution that demonstrates well the ongoing crisis in the social sciences, and a poll of prominent intellectuals regarding their views on Belarusian national development. The second part of the issue extensively examines the situation of modern thinking and challenges Belarusian intellectuals .

In the Intellectual History section of the journal, Ivan Novik shows **how the Marxist paradigm was established and institutionalised in science** and education during the first decades of the Soviet regime's rule in Belarus. The article examines the influence of famous Soviet philosophers who were born in and made their academic careers in Belarus – Siamion Valfson, Salamon Kacenbohen, Ruvim Vydra, Bernard Bychoŭski – on the creation of Soviet Marxism.

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The author shows how Soviet ideology was able to obtain complete ideological domination and how those who disagreed with it were excluded from intellectual circles. But unlike in 1920s, the years of creation of Soviet Marxism and its transmission, in the 1930s Belarusian Soviet intellectuals shifted their scholarly focus to the legitimisation of Stalinist repression.

The next section presents a review of a doctoral thesis which was defended at the Faculty of International Relations of Belarusian State University. The thesis discusses [the foreign policy of Iraq in 2003-2011](#). The author of the review works as an expert at the Highest Attestation Committee – a state institution which decides on whether or not an individual will be awarded an academic degree.

In the introduction to the document Andrej Kazakievič demonstrates that in fact the Committee declined the dissertation because the author did not use a particular conspiracy theory in his argument and, to make matters more complicated, he also lacked the ideological accuracy and requisite anti-Americanism. The review, for its part, has no academic argumentation whatsoever to support its claims and demonstrates the depth of degeneration in state-run political science departments.

The discussion section of the issue presents a poll of several well-known Belarusian intellectuals on three main questions: [what is the impact of intellectuals on contemporary Belarusian society and culture?](#) What can justify the continued existence of intellectual thought in modern Belarus, as social sciences and humanities are playing an increasingly minor role in society? And what is the biggest current challenge for Belarusian intellectuals in terms of thought, the current social situation and culturally?

The rest of articles form a section that discusses the state of modern thinking in Belarus. Valiancin Akudovič in his text suggests [three stages of modern Belarusian thinking](#): the end of 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, when creation of Belarusian philosophy in the context of a national culture occurred and it dissociated itself with the prevailing institutionalised philosophy, which it viewed as dogmatic and anti-Belarusian.

In 2000-2010, intellectuals mainly focused on personal and collective projects instead of conceptual ones, especially those with a national flavour. At that time they also returned to being on good terms with the academic community. Today, Akudovič states, intellectuals do not see any real tasks to solve in front of them as philosophy is facing a major crisis and is merging with literature.

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In describing the [development of the field of philosophy in Belarus](#), Tacciana Ščytčova employs the concept of “the negative dialectics of liberation”, where liberation means de-ideologisation. Deprived of an ideological framework, philosophy in Belarus appeared to lack academic and public recognition for its activity. The collision of three contexts – global, regional and national, and a political task of formation of national project complicated the issue even more.

The intellectual arena became politicised and polarised on the grounds of language, history and culture, but all camps now face a common threat – the decline of classical philosophy, when knowledge becomes a means of seeking utility. In the end, the author leaves it an open question on whether or not philosophy can survive at all in current Belarusian regime.

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to resolve practical problems

Tacciana Vadalažskaja states that **the works of the majority of Belarusian intellectuals and researchers fail to resolve practical problems**, and the results of their activity do not reach the general public. Belarus thus lacks philosophical thinking and inquiry as a widespread practice, and it also lacks the infrastructure of thinking which can transmit it to new generations. Individuals and organisations do exist, but sustained schools of thought have not yet appeared.

Pavel Barkoŭski looks at the current situation surrounding Belarusian philosophy through the lens of a situation filled with uncertainty and dwelling at the crossroads. Belarus is in fact but a part of the intellectual periphery of Europe. Belarusian intellectuals themselves are struggling with whether they should accept eastern or western patterns of thinking and reject local approaches as being alien and provincial, which in the end promotes a kind of colonial style of thinking.

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To overcome this, the author suggest a few directions for the nation's overall intellectual development: historicise the thinking, or understand one's place between the past and future. Furthermore, people should continue working with the deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings, which vanish in modern societies. Society should also strive to rid Belarusian philosophy of its universality of thinking and contextualise it. Finally, promote philosophy as a search for the unknown and make it practical at the same time.

Ihar Padporyn in his article describes a few major problems that Belarusian official intellectuals have: thinking within a framework that the authorities have set up for them in order

to reap the benefits from regime support; trying to scientifically justify and elaborate everything that Aleksandr Lukashenka says; using Marxist-Leninist terminology to explain modern society and ignoring western theories and approaches; using outdated approaches to develop practical recommendations; writing vague and unclear texts.

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Viačaslaŭ Babrovič in his analysis uses [the analogy of a patriarchal family](#), in contrast with intellectuals who believe they have the role of an “unloved child”. He claims that the regime is not interested in critically thinking people and therefore does not support either social sciences or the humanities, criticising them for a lack of efficiency and practical results.

On the other hand, official intellectuals carry out their work only formally, having no incentives and freedom for development and creativity. Babrovič also claims that 2010 protest put a clear division among Belarusian intellectuals, those supporting and opposing the regime.

Aliaksandr Sarna defines an [intellectual as a composition of three aspects](#) – an erudite, who has certain knowledge, an expert – a person, who not only possesses knowledge but is able to apply it practically in social projects, and an intelligent – a nation’s moral authority and protector of public interest.

In practise, however, intellectuals cannot usually balance these aspects and have to act as double agents, separating private life from state and society. Otherwise, they become a function of the system. To avoid this, intellectuals should not identify themselves with business and state and instead critically discuss their operation.

The issue also publishes a number of book reviews about social sciences and history, which study Belarus and the Eastern European region.