

Belarus' Authoritarian Puzzle

The Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe hosted another interesting event within its public lectures series. On December 3rd, 2012 Natallia Pinchuk delivered a lecture titled «Belarus' Authoritarian Puzzle».

The speaker, a young Belarusian scholar residing in Italy, and a frequent guest at MIREES, focused her presentation on some key economical, political and cultural aspects of the country that has become synonym for the last dictatorship in Europe.



Except for a short-lived experiment in 1918-1919, Belarus has never been independent before 1991. A part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania between the XVI and XVIII century, it was incorporated in the Russian Empire and later in the USSR, when it suffered from cultural and linguistic Russification. Even today most Belarusians speak Russian as their first language.

Pinchuk pointed out several times the under-development of Belarusian civil society, the dominant behavioral pattern among people being a strong disinterest in politics and

a fear of change and social instability. According to the speaker, the country is in desperate need of a process of de-Sovietization.

Following these considerations, a special attention was devoted to Belarus' relationship with its two main trade partners, namely Russia and the European Union.

In the year 2000, Belarus and Russia established the Union State with the aim of guaranteeing equal labor rights and removing border controls. Ten years later, a Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan came into existence in order to create a free trade area between the three countries, a unification of legislation and external tariffs. At present, 100% of Belarusian overall natural gas consumption is dependent on Russian imports.

On the other hand, in 1997 the European Union suspended contacts and contractual agreements with Belarus and limited its assistance in supporting civil society. Furthermore, a year later Belarus' senior officials were banned from entry into the EU. Bilateral trade and economic relations between the EU and Belarus are currently still regulated by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), signed by the European Community and the Soviet Union in 1989.

Pinchuk defined this unsteady relationship as «tango all over again». As a reaction to Lukashenko's fraudulent elections and repressive actions against the opposition, the EU puts in place sanctions. Consequently, Lukashenko releases political prisoners (leaving, however, the character of the regime intact), after which the EU enhances contacts with the government.

Moscow has continued to subsidize the Belarusian authoritarian regime because Western influence represents an external threat to Russia. Conversely, current EU policies tend to privilege programmatic concerns over «Europeanization» as tools of overcoming the impasse in EU-Belarusian relations. According to the speaker, this «competition» for influence over Belarus implies the struggle for Belarusian identity and could lead to polarization between Russia and EU, should the country become politically unstable.



The above mentioned strategic rivalry between Russia and the EU has generated a favorable environment for the survival of Belarusian authoritarianism. President Alexander Lukashenko has been skillfully playing with the paradoxes of such policies: he has traded political loyalty or threatened with geopolitical reorientation in order to gain foreign support. Behind the game of «virtual integration» with Russia, the regime has pursued a state-building policy which emphasized Belarusian independence and created room for a distinct Belarusian identity. Pinchuk called this «identity entrepreneurship», i.e. the extraction of benefits in the form of energy subsidies and credits in return for political loyalty or through the threat of political reorientation.

The lecture arose much interest among the audience and was traditionally followed by a lively debate.

Dora Komnenović
MA MIREES Academic Tutor