

SCIENTIFIC REVIEWS. OPINIONS

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Review of the Monograph

Belarus on Its Way to the Future: Sociological Assessment.

Ed. by I.V. Kotlyarov. Minsk: Belaruskaya navuka, 2015. 499 p.



**Konstantin Nikolaevich
KALASHNIKOV**

Ph.D. in Economics

Institute of Socio-Economic Development of Territories of RAS
56A, Gorky Street, Vologda, 160014, Russian Federation
konstantino-84@mail.ru

Terra incognita, or What do we know about Belarus?

If we decide to hold an impromptu case study, go out in the streets of Russian cities and ask passers-by a simple question “What do you know about Belarus?”, then we will very quickly understand that our ideas about this country are vague and the knowledge fragmentary. People will probably say that Lukashenko is a strong President who knows how to restore order in the country. They will also recall the cleanliness of Belarusian streets and security of ordinary citizens, the facts they know either from experience or from the stories of their acquaintances. Perhaps, these few bits of information make up the notion of the Russians about the life of their Western neighbors.

Therefore, the publication of the monograph “Belarus on the Way to the Future: the Sociological Dimension”, a large-scale work comprising almost 500 pages and dedicated to the development of the Belarusian society and touching upon virtually all aspects, including the development of political institutions and social development, will probably be good news for those who lamented the well-known informational isolation of Belarus. The book was published in 2015 in Minsk. Its authors are leading Belarusian sociologists: I.V. Kotlyarov, V.L. Abushenko, E.M. Babosov and others.

Leafing through the pages...

While reading the monograph, one cannot but notice a complex conglomerate of assessments, ideas and impressions it contains. The

most variegated views are intertwined here, among them we can find such ideas that cannot be found in the Russian ideological space any more. For example, a telling example is the formulation of the issue concerning the attitude of the Belarusian people toward entrepreneurship, it implies that the attitude can be not only positive but also negative. In the eyes of almost 20% of the Belarusians, entrepreneurs look compromised: they “don’t create jobs, they produce nothing, and are engaged only in trade”, and 13% of surveyed residents of Belarus believe that entrepreneurs hamper economic growth and competition. It is worth mentioning in the same context the section of the monograph under the catchy title “The working class in the postindustrial world of illusions”. This section sharply criticizes the idea of the “death of labor”, which supposedly should come with the formation of the post-industrial society.

At the same time, the research team that is developing the “Socio-cultural portrait of Russia’s regions” project under the supervision of N.I. Lapin will find very interesting the section devoted to the study of socio-cultural determinants in the development of Belarus, especially after Belarusian sociologists expressed their intentions to study this direction more deeply, particularly in the framework of the research on “finding a clue to the cultural code” of the Belarusians.

The book provides evidence that Belarusian scientists are able to learn from Russian mistakes. The reform of healthcare financing mechanisms in the aspect of transition to insurance principles and, consequently, gaining additional source of funds, which was undertaken in Russia, has given very insignificant

results. The reasons for this failure are obvious: no matter what tools the government uses for the allocation of funds, the financial substrate that feeds the social system remains the same. The authors demonstrate a complete understanding of this relationship, and we should hope that the Belarusian authorities will listen to these reasonable arguments.

However, of the greatest interest are the sections of the book that are related to social and political aspects of life of Belarusian people. The authors show that it is difficult to call the citizens of Belarus wealthy under all possible assumptions. For example, a significant share of Belarusian pensioners – 60% – are not satisfied with the amount of their pensions. People say that the amount of pension payments is only enough to buy food and utilities, but the majority of them have to save up money to buy clothes and shoes, not to mention durable goods. The satisfaction with life index in Belarus measured in the monitoring mode is 50%. A significant proportion (36%) of the citizens are optimistic, believing that in the near future the situation will change for the better, but still 20% think it will remain unchanged, 7% expect a change for the worse, while about 37% of the Belarusians do not presume to speculate upon the prospects for the development of the country. The life satisfaction index, according to estimates of the authors of the monograph, is 87%, however over 30% describe their living conditions as “difficult but bearable”. Meanwhile, Belarusian citizens say that life in their country is safe: more than 80% feel safe on the streets. It turns out that, although the standard of living of the Belarusians is low, they feel protected by the government.

A “special” path of Belarus

What is the secret of the “special” path of Belarus? After the Soviet Union, the last empire in world history, collapsed in 1990, the former Soviet republics, having gained independence, started to move toward political liberalization. It is often forgotten that true democracy does not eliminate the need for a strong government able to protect property rights, to fight against external and internal threats, to create a modern infrastructure, and what Western scholars call the “rule of law”. The experience of the Russian Federation shows that to build a modern state is a not less but more difficult task than to form democratic institutions. The attempts to achieve this goal were not successful even in Ukraine, where, it seems, there was a mature civil society and the desire for freedom has traditionally been very high. In this sense, the path of Belarus is unique: unlike Russia and Ukraine, where from time to time after all there emerged new “iconic” leaders on which the people pinned their hopes, Belarus throughout the whole post-Soviet period was headed by one President – Alexander Lukashenko. Today, he remains the main subject and the center for the adoption and implementation of fundamental political decisions. The all-time President has become a kind of symbol of the firmness of the existing political system and lack of prospects for moving toward democracy. However, there is reason to believe that the Belarusian people do not view this as a big problem. In the latest election, Alexander Lukashenko won a landslide victory; his national recognition is confirmed by the data of sociological surveys: 82–84% of voters are ready to vote for the incumbent President.

How do Belarusian scientists estimate the prospects for democratic development of their country? They say that the democratic path is desirable, but they do not see any fatal contradictions between democratic values and the order established in Belarus. When listing the criteria of democracy, the authors seem to imply that Belarusian political life meets almost every one of them. So, I.V. Kotlyarov, in the section of the book devoted to a multi-party system that failed, sharply criticizes Belarusian political parties, accusing them of all possible evils: absence of charismatic leaders and bright ideas, corruption and outright laziness. Analyzing the development of the political system, he comes to the conclusion that “citizens of Belarus do not feel the real need of the parties, and, therefore, there is no demand for them in the Belarusian society”. At the same time, according to the data of the monitoring that he provides, 47% of the Belarusians want their country to have strong political parties.

It is very likely that for the Belarusians the negative examples of socio-economic development in the neighboring CIS countries serve as a warning about the dangers that may await them on the path of democratic transformation. This fact has strengthened in the Belarusian people their strong loyalty to the state, which they are based on and which they perceive as a guarantor of stability, as a core value. Frankly speaking, even in Russia, many representatives of the middle-class support Vladimir Putin mainly due to the fact that the concept of “democracy” has absorbed a lot of negative connotations because it has become associated with the chaos of the 1990s, economic crisis and the looting of the country.

And although we can not but point out the fact that there is no developed civil society and multiparty system in Belarus, and we cannot but express doubt about the fairness of the presidential elections, but we also cannot hush up the victory of the Belarusian authorities in one important point – the legitimacy of the regime, which American political scientist and sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset identified as the consent to move along the chosen path, regardless of economic failures.

It is no coincidence that in Russia, where if not the political outrage, then, at least, the indifference of the government to its people is still present, many are nostalgic about the Soviet past, saying that “there was more order at that time”. Thus, the results of public opinion measurements carried out by Levada-Center indicate that more than half of the citizens consider the economic model based on state planning and distribution to be more adequate than the market model, and 37% of the Russians would prefer the Soviet political system. It is the very power of the state, the power that the Russian society lost in the era of Boris Yeltsin, and has not recovered in present era (according to Levada-Center, only 23% of the Russians are satisfied with the contemporary Russian political system) that is so appealing to the Russian people when they

consider the Belarusian political regime, to some extent reminiscent of the Soviet system. The power of the state, apparently, is the key to its permanence. However, the question remains open concerning the possibility of progress in the development of democratic institutions in the Republic of Belarus in the foreseeable future.

Despite the fact that the research of Belarusian scientists is primarily based on the monitoring, “index” approach, we can say that the large volume of factual material contained in the book will provide wide perspectives for interpretations, even to those sociologists who do not advocate “hard” research methods. At the same time, the authors of the monograph not just provide the key indicators and a dry description of detectable trends, but they also interpret the processes under observation in line with the general demographic, socio-cultural and socio-economic development of the country and in the context of the conceptual-theoretical and methodological field of modern sociology. Perhaps, this book will help the Russian citizens at least, the representatives of scientific and educational community, to fill the gaps in the knowledge about the life and fate of the Belarusian people and, at the same time, to think about the future of their own country.

Information about the Author

Konstantin Nikolaevich Kalashnikov – Ph.D. in Economics, Research Associate, Institute of Socio-Economic Development of Territories of Russian Academy of Science (56A, Gorky Street, Vologda, 160014, Russian Federation, konstantino-84@mail.ru)