
The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

Working Paper Series

Press Coverage of Belarus, A Newly Independent Country in Transition

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#2000-3

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An Introduction into the Situation in Belarus

In 1991 the heads of founder states of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, that is Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine met at a picturesque natural reserve Belarus is proud of, called Belovezhskaya Pushcha, to conclude that the USSR ceased to exist as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality and to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States. Prior to the event Belarus had already declared its sovereignty and independence but did so following the examples of Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine rather than seeking independence itself. When with the collapse of the Soviet Rule independence came somewhat automatically, it caught many Belarusians off-guard and unprepared. With no recent experience of economic autonomy and barely any history as a sovereign state (for Belarus spent most part of its history as a province of Russia, Poland or Lithuania), Belarus began a difficult transition toward a market-oriented economy and to greater self-determination and democracy.

Being part of the former USSR, Belarus's economy was largely dependent on Russia and other constituent republics. As the single economic system collapsed, Belarus lost its traditional markets and found itself in a deep economic crisis. Production dramatically dropped. Inflation, budget and trade deficit significantly increased. Market reforms taking place slowly and involuntarily due to Belarus's unpreparedness and habitual inertia (after 70 years of state regulation and control and directions from the center in Moscow) have resulted in the growing rate of crime, growth of corruption and "abuse of authority often with the involvement of law enforcement authorities."⁽²⁾ The absence of adequate legal system has led to increasing fraud and misconduct of economic agents. Economic destabilization, disruption of the social welfare system, and a dramatic fall in real incomes of the overwhelming majority of the population have created public distress and uncertainty, a phenomena unknown to the Soviet people in the

somewhat better 1970s and 1980s.(1) Inequality in the society has dramatically increased, as a small group of people got hold of a big proportion of the society's wealth while the majority experienced a significant fall in their living standards. This provided fertile soil for the rapid growth of the shadow economy and political radicalism, which began to threaten the security of man and society as a whole.

Political changes in Belarus known for its political apathy have been sluggish and somewhat inadvertent. Although toward the end of the 1980s, the monopoly of the Communist Party, which was the sole ruling party under the Soviet government was undermined by the emergence of other groups calling for political and economic reforms, the newly born political structures have had little impact on political life in the country and none of them has succeeded in gaining wide spread support so far. According to recent polls, among 35 political parties and movements operating at present in Belarus, it is still the Communist Party that enjoys the greatest popularity. However even the number of its admirers is rather insignificant (9.7% of the respondents). All the other parties and movements have even lower rating.(3)

The first opposition movement Belarusian Popular Front that later became one of the most active opposition parties was established in 1988. It is officially described as an "anticommunist movement campaigning for democracy, genuine independence for Belarus and national and cultural revival." (4) The BPF calls itself "a national liberation movement" and vigorously promotes the use of the Belarusian language. The movement played an important role in Belarus's declaration of sovereignty and independence. However it is also known for its rather aggressive and antagonistic attitude towards Russians. It may possibly be one of the reasons why the BPF has failed to find numerous supporters among the public as the majority of Belarusians still identify themselves closely with Russia (the majority, even ethnic Belarusians, speak

Russian) and nationalistic ideas are popular only among the few. The March 1991 referendum held throughout the Soviet Union showed that 83% of Belarusians wanted to preserve the Soviet Union.(5)

With a change towards democracy Belarus began a transition to a free media system. In the pre-perestroika Soviet Union, the government used its monopoly on the media to disseminate carefully selected and censored information and propaganda. "The government assumed the right to "manipulate images directly - often, lie - in the service of their power." The media also were expected to investigate situations in Soviet society that were not conforming to Communist ideals, and to urge conformity." (6) With perestroika and glasnost, for the first time people began to express their opinions publicly, "to have views - to criticize and postulate."(7) For the first time in their recent history, journalists and citizens have been able to publicly question government policies and actions through independent, privately owned media outlets. Those media that have achieved independence from government control have experienced the greatest freedom of speech.(8)

The development of a free press in Belarus began in the early 1990s when independent media began to emerge and "not only the state or one political party became media owners" but also "different structures of the forming civil society (political parties and public movements, non-state business, independent trade unions, church, national minorities, etc" (9) However, despite a rapid increase in numbers, the independent press as an initiator and instigator of democratic processes in Belarus has had to face sometimes even insurmountable problems. Although out of over 1000 newspapers and magazines published in Belarus, over 600 are independent, only 17 or 20 of them are of analytical character and report news on major political and social issues. Moreover, the entire circulation of these papers is less than a daily circulation

of a single state-owned newspaper, Sovetskaya Belorussia.(10) In addition, there are no independent TV channels or radio stations (again, radio stations of analytical character, as there are some entertainment ones that do not deal with politics). The only Belarusian television channel which is controlled by the state turns out to be the major news source for the majority of Belarusians (at least, 90% of the population watch TV regularly, while only 60% read newspapers).(11) All this leads to believe that independent media failing to become more influential can hardly play a crucial role in the country's hesitant moves towards democracy.

It would seem unfair not to mention the influence of Russian mass media on Belarus. Under the Soviet rule the major news organizations that catered for all of the former republics and provided the main news about the entire Soviet Union were situated in Moscow and were considered the most reliable sources of information. The Belarusian media were more peripheral as they dealt with mostly local issues. When the Soviet Union broke up those All-Union news media were transformed into Russian nationwide news organizations. However they have preserved their popularity in Belarus, especially Russian television companies, which are still available and easily accessible. According to the polls conducted in Belarus in 1996, 86% of the respondents regularly watch ORT (Public Russian Television) and 52% watch RTR (Russian Television) while the regular audience of the only Belarusian television channel is accounted for by 65.8%. Besides, it is the Russian channel ORT that is believed to provide the most reliable information: 43% of those surveyed said they trusted it, while only 18.3% showed trust in the Belarusian television channel.(12) The ramifications of this long time influence are that the Belarusian media which had never before in their history been granted the status of nationwide news organizations, have yet to earn the confidence and trust of their viewers or readers and have

yet to attain the reliability and professionalism characteristic of those primary sources of information on a state level.

In an attempt to change the old political system a new Belarusian constitution was adopted in 1994 making Belarus a multi-party democracy with an elected presidency. A few months later after the adoption of the constitution a quickly organized election was held and Alexander Lukashenko, who ran on an anti-corruption program and the promise to integrate with Russia, became the first Belarusian president. His victory was quite a surprise to the majority of political factions as prior to being elected to the parliament in 1990 he had worked as a director of a collective farm and his experience as a politician was rather short. Although the relationships between the executive power and the opposition had been adversarial since the very beginning of a multi-party system in Belarus, after the election of the new government in 1994 the confrontation has reached an unprecedented level. After a number of the government's efforts aimed at suppression and weakening of the opposition (certain incidents of the use of violence by the authorities during demonstrations and mass protests, detention of demonstrators and opposition leaders, attacks on non-governmental organizations, etc) the Belarusian president was accused of seeking to subordinate and control most aspects of public life, both in government and in civil society. The opposition criticized the government for its unwillingness to implement market reforms and its inclination to restore the old style Soviet economic policy by impeding privatization and continuing to exercise price and exchange rate control.

However, one of the main accusations is the government's monopolization of the media and information flows as well as marginalization and harassment of the independent media. Freedom House ratings place Belarus among countries with the press definitely "not free", while, for example, Russia has a "partly-free" media system.(13) Editor & Publisher listed Belarus

among the world's ten worst enemies of the press.(14) The most often cited examples are the following. The state media are reported to have been brought to heel in 1995 with the dismissal of several editors of state newspapers after they published blank spots where a report on corruption implicating a number of government aides was to have appeared (the report had been barred from publication by the government). In the same year public warnings were issued to the independent press to be more objective and refrain from criticizing the president; printing and distribution contracts with the independent press were annulled. In 1997 the president threatened to jam "unobjective" Russian TV stations for their critical reports on government policies and has expelled at least one Russian bureau chief. In July 1997 the Belarusian who headed the Minsk news bureau of Russia's state-owned ORT network and who had been warned before about his "unobjective" coverage of anti-government rallies, Pavel Sheremet was arrested. He was accused of illegally crossing a border between Belarus and Lithuania. The border crossing was part of his investigation into smuggling, "one of the most lucrative businesses in the impoverished Belarus economy". The journalist was kept in custody for two months and tried afterwards. In 1997 the independent newspaper Svaboda was closed by the government for inciting "social intolerance" and "hostility between society and the authorities". It is however still published by the same editorial staff but has a different title Naviny and the former title Svaboda is always placed under the new one with a notice that says that it was shut down in November 1997.

The international community has expressed its growing concern over Belarus's rapidly deteriorating human rights record and "the government's continued efforts to undermine the rule of law."(15) As a result the U.S. government, the E.U., and major international lending

institutions have limited their ties with the Belarus government and Belarus began to face the prospect of isolation from the Western world.

As a constituent republic of the former Soviet Union Belarus seldom hit the headlines of international newspapers. With gaining independence Belarus became of interest to international community and more and more reviews on Belarus began to appear in the international press. However, very soon to its surprise Belarus had to admit that the reviews turn out to be of a highly critical character, giving an unfavorable and negative impression of the country. In October, 1996 one of the Belarusian major government newspapers published an article beginning with the following words: "the peculiarity of the political situation in our country is that after the single country broke up and the absurd reforms were imposed on our people, Belarus found itself on the edge of political confrontation both inside and outside the country. All pro-Western political groups in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Belarus have launched an unprecedented campaign aimed at destabilization of our country. The insinuations of the Western press about the "conservative Belarus", about the "national nihilism of the Belarusian people" and about "Lukashenko's dictatorship" have come into use."(16)

Since there is a discrepancy in the coverage of the same events by the government, independent and foreign press and since there is a growing concern of the Belarusian government about the image of Belarus on the international arena, this research paper uses a comparative analysis of the coverage of the same event in Belarus by the government, independent and international press and attempts to find out how the three types of press interact and what effect this interaction may have on a society in transition. The event chosen for examination is a controversial referendum that was initiated by the Belarusian president in 1996 and the results of which have not been recognized by Western nations (one of the reasons such recognition was

withheld is that the opposition did not have an adequate opportunity to air their views, as Belarus's major news media were under rigid control by the government).

Two major Belarus's government daily newspapers, Sovetskaya Belorussia and Narodnaya Gazeta, as well as one of the oldest and most influential independent newspapers, Svaboda (published twice a week), were chosen to examine domestic coverage. Seven international newspapers: 4 American (The New York Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, The Wall Street Journal) and 3 English newspapers and magazines (The Independent, Financial Times, The Economist) were taken to represent international coverage. Articles published over the period of time from July 24 to December 31, 1996 (from the point when the conflict began to escalate until the climax and a little after) were examined.

The Chronology of the Event

In May, 1996 after a few months of a running battle with both the Supreme Soviet (the legislature) and the Constitutional Court, Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko demanded constitutional amendments to give him new power over Belarus's legislature and highest court. The amendments were to enable him to dismiss the legislature and create a second legislative chamber, to which he would name a third of members (while the rest would be drawn from officials, appointed by his administration), and control a new upper house of parliament with veto power over the lower house. In addition, it would enable him to name half the justices to a new Constitutional Court and give him still greater freedom to rule by decree. Lukashenko justified his decision by claiming that the legislature and the Constitutional Court had been blocking his efforts to revive the country's shattered economy. By that time the Constitutional Court had ruled 15 decrees issued by the president unconstitutional. The parliament refused to

adopt the amendments and the president declared he would put the changes to a referendum on November 7.

All major political parties, traditionally weak and divided, united in their attempt to oppose Lukashenko, and leaders of the legislature, the Supreme Soviet, threatened to impeach him unless he backed down from his effort to expand his powers and withdrew 15 decrees that the Constitutional Court had ruled unconstitutional.

Seven parties -- including nationalists, reform advocates and Communists -- denounced Lukashenko's move in an unprecedented joint declaration which said "the aim of ... this referendum is to create unlimited power in the hands of one person for many years" and establish "a totalitarian regime". Seeking to blunt Mr. Lukashenko's drive for power, the parliament rescheduled Lukashenko's referendum to November 24 and added three questions of its own, including one eliminating the office of the presidency. The parliament's date for a referendum was considered less advantageous for the President because a series of city elections were scheduled then which meant it would bring urban voters to the polls.

The Constitutional Court ruled that the referendum could only have "an advisory character" but President Lukashenko insisted the vote would be binding. Lukashenko sacked the country's chief electoral official, who, siding with parliament and the courts, ruled the referendum would carry no legal force.

The date of the referendum was eventually scheduled for November 24 (with polling stations to be open from November 9 for those unable to vote on the later date. Copies of Mr. Lukashenko's final draft constitution did not appear until November 12.

Parliamentarians called an emergency session for November 15 to consider the crisis. Several dozen deputies refused to leave the parliament, fearing the president might bar them from the chamber as he did Mr. Victor Gonchar, the sacked electoral official.

On November 18 Mikhail Chigir, the Prime Minister, together with the labor and deputy foreign ministers resigned and thus backed parliament. All had previously been loyal to the president.

On November 19, over 70 MPs submitted to the country's highest court a motion to impeach President Alexander Lukashenko.

As the confrontation escalated and there were fears that violence could be brought out to the streets Russia's Prime Minister, Victor Chernomyrdin, and the speakers of both houses of the Russian parliament flew to Minsk on November 21 to try to resolve the growing conflict between the Belarusian president and parliament. After a night of Russian-mediated talks, a compromise was signed by the President, by the Speaker of the parliament and by the visiting Russian Prime Minister, Viktor S. Chernomyrdin. Under the compromise, the referendum was to conclude on Sunday, November 24, but the results would not be binding, and parliament was to end its bid to impeach Mr. Lukashenko

But no sooner did the Russian government proclaim a diplomatic breakthrough than the Belarus Parliament refused to endorse the compromise, complaining that it legitimized the president's attempts to change the Constitution and undermine democracy. Many deputies labeled it a betrayal of their struggle against President Lukashenko's increasingly authoritarian regime. In response, the president signed a decree Nov 23 declaring the vote legally binding.

Slightly more than 70 percent of voters approved President Alexander Lukashenko's proposed constitution in a referendum that ended November 24, despite the heated objections of

opposition lawmakers, the courts and international human rights groups. Turnout was reported at 84 percent, but Viktor Gonchar, the former head of the country's electoral commission who was fired by Lukashenko the previous week, said the turnout figure was impossibly high and clearly indicated that the vote was falsified.

The new Lower House was formed on November 28. The 110 - out of 199 - deputies voted in chorus. As the rest had been dismissed, no dissent was heard. The Constitutional Court was forced to abandon the impeachment proceedings against the president, as a number of deputies withdrew their signatures from the motion.

Facing defiance from several dozen deputies occupying the old parliament, police were sent to close down the parliament and evict all opposition deputies from the chamber. Officials said the building needed "restructuring and renovating".

The referendum was strongly condemned by Western governments and the event marked a starting point in the isolation of Belarus, as major international organizations refused help to the former Soviet republic.

The international community has not recognized the results of the referendum as legitimate and insists on the fulfillment of 1994 Constitution. Major international organizations have never recognized the legislature of the new parliament, and in 1998 the OSCE invited the original parliament of 13 to an international parliamentary meeting in Copenhagen.

The Coverage of the Event by the Government Press

The European Institute for the Media, issued a press release on November 18, 1996, which criticized state bias in referendum coverage. The EIM concluded that "voters were denied the chance to exercise a democratic choice because of the one-sided nature of the broadcast coverage throughout the referendum campaign." The Presidential draft received overwhelming

coverage in the news broadcasts and commentaries, while the alternative draft proposed by the Supreme Soviet was treated as something which voters were advised to reject. An overview of the two government newspapers Sovetskaya Belorussia and Narodnaya Gazeta from July 24 to December 31 shows that an overwhelming majority of the articles on referendum supported the Presidential draft. The situation in the two newspapers is different as the former (Sovetskaya Belorussia) had been pro-presidential from the very beginning, while the other (Narodnaya Gazeta) was originally the legislature's newspaper, but on June 28, just on the eve of the events was reorganized by the president's decree into a closed corporation part of which became owned by the presidential administration. The government appointed a new editor and thus took it under control. (This turned out to be one of the decrees ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court). Articles containing criticism of the executive branch, although some could still be found shortly following the reorganization, gradually disappeared from the newspaper's front pages.

The reasons used to justify the president's initiative to introduce amendments into the 1994 Constitution in the government press were the following: "The complex economic, political and social problems of the transitional period, that are affecting Belarus now, require coordination and close cooperation of all the branches of government" to ensure their effective functioning (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 10, 1996); the balance between the three branches of government in the 1994 Constitution was reported to be broken, resulting in the domination of the legislative branch (Narodnaya Gazeta, September 5, 1996). To illustrate this imbalance the following examples were used: any decree or order of the president might be rejected by the Supreme Soviet and the Constitutional Court, and both the Supreme Soviet and the Constitutional Court could impeach the president while the executive branch could not recall deputies or members of the Constitutional Court or dismiss them. The constitutional reform

would continue and improve the democratic processes, promote the formation of Belarusian statehood and help to overcome the economic crisis (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 29, 1996).

Among the prevailing ideas for supporting the referendum was that in order to improve the situation a hard-line government was needed: "Today, sometimes quick and rather hard-line decisions are needed to be taken" (Sovetskaya Belorussia, September 28, 1996); "a strong and sometimes unlimited power in the hands of one leader who is capable of decisive actions and who is not afraid of taking responsibility -- this is what people in all past times pinned their hopes on" (Narodnaya Gazeta, October 4, 1996); and besides, they reflect people's cultural values and are reinforced by a Slavic understanding of the leader; "The term "state" in Slavic languages directly combines the idea of power and property in the hands of one man and presupposes the existence of a leader, a head, the domination of power over the law" (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 30, 1996). Another line of argumentation supporting the president's position strongly resembled the Communist-style personality cult: the president is one who comes from common, working people, who understands their needs and who is capable of improving their lives (Narodnaya Gazeta, October 19, 1996); statements like people "believe in his honesty, decency and state wisdom" are widely used (Narodnaya Gazeta, October 17, 1996).

In contrast, the deputies were portrayed as people craving for power and interested in plundering the state sector of the economy (Sovetskaya Belorussia October 10, 1996). The president does not let the deputies do it and that is why they attack him and accuse him of his refusal to implement market reforms (Narodnaya Gazeta, September 28-30, 1996). "I am not against privatization, but I think it should be done in the interests of people, but not in the interests of only a group of people that have power", which is why they hamper realization of the president's economic policies to the full (Sovetskaya Belorussia, September 27, 1996). The

deputies are accused of destabilizing the country; "speculating on certain economic hardships in the republic, the deputies attempted to artificially fire the passions in the parliament in order to create an impression that the social, economic and political situation in the country is extremely serious" (Narodnaya Gazeta, August 6, 1996); "in fact there is no opposition but there is obstruction, there is nothing but rejection of all and everything, whatever the president does it is bound to be bad" (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 6, 1996).

Another idea which is widely used in the government-controlled press to support the referendum and the presidential draft of the constitution was that for the first time in their history people had an opportunity to decide which constitution to adopt. It was considered "the highest form of democracy" (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 30, 1996).

Also, the idea is promoted, playing to the Cold war era antagonism toward the West, that the president is criticized by the nationalists who serve the interests of the West (for a certain reimbursement) which was interested in NATO's expansion and opposed Belarus's close ties with Russia for those reasons (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 2, 1996). "If Lukashenko had not conducted a policy aimed at close ties with Russia, if he had allowed to privatize (which in fact means to plunder) all the state property, then there would not be so many attacks on him either inside or outside Belarus" (Narodnaya Gazeta, September 24, 1996).

An interesting feature of the government coverage is that the majority of articles are written either by professionals in different fields (but not journalists), by ordinary people or groups of workers or veterans who sent their letters to the newspaper. This seems to be part of a deliberate strategy aimed to show that the majority, especially the common, working people, supported the president, also reinforced by phrases that stress the president's popularity -- "and everywhere he found support and understanding" (Sovetskaya Belorussia, August 20, 1996). "I

admire the president for his honesty, kind-heartedness and unaffectedness", and "the draft of the Constitution is saturated with the spirit and interests of working people" (Narodnaya Gazeta, September 24, 1996).

There is an overwhelming lack of an alternative point of view only stressed by the false sincerity of the editors of Narodnaya Gazeta when they did publish an article written by the president's opponent, deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet Gennady Karpenko and found it necessary to state following the article that "this is the third major statement of G.D. Karpenko in Narodnaya Gazeta in 1996".

Given this limited perusal of the government coverage of the referendum, the conclusion may be reached that instead of providing clear arguments or explanations to support the idea of the referendum, most of the articles were rather aimed at appealing to people's emotions.

The Coverage of the Event by the Independent Press

As a whole, coverage by the independent press in Belarus may be characterized as being aimed at a critical analysis of the government's actions but in particular it treats the president's personality and behavior. The amendments suggested by the president receive a detailed analysis and refutation. But one of the characteristics peculiar to the independent press is that few events are presented without their own political underpinning; everything that happens is explained in terms of certain political self-interests. There is considerable information that is not proved. Parliament officials that are denied access to state-run media find an ample opportunity to express their views in the independent press. However, it lacks any real criticism of the president's opponents and thus shows its own bias in the coverage. For example, when in September 1996 the Supreme Soviet deprived journalists working for the Belarusian Broadcasting Company of accreditation to the Supreme Soviet sessions for "systematic biased

and unbalanced coverage of the Supreme Soviet's sessions", the journalist reporting on the event writes: "The Supreme Soviet's decision does not inspire great admiration...but it may also prove to have good effect. By doing this the parliament stated out loud that the Belarusian pro-presidential television disseminates misleading information. This must urge a certain, most active part of the population to look for information about the legislature from other sources" (Svaboda, October 1, 1996). This argument seems rather weak taking into account the fact that the majority of the population do not support the opposition parties and are unlikely to make an effort to look for information about them from sources other than usual.

The decision to hold a referendum and expand his powers is mainly explained by the president's inclination to authoritarianism. "Head of state has passed the boundaries of the legal space and began to walk throughout the whole legal area of the state. It was proved by the Constitutional Court 15 times. But some time he will have to answer for this. It means that it is necessary to expand your powers and to make it legal, what was done illegally, by the will of the people" (Svaboda, August 23, 1996). In general, there are quite a lot of references to the president's illegal actions that were condemned by the Constitutional Court in the independent press, while the government press tries to ignore them and refer to them only in a round about way.

Commenting on the government's allegations that the legislature destabilizes the situation in the country, the independent press states that "it is typical of all dictators to explain the attacks on democracy and human rights by stability." (Svaboda, September 3, 1996). Moreover, these allegations try to disguise the government's demagogic behavior by claiming that the situation could have been much better if those hostile to the president had not prevented the implementation of reforms. "The president and his followers from the very first days of coming

in office involved themselves in a constant search for those who are to blame and to whom they can shift the blame to for all of their faults and mistakes (Svaboda, August 30, 1996).

A great deal of attention is paid to the influence of old Soviet stereotypes both on the government and the majority of the population, which is derogatorily referred to as the electorate (it comes from the word to elect and by it they mean the rural and older population that constitutes the majority of the voters): "Although the building that had been erected by the builders of communism has finally collapsed, the foundation has remained. And now any construction which would be based on it is doomed to preserve its basic features" (Svaboda, September 17, 1996). The government is not used to the opposition on the part of other branches as in the Soviet Union the Supreme Soviet was a decorative supplement ready to approve any decisions taken in the offices of the Central Committee (Svaboda, September 3, 1996). On the other hand, the people that lived the best part of their life under an oppressive regime also find it difficult to change their attitude to many things they have always considered natural. When two opposition leaders returned from their trip to the USA, one of them says to a group of rural people: "We wanted to learn the experience of the American Congress". The veterans tell him in response: "We do not need this experience, we have lived for 70 years with our own brains". (Svaboda, August 30, 1996). The president's popularity among common people is explained by his ability to catch this spirit.

The president's incompetence and inconsistency is criticized throughout the whole coverage. "Having become head of state he preserved the way of thinking and acting of that of a manager of a collective farm, only now this collective farm has extended to the size of a nation of ten million" (Svaboda, September 3, 1996). "Talking about the economy, Alexander Lukashenko likes to play the role of a kind czar, who can once just decide to forgive a huge debt

to a slack business manager - as if the latter owes it personally to the president, but not the state, that is you and me" (Svaboda, September 3, 1996). To demonstrate his inconsistency in trying to justify his actions the readers are reminded that "on the one hand, Lukashenko all the time takes the experience of European countries as an example. In particular, he refers to the French experience while preparing his draft of the constitution. On the other hand, the hostile attitude to the West, its way of life, political system, western civilization is being forced upon the public" (Svaboda, November 22, 1996)

However, the independent press quite often goes too far in its interpretation and by deliberately exaggerating the facts and stating that "a police fascist state is being established" in the country (Svaboda, September 13, 1996), may well lose the credit of their readers. Comments like "political rabble that have fallen greedily upon power and that are trying to take the country under their control by purely criminal methods more typical of a zone" (Svaboda, November 22, 1996) give reasons for the government to accuse the independent press of not being objective.

In general, the coverage of the referendum by the independent press deals a lot with the mistakes and faults of the executive branch of government and debunks any kind of the government's demagogic or absurd claims. But on the other hand, along with the extensive criticism of the president's draft of the constitution, there is almost no analysis of the advantages or disadvantages of the draft suggested by the opposition. There is no analysis of what else could be done to improve the situation. This is one of the weak points of their coverage.

The Coverage of the Event by Anglo-American Press

The international coverage, as distinct from any of the domestic, presents all the events in a broader context both in terms of time span or international significance. All the articles contain a short summary of what preceded the events, place them in a historical and cultural context, as

well as interpret them in terms of their importance to the rest of the world. The coverage highlights the most important issues and makes real causes and the political underpinning of the event look clearer. Being mainly of a critical character and disapproving of Belarus's official policies, the reports mostly draw on independent sources of information. There are numerous quotations from opposition leaders, foreign diplomats and representatives of NGOs. At the same time there are also a lot of references to Belarus's government officials which makes the reports seem more balanced.

The referendum is interpreted in Anglo-American coverage as Belarus's "hard-line" president's campaign to seize new political powers and assume control of the whole country (The Washington Post, October 6, 1996) which would reverse the country's "tentative steps towards democracy" (The Independent, October 17, 1996). The referendum looks like a charade designed to sweep aside political opposition and establish a dictatorship (The New York Times, November 22, 1996). To prove the president's "increasingly totalitarian" methods, the newspapers selected for this study provided a review of what would be considered attacks on freedom and human rights in their societies. They mention facts like the dismissal of newspaper editors, suspension of trade unions and nationalization of commercial banks that occurred over the two years preceding the referendum and explain them as part of the president's "effort to consolidate his rule" (Financial Times, July 30, 1996).

One of the most striking differences that catches the eye while comparing the Anglo-American coverage to either category of domestic press in Belarus is the emphasis and significance attached to the fact that the new draft of the constitution would extend the president's term in office for two years. Almost all of the stories covering the referendum in the Anglo-American press when explaining what would happen if the president won the referendum

mentioned two major things: it would give the president nearly total control of parliament and the higher courts and would "extend his term by two years" (Financial Times, November 18, 1996). However, this fact is almost ignored by the government coverage of the event. For example, Sovetskaya Belorussia contained only one article (which is in fact a letter from a Belarusian expressing his views on the amendments suggested by the president) that contains reference to the extension -- and this is over a period from July to December during the time the whole event was covered. Surprisingly, the independent press, although sometimes alluding to this point, nevertheless does not pay it the attention which it would seem to deserve as it may suggest the true motives of the people involved in the conflict.

One of the major issues included in the coverage by the Anglo-American press is the significance of the events in Belarus in an international context. Belarus's relations with Russia and the prospect of their integration are of particular interest. For example, The Washington Post explaining the reasons why "Belarus's explosion-in-waiting is worrying," writes: "when NATO grows, as planned, to take in Poland and others, Belarus will be an unstable land link between a larger NATO and a still prickly Russia. Indeed, at a time when the rest of Europe is busy building new networks of all kinds to avoid destabilizing "gray areas" of security, Belarus is fast becoming a black hole that could radiate instability around the neighborhood" (The Washington Post, September 17, 1996). Fear that the former Soviet empire could reemerge is often expressed: "It would be worrisome strategically only if Belarus's willingness to re-create the Soviet Union encouraged Russia to start pressing a bunch of other countries into joining as well" (The Economist, August 24, 1996). Also, Belarus is compared to other republics of the former Soviet Union in terms of its progress and economic development; for instance, Belarus is described as "the least enthusiastic breakaway of the former Soviet Union". It remains "the least

reformed and most impoverished European part of the former empire - its economy in a state of collapse and its politics bordering on farce". (Financial Times, November 21, 1996).

A great deal of attention in the Anglo-American press reviewed is paid to the country's economy and progress in implementing market reforms. The president is strongly criticized for his Soviet style approach in solving economic problems, nationalization of banks and resistance to the privatization of industry. "The president apparently is convinced that it is cell-phone-toting, BMW-driving hankers -- not misguided government policies -- that caused the country's near-bankruptcy and the 40% drop in economic output in the past five years" (The Wall Street Journal, August 9, 1996).

Another topic that is thoroughly explored by the Anglo-American press is a growing clampdown on the independent press within Belarus and at the same time the increasing control of the state press and broadcasting that are the main sources of information for the 10 million Belarusians. "Lukashenko "clearly regards control of information as an essential part of getting dictatorial power," a Western diplomat said. Within months of winning election in 1994, he replaced editors of several state-owned newspapers with his appointees and took control of state broadcasting" (The Washington Post, October 06, 1996). During the referendum campaign, "authorities shut down the only independent radio station, froze the bank accounts of at least five weekly newspapers for alleged tax evasion and forced one paper out of its office. In December 1994, his (the president's) administration barred reporting of a legislator's speech that accused Lukashenko of corruption, leaving newspapers to publish blank spots where the articles were to have appeared" (The Washington Post, October 6, 1996). They criticize the state-run television channel for "a barrage of propaganda" in favor of the president, "unsullied by alternative views" (The Independent, October 17, 1996).

In portraying the image of the president, the foreign newspapers mostly use statements or quotations from his speeches without commenting on them much. " At a news conference in Moscow this week, Mr. Lukashenko said Belarus was free, even as he scribbled down the names of reporters who asked unfriendly questions. Fears of a dictatorship, he declared, resulted from an American plot to thwart an alliance between Russia and Belarus. "The C.I.A. cares about the revival of an empire, " Mr. Lukashenko said. "It scares them" (The New York Times, October 20, 1996). "I want to say clearly that should anyone try to remove me, I would remove him, or anyone else for that matter, even while they are thinking about it," he told an audience of government officials" (The Washington Post, July 30, 1996). A quotation like this would not appear in the government press. His popularity is explained by " The president's evident charisma and honed political instincts" (The New York Times, October 12, 1996). "Lukashenko's fans praise him for his iron fist and for halting post-Soviet reforms, but mostly they applaud him for renewing ties to Mother Russia -- where most Belarusians still look for economic salvation" (Chicago Tribune, November 22, 1996).

Analysis of the foreign newspapers shows that the events in Belarus are interpreted according to the standards prevailing in the societies where the newspapers are located. The topics that the coverage focuses on illustrate the choice of the issues that are considered to be of greater importance for a country in transition from totalitarianism to democracy, but made by those living in much more politically advanced countries. The methods and political decisions that may seem quite acceptable for a government made up of people brought up in a totalitarian state may not find support among the states with a long history of democracy and press freedom.

The significance of press interrelationships in a society in transition

Belarus, a newly independent state, after 70 years of a repressive political system has officially declared its option for democracy and respect for human rights. In beginning to change its political system (a multi-party system and the office of presidency have been introduced), Belarus has unexpectedly found that besides an array of problems connected with structural and institutional changes, it has yet to face a still greater hindrance on its way to a free society - that is the problem of a change in people's attitudes and understanding about democratic values and assumptions. The performance and relationships of the three different kinds of press encompassed by this study will play a role in this transition although it can not yet be seen definitively, both from this limited examination and because Belarus' transition is only in its early stage, what the outcome will be.

As a whole, the coverage of the chosen event by both types of domestic press in Belarus shows that the press is still very much influenced by the old stereotypes. The survey of this project showed that the government press was especially biased and still contained a lot of the Soviet style propaganda, and was virtually explicit in its desire to support the president and agitate people to vote for his draft constitution. Certain journalists still find it difficult to accept the idea that in a free society you talk openly about such important things as government policies and different political interests. An article under the title "The Constructors of a Trap for Belarus" published by Narodnaya Gazeta, commenting on the adversarial nature of foreign coverage on Belarus, reveals this attitude by citing examples of certain "influential western newspapers and magazines" like The New York Times, The Economist and Financial Times giving articles about Belarus titles like "The Tyrant of Belarus", "Alexander the Worst" and "A collective farmer with czarist ambitions", or when they give "insulting" characteristics such as

"an accidental politician", "the embodiment of dictatorial methods" and "the creator of a police state in the spirit of a Latin American junta." The negative attitudes stuck out very explicitly: "It would be a bad mistake of the West to surrender Belarus to Russia", said The Washington Post without trying to disguise their misgivings; The Economist is also quoted: "...the main danger of the union (between Belarus and Russia) is that it may create a precedent". The author of the Narodnaya Gazeta article expresses surprise that journalists openly talk about their governments' actual foreign policy interests without even "disguising" them.

The coverage by the independent newspaper Svaboda chosen for the study, although much more objective in its criticism of the government, nevertheless had its own certain bias. Among the opposition leaders, representatives of the Belarusian Popular Front (Belarus's most active opposition party) received a definite advantage either in the coverage itself or in the opportunity to express their views via the newspaper. Besides in this instance no criticism of the opposition party or the parliament whose interests the newspaper reflected could be found. This suggests that even the independent media are still influenced by the Soviet tradition when journalists could not question the actions and decisions of their leaders and had to support them implicitly. Yuri Toporashev, an independent journalist, writing about his impressions of the International seminar "The Effectiveness of Mass Media in Belarus" in Minsk in 1998 says that many of the ideas that American journalists take for granted still sound wild to their Belarusian colleagues, because: "We have it in our genes that the newspaper is first and foremost an ideological mediator between the government and the public, "guided" and "directed" by those in power who are intent on keeping this "ideological mediator" under constant and total control."(17)

The international press, not directly involved in any political interests inside the country, provides a more balanced point of view. Even while favoring the opposition they do report on statements or claims made by the government. For example, they cite president Lukashenko's accusations that the West meddles in his nation's internal affairs (The Independent, October 17, 1996). Even the president himself, mostly disdained by foreign journalists speaking at the CIS journalists forum in Minsk, admitted that "more often it is they, foreign journalists, who examine the events in Belarus in a profound and serious way, rather than their colleagues in the CIS" (Sovetskaya Belorussia, May 6, 1998). But the most important feature of the international coverage is that it brings a new element to the coverage of the events in Belarus, because it interprets them according to its own standards. This fact is very important for a country in transition from totalitarianism to democracy as it may help to indicate what is the right way for the country to follow.

The role of the international press becomes even more important in a country where the majority of the information delivered to the public is controlled by the state. As the opponents of the government do not find an easy access to state-run media, this shortage is somewhat counterbalanced by ample quotations about policy and politics from the opposition in the international press. It also helps to alleviate the difference between the influential and dominant Belarus state-run media and the weak independent ones. Over the period from July to December 1996 the independent newspaper Svaboda published at least 22 articles on the referendum issue translated from American, English, German and French newspapers. The effect of this is to add weight and significance to the independent press as it builds its credibility by harvesting material from the international community. It also helps to draw the government's attention to the foreign reports on Belarus and urge them to react. It can be speculated that the more open coverage of

the international press provides encouragement to the independent press in Belarus, although this is somewhat fragile because the independent press is often accused by the government of being manipulated by the international community.

The comparative analysis of the coverage of the referendum in 1996 shows that as the confrontation escalates within the country and more and more critical reviews appeared in the international press, the international coverage also became an internal issue. The Belarusian government got more and more concerned with the image of Belarus on the international arena. As soon as there appeared probably a single article in the major western newspapers which was not as tough on the Belarusian president and which somewhat criticized the foreign coverage of the country for exaggeration and unwillingness to look at the opposition in an unbiased way, it was immediately translated and published in both the government newspapers under study. It is frustrating not to be able to reach definite conclusions about the influence of press coverage on the actual outcome of the referendum issue, but the story shows that a nascent dynamic is underway.

As a newly independent state Belarus is striving to make its way into the international community and that is why it will find it increasingly necessary to react to the negative reviews. Foreign coverage being a new element in the Belarus's political life, the first reaction of the government has been very much in the old Soviet style as it has tried to find ideological explanation for the critical character of the foreign press. But the very fact that the government and the government press are forced to react may well promote the independence and democratization of the country.

Perhaps one of the illustrations of this influence is the growing concern among independent journalists about a certain bias in their own newspapers. For example, Galina

Aizenshtadt, an independent journalist, writes: "Interestingly, our opposition has inherited one more Soviet tradition - every group glorifies only their leader." (18). And Nikolai Kholezin, ex-deputy editor of the weekly "Imya" says: "There is no such a daily newspaper in Belarus that would be typical for European countries and that would inform readers without a bias. I have to buy 10 newspapers and absorb 10 points of view on the same event. And the independent press that attracts the Belarusian journalistic elite does not provide me with this news."(19) By the way Nikolai Kholezin is now working on the project to start a new newspaper that would presumably be devoid of these faults. So if a tradition of a more free and unbiased reporting is taking roots in Belarus then there would be reasons to believe that the press can start to exert more influence on the democratic processes in the country.

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