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Oleg Manaev: The “Civil (Society) Constructor” Soldiers On

KAROL JAKUBOWICZ

The focus of this essay is Professor Oleg Manaev, a Belarussian social scientist and dissident who may fall victim to President Lukashenka’s persecution of all forms of free scientific inquiry and free speech. This call for solidarity with Manaev shows his situation and efforts to promote democratization in his country against the context of the authoritarian system in Belarus.

In the old Soviet Union, an Estonian researcher got into serious trouble when he published the results of audience research showing that an educational television channel officially called “Leninist University for the Millions” did *not*, in reality, have an audience of millions. Those days, one would hope to believe, are past. Perhaps, but not in Belarus.

We should be seriously concerned when a Belarussian social scientist is called into the general prosecutor’s office after publishing the results of a public opinion poll and warned that “in case of continuing of dissemination of unconfirmed information you will be accused according to the Law right up to Article 369-1 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus,” potentially carrying a sentence of 2 years in jail. The scientist in question is Professor Oleg Manaev (Aleh Manayeu), director of the Independent Institute of Social-Economic and Political Research (IISEPS).

It was not an idle threat. On August 4, 2006, a court in Minsk handed down the verdict after a closed-door trial of four leaders of “Partnership,” a Belarussian nongovernmental organization devoted to training Belarussians to be election observers and educating them on their voter rights under Belarussian law. They had been arrested on February 21, 2006, 2 days after the presidential election that returned President Lukashenka to power for another term. Their crime? All they were guilty of was conducting exit polls on election day, but they were charged with “leading an organization that undermines citizens’ rights” and sentenced for up to 2 years in jail.

International observers said the election had failed to meet international standards and was characterized by a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association, and expression, as well as by a climate of insecurity and fear and a highly problematic vote count. The official result (83% in favor of a third term for Lukashenka) was widely regarded as rigged (see Chavusov, 2006). And yet the prosecutor told Manaev, the head of a reputable, experienced, and internationally recognized research institute, that “information about the results of recent Presidential elections in the Republic of Belarus, disseminated by you, is confirmed by nothing and contradicts the information received according

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to the legal procedure and published by the Central Electoral Commission.” Here—in pure Orwellian fashion—is the Ministry of Truth holding up its own fabrication as the absolute standard of truth. Challenging that fabrication is a crime.

Oleg Manaev once called himself a “civil constructor,” a person dedicated to promoting the emergence of civil society in his own country. He has persevered in this against impossible odds for the last 15 years, not least by publishing an impressive array of scholarly writing on the subject in Belarus and a wide range of other countries (see the Appendix), and is not giving up. He deserves all the support we can give him.

He knows he is taking a very big risk. Yet, he has said, “I continue my work not because of my political or ideological stance, but because providing unbiased and objective information to the public is part of my professional and public obligation. Despite all of the obstacles, I can see concrete results of our activities, and that spurs us forward.”

IISEPS is devoted to promoting democracy and a free market economy in Belarus. It is a hotbed of activity—a research center, a think tank, and a social actor committed to spreading information and ideas at home and abroad.

Paradoxically, much of IISEPS’s research should be music to Lukashenka’s ears. When asked in April 2006 whether they considered themselves Europeans or Soviet people, 52% of residents described themselves as “Soviet,” and only 36% as “Europeans.” In another poll, 60.8% said they trusted Lukashenka (up from 38.2% in 2002); 30.6% trusted political parties supporting the government, and only 15.5% trusted opposition parties. Trust in civil society was down rather than up. On another occasion, 70% thought Lukashenka was successful in maintaining stability in the country (though 47.9% thought he was not successful in promoting democracy and political liberties, as against 37.6% who saw success in this area as well). A study on “Indirect Indicators of Discontent” found that “the potential of discontent is pretty high. However, these are exactly indirect indicators which make it difficult to say if the potential energy of discontent may transform into kinetic energy of changes.” Why? Because yet another poll discovered that in the view of 86.1% of respondents, their well-being in the past 3 years has either improved or not changed, and 44.9% thought the country’s economic situation would improve in the next 3 years, while only 12% thought it would deteriorate.

So, Lukashenka should be sitting pretty. However, Belarus is one of the out-and-out authoritarian systems to survive the collapse of the Communist system (Carothers, 2002; Forbrig, Marples, & Demes, 2006). In such a system, no center of independent thought and action can be allowed to exist. More than that: There must be the Potemkin village of enthusiastic popular support for the leader. Lukashenka would have won the presidential election. Vote rigging did not serve the purpose of securing a victory but of making sure it would be a “triumphant victory.”

Lukashenka has proved to be very adept at the game of “political preemption,” a strategy developed by the leaders of the remaining post-Soviet autocracies after Georgia’s 2003 Rose Revolution, Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan:

Preemption aims at political parties and players that are still weak. It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture. Last but not least, it violates the electoral rules even when the incumbent would be likely to win in a fair balloting....

By uprooting political and social alternatives well before they develop into threats, incumbents can win elections long before the start of the campaign. And the validity of their victory is less likely to be contested when the strongest challengers have already been denied entry into the race by disqualification or other more nefarious means. Preemption has an enormous psychological impact on both the political and social opposition; such systematized repression instills in them a sense of hopelessness and imposes the perception that political change is far beyond reach. (Silitiski, 2005, p. 84)

So, inevitably, IISEPS has faced its own share of problems. It was liquidated by a decision of the Supreme Court in April 2005 and had to be re-registered in Lithuania. What this means is that, formally, IISEPS no longer exists in Belarus. Therefore, Manaev and his colleagues conduct their polls as “private persons” and publish the results as “private experts’ comments.”

In one way, this is convenient. According to a resolution by the Belarussian Council of Ministers, “legal persons” wishing to conduct public opinion polls in the country need government permission to engage in such activity and publish the results. The resolution says nothing about physical persons doing the same thing, so—on the face of it—Manaev and his colleagues are in the clear. However, judging by the latest warning from June 2006, the authorities’ patience is wearing thin, and, if it comes to that, they will not be shy of using trumped-up charges to convict them. After all, Aleksandr Kozulin, an opposition candidate in the presidential election, has been convicted of “hooliganism” and disturbing the peace and sentenced to 51/2 years in a medium-security colony.

So why is Manaev still at large? Lukashenka’s people know that Manaev is internationally recognized. He himself has said: “Lukashenka allows some democratic window-dressing because he needs to demonstrate his legitimacy to the world. But all independent media, politicians, and scholars in Belarus are under intense pressure. We face a real war against us.”

There is evidence that international opinion keeps tabs on Manaev’s fate. The head of the Minsk office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Ambassador Eberhard Heyken, who personally attended a court hearing on the closure of the institute, said afterward that “it is extremely regrettable that the IISEPS has been forced into liquidation. The founders of the institute have always attached a great importance to scientific independence and, until the liquidation, a certain freedom from censorship has guaranteed the professional objectivity of the surveys.” The OSCE office said in its press release that IISEPS was known in Belarus as a serious institution for the investigation of public opinion and had acquired an excellent reputation, with its publications serving as a reliable and indispensable mechanism to assess Belarussian public opinion in all of its diversity.

Also, the Luxembourg Presidency of the European Union, speaking on behalf of the entire organization, expressed its concern at the decision of the Supreme Court of Belarus to shut down IISEPS, noting its excellent reputation for professional and objective work: “Conducting independent research into citizens’ views on topical issues is a normal activity in any democratic society, says the President’s statement, and we therefore urge the Belarussian authorities not to deprive their people—and themselves—of valuable information about public opinion.”

The U.S. Embassy, too, expressed its profound disappointment over the decision to liquidate IISEPS “on what appear to be dubious legal grounds.” By closing IISEPS, a respected organization devoted to professional sociological research and opinion polling,

the Embassy statement said, the Belarussian authorities had taken another step toward depriving Belarussian society of sources of independent thought and discourse. Once again, the government had demonstrated a fundamental lack of regard for the principles of a democratic society it is committed to uphold as a member of the OSCE. The Embassy statement continued “The United States calls upon the Belarussian authorities to live up to [their] commitments to the OSCE and reverse this decision, which clearly violates those solemn commitments.”

Thus, Manaev’s and IISEPS’s international connections create something of a protective shield for them and can assist in their daily work. For example, the launch ceremony of Manaev’s book *Emerging of Civil Society in Independent Belarus. Sociological Experience: 2001–2005* took place on April 11, 2006, at the Latvian Embassy in Minsk. However, this has not been enough to allow the institute to go on in Belarus, and no one can be certain what the future holds for Manaev, especially if he continues to make statements such as the following when speaking at the Center for International Private Enterprise in Washington, D.C., in 2003: “Today, Belarus is being used as a ‘testing ground’ by forces seeking to re-create the glory of the former Soviet empire. The strengthening of Lukashenka’s dictatorship could cause destabilization in the whole region, thereby affecting Europe and beyond.”

We can all help Belarus by making sure that actions by the authorities to stifle democracy are widely publicized and condemned. We should also make every effort to let people who oppose the regime know that their actions enjoy the solidarity and support of the international community. The word “community” is important in this respect: People in Belarus and elsewhere fighting for freedom and democracy must know that they are part of a much wider community of resistance to violations of human rights and struggle for their full observance. The worst thing that could happen is for them to feel forgotten and unrecognized, abandoned at a time of need. This must not happen to Oleg Manaev and others like him in Belarus.

The IISEPS

In regard to the functions of IISEPS, the institute studies socioeconomic and political processes and their impact on public opinion and policy through national polls, interviews with leaders and experts, and analysis of mass media, legislation, socioeconomic statistics, and the platforms and documents of political parties, public associations, government bodies, nongovernmental organizations, and so forth. It organizes international, national, and regional conferences and seminars for politicians, scholars, journalists, businesspeople, and other leaders from around the world. IISEPS publishes analytical papers, books, national polls, and media resources and consults with business leaders, democratic activists, and other research institutes to strengthen support for free markets, democracy, and social science research in Belarus. In addition, it publishes a quarterly analytical bulletin, *IISEPS News*, and has established two annual awards (“best journalists publications based on the results of independent research” and “best use of independent research results in massmedia”).

IISEPS runs a documentation center (the first nonstate archive in the country) and has shared its documentation (research results and extensive documentation on all aspects of life in Belarus) with the National Archive of Belarus, as well as with the Belarussian State University. Finally, the institute has a monthly e-bulletin, *INFOFOCUS*.

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- Silitski, V. (2005). Preempting democracy: The case of Belarus. *Journal of Democracy*, 16(4), 83–97.

Appendix: Selected Books by Oleg Manaev

- Emerging of civil society in independent Belarus. Sociological experience: 1991–2000*. Riga, Latvia: Layma, 2005. 784 pp. (Russian)
- Independent research in independent Belarus: Fighting for reality*. (editor) Novosibirsk, Russia: Vodoley, 2004. 216 pp. (Russian)
- Emerging of civil society in independent Belarus. Sociological experiences: 1991–2000*. Minsk: PhilServPlus, 2000. 626 pp.
- Youth and civil society: A case of Belarus*, (editor). Minsk: Skakun, 1999). 284 pp.
- Media in transition: From totalitarianism to democracy* (editor). Kiev: ABRIS, 1993. 292 pp.
- Interaction of media, public and power institutions in democratization process* (editor). Minsk: Belarussian State University, 1991. 150 pp.
- Youth and democratization of Soviet society* (editor). Minsk: Nauka i Tekhnika, 1990. 135 pp.

