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. His 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.
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.

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.

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.”
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 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.

Belarusian President Attempts a Divisive National Ideology

In his annual parliamentary address last week, Belarusian president Aliaksandr Lukashenka stated the need for defining a post-soviet Belarusian identity. By a way of an answer, he offered curtailing of democratic freedoms and crackdown on dissent.

This echoed his New Year 2011 speech, when Lukashenka said that only those who had voted for him at the last election were worthy Belarusians, the opponent being outcast. Rather than seeking a substantial answer to the pertinent question of Belarusian national identity and that would unite the nation
for the new century, Lukashenka started dividing the nation, and by force. Recent harsh sentences for opposition activists is yet another evidence of that.

Until recently, Lukashenka demonstrated a superbly sharp instinct for power, which helped him navigate many precarious situations in 17 years in power. That instinct led him to produce the ideology of independent Belarusian statehood. This ideology, applied with flexibility and skill, formed the corner stone of Lukashenka’s power in Belarus, much more than cheap Russian energy. His regime did rely on coercion, but also to a great degree on consent about protecting Belarusian independence, the point to which even the opposition could not but subscribe.

By the end of the 2010s, however, the idea of Belarus independence got so entrenched and constitutionalised, that another ideological boost became necessary. With a firm statehood foundation, Belarusians continued to lack a cohesive and clear sense of their national identity. Neither the 19 century nor Soviet ideas about national values and attitudes seem to hold water twenty years into the post-soviet era. Belarusians need a sense of themselves and their place in the present-day world. This, Lukashenka seems unable to offer.

It is very unlikely that purging “good” Belarusians from the “bad”, will by itself yield Lukashenka the desired national identity. It may appear easier to preach to the converted, at the first sight, but one still needs to know what to say and what vision and goals to set to the audience, beyond further social policy spoils as the president has done so far. Not is only Lukashenka’s tactics time-delaying at most as regards social progress, it is also self-destructive. The approach of keeping unity but excluding dissent is unfruitful as it can eventually eliminate everyone out down to the last man.

A unifying ideology, instead, the one that finds place for diversity and dissent, can survive through the ages, and
thrive in different economic conditions. Lukashenka does not seem comfortable with the idea though. Or perhaps he has reached his depth?

Implications

Four scenarios are likely to play out in Belarus in the short to medium term. The most likely one is the continued polarization of society and regime’s increased reliance on coercion rather than consent. This would involve economic austerity, protectionism and parazyting on the country’s transit status, under Lukashenka’s continued grip.

Another possibility is the emergence of a credible opponent that would pick up where Lukashenka has left in ideological terms and offer the society a unifying concept of national identity. A quick regime change by popular pressure will ensue, most likely in a more democratic direction. The social basis for such an ideology is consolidating, it remains to be the question of the right individual with the right agenda coming to the fore without his activity being nipped in the bud by the current Belarusian authorities.

Yet another possibility is Lukashenka’s concentrating and pulling out a credible – and unifying – national identity himself. Unless it has viable ways of incorporating dissent, however, the ideology would not last. The possibility is small, but should not be ruled out entirely. Lukashenka’s ability to play this scenario will depend on his perception of the vulnerability of his position and having an intellectual range of available solutions at hand. In this case, Belarus would become a neutral state trading equally with Europe and Russia, with a more relaxed and relatively legitimate regime, though not a liberal democracy.

The final one is Russia’s coming to buy up Belarus’s family chest, which would not, however, result in the loss of political sovereignty but will forestall any meaningful
economic reform and progress. This scenario may well combine with the first one.

As long as Lukashenka continues dividing Belarusians into the “proper” and “improper” ones, he is losing ground as a credible and genuine national leader. The more the balance of his power basis tilts from ideological consent to political coercion, the more vulnerable his hold over Belarus becomes.

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