

MEDIA IN POST-SOVIET BELARUS: BETWEEN DEMOCRATIZATION AND REINFORCING AUTHORITARIANISM

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Abstract: The media system in post-Soviet Belarus, just like Belarusian society as a whole, is deeply divided. While the state-run media survive through financial support from the state and has won the trust of the “common majority,” independent media attract support from abroad and appeal mainly to an “advanced minority” that disagrees with the policies of the current government. The media strengthen “social capital” in these two different parts of Belarusian society, contributing to the further coexistence of authoritarianism and democracy within one country. However, as a result of state policy, the authoritarian state media completely dominate the democratic media, creating a media model best described as “Islands in the Stream.”

The Republic of Belarus is a shining example of a “hybrid regime” or “competitive autocracy” in the post-Soviet space.¹ As William Dobson stressed, “Although these regimes are much more tactically subtle and

¹ Kimitaka Matsuzato. 2004. “A Populist Island in an Ocean of Clan Politics: the Lukashenka Regime as an Exception among CIS Countries” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 56: 2; Javier Corrales. 2006. “Hugo Boss.” *Foreign Policy*, January-February; Dmitri Furman. 2007. “Problem-2008: Commonalities and Peculiarities in the Transition Processes in Post-Communist States.” Polit.ru, <http://polit.ru/article/2007/10/19/furman/>; Ivan Krastev. 2012. “Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 22: 2 (April).

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adaptive than the old-school communist regimes and military juntas of the past, at their core these systems are still about maintaining power through coercion. The regimes are smart enough to know that they cannot squelch all dissent and should not even try. Instead, they focus on what counts.”² Thus, after the collapse of the USSR in December 1991, Belarus became an independent state and declared democracy and rule of law as its constitutional principles. But after Alexander Lukashenka’s victory in the relatively free and fair presidential election in 1994, he employed a simple strategy for ruling the country: He rebuilt the Soviet-style command economy and isolated Belarus from the economic chaos that encompassed the rest of the USSR in the mid-1990s. By reducing the unemployment level to below 1 percent and providing moderate, but stable, economic growth, he satisfied public expectations. During the first years of his rule, he also marginalized or eliminated any political alternatives. The concentration of economic and political power allowed him to exert direct personal control over the state. In turn, the state put most of society under its control. The state-run media became one of the key-stones of this control system.

Despite this extensive state control, around 30 percent of the country’s economy is private; there are 15 officially registered political parties, and over 2,000 non-governmental organizations, independent business associations, human rights groups, think tanks and other organizations that comprise Belarusian civil society. Despite constant pressures from the state, unequal resources, and adversarial political, economic, legal, and technological conditions, independent media continue to exist and make significant contributions to the development of civil society and elements of democracy.

The present article examines how this “dual system” works, explores its peculiarities and commonalities with other post-Soviet countries, and predicts its prospects. For this purpose, I will locate the Belarus media system in the world media freedom landscape, analyze its unique characteristics with a special emphasis on the media’s elections coverage, the social grounds of media system duality, and media’s role in generating trust as a “lubricant for cooperation” in both social and media systems. Moreover, I will define what Belarus can tell us about media in non-democratic regimes and social science theory more generally. The main contribution here is the “Islands in the Stream” model.

Belarus in the World Media Freedom Landscape

Perceived media freedom varies widely across countries, with as many as 97 percent in Finland and as few as 26 percent in Belarus saying their

² William Dobson. 2012. *The Dictator’s Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy*. New York: Doubleday.

media are free. Expert evaluations of media freedom fall in line with these assessments by the public. Ten out of the 13 countries with the lowest percentage of adults saying their media are free are rated “not free,” according to Freedom House’s 2013 evaluations of press freedom (see Figure 1).³

Figure 1. Lowest Perceived Media Freedom Worldwide, Percent

| | Yes | No | Don't Know/ Refused | Freedom House Press Freedom Status |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Belarus | 26% | 47% | 27% | Not free |
| Gabon | 32% | 62% | 6% | Not free |
| Chad | 32% | 65% | 2% | Not free |
| Zimbabwe | 32% | 54% | 13% | Not free |
| Palestinian Territories | 33% | 56% | 10% | Not free |
| Armenia | 35% | 49% | 15% | Not free |
| Sudan | 37% | 57% | 5% | Not free |
| Congo (Brazzaville) | 37% | 59% | 4% | Partly free |
| Russia | 38% | 41% | 21% | Not free |
| Congo (Kinshasa) | 38% | 48% | 14% | Not free |
| Mauritania | 38% | 57% | 5% | Partly free |
| Macedonia | 39% | 45% | 16% | Partly free |
| Yemen | 40% | 27% | 33% | Not free |

Source: Gallup. Data collected in 133 countries in 2012.

Residents in many of these countries with the lowest percentage of adults saying their media are free have consistently expressed skepticism about the presence of media freedom. As one can see from the Freedom House “Nations in Transit” statistics, Belarus had low levels of media independence over the last decade (see Figure 2).⁴

³ Freedom House. 2013. *Freedom of the Press* Data, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press>

⁴ Freedom House. 2013. *Nations in Transit*, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2012/belarus>

Figure 2. Belarus Nations in Transit Ratings and Average Scores

| Features | '03 | '04 | '05 | '06 | '07 | '08 | '09 | '10 | '11 | '12 |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| National Democratic Governance | N/A | N/A | 6.75 | 7.00 | 7.00 | 7.00 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 |
| Electoral Process | 6.75 | 6.75 | 7.00 | 7.00 | 7.00 | 7.00 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 7.00 | 7.00 |
| Civil Society | 6.50 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.25 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.25 |
| Independent Media | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.50 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 |
| Local Democratic Governance | N/A | N/A | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 |
| Judicial Framework and Independence | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 6.75 | 7.00 |
| Corruption | 5.50 | 5.75 | 6.00 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.25 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.25 |
| Democracy Score | 6.46 | 5.54 | 6.64 | 6.71 | 6.68 | 6.71 | 6.57 | 6.50 | 6.57 | 6.68 |

Source: Freedom House

Peculiarities of the Belarusian Media

According to the *State Media Register*, as of January 1, 2014, Belarus had registered 1,556 periodicals (including 410 state-run and 1,146 private), 262 radio and TV stations (178 state and 84 non-state), and 9 information agencies (2 state and 7 non-state).⁵ The Belarusian Association of Journalists (a professional organization uniting approximately 1,500 journalists primarily from non-state media) noted that less than 30 of the registered non-state periodicals are focused on covering public or socio-political issues, the rest are focused on business, entertainment, sports, cultural affairs, and ads. Almost half of them were expelled from the state-owned distribution networks before the previous presidential election in 2005.⁶ In terms of periodicity, circulation and air-time, the state-run media dominate the media landscape – the ratio between them and independent media is approximately 9 to 1.⁷

Broadcasting in Belarus remains under strict government control.

⁵ Belarus Media Data 2014 from the Republic of Belarus Ministry of Information, at <http://www.mininform.gov.by/smi/> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁶ Belarusian Association of Journalists. 2013. *Mass Media in Belarus 2012*, Minsk at http://baj.by/sites/default/files/monitoring_pdf/mediamonitring2012en.pdf (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁷ Oleg Manaev, Natalie Manayeva, and Dmitry Yuran. 2012. "Islands in the Stream": Reflections on Media Development in Belarus." in Peter Gross and Karol Jakubowicz, eds., *Media Transformations in the Post—Communist world: Eastern Europe's Tortured Path to Change*. New York: Lexington Books: 195-215.

Most importantly, national television networks are state-owned. According to the Freedom House *Freedom of the Press 2012* report, “the state maintains a virtual monopoly on domestic broadcast media, which consistently glorify Lukashenka and vilify the opposition. Only state media broadcast nationwide, and the content of smaller television and radio stations is tightly restricted.”⁸

The state-owned media are in a beneficial position compared to the independent media: they enjoy subsidized rent, salaries, distribution, printing, tax exemptions and direct funding from the government, as the International Fact-Finding Mission to the Republic of Belarus report *For Free and Fair Media in Belarus* indicates.⁹ In 2010, the Council of Ministers approved special resolution No. 855, which includes a list of print media whose editorial boards were entitled to subsidies from the state budget that year. The list of state subsidized media outlets includes twenty-four publications. Not surprisingly, “Sovietskaiia Bielorussiiia,” the Belarusian newspaper with the largest circulation (2.5 million copies weekly), founded by the Presidential Administration, is among them. Support for the state-run media outlets is rapidly growing: from 2002 to 2009, financial support for the state media from the state budget grew almost fourfold, from \$24 million to over \$90 million.¹⁰

As a result of the economic, political, and legal preferences for the state-run media and discrimination against the non-state media, the number of non-state media has decreased twofold during the last decade, and the Ministry of Information refuses to register new independent media outlets. The editors of state-run media are appointed by the president or local authorities. Such control over personnel gives the state enormous influence in shaping editorial policy and presents a fertile environment for editorial bias.

The internet remains the most liberalized sector in Belarus’s information space. The number of Web-users exceeds 5 million people (over 60 percent of the adult population, and the same number of people use social networks): this audience increased by more than 10 times since the late 1990s. Authorities have reacted to the growing influence of the internet on Belarusians by attempting to take control of the Web. Thus, Presidential Order No. 60 of February 1, 2010, “*On Measures to Improve the Use of the National Segment of the Internet*,” came into effect on July 1, 2010, and introduced various restrictions. But an even more important factor that limits the internet role as a counterbalance to state-run media dominance is

⁸ Freedom House. 2012. *Freedom of the Press 2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.freedom-house.org/uploads/pfs/371.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.i-m-s.dk/files/publications/1528%20Belarus.web%20final.pdf>

¹⁰ Belarusian Association of Journalists. 2009. *Media in Belarus 2008*. Minsk. At http://baj.by/sites/default/files/monitoring_pdf/mediamonitoring2012en.pdf.

the way that people use it. Thus, according to an Independent Institute for Social, Economic, and Political Studies (IISEPS) March 2013 poll, only 21.8 percent of all internet users go on-line to obtain political information; the rest use it for communication and entertainment.

Belarus adopted a new media law in 2008 and it took effect in 2009. The law set up a number of obstacles for independent journalists and media outlets, shortening the list of journalistic rights. Some of these control measures include: having journalists go through a three—step accreditation process after which they can be denied accreditation without any explanation; increasing the authority to penalize journalists and mass media outlets for vague reasons, such as “dissemination of inaccurate information that might cause harm to state and public interests” for which journalists could be fined and operations of media outlets could be suspended or terminated; requiring all print and broadcast media outlets to re-register with the Ministry of Information (at least half a dozen independent media outlets were denied registration); sanctions when media materials are found to violate requirements for “compliance with reality;” and foreign ownership of media being restricted to 30 percent. Other laws detrimental to freedom of speech and the press include *The Law on Public Service*, *The Law on Counteracting Extremism*, and *The Criminal Code*.¹¹

Peculiarities of Media Elections Coverage

These characteristics of the Belarusian media determine what they can say and do. State control naturally has a huge impact on the way that the Belarusian media cover elections. “By focusing their attention on one candidate, i.e. the incumbent, and giving him positive coverage while negatively assessing his opponents, the state-owned media violated the principle of equal opportunities and equal access to the media,” according to a Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ) Analytic Report on “Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media” which summed up the findings of presidential election coverage from October 11 to December 25, 2010, in 18 media, including the national state-owned TV and radio networks, internet resources, regional TV and radio stations and both the state-owned and independent press.

State media provided biased coverage of the opposition candidates and did not offer them a chance to rebut. By citing only negative opinions about them and negative assessments of their agendas, the state-owned media in fact censored public opinion, depriving the opposition candidates’ supporters of their voice. Thus, during the election, the state-owned

¹¹ Natalie Manayeva, Anna Aniskevich, and Anton Dinerstein. 2011. “Mass Media under the Eye of Big Brother: Governmental Control Over Mass Media in Belarus.” *Otázky žurnalistiky* 3-4: 3-19.

media did not reflect the interests of all social groups. In fact, they actively demonstrated their loyalty to the incumbent by acting as an instrument of power and an ideological tool.

Just like in the previous elections, by adopting a low-key approach to the election and marginalizing the opponents of the current regime, the state-owned media contributed to undermining political competition and the contest of ideas. In this way, they actually excluded, or at least diverted, voters from political competition. State-run media do not adhere to professional standards or the ethical principles of journalism.

Although the independent print press offered a varied picture of the election, their limited circulation prevented them from becoming a competitive information source. For the same reason, they could not efficiently oppose the practice of ignoring government opponents or their negative representation in the state-owned media.¹²

Figures 3-6 prove the conclusion about different media sub-systems in Belarus producing different discourses – one reflecting an authoritarian “picture of the world”, and the other a democratic one. The state-owned media focused heavily on Lukashenka in its election coverage (Figures 3 and 5). However, television spent little time on the elections, preferring to distract popular attention away from this topic by focusing on other topics (Figure 4). The opposition did not have access to state television, but gained much more coverage in the independent press (Figure 6).

Thus, according to Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm’s classification,¹³ the Belarusian media model could be identified as authoritarian: the function of the state-run media is to support the policies of the authorities; state-run media fosters support for the president, as well as social and national unity; and the state has the right to control mass media by enforcing a repressive media law and other means. According to Jakubowicz’s classification,¹⁴ Belarus falls into the category of non-competitive regimes and its media system is very different from media systems in Western Europe, or even from those of the Baltic States, Ukraine, or Poland, Belarus’s closest neighbors.

[The figures on the following two pages all come from the Belarusian Association of Journalists - see footnote 12.]

¹² Belarusian Association of Journalists. Media Monitoring. 2010. Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Election in the Belarusian Media (Final Report), at http://baj.by/sites/default/files/monitoring_pdf/Coverageofthe2010PresidentialElectionintheBelarusianMedia-final-2010.pdf. The period analyzed ran from September 25, 2010 to December 19, 2010.

¹³ Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, Wilbur Schramm. 1963. *Four theories of the press: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

¹⁴ Karol Jakubowicz. 2007. *Rude awakening: Social and media change in Central and Eastern Europe*. New York: Hampton Press.

Figure 3. Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Elections by State TV (actors), percent

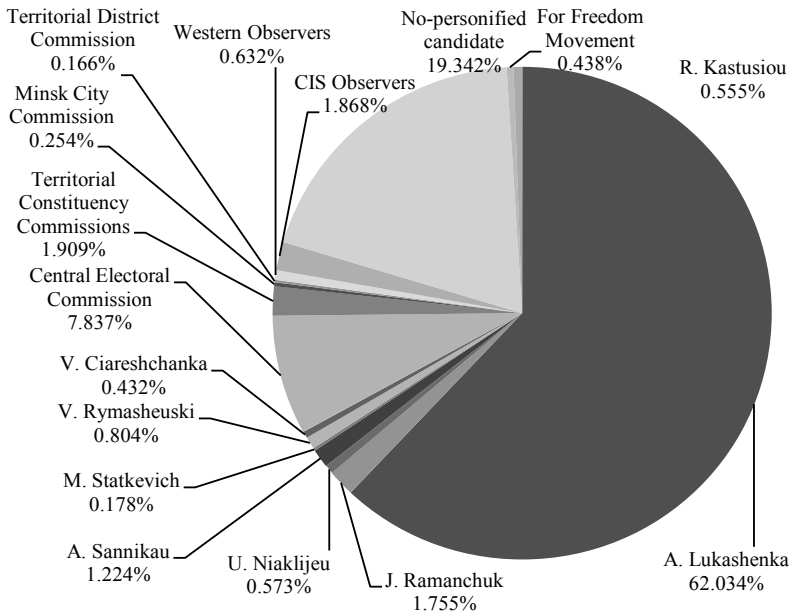


Figure 4. Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Elections by State TV (subject), percent

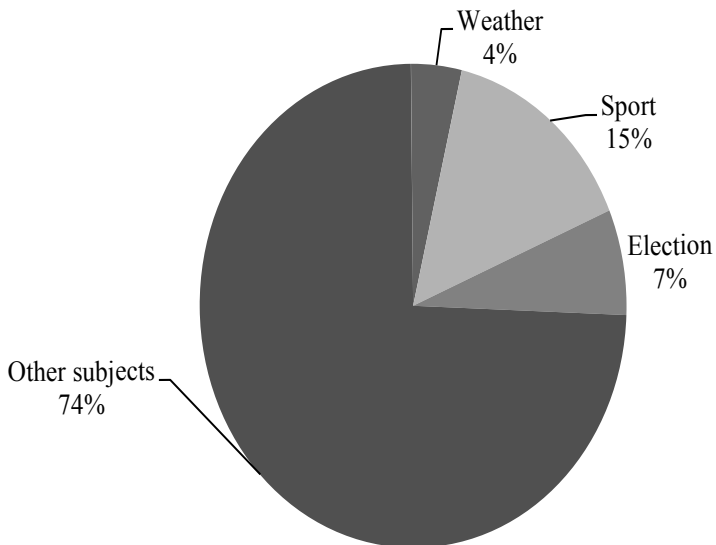


Figure 5. Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Elections by the State-run newspaper *Sovietskaia Bielorusiia*, percent

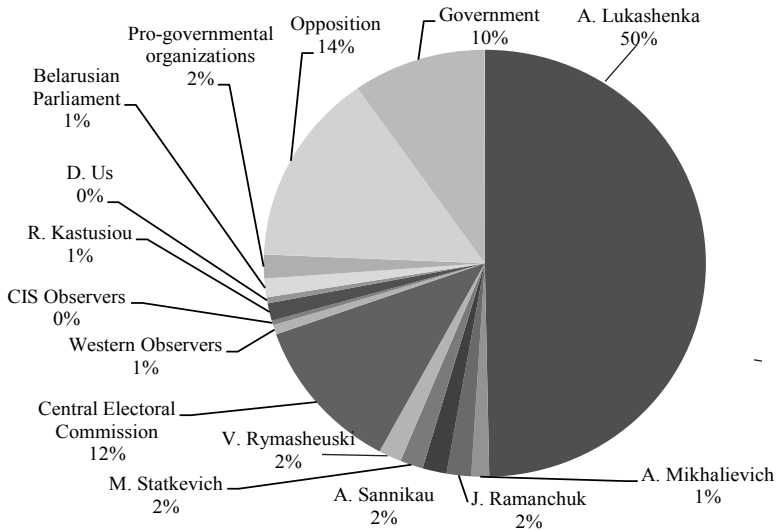
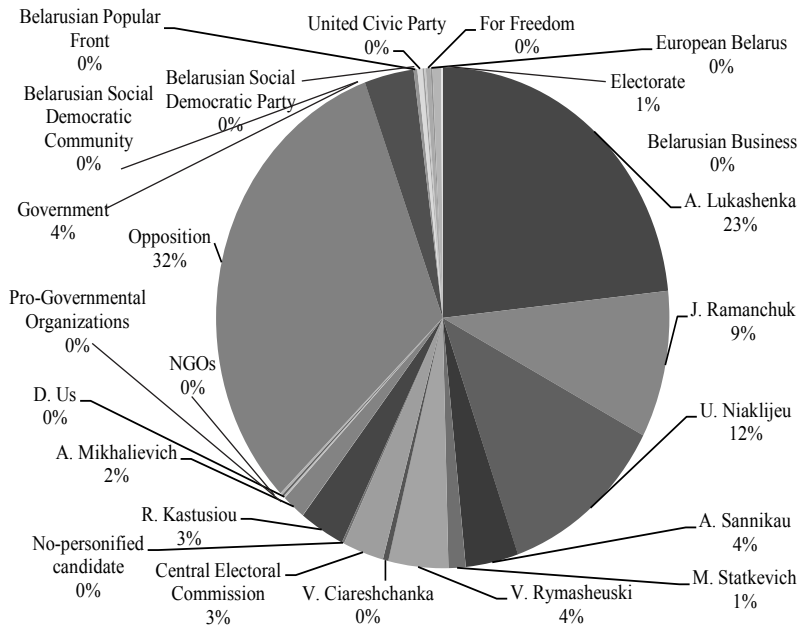


Figure 6. Coverage of the 2010 Presidential Elections by the Independent Newspaper *Nasha Niva*, percent



The dominant “media philosophy” was clearly formulated by Belarus President Lukashenka in various public statements:

- “Journalism is probably a state profession, and journalists are the state’s men” (1999).
- “Freedom of the press does not constitute total permissibility, but is an ‘inside editor.’ And we should not intend to avoid such an editor, let him serve society” (1999).
- (About Western media projects for Belarus) “Our country falls into a disinformation circle” (2005).
- “Mass media today is a weapon of mass destruction. The most powerful one. This is a war that never ends” (2006, two months before the presidential election of 2006).
- “On the eve of the presidential election, Belarus was exposed to massive information pressure from the outside, which is still growing” (2006, two months after the presidential election of 2006).
- (Addressing journalists) “You are the most powerful weapon of the president for the purpose of state governing” (2008).¹⁵

Under Lukashenka the Belarusian political system, however, has not collapsed over the course of two decades and the Belarusian authorities do not face massive public protests. Several attempts to introduce “colored revolutions” during the last decade failed, not only due to brutal repression but mostly because of the lack of massive public support. According to an IISEPS public opinion poll conducted in June 2011, 53.3 percent of respondents think that the mass media in the country are dependent (31.2 percent answered “some media are independent, and some not,” 10.3 percent said “media are independent”). And most of them have no doubts on whom the media depend: three quarters named the president and other authorities, while only 13.2 percent named the audience, 7.1 percent – political parties and NGOs, and only 1.7 percent – private business. However, responding to the question if they have enough access to information about current life in Belarus, 52.9 percent of respondent said “no,” while 46.7 percent said “yes,” and to the question “to what extent does information that you get from official sources correspond to your real life?” 48.3 percent said that it “does not correspond completely/to some extent,” while 51.2 percent said that it “corresponds completely/to some extent.”¹⁶ These numbers mean that many people who consider the media to be dependent on the state see nothing wrong with this state of affairs.

The image of Belarusian mass media is surrounded by myths. And

¹⁵ Vladimir Podgol. 2007. *Lukashenka’s quotes from Podgol collection*. Minsk: F. Skaryna Publishing.

¹⁶ Results of National Opinion Poll Conducted in June 2011, at <http://iiseps.org/dannye/8/lang/en>.

these views are common in Belarus and in the West, among journalists and politicians. These myths are deeply rooted in society. According to one myth, the state-run media are bad while independent media are good. According to another myth, if all Belarusians use only independent media, Belarus will evolve into a democratic country. Sometimes journalists publish excellent articles but they do not gain public interest and support. Occasionally ordinary publications raise important issues. Why does the system work like this? Answers must be sought in society and not in the media.

Peculiarities of Belarusian Society

In response to the above data and statements, one could ask: Why do so many Belarusians who consider the media to be dependent on the state see nothing wrong with this? Similarly, one can ask a related question: Why does the regime allow independent print media to exist at all and why does it not block access to websites it does not like following the Chinese example? To answer these questions, it is necessary to invoke the peculiarities of Belarusian society.

Most of the peculiarities are deeply rooted in Belarus's history, culture and geography which can explain Belarusian authoritarianism and its vitality: (1) the gradual separation from the USSR and its heritage, (2) the growing breakdown of political and social values in society, (3) the redrawing of its social landscape, (4) the Belarusians' unformed national identity and (5) their consequent ambivalence about the country's geopolitical orientation.¹⁷

Hallin and Mancini, who developed one of the most comprehensive comparative analyses of media systems and politics in the post-Communist countries, stressed, "The free media that evolved in Eastern Europe in the 1990s were not born out of nothing" and speak about "the legacy of the Communist system."¹⁸ This is true, of course, but "Belarusian peculiarities" cannot be reduced simply and solely to this legacy. The Soviet heritage is gradually but steadily being overcome by Belarusians: the number of respondents in favor of restoring the U.S.S.R. fell to half the previous level over 18 years, while opposition to its restoration increased 2.7 times. The number of respondents uncertain about such a restoration also dropped.

¹⁷ Oleg Manaev, Natelie Manayeva, and Dzmitri Yuran. 2011. "More state than nation: Lukashenka's Belarus," *Journal of International Affairs*, 65(1).

¹⁸ Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, eds. 2011. *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini. 2012. "Comparing media systems between Eastern and Western Europe." In Peter Gross and Karol Jakubowicz, eds. *Media Transformations in the Post-Communist world: Eastern Europe's Tortured Path to Change*, (New York, Lexington Books): 18-35.

This is evidence that the nature of Belarusian authoritarianism differs from that of its Soviet past.

Another important feature of Belarusian authoritarianism is the significant split in society. The observation that “winners get everything and losers nothing” fits this country: it means not just the replacement of one ruling elite by another, but the replacement of one value system with another. The new values of national independence, political democracy, the rule of law, a market economy, and “the return to the European family” inspired Belarusian democrats of the “perestroika wave” and led to the emergence of independence and democracy in the early 1990s, but were replaced by patriarchic values of the rule of “the father of the people,” “a fair distribution of prosperity,” and the “restoration of the historic and cultural union/friendship with Russia.” Moreover, the latter values of the “common majority” were consolidated while the democratic ones of the “advanced minority” were marginalized via various political, legal, economic, informational, educational, and other means. Instead of a system of checks and balances, Belarus ended up with a system based on one group’s absolute domination.

Analysis proves that the split has not only been of a social-demographic nature, but also of a value nature in a way pre-determined by the legacy of the Soviet and Russian Empire, including a lack of initiative, responsibility, and trust on the one hand, and a tendency to rely on the authorities, on the other. Thus, Lukashenka convinced supporters to come out against privatizing state property; they do not see infringement of human rights or problems with the political climate and state of democracy; and a majority of them supported Lukashenka’s candidates in the parliamentary and local elections that they consider free and fair. In contrast, his convinced opponents speak out for privatization and are seriously concerned over human rights infringements, the political climate and the state of democracy. They mostly supported alternative and independent candidates in the parliamentary and local elections which they considered neither free nor fair. The correlation between those who believe the best form of government is democracy and those who chose “a strong hand” is 48 percent vs. 43 percent among those trusted to Lukashenka, while 82 percent vs. 10 percent among those who do not trust him.¹⁹

Strengthening the societal split with a “stick and carrot” policy had much more fundamental consequences for the country than simply a promotion of one set of values and the marginalization of others. Lukashenka’s policy affects the very social structure of society. During the first decade of Lukashenka’s rule, the social position of several socio-professional groups has been downgraded, while the status and position of

¹⁹ Oleg Manaev, Natelie Manayeva, and Dzmitri Yuran. 2011.

other groups has increased. Unlike the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, this change occurred without mass violence. However, this “quiet revolution” has already had serious consequences for Belarusian society and the state because it marks a significant redistribution of power, re-allocation of property, and access to social resources, such as healthcare, education, and a culture that stands behind the redistribution of social statuses.

One additional important feature of Belarusian society is its incomplete national identity. I define national identity as a system of institutional and cultural features that clearly sets the Belarusian nation, state and society apart from others. After a three centuries break in its nation and state building, Belarusians faced a serious challenge of self-identification: Who are we? To what culture, or, broadly speaking, civilization, do we belong? These questions might sound strange for almost all of our neighbors – Poles, Baltic peoples, Russians, Ukrainians, but not for many Belarusians. The weakness of the national identity makes Belarusian society unstable and creates a need for some “unifying basis.” Lukashenka used this situation effectively, introducing himself as the essence of the “unifying” base.²⁰

According to Samuel Huntington’s theory, Belarusian history, as well as the histories of Ukraine and Moldova, can be viewed as examples of “torn” or “cleft states” on a “civilization fault line” between the Western European Catholic/Protestant and the Eurasian Orthodox civilizations.²¹ Under these circumstances, Belarus’s incomplete national identity turned into the ambivalence of its geopolitical choice: while the more “advanced minority” looks up to Europe, the “common majority” looks up to Russia. Throughout his career, Lukashenka masterfully used these internal and external contradictions. On the one hand, for twenty years he demonstrated a strong pro-Russian political orientation domestically, thus getting support from the majority. On the other hand, he played a game with both Russia and the West, and managed to get support from both sides (mostly from Russia but sometimes from the West as well).

Trust as a “Lubricant for Cooperation”

Thus, the coexistence of state and non-state media that became a key feature of the post-Communist Belarusian media system is deeply rooted in the country’s history and culture, both at the structural and cultural levels. The state-run “media sub-system” follows political, legal, economic,

²⁰ David Marples, 1999. *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*. Newark: Harwood Academic; Grigory Ioffe. 2008. *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; Ryszard Radzik. 2012. *Białorusini Miedzy Wschodem a Zachodem*. Lublin, UMCS.

²¹ Samuel Huntington. 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

cultural and professional standards supported by the “common majority” and the state, while the independent media follow the “advanced minority” and to some extent the West.

At first glance, the Belarusian media system looks as if it were at the intermediate stage of transformation in Central and East European post-Communist countries, where non-state media gradually replace the state-run media. But this similarity is deceptive. In Belarus both media sub-systems came into being at the beginning of the 1990s and during the two following decades continued to reproduce themselves with some minor deviations. The state-run segment of the Belarusian media became more visible and prominent, while the independent media appear less visible. This discrepancy leads to a problem in assessing their real role in society. Which “media sub-system” is more influential and effective?

To answer this question, I use one important “cumulative” indicator that has broad theoretical and other implications: public trust in the media. One of the basic reasons why trust is essential for society is its complex relationship with cooperation. On the one hand, trust is a necessary precondition for cooperation; on the other hand, trust is a product of successful cooperation. According to Putnam, “trust is an essential component of social capital... it lubricates cooperation.”²² At the same time, Gambetta stressed that distrust destroys cooperation: “If distrust is complete, cooperation will fail among free agents.”²³

The Polish sociologist Peter Sztompka asserted that after the collapse of the Soviet system many post-communist societies experienced “a cultural trauma,” which includes crises of trust and confidence in institutions.²⁴ The result is an “atomized society” in which trust is confined to small local pockets of inter-personal interaction. With the erosion of confidence in social institutions, people prefer to solve problems using personal connections.

According to the December 2010 IISEPS public opinion polls displayed in Table 1, those Belarusians who trust the state media and those who put their faith in the independent media differ significantly in their attitudes towards basic social institutions in the country. For example, those who trust state media have much more trust in the president than those who rely on independent media. The data²⁵ here support our conclusion that in

²² Robert Putnam. 1993. *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²³ Diego Gambetta. Ed. 1988. *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

²⁴ Peter Sztompka. 1999. *Trust: a sociological theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁵ Dzmitri Yuran. 2011. Public confidence in social institutions and media coverage: A case of Belarus (master’s thesis). Retrieved from http://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2000&context=utk_gradthes

Belarus different media sub-systems are based on different social-political sub-systems.

Table 1. Trust for Mass Media and Confidence in Selected Social Institutions

| Of those who trust independent media | Of those who trust state media |
|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The President</i></p> <p>48.8% have confidence in the President and 42.2% do not.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The President</i></p> <p>89.3% have confidence in the President and 7.1% do not.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Military</i></p> <p>50.4% have confidence in Belarusian Military and 36.9% do not.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>The Military</i></p> <p>76% have confidence in Belarusian Military and 15.5% do not.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Opposition Political Parties</i></p> <p>22.9% have confidence in opposition political parties and 59.4% do not.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Opposition Political Parties</i></p> <p>15% have confidence in opposition political parties and 72% do not.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Independent Labor Unions</i></p> <p>47.3% have confidence in the independent labor unions and 32.6% do not</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Independent Labor Unions</i></p> <p>42.3% have confidence in the independent labor unions and 35.4% do not</p> |

Source: IISEPS

Table 2 examines the evolution of public trust for different media sub-systems. Based on these public opinion polls, we conclude that in the past 17 years:

- The total average level of trust (i.e. ratio between trust and distrust) for the state media is higher than for the non-state media;
- The total average level of distrust (i.e. ratio between distrust and trust) for both state and non-state media has significantly grown;
- Distrust for the state media has grown more rapidly than for the non-state media.

However, when we evaluate these indicators we should also take into consideration the fact that in Belarus people's trust in each other is low. Thus, responding to a question in the March 2013 IISEPS survey, "Can you trust most people or should you be very careful in relations with them?"

only 23.1 percent of respondents chose the first option while 70 percent preferred the latter. This data supports Sztompka's conclusion about the crisis of trust in post-Soviet societies that transformed them into "atomized societies" in which trust is confined to small local pockets of inter-personal interaction.²⁶ In this context, the mass media remain one of the few institutions that provide many people some sort of "social grounding," i.e. values (for example, pro or contra Lukashenka, pro Russia or the EU) shared by different parts of society, regardless of its nature.

Table 2. Dynamics of Public Trust in Different Media Sub-Systems (%)

| Years | State Media | | Non-State Media | |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|
| | Trust | Distrust | Trust | Distrust |
| 06/2013 | 33.6 | 53.0 | 31.1 | 51.6 |
| 06/2012 | 32.4 | 58.4 | 35.5 | 48.1 |
| 09/2011 | 25.7 | 62.2 | 32.8 | 52.2 |
| 09/2010 | 35.9 | 48.7 | 30.4 | 49.4 |
| 09/2009 | 44.7 | 42.1 | 45.3 | 35.5 |
| 06/2008 | 47.7 | 46.9 | 49.6 | 48.5 |
| 05/2007 | 51.0 | 39.7 | 50.6 | 35.5 |
| 06/2006 | 57.0 | 35.0 | 37.0 | 47.3 |
| 03/2005 | 53.9 | 33.2 | 40.0 | 40.2 |
| 03/2004 | 47.6 | 37.0 | 35.7 | 42.1 |
| 03/2003 | 45.0 | 37.3 | 43.8 | 33.8 |
| 04/2002 | 38.7 | 43.1 | 32.2 | 43.5 |
| 04/2001 | 33.1 | 35.4 | 25.3 | 31.8 |
| 04/2000 | 38.5 | 31.6 | 25.7 | 31.9 |
| 03/1999 | 39.1 | 31.0 | 21.8 | 32.6 |
| 09/1998 | 41.8 | 26.0 | 19.6 | 32.6 |
| 11/1997 | 43.7 | 21.0 | 25.4 | 24.1 |
| Average | 42.9 | 38.0 | 34.3 | 38.7 |

Source: IISEPS

Surprisingly, despite the fact that the actual ratio of state—run to independent media in Belarus is heavily tilted to the former, the ratio

²⁶ Sztompka.

between their influences is quite comparable, and even exceeds the ratio of the constituent groups they rely on and represent. This data might indicate a chance for a gradual replacement of the state-run media sub-system with the non-state sub-system under favorable circumstances, i.e. real democratization of the existing regime.

Internal Media System Factors

There are various factors at play in the two media sub-systems, some of them are internal to the media system (journalism education and training, professional standards) while others are external. I will analyze two of them – one internal and the other external – to demonstrate how they affect the level of trust in the media.

The first factor is the interaction between the media and its audiences. For decades, Soviet media used audience feedback, such as letters and phone calls from readers, listeners and viewers, meetings with the audience, etc., not so much for widening the public space, but to strengthen the authorities' editorial discourse. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, independent media began restoring the long forgotten freedom of expression and forming a genuine public discourse. Today, approximately 10 percent of Belarusians express their opinions to the mass media, as the data in Table 3 indicate.

Table 3. Have you ever communicated with mass media (i.e. sent letters, articles, and answers to various competitions, came to editorial meetings or called them by phone, etc.)?

| Options | Percent |
|--------------------|----------------|
| Yes, several times | 9.5 |
| Yes, one time | 11.0 |
| No, never | 78.5 |
| DA/NA | 1.0 |

Source: IISEPS September 2012 Poll.

However, not all of the submissions to the media were published, and approximately a third did not get any response at all, as Table 4 shows.

Table 4. If you communicated with mass media, what was their reaction?

| Option | Percent |
|---|---------|
| My letter (or article) was published | 7.0 |
| I received a written reply from the editors | 5.2 |
| My letter (or article) was passed to the appropriate authorities for their reaction | 2.0 |
| My letter (article) received no response from the editors | 6.2 |
| DA/NA | 79.6 |

Source: IISEPS

Table 5 shows how media train the audience to address “in the right course.” The more you follow “the right course” (i.e. cover “the right” issues and make “right comments”), the more you are published and the less your opinion gets “passed to the appropriate authorities” or receives no reaction at all.

Table 5. Editorial Reaction to Feedback Depending on Its Frequency (percent)

| Frequency of feedback | Letter was published | Received written reply | Letter passed to appropriate authorities | Letter received no reaction |
|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Several times | 46.2 | 9.1 | 16.1 | 23.1 |
| One time | 21.0 | 10.2 | 28.7 | 34.1 |

Source: IISEPS

A comparative correlation analysis of the public trust in the media and the feedback experience reveals a different reality for the state and non-state media, as Table 6 shows. This table reveals the different mechanisms of response to audience’s feedback by different media sub-systems. Those readers, listeners, and viewers who communicated with state-run media trust them less than before this experience, while those

Table 6. Trust in Belarusian Media (percent)

| Type of Media | Sent information to media (20.5) | Sent nothing to media (79.5) |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| State Media | | |
| Trust | 30.9 | 35.6 |
| Distrust | 52.1 | 43.4 |
| NA/DA | 17.0 | 21.0 |
| Non-state Media | | |
| Trust | 39.0 | 30.5 |
| Distrust | 39.3 | 41.2 |
| NA/DA | 21.7 | 28.3 |

Source: IISEPS

readers who communicated with the non-state media trust them more after communicating with them. This data supports the conclusion that different media sub-systems operate under different principles of interaction with their audiences. The state media, despite various advantages, tend to use public opinion in their own favor, reproducing the old social system. In contrast, non-state media, despite various disadvantages, tend to openly express public opinion, thus producing a new social system.

Another external factor that affects trust in the media is foreign influence. As Hallin and Mancini noted, “foreign influence seems much more central to the process of development of Eastern European media systems than to those of Western Europe. In the media sphere, both foreign ownership and the importation of professional models from outside the region clearly are major factors affecting the development of media systems.”²⁷

In the case of Belarus, the foreign factor in the media system’s development and earning its public’s trust is very specific. Due to various restrictions - legal, political, and economic - foreign ownership is limited. For this reason, foreign ownership does not affect the media system significantly, like it does in other CEE post-Communist countries. Foreign media influence works in a different manner – not through ownership but, rather, through discourse (i.e. principles of coverage, like separation of facts and opinions, presentation of conflict opinions, issues selection), economic (funding, technology, educational and training programs), and moral-political support (awards, making political statements, invitations for various visits to foreign countries) from abroad.²⁸

²⁷ Hallin and Mancini.

²⁸ Oleg Manaev. 2008. “Foreign Media Influence on Belarusians.” *Global Media Journal*, Polish Edition, 1(4).

Foreign print media are not popular and do not have a significant influence. The total audience for a dozen Western radio stations that broadcast to Belarus during the last five years has decreased from 15 percent to just 5 percent. As Tables 7 and 8 show, television has a much more significant audience share. Russian TV, for example, attracts more than 91 percent of the audience.

Table 7. TV audiences in Belarus (“What TV channels do you watch?”)

| TV Channels | Percent |
|---|----------------|
| Russian TV | 91.2 |
| Belarusian TV | 89.6 |
| Local TV | 57.2 |
| Satellite TV | 28.1 |
| Russian Service of Euro News (Lion) | 22.1 |
| Polish TV | 10.0 |
| Special RTVi Program for Belarus (New York-Moscow) | 12.0 |
| Independent TV Channel for Belarus BelSat (Warsaw) | 9.8 |

Source: IISEPS March 2011 poll.

According to an IISEPS June 2011 poll, the majority of internet users choose foreign sources: 35 percent Russian, 13.3 percent European, 2.2 percent American, while just 33.3 percent choose Belarusian sources (see Table 9).

In evaluating the role of foreign mass media, we should also keep in mind that during the last year only about 20 percent of Belarusians traveled abroad; a decade ago 15 percent did so. This means that for the majority of Belarusians, the media still are a major source of information about life abroad.

The “Islands in the Stream” Model

The discussion above leads us to important theoretical and practical questions. Can one define the different media subsystems which coexist (as well as social sub-systems that provide their support) as separate? Can one define this coexistence of different media subsystems as an “Islands in the Stream” model with its own nature, or just as a temporary period of transformation from one well-known model to another? What is the criterion for its definition?

Table 8. Radio audiences in Belarus (“What radio stations do you listen to?”)

| Radio Stations | 03/96 | 03/09 | 06/11 |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Radio Racia (Belostok) | 3.4 | 2.4 | 1.6 |
| European Radio for Belarus (Warsaw) | 4.9 | 3.6 | 1.1 |
| Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty (Prague) | 3.2 | 1.6 | 0.7 |
| Russian Service of Radio Liberty (Prague) | 4.2 | 2.3 | 0.6 |
| Belarusian Program of Radio Polonia (Warsaw) | 4.5 | 3.1 | 0.5 |
| BBC (London) | 2.8 | 2.3 | 0.5 |
| Baltic Wave (Vilnius) | 2.8 | 2.2 | 0.3 |
| VOA (Washington DC) | 3.7 | 2.2 | 0.3 |
| Radio Sweden (Stockholm) | 1.4 | 1.1 | - |
| Total audiences (listening in various combinations) | 15.0 | 10.0 | 5.0 |

Source: ISEPS March 2011 poll.

Table 9. Internet usage in Belarus (“Do you use Internet?”) %

| Options | 06/06 | 09/13 |
|-------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Yes, every day | 5.1 | 31.5 |
| Yes, some times a week | 9.6 | 19.3 |
| Yes, some times a month | 8.4 | 7.0 |
| Yes, some times a year | 4.6 | 0.8 |
| No | 67.8 | 38.1 |
| Do not know what it is | 3.8 | 3.3 |

Source: ISEPS Jun3 2011 Poll.

I believe that the media system, as well as social and political development in Belarus, are not just an “atypical case” or a “deviation from the mainstream.” While the state media subsystem gains support from the state and is trusted mostly by the “common majority,” independent media gain support from abroad and are trusted mostly by the “advanced minority” who disagree with the leadership. The media strengthen “social

capital” and “lubricate cooperation” in the two different parts of Belarusian society, contributing to their further coexistence. Moreover, the role of the media is not limited to simply contributing. As Gross argues, “the highly politicized, pluralistic, opinionated and judgmental journalism with neither shared standards nor a professional, democratic-minded culture that prevails in Eastern Europe not only represents civil society, but is civil society.”²⁹ Both media sub-systems in Belarus not only reflect or represent their constituencies (the different parts of society mentioned above), but actually produce them.

The practical question in this regard that is frequently asked in the West is: When will the independent media in Belarus become sustainable and able to continue activities without support from abroad? Or, in other words: Will media in Belarus enforce democracy or reinforce authoritarianism?

There is no definite answer to this question yet. One could expect that because of the different, and sometimes contradictory sociopolitical and cultural subsystems that coexist in Belarus due to its history, culture, and even geography, different media subsystems could coexist here for quite some time, not exactly replacing one another or converging in the end, but remaining natural for this nation and society. This social and media “duality” or “parallelism” could be broken in favor of either of the sides due to various internal and external factors.

The very existence of these two media systems – journalists, media outlets, ideas, technology, management, finance – indicates that in Belarusian society there is a demand for two completely different sets of values. One set of values appeals to one group of people, while the other appeals to the others. Expecting the “opening gateways” to quickly change the situation would be simplistic. It is not so much the media that shape the social reality as reality itself which shapes different forms of media. And it is not the specific people who work in these systems that are so important.

The two opposing media subsystems are constantly reproduced. I believe they will not go away for a long time, unless the different parts of the Belarusian society that generate a social demand for them disappear. Thus, one can confidently explain the reasons for the rapid decline of trust in state media. With the expansion of authoritarianism, they have to distort reality more. This alienates former supporters. But that does not mean that those who depart from “them” come to “us.” They just go into consumerism, immersed in social apathy.

If at their origin (before the collapse of the Soviet Union), the non-state media displayed a more objective approach to reflecting reality – not only the present but also the past (the Grand Duchy of Lithuania,

²⁹ Peter Gross. 2002. *Entangled evolutions: Media and democratization in Eastern Europe*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Bolshevik revolution, Belarusian People Republic, WWII, and so on) – now the range of discourse among independent media is much poorer. Objective information is increasingly giving way to the “promotion of democracy” and communication – to “democratic mobilization” regardless of what it is about, whether education, culture, sports, or lifestyle.

The media include some extreme “black and white” and “our vs. not our” viewpoints. The system of “rejection” of their own and others (events, people, and opinions) operates in a tougher and more uncompromising manner. Those who are considered in the “wrong” are simply removed and discarded.

The combination of these factors explains the longevity of Belarus’s model as a “hybrid regime” or “competitive autocracy,” which more generally describes mixes of authoritarian and democratic elements that can coexist for a long time.³⁰ Similar processes – with their peculiarities – take place in Russia and Ukraine because of their similar social and cultural grounds.

Supporters of democracy should not mirror those who disagree with them – neither in politics nor in the media. Otherwise they become the same as the ones that they oppose. Many already have gone down this path. People see it and turn away. Of course, democrats should not forget about their principles. But they have to think about what to do in their own community. After all, the logical consequence of the myths that I mentioned will be that when the democrats are eventually able to take power, they might be tempted to use authoritarian media methods in the name of democracy. Such actions would compromise the very purpose of democracy. The way out is not to ignore, not to alienate those “others.” It is one thing to criticize the government for wrong policies, and quite another to criticize the other part of the people for their “wrong views.”

The two different societies in Belarus will not go away in the foreseeable future. Those who are eager for democracy should move from the philosophy of barricades to a philosophy of coexistence with their opponents – in politics, economy, culture, and in the mass media. After all, they are all one people – Belarusians.

³⁰ See the above-mentioned publications by Matsuzato, Corrales, Furman, and Dobson.

