



## TRANSITIONS ONLINE: Fake News in the Service of Post-Truth Belarus

by Peter Gross

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*The fate of the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies emphasizes the need to protect the few remaining independent sources of information in the country.*

Until the crackdown on dissent that unrolled last month, Belarus had been flirting with Western Europe, which had reciprocated in an attempt to reduce Russian influence in the country. Such *realpolitik* has seldom done any good, however, and especially in light of recent events, the West should instead increase its support for democratization and enhanced freedom of the press, both languishing in the dungeons of authoritarianism.

In mid-2016, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, dubbed Europe's "last dictator" – an increasingly inaccurate label given the line of candidates who appear eager to wield absolute authority – publicly discredited the 25-year-old **Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies** (IISEPS). The institute had already been forced out of the country in 2005, re-establishing itself in neighboring Lithuania.

Last year, IISEPS' continued survey work in Belarus on a number of socio-political issues led to one of those show trials favored by the Soviets, this time in the form of a television program – "Primate IISEPS," which was aired on Belarus state-run TV in August. The essence of the broadcast was the revelation by Yevgenii Kovalev, head of the network of IISEPS pollsters, that the institute's survey results had over the years been "tailored to the desires" of Western donors.

This is a glaring example of fake news in the service of a society living in a post-truth world since 1922 when it became a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. The irony, of course, is that a dramatic reduction in funds is challenging IISEPS' continued existence.

Oleg Manaev, founder and head of IISEPS and a former professor of sociology at Belarus State University, denies the allegations. He told me that Kovalev's "confession" was a result of him being "broken by the repressive machine" of the regime. If he could re-connect with Kovalev, he would "thank him again for [his] effective work for IISEPS under very hostile circumstances, [and] for our long-lasting friendship ... Of course, I'd like to know how he was forced to state what he has stated, but I understand it is impossible while he lives in Belarus."

Refutations are not always effective even when they come from credible professionals like Manaev, who has himself been harassed, arrested by the Minsk riot police, and interrogated 10 times over the past two decades by the office of the General Prosecutor and the Supreme Court. Knowing this, Manaev brought the case to the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR). After examining the available information on the charges of data fabrication and "missing or inadequate information regarding fieldwork (e.g. interviewers' identification, routes, and response rates)," WAPOR issued a statement on 20 December 2016, unequivocally announcing it had "uncovered no evidence of data fabrication that would have been orchestrated by IISEPS."

Unfortunately, the statement will not do IISEPS or Manaev, who is in the United States pondering what the future of the institute might be, any practical good. The televised takedown of IISEPS is yet another warning to the two remaining non-governmental public opinion polling institutions in Belarus – the Axiometrical Research Laboratory NOVAK and the Center of System Business Technologies (SATIO) – to tow the government line. Not that they needed reminding. After all, they have to be registered with the state Commission on Public Opinion and, therefore, are under constant scrutiny. Any missteps such as asking the "wrong" questions on issues considered sensitive by Lukashenka, or tackling the "wrong" research topics, could lead to them being closed for "violating the law."

These non-governmental public opinion polling institutions should be supported, says Manaev, as should be the few semi-free media outlets – *Narodnaya Volya*, *Svobodnye Novosti*, *Solidarnost*, *Nasha Niva*, BelaPAN, tut.by, navy.by, and belaruspartisan.org. Support should also be extended to the semi-free think tanks – the Belarus Institute for Strategic Studies, the Liberal Club, and the Institute for Privatization and Management Research Center. "Even if they cannot replace IISEPS completely, they provide important information and analysis about developments in the country," Manaev observes.

Such information and analysis, coupled with unfettered news reporting, not only aids democratization, but also equips Belarus citizens to recognize and combat Russian propaganda and disinformation. Lukashenka may not be sympathetic to

democratization but, egocentric as dictators are, he should be reminded that keeping the country out of Russia's frigid embrace also saves him from becoming a small, marginally important, regional Russian apparatchik. And then again, perhaps he does not care about that either.

Dictators are prone to project onto others what they themselves do, and accusing their opponents of gross misdeeds has long ago become an established pattern; articulating laws and interpreting them in ways to serve their interests is standard practice; controlling news and information dissemination and those who supply data about their societies is age-old behavior; and seeking to keep out foreign influences that could aid society's democratize is a given. Having achieved all this, it is no wonder that Lukashenka was able to claim in his New Year's message to his citizen-subjects that the country is "an island of stability and tranquility" compared to the chaos and terrorism he sees in the rest of the world.

The announcement in January 2017 that citizens of the 80 countries doing business with Lukashenka's Belarus can gain five-day, visa-free entry to his "island of stability and tranquility" should not be interpreted as an opening of the country. That is even more true given **the brutality exerted these past weeks** against those who dared take to the streets to protest against the government's insensitivity to the unemployed.

The West must quickly forget about the flirtations of last year, and answer by sending increased aid to the few think tanks, research institutes, and media outlets that remain independent. But who will be up to the task?



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