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Women, Political Discourse, and Mass Media in the Republic of Belarus

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We should have no less than 30 to 40% women in parliament.
--Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko

They are dreaming men's dreams.
--Simone de Beauvoir

Keywords

Republic of Belarus, women and leadership, mass media, parliamentary elections

Abstract

This paper examines roles that patriarchal ideologies and the mass media are playing in incorporating more women in state decision-making processes in the Republic of Belarus. While the patriarchal beliefs about femininity that pervade Belarus' dominant culture normally could be expected to obstruct women's access to national elected positions, Belarusian President Lukashenko, invoking patriarchal notions that women are naturally kind, weak, and in need of protection, in 2004 deployed the media and other state resources to increase women's presence in parliament. This paper is part of a larger project on the same topic.¹

Introduction

Prior to the 2004 parliamentary election only 10% of the Belarusian Parliament's representatives were women. Just before candidates launched their 2004 campaigns President Aleksandr Lukashenko announced, while addressing parliament and the people of Belarus:²

We should have no less than 30 to 40% women in parliament. Therefore I will use all means to support greater representation of the female portion of society in parliament. . . . Male candidates who will compete against women . . . [should] give up [their intention to run for office] and let women work. Women should be widely represented in parliament. Then the parliament will be stable and calm. Women are always an emanation of kindness. Then the male Members of Parliament will work properly.

The president's proposal to support women candidates for parliament grew out of his assumption that women are "weak" and must be protected. But Lukashenko wished to protect potential female candidates not because it is his responsibility to act as the guarantor of the Belarusian Constitution, which includes language ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens regardless of gender, but because it was politically expedient. He expected, as his remarks above reveal, that a higher percentage of women in parliament would stabilize and pacify the assembly, which, since the 2002 election, was supposed to have been Lukashenko's "pocket" parliament but had demonstrated unexpected independence. Having more women in parliament would, Lukashenko says, catalyze male Members of Parliament (MPs) to work "properly," by which the president meant that women would be more likely than men to carry out his agenda. Lukashenko's strategy thus reveals the close connection between the social

and legal conditions that characterize Belarus' public sphere and the patriarchal definition of femininity as "weakness," "dependence on men," and an "inability to act on one's own" in Belarus' dominant culture.

Such patriarchalism directly influences the majority of Belarusians' ideas about women's ability to serve as political leaders. For instance, a national survey conducted by the "Women's Leadership Project" of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Belarus shows that 61.1% of the country's men believe that "there are enough" women in parliament while 4.7% thought that there are "more than enough." Simultaneously 32% of all men surveyed explained their attitudes by saying that "women have a different predestination [than men]." The UNDP report (2005) concludes:

Thus saying that men have more rights and opportunities in the sphere of public politics, the majority of this social group considers the situation normal and do not consider it necessary to expand female representation in the higher representative body of the country.

As a result, the numbers of women in national elected positions declined dramatically after the Republic of Belarus was established in 1991 as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had used quotas to ensure representation of women and ethnic minorities at all levels of government. Belarus is not the only country in the former Soviet sphere where the number of women in national representative institutions has declined with the abolition of quotas. Nevertheless, Belarus is a special case because its so-called transition to democracy and capitalism has been unique in Eastern Europe.

Presidential Populism

Lukashenko, then a political novice whose populist anti-corruption crusades earned voters' favor, was first elected president in 1994. According to the Belarusian Constitution, the next presidential election should have been in 1999. However, in 1996 Lukashenko disbanded parliament, which had been seeking to impeach him, and held a referendum that extended his presidency to 2001, at which time he successfully ran for a second term in office. This term should have ended in 2006 but in 2004 Lukashenko used a referendum to lift a constitutional ban on his third presidential term. Lukashenko won the last presidential election on March 19, 2006 and, according to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), claimed to have garnered 82.6% of the vote (with turnout at 92.6%). Unlike other countries in Eastern Europe, Belarus, under Lukashenko, a former collective and state farm manager, has eschewed capitalism in favor of market socialism. Lukashenko's version of market socialism entails central economic planning, limited privatization and liberalization, and considerable state regulation of prices, currency exchange rates, and private enterprise.

Although international entities as ideologically diverse as the International Federation of Journalists, Amnesty International, the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the United States government have criticized Lukashenko's policies harshly, the majority of Belarusians approve of them, especially his program of market socialism. Indeed, populism—giving voters what they want—is one of Lukashenko's ruling hallmarks and is largely responsible for his long hold on the presidency.

Hence, Lukashenko's support for women candidates for parliament is surprising because it is a rare instance in which the president has taken a position that runs counter to majority opinion: on its face Lukashenko's promise to encourage women's leadership is inconsistent with prevailing sentiments that women's natural weakness renders them unfit to hold high level elective office. Nevertheless, Lukashenko made good on his pre-election promise and the number of female MPs elected to parliament tripled in 2004.

The Why and How of Sexual Politics in Belarus

Two questions emerge out of this situation:

- 1) Why did the president decide to increase the number of women in parliament?
- 2) How did Lukashenko succeed in achieving this goal?

The answer to the first question is connected to problems that Lukashenko was facing prior to the 2004 parliamentary elections. The sitting parliament was not loyal and predictable enough; it did not “rubber stamp” Lukashenko’s agenda. Some of its male MPs openly disagreed with the official point of view—Lukashenko’s—and proposed alternatives to Lukashenko’s policies. A few even went on hunger strikes. During this period one of a small number of female MPs broke with her male colleagues and declared her loyalty to the president in the independent *Belorusskaya Gazeta* (2004):

We feel the energy and power of Lukashenko even while watching him delivering his speeches on TV. And when he is coming to parliament personally it is as if everybody becomes smaller and even his opponents are shaking. What is more, over the years Lukashenko became more knowledgeable and is able to control what he is talking about.

This is probably one of the most supportive texts ever written about Lukashenko. Significantly, the deference to Lukashenko and admiration for his political virility that is displayed by this female MP’s remarks is consistent with patriarchal stereotypes of women as acquiescent, stereotypes that suggest women both need and desire to be led by strong, authoritarian men such as Lukashenko. Moreover, the female MP’s obsequiousness contrasts starkly with displays of independence among male MPs. If we keep in mind that Lukashenko subscribes to patriarchal constructions of femininity, as demonstrated by his suggestion that women are essentially “kind,” it’s not unreasonable to conclude that stacking parliament with “compliant” women was appealing because he assumed they would obey him. Of course, increasing the number of pliable MPs would eliminate “problems” posed by independents.

In addition to praising Lukashenko in *Belorusskaya Gazeta* the female MP quoted above went on, in the same article, to offer another explanation why the president wanted to increase the number of women deputies. She said, “If we are able to reach the percentage of female representation set by the country’s president we will be able to increase the human development index immediately.” What she means is that with more women in parliament Belarus will fare better in numerous international reports on human development in post-Soviet territories. The advantages of Belarus garnering higher human development rankings would be twofold. First, better rankings would prove indisputably that Lukashenko’s market socialism was better for the country than liberal capitalism, which in Russia and other parts of post-Soviet Eastern Europe had led to declines in the numbers of women in legislative assemblies. Second, higher human development scores could be used as a counter-argument to Western opponents who consider the Belarusian regime undemocratic. ^[3]

Thus the conditions and reasons for demanding women’s greater participation in national elective politics are fairly obvious. Lukashenko’s international currency would increase if more women were elected to parliament. Apart from this, the system of controlled elections that Lukashenko proposed—prohibiting male candidates from running against women, for instance—would cultivate victors’ loyalty to him. The winning women personally would feel grateful if not indebted to the man whose help was indispensable to their move up the socio-political ladder. Indeed, patriarchal social attitudes, especially the belief that women should be dependent on men, and the absence of other legal mechanisms facilitating women’s upward mobility would highlight female MPs’ perception that their success was due solely to

Lukashenko's support. This in turn would ensure their allegiance to Lukashenko and his policies.

The answer to the second question, namely, which mechanisms increased female representation in politics, is not obvious and requires additional research. In this paper I can only gesture toward some of the contributing factors, which are that most Belarusians unequivocally trust the state and its information outlets and that the regime provided extraordinary material and ideological resources to female candidates who campaigned as Lukashenko loyalists.

As one of the female, government-supported candidates who won a seat in parliament explained the reasons for her success: "I was competing with two men. But they were not working at all. They were not meeting their voters. And I had a car that would transport me from one meeting to the other where the people were waiting for me." The complete import of this explanation becomes clear only when it is compared to the testimony of an independent female candidate who lost: "I was shocked how scared the people in the countryside are. People are not coming to my meetings and [they are saying the reason is] that the *brigidir* [the local authority] was going around and promising, 'Don't even think of going [to the candidate's meeting]. You will not get a horse and will not be able to plant potatoes.'"^[4] Clearly, the government manipulated the election by providing approved candidates tremendous material support while using state employees/representatives to intimidate potential supporters of independent candidates.

Another explanation for the tripling of women MPs is that the state media was one of the resources available to government-endorsed candidates. The state media has extraordinary influence in Belarus because of the material and ideological conditions of its production and availability/delivery. The Belarusian state media reaches larger audiences and is more accessible than the non-state media, whose operations are severely curtailed by the government. For instance, the state "mouthpiece," *Sovietskaya Belorussiya* (some refer to it as "Lukashenko's newspaper"), whose founders include members of the presidential administration, has the highest circulation in the country because the government forces organizations and businesses to subscribe to it. In addition to being more available, state newspapers are also cheaper. They are delivered to the country's most remote villages regularly and are displayed in advantageous spots in shops and newspaper stands. Moreover, international radio and television stations, such as Russia's *HTB* (NTV) and the U.S.-financed Radio Liberty, have limited delivery capabilities in Belarus while Western, non-Russian print media generally are not available except to diplomats.

Nevertheless, the most important ideological factor in the production and dissemination of state media is the general trust that Belarusians express toward everything produced by the state. This phenomenon is partially rooted in the country's Soviet past. However, from my point of view such confidence in the state is forcefully, albeit not always skillfully, promoted by the current regime. Regardless the reason, the public's faith in the state extends to the state media, which has the legitimacy of an official document. Indeed, Lukashenko actively promotes a symbiotic relationship between the state and its media outlets. For instance, when the president met with the staff of one state media company he made it clear that their role is to promote government perspectives and policies: "Any group has a director. Your director is the state and you express the point of view of the state. You should not conceal this."^[5]

Aside from this deliberate imbrication of state and media, the media's greatest power derives from its role in producing social reality. Social "reality" is not given; it is constructed. Mass media are one of the mechanisms that provide material for the social construction of reality. Hence, our perception of the world is to a great extent mediated by the topics, heroes, genres and "facts" supplied us by the mass media. As the media deliver (in print and broadcast) this content they simultaneously occupy the position of a social (versus an individual) speaking

subject. This allows the media to label—to interpret—events that they cover and, in so doing, shape the audience’s perception of “facts.”^[6] Consequently, the mass media construct rather than merely report/reflect reality. The media produce a story of reality by narrating it.

Conclusion

The power and influence of the state media in Belarus stem from material support provided by the government, the symbiosis of state and media that facilitates transference of the audience’s trust in the state to the media, and the mass media’s ability to construct social reality. These factors increase the credibility of the state media among the general public to the degree that when the media act to fulfill Lukashenko’s wishes the media have so much influence that the audience’s deeply ingrained patriarchal convictions can be overridden. This occurred in the 2004 parliamentary elections when Lukashenko, inspired by his own patriarchal beliefs, successfully deployed government resources, particularly the media, to increase by threefold the percentage of women in national leadership positions. Paradoxically, then, Lukashenko invoked patriarchalism to obtain a result—increased representation of women in national government—that on its face appears to enhance women’s status but actually exploits women to shore up his position as Belarus’ “daddy,” as the president known among both supporters and the opposition.

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Notes

^[1] I would like to acknowledge the kind help of Olga Zubkovskaya in reviewing and commenting this text.

^[2] The official name of the Belarusian Parliament is “National Assembly.” It has two chambers, the Chamber of Representatives and the Soviet of the Republic. The Chamber of Representatives (lower) is elected, while the president appoints the members of the Soviet of the Republic. In this text I refer only to the lower chamber.

^[3] It might be reasonable to note here that the percentage of female representation in government bodies serves as one of the coefficients in calculating an index of democratic development.

^[4] This is a potent threat because huge numbers of Belarusians, especially those who live on agricultural collectives, depend on subsistence farming for survival.

^[5] I will not discuss here how as a result of this situation the mass media became an instrument of the state.

^[6] I am not commenting upon the role of language in the construction of social reality. See, for example, Блакар Р. М. Язык как инструмент социальной власти (теоретико-эмпирические исследования языка и его использование в социальном контексте) // Язык и моделирование социального взаимодействия: Сб. ст. / Общ. Ред. Петрова В. В. – М.: Прогресс, 1987. – С. 88-121, and Лакофф Дж., Джонсон М. Метафоры, которыми мы живем // Язык и моделирование социального взаимодействия: Сб. ст. / Общ. Ред. Петрова В. В. – М.: Прогресс, 1987. – С. 1126 – 170.

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