Belarusian State Ideology: A Strategy of Flexible Adaptation

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Abstract
While in some Eastern European countries a wave of colored revolutions challenged existing political orders, Belarus has remained largely untouched by mass protests. In Minsk, the diffusion of democratic ideas leading to the mobilization of population meets a stable authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, the stagnating democratization process cannot be only attributed to the strong authoritarian rule and abuse of power. Indeed, Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko still enjoys popularity by a large part of the population. Although international observers report that elections in Belarus have never been free and fair, few commentators doubt that Lukashenko would not have won in democratic elections. This evidence suggests that the regime succeeded in building a strong legitimizing basis, which has not been seriously challenged during the last two decades. This paper explores the authoritarian stability in Belarus by looking at the patterns of state ideology. The government effectively spreads state ideology since the early 2000s. Ideology departments have been created in almost all state institutions. The education sector has been affected by the introduction of the compulsory course “The Fundamentals of Belarusian State Ideology” at all universities, and increasing attention to the patriotic education at schools. Based on document analysis, I trace the creation of “ideological vertical” in Belarus and focus on the issue of ideology in education and youth policy sectors.

1 Introduction

Authoritarian stability has attracted growing scholarly attention in the recent years, not less because of evident failures of Western democracy promotion initiatives (e.g., Grimm, 2015). Broadly speaking, research on authoritarian stability has followed two different paths. Seeking to explain authoritarian persistence, one group of scholars have concentrated on its external dimension, by analyzing how autocrats help each other to withstand
democratization pushes from abroad (e.g., Vanderhill, 2012, Tolstrup, 2015). Another strand of research focused on domestic sources of regime stability, such as repression, co-optation, and legitimacy (e.g., Gerschewski, 2013, Kailitz, 2013, Josua and Edel, 2015). This paper contributes to the latter research direction, by analyzing ideology as one of authoritarian legitimation strategies. On the example of Belarus, the paper shows how state ideology is deployed to legitimize the regime. Additionally, this paper demonstrates that the official state ideology is not a stable construct, but is adaptable to the external political environment. Indeed, no state performs in a vacuum. Even politically closed authoritarian regimes shape their strategies considering both domestic and international factors. Hence, the ideology serves two purposes: accentuating the sovereignty of Belarus in light of assertive Russia’s politics, and legitimizing the regime, portraying it as the main guarantor of sovereignty and stability.

The Belarusian case is interesting and important because of several aspects. While in some post-Soviet countries a wave of colored revolutions challenged existing political orders, Belarus has remained largely untouched by mass protests. In Minsk, the diffusion of democratic ideas leading to the mobilization of population meets a stable authoritarian regime. Whereas repression is one of the sources of authoritarian stability in Belarus (e.g., Ash, 2015), the stagnating democratization process cannot be only attributed to the strong authoritarian rule and abuse of power. Popularity of the regime suggests that it has succeeded in building a legitimizing basis, which has not been seriously challenged during the last two decades.

As Gerschewski (2013) points out, it is difficult to measure and to evaluate how successful an ideology is or has been. Nevertheless, it is interesting and important to explore how governments seek to boost their regimes. Especially Western policy makers should have a better understanding of the societies in which they want to promote democracy. For example, the European Union not only undertook restrictive measures against the Belarusian regime, but also declared a desire “to win hearts and minds” of the Belarusian population (Bosse and Korosteleva, 2009, p. 145-146). Western policy makers should keep in mind, however, that authoritarian regimes also care about the minds of their populations and seek to prevent others doing this too actively, by investing considerable resources in propaganda activities.

This paper traces the evolution of the identity-building in Belarus and the consequent
creation of “ideological vertical” after 2002, when state ideology has been officially introduced. It then focuses on the issue of ideology in education and youth policy sectors, by exploring the content of the university ideology courses and patriotic education at schools. This paper is based on primary sources in Russian and Belarusian language, such as official documents and public statements of the country’s political elites. The paper also refers to Russian and Belarusian secondary sources.

2 Legitimacy and legitimation in authoritarian regimes

According to Max Weber, legitimacy, understood as a morally valid or rightful rule, is one of the most important factors in survival of political systems (Weber, 1978, Gilley, 2009). Legitimacy is a concept widely adopted in political analysis to explain stability or change of political orders, even though there is no unity among scholars on its exact conceptualization and measurement (e.g., Gilley, 2009, von Haldenwang, 2016). Whereas it has long been acknowledged that both democracies and autocracies seek to legitimize their rule, only recently scholars have started to study the role of legitimacy in sustaining authoritarian regimes (e.g., Gerschewski, 2013, Holbig, 2013, Kailitz, 2013, Kneuer, 2013, Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014, von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015a, Brusis, 2015, Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2016, Mazepus et al., 2016). The main claim uniting scholars of authoritarian legitimation is that authoritarian regimes do not entirely base their rule on repression, which is too costly for the regimes and show its weakness. They also actively seek to make the regime acceptable to the majority of the population (Göbel, 2011, Gerschewski, 2013, Grauvogel and von Soest, 2014). In the theoretical framework proposed by Gerschewski (2013), legitimation constitutes one of the three pillars of authoritarian stability, along with repression and co-optation. In this paper I follow von Soest and Grauvogel (2015a) who distinguish between claims to legitimacy and the legitimacy itself. Hence, I adopt their definition of legitimation referring to the process of gaining support or as “the strategy by which legitimacy is sought” (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2015a, p. 5).

In a broader discussion of authoritarian stability, some of the post-Soviet authoritarian regimes have increasingly gained scholarly attention. In discussing institutional
legitimacy, Brusis (2015) suggests to look at electoral authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet Eurasia, where regular elections are conducted not to select effectively political elites, but to reinforce the popular belief that elites are indeed selected in competitive elections. Hence, for electoral autocracies it is important that elections are perceived by the population as a tool to regulate the access to power (Brusis, 2015). At the same time, behind the facade of representative democracy, democratic rules are constantly violated (Schedler, 2013). As in some of the post-Soviet countries fraudulent elections mobilized people to protest against regimes, elites have to rely increasingly on alternative legitimation sources. These sources can be, for example, the ability to deliver security and economic prosperity, but also alternative strategies, such as mobilization of nationalist sentiments, as in the case of Russia. As Schedler (2013, p. 55) puts it, modern authoritarian regimes “cannot ground their right to rule on secure claims of tradition or divine will. Ideologically homeless, lacking a secure roof of legitimacy over their exposed heads, they have to tap non-religious sources of legitimacy: nationalism, socialism, Asian values, whatever. Even when, longing for the comforts of pre-modern legitimacy, they invoke timeless sources of authority, they have to invent them, like the Arab monarchies.” This is especially relevant for post-communist autocracies, which could not straightforwardly deploy the communist ideology after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and tried to adopt themselves to the post-Cold War realities. For example, in Russia, Putin has built his legitimation strategy on economic performance (before the annexation of Crimea and Western sanctions) and the discourse of order and stability (Mazepus et al., 2016), and creating enemy images (Gaufman, 2016). The Karimov regime in Uzbekistan went further and has elaborated and transmitted a conception of the official state ideology (March, 2003). Hence, a common feature of authoritarian regimes is that through discourse and specific policies, they seek, as Göbel (2011) puts it, “to make people want what the government wants them to want”.

Ideology is one of many legitimation strategies at the disposal of authoritarian regimes. A general expectation would be that in the post-Cold War world, ideology may serve as a legitimation strategy in communist-party regimes, such as China, North Corea or Cuba (Holbig, 2013, Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2016). Existence of official ideologies in electoral autocracies is rather an exception. The definition of the concept of ideology itself is contested, although the research on ideology has proliferated since recently (Maynard
For the purpose of this paper and in the context of legitimation strategies I will adopt the definition of von Soest and Grauvogel (2015b, p. 7) who define ideology-based legitimacy claims as “general narratives regarding the righteousness of a given political order” that may include “references to nationalism, societal models and religion”.

As it will be demonstrated in the following sections, ideology is not always a stable construct, but it is constantly adapted to the emerging needs of the regime, caused by both internal and external political circumstances. Further sections will show that Belarusian ideology follows what Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2016) call the strategy of flexible adaptation in their study on ideology. In their theoretical framework the authors differentiate between two ideal types of ideology. The first type is the “freeze-frame” strategy, when authoritarian leaders fix or stabilize the content of their legitimating ideologies making them rigid and not accepting alternative interpretations of concepts. The second ideal type is the strategy of flexible adaptation. In this case ideology serves as a manipulative tool, which the regimes adapt to a changing environment, as a reaction to the outside stimulus, and adjust their strategies according to the new circumstances.

3 Pre-ideology years in Belarus

Regime stability in Belarus is attributed to a mix of many factors, such as repression (Silitski, 2005, Ash, 2015) fragmentation of the opposition (Ash, 2015, Burkhardt, 2015), support from regional powers (Yakouchyk, 2016), and weak national identity (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). Another factor which is often mention in literature is popularity of the regime (Marples, 2006). One possible explanation of the regime popularity, especially in the first post-independence years, is Soviet nostalgia of the population. Indeed, the Belarusian independence was not a result of social mobilization but simply a product of the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Mildner, 2000). As Marples (1996) argues, it was a process largely determined by external circumstances, and would not have occurred without the collapse of the USSR. Belarusian independence was more a surprise than a result of social mobilization, and the country did not find itself comfortable with such a drastic change. The independence was met by the population without great enthusiasm.

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1They distinguish between six dimensions of the legitimation strategy: ideology, foundational myth, personalism, international engagement, procedural mechanisms, and performance.
In the referendum on March 17 1990, almost 83% of Belarusians voted in favor of the preservation of the Soviet Union, clearly above the Soviet Union average of 76% (Claire, 2005, Rudling, 2010).

During the first years of Belarusian independence, the Belarusian Popular Front, the then major opposition force, managed to implement its cultural agenda (Leshchenko, 2004). For example, new symbols, aiming to be more authentic and historically rooted were introduced: a white-red-white flag instead of the red-green BSSR flag, and Pahonia coat of arms (a mounted knight) instead of the old state emblem (Leshchenko, 2004). According to Leshchenko (2004), the nation-building policies of Belarusian nationalists failed because they ignored the recent history of Belarus and experience of the society, and were perceived by the population as coercive. This, according to Leshchenko, provided a fertile ground for Lukashenko, who glorified the Soviet past instead. The first democratically elected Belarusian president has largely built his campaign on the idea of re-integration with the former Soviet Union countries, and especially with Russia.

Soon after the presidential elections, in a 1995 referendum, Belarusians voted for the introduction of a modified version of the Soviet flag, the introduction of Russian as the second official language, and the government’s course on close economic integration with Russia (Buhr et al., 2011). Some scholars find an explanation for this phenomenon in the history of Belarus. Before communism, Belarus was one of the poorest countries in Europe with the lack of statehood and delayed national movement. In less than 50 years, the country has experienced tsarist Russification policy, destruction of its elite under Stalin, fascist occupation and ultimately Sovietization (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). As a result, almost all traditional civil structures and the associated values were extinguished and the country became independent with weak national consciousness (Mildner, 2000, Mihalisko, 1997). After the Second World War, the Soviet Union has greatly invested in the country and made it the showcase of Soviet economic development (Ambrosio, 2006, Rudling, 2010). Even in the last years of the Soviet Union existence, as the Union was economically just before the crash, Belarusian economy was much more stable compared to other Soviet republics, and living standards in the country were higher than elsewhere in the USSR (Mihalisko, 1997). The pride of the Soviet achievements in Belarus has reinforced the connection between the Belarusian and Soviet identity. As Miazhevich (2007, p. 1334) puts it, Belarusians were “one of the most wholehearted bearers of Soviet
During the first years of his presidency, Lukashenko has built his discourse on the belonging together with Russia to other than the Western European civilization. According to the Belarusian president, Orthodoxy and Slavic unity are the main characteristics that distinguish the Belarusian people along with the Russians and Ukrainians from the other. This opinion is shared by the population. In an opinion poll, 67% of Belarusians answered that they consider Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians as three branches of the same people, rather than different peoples (Manaev et al., 2011). Other fundamental guideline on which the official Belarusian national idea in the 1990s was based is a positive philosophy of the Soviet experience and the belief that it is necessary to preserve and to reproduce some of its components in contemporary Belarus (Bekus, 2008). This perception is still widely shared by USSR-nostalgic parts of the population. In an opinion poll conducted in 2006, 52% of Belarusians answered that they consider themselves “Soviet people” (Bekus, 2008). Thus, Soviet nostalgia played a significant role in the self-determination of Belarus, and was successfully exploited by the regime.

To large extent such discourse was also an adaptation to external political environment. The rhetorics of integration with Russia is due to Belarusian economic and energy dependence on Moscow. Belarusian economy was strongly tied to the Soviet Union, and, as many other Soviet republics, Belarus has always been heavily dependent on Russian energy imports (Balmaceda, 2008). After the collapse of the USSR keeping strong ties with Russia was essential for Belarus. Soon after the independence Belarus started to build up close political and economic ties with its big Eastern neighbor and has successfully championed the integration course since then (Rontoyanni, 2005). Soon after being elected, the first Belarusian president initiated a referendum in 1995 with one of the questions devoted to a close integration with Russia. 83,3% of voters positively answered the following question: Do you support the actions of President aimed at economical integration with Russia? Maćków (2004) explains such a strong support for the integration towards East with the fact that many Belarusians connected the deterioration of their

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2 There is, however, an evident trend that the views of the population are changing. The number of those who want to restore the Soviet Union has decreased by half since 1993, and those who oppose the revitalization of the Soviet Union have increased almost threefold (Manaev et al., 2011).

living conditions with the politics of 1991-1994, which they interpreted as distancing from Russia.

Between 1995 and 1999 both countries signed a number of bilateral agreements envisioning close economic, political, and military integration, among others establishing a Union State (Korosteleva, 2012). Nevertheless, many treaties were never fully materialized. For example, the two countries did not reach an agreement on fiscal and legislative issues of the Union State, the common currency, and the political shape of the Union (Deyermond, 2004). Nevertheless, close integration with Russia guaranteed a long-term economic support for Belarus. According to some estimations, Russian economic benefits to Belarus account for 4 to 11 per cent of the Belarusian GDP (Fritz, 2007). Russian economic subsidies allowed to achieve and to maintain the so-called Belarusian economic miracle associated with economic growth, low unemployment rates, regular wages and pensions (Korosteleva, 2012).

It is interesting to see how real political life found expression in the nation-building strategies of the regime. Ostrovskaya (2010) analyzed the school books in Belarusian history published and used in schools from 1990 to 2010, and found significant differences in interpretation of the same historical events. The first post-independence books negatively assessed the Soviet past and tried to cultivate interest to the Belarusian history and pride for the country (Ostrovskaya, 2010). Nevertheless, in the period following the first presidential elections there have been no attempts to create a national idea, and the new school books of this period leave an impression that their main scope is to neglect, standardize, and relativize the value of the Belarusian history (Ostrovskaya, 2010). Belarusians were described there as Russians, and much attention was devoted to the idea of panslavism. Indeed, in the real political life things were going alike. Mihalisko (1997) refers to this approach of the Belarusian government as “Little Russianism” whereas Eke and Kuzio (2000) describe Belarus of the late 1990s as a “state whose official policy of seeking to be incorporated into a union-based relationship with the Russian Federation means that it continues to tread a difficult path between rejection of the consequences of independence and sovereignty on the one hand and the paradox of trying to preserve that independent status within a new or renewed (con)federation on the other”.

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Starting from 2003 the situation has changed. After the introduction of the official ideology changes are also traceable in the school history books. School books in this period still highlight the pre-Soviet history of Belarus but also attempt to find deep roots of Belarusian statehood. Much attention is devoted to the victory in the WWII, and in particular the role of the unity of Belarusians. As Ostrovskaya (2010, p. 23) highlights, the scope of such an emphasis on the national unity is to give an example for imitation nowadays: “unite together to fight the enemies - the opposition, the crisis, the West - and achieve victory. The victory is seen as a goal, the highest value to be pursued at all costs, despite all the sacrifices, but not as a means to achieve a peaceful life or well-being of citizens”.

4 Introduction of ideology

Whereas from early 1990s up to 2002 the main emphasis was made on the integration with Russia and downplaying the Belarusian statehood, starting from 2003 there has been an evident shift toward Belarusian sovereignty in the official discourse (Miazhevich, 2007, Rudling, 2010). This shift could be explained with the change in Russia’s policy towards Belarus. Unsatisfied with the speed and depth of the integration of Belarus-Russia Union State, in 2002 Putin offered to integrate Belarus into Russian Federation as a Russian region. In the same year the level of popular support of president Lukashenko reached its historical minimum, whereas the level of support for Putin among the Belarusian population increased (Rudling, 2010). The distancing from “little Russianism” is evident in the inaugural speech on ideology on 27 March 2003: “We are not someone’s province, not Europe’s eastern outskirts or Russia’s western outskirts” (Lukashenko, 2003). Russia was suddenly criticized by the Belarusian leader, who argued that its big Eastern neighbour “ceases to be today a spiritual and cultural stronghold of the Eastern Eurasian civilization” and cannot even be an example for Belarus in terms of economic and technological development (Lukashenko, 2003). Belarusians, according to Lukashenko are “pedigree Slavs”, “who preserved their pedigree qualities by defying external influences and deriving their developmental priorities from within themselves rather than externally” (Leshchenko, 2008, p. 1422). Lukashenko famously argued that Belarusians are “the same as Russians but

\footnote{Author’s translation from Russian.}

A closer look at the inaugural speech of Lukashenko reveals that the need of a Belarusian ideology was also due to growing concerns with the US export of democracy, and in particular the war in Yugoslavia and invasion of Iraq. Traditional values of Belarusians were opposed to those of Western Europe: “We are faced with a new challenge of history - cultural and ideological aggression of the Western world [...] Belarusian ideology must be oriented on traditional values of our civilization: the ability to work not only for profit, but for the good of society, the collective, and other people; the need for high ideals and purposes, mutual support, teamwork, as opposed to the Western individualism; social care and respectful relations between the state and the people [...] Thanks to its national characteristics, Belarusian people will not let fascinate themselves by beautiful demagoguery of liberal values” (Lukashenko, 2003).

When motivating the need of ideology, Belarusian president made parallels to the collapse of the USSR. He mention both the Soviet Union and Belarus in in biological terms, as an organism: “If the immune system is weakened, any, even the most insignificant infection becomes lethal. The same situation is with the state: when ideological basis of society is destroyed, its death becomes only a matter of time, even when the state may appear strong and formidable” (Lukashenko, 2003).

In framing his discourse on sovereignty and independence of Belarus, Lukashenko has linked them to his personalist regime (Burkhardt, 2015). Such a legitimation strategy is not unique in the post-Soviet region. For example, Anceschi (2014, p. 734) shows how Kazakhstani regime adjusts its rhetoric to reshape the identity of the population “in order to promote forms of self-perception almost exclusively associable with the leadership that ruled the country in the post-Soviet era”. In Belarus, this discourse is reinforced by visual means. For example, on the streets one can frequently see posters in national colors depicting war veterans with children or young people, soldiers and policemen, often with the text “for Belarus” or “for stability” (Sloboda, 2009). At the same time the Ministry of Education of Belarus lists among the priorities of children and youth education “the development of respect for the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus” (Sloboda, 2009, p. 178).
4.1 Educational scope of ideology

One of the major aims of the official state ideology was educating the younger generations of Belarusians, those born and socialized in an independent country. In the inaugural speech on ideology a special role was devoted to the importance of ideology at universities: “Our professors say what they want. If the professor likes the ideas of liberalism, he builds his lecture on how great is America and how bad is Belarus. Demagogy about democracy, pluralism, freedom of the young spirit is everywhere [...] Such arguments are like rust, they corrode the student environment [...] During this year, ideological education in universities (both state and private) should be radically changed. Otherwise, we will just lose our youth” (Lukashenko, 2003). Following this speech a decision was made that ideology should work to educate citizens (Bekus, 2008). Soon after the speech, the ministry of education issued a document “On the ideological accompaniment of educational work” and later “On urgent measures for the organization of ideological work at universities”. Education sphere has been announced to be one of the priorities of the government (Ostrovskaya, 2010), and already in 2003, a compulsory course “The ideology of the Belarusian state” was introduced at the university level.

The textbooks of ideology resemble Lukashenko’s speech of 2003, both in structure and content. Vyacheslav Bobrovich, a professor teaching Belarusian ideology in one of the universities wrote in 2004, shortly after the introduction of the course, that the course content is often taught in a primitive way and many professors just quote the president fearing to say something wrong.\(^6\) Feduta (2006) analyzed the text books in ideology and came to conclusion that all of them have difficulties even in defining what is national ideology. Bobrovich (2012, p. 5) argues that the true purpose of the state ideology was “to justify the government course and to provide it with additional legitimacy”.\(^7\) According to him the government’s policy of “reeducation of the nation” “led to the preservation of an authoritarian culture and deep stagnation in all spheres of public life” (Bobrovich, 2012, p. 5). Rudling (2010) similarly argues that Belarusian ideology is based on emotions and serves to legitimize the politics of nation-building.

A presidential decree of 20 February 2004 “On improving the staffing of ideological work in the Republic of Belarus” enacted among others the number of staff responsible for


\(^7\)Author’s translation from Russian.
ideological work in every local administration. For example, 3 people should be evolved in ideological work in municipalities with the population under 20000. Similar positions of “ideologists” have been established in all universities and professional schools, and even in students’ dormitories. Thus, in educational institutions there is a systematic ideological work encompassing both training and extracurricular activities. Additionally, universities had to establish a systematic control on the procedures of student’s employment abroad during the study breaks. Universities were also advised to “promote political and ideological culture of teachers and students, based on the ideals and values of the Belarusian society and the state [and] to form profound civil-patriotic qualities of students, ability to reasonably resist the slanderous fabrications and anti-state attacks”.

The command of the Ministry of Education “On the ideological accompaniment of educational work” issued in December 2003 prescribes several measures to be implemented in the education sphere (at universities and professional schools). The document provides a definition of ideology, which is a “system of ideas, views and conceptions on the goals of the development of society and people, as well as on the ways and means to achieve these goals, embodied in the values and beliefs of people”. Ideology in education is “the most important duty of state and society” and is aimed at the formation of students’ “social and psychological competence”. Students’ competency, according to the ministry, has to be expressed through different characteristics, on the top of which is “outlook reflecting the ideals of the Belarusian society and state, its political and economic structure”. Thus the ministry gives a definition of the right student who has to support the political regime and its values. In 2005 some other measures have been introduced, such as a supplement to a scholarship for students “for active participation in socially significant activities”. Such activities are usually connected with the membership in the budget-financed youth organization “Republican Union of Youth”, which promises to give its most active members access to better jobs and other privileges (Manaev et al., 2011).

The Union constantly organizes nation-wide patriotic actions with pathetic names, such

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8 Uказ Президента Республики Беларусь от 20.02.2004 Н 111 “О совершенствовании кадрового обеспечения идеологической работы в Республике Беларусь”.
9 See footnote 12.
11 See footnote 12.
12 Ministry of Education. “On improvement of ideological and educational work in institutions providing higher education”, 3 February, 2005, Н 42.
as “I live in Belarus and I am proud of it” or “I am the citizen of Belarus”. Many of the Union’s actions are connected to the Great Patriotic War, resembling the overall emphasis on this narrative in the educational system. Nevertheless, the importance of the organization in educating patriotic youth might be overestimated. The organization is massively funded by the state (two thirds of the state budged for the youth policy) and the number of its members (almost half a million) can sound impressive. Nevertheless, many of its members know little about the organization when being collectively recruited at schools.

The introduction of state ideology has reinforced the emphasis of the Great Patriotic War in education (Goujon, 2010). Along the compulsory course in state ideology, a course “The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People” was introduced in university programs. The course represents Belarus from both heroic and victim perspectives and glorifies the Belarusian distinctiveness during the war (Goujon, 2010). The authorities often refer to the price of the Belarusian independence in terms of victims during the WWII and the role of the modern Belarusian state in preserving independence and sovereignty. Nevertheless, it is questionable for how long the Patriotic War narrative might work and whether it is working at all. Yarik Kryvoi, the founder of the English language online magazine BelarusDigest, highlights the artificial character of ideology and lack of appeal to younger Belarusians. Younger generations are less attracted by the narrative glorifying the Soviet past and the importance of the Great Patriotic War, which build the core narrative of ideological work.

Let us have a closer look at a study program in ideology at the Belarusian National Technical University. On the one hand, the course covers topics directly related to the role of the current regime. For example, one of the topics of the course is “President of the Republic of Belarus as a guarantor of formation and realization of governments’ ideological policy”. The course book also provides sample questions for the final exam. The questions are not framed as questions but as fixed statements, which have to be justified by students. One of such exam questions is framed in this way: “rights and

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13BRSM: “We are planning to get European funding” (in Russian). https://goo.gl/E3vZcA (accessed on 4 November 2016).
liberties of the citizens of Belarus are the highest priority of the Belarusian state". Thus, the students are not really encouraged to think critically, but rather to remember and to repeat the “correct” answers. Overall, however, the course tends to give a general overview of different political ideologies. The course is not as indoctrinated as one can think once knowing about the very existence of such an university course. From this point of view, ideology might even play a different role, by making students confident with different political ideologies and confronting it with the Belarusian one. At the end, it is up to a single professor how to teach the subject. As a Belarusian political correspondent Artyom Shraibman highlights, because of “the intellectual atmosphere of political indifference and frustration” the overall tendency is not to politicize the classes and “nobody wants to either criticise the government nor to glorify it”. At the same time ideology is seen by many students as a boring and useless subject.

4.2 Adaptation of ideology after the Ukraine crisis

The introduction of ideology itself in the early 2000s was already a reaction to the deteriorating relations with Russia on the one hand and Western democracy promotion on the other hand. In that period the official narrative changed from the emphasis on Slavic brotherhood to the importance of national sovereignty and independence. Since then the regime has been gradually changing its approach towards traditional Belarusian culture, by incorporating culturalists elements in the state’s policies. In this context Burkhardt (2015) calls this phenomenon “authoritarian learning” of the regime. By borrowing culturalist elements of some opposition groups and and incorporating them into official discourse and policies, the regime “strengthened its own claim to legitimacy and deprived the opposition of the potential driver of mobilization” (Burkhardt, 2015, p. 166). Indeed, in the last years, Belarusian authorities tolerate independent civil society initiatives aimed at promotion of the Belarusian language and strengthening of national identity, such as the Budzma campaign, and even encourages the usage of Belarusian language.

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The so-called “soft Belarusization” has especially intensified after the outbreak of crisis in Ukraine with more attention given by the state to the Belarusian language and promotion of cultural and historical heritage. Accordingly, official attitude towards the interpretation of history was adapted to the new circumstances. Whereas previously most of attention was concentrated on the achievements of Belarusians during the Great Patriotic War, now earlier periods of Belarusian history, such as Grand Duchy of Lithuania have gained prominence. This shift goes parallel to the fastly improving relations between Belarus and the West on the one side and an increasing distancing from Russia on the other side.

5 Conclusion

This paper has discussed ideology as a legitimation strategy of authoritarian regimes. It is a challenging task to assess whether this strategy has really worked and was crucial for high support rates of the president. Even if the citizens of authoritarian regimes express the support for it, it is not clear whether they do it because of a genuine belief or out of fear for repression (Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2016). In the second case the whole ideological system rather borders on soft repression. Belarusian authorities made an effective use of state ideology since the early 2000s. Ideology departments have been created in almost all state institutions. Education sector has been affected by the introduction of the compulsory course “The Fundamentals of Belarusian State Ideology” at all universities and by increasing attention to the patriotic education at schools. Overall, the government has invested considerable resources into the development of the official ideology and building an “ideological vertical”. Despite considerable efforts, it is questionable whether ideology can be an effective legitimation tool in modern Belarus, without a historically rooted party ideology.

Another aspect this article tried to illuminate is the adaptable character of the Belarusian ideology. The introduction of ideology in the early 2000s was a reaction to the deteriorating relations with Russia on the one hand and pressures of Western democracy promotion on the other hand. In that period the official narrative changed from the emphasis on Slavic brotherhood to the importance of national sovereignty and independence.

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Since then, and increasingly after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the regime has been gradually changing its approach towards traditional Belarusian culture, by incorporating culturalist elements in the state’s policies. In this context Burkhardt (2015) calls this phenomenon “authoritarian learning” of Belarusian regime. By borrowing culturalist elements of some opposition groups and incorporating them into official discourse and policies, the regime “strengthened its own claim to legitimacy and deprived the opposition of the potential driver of mobilization” (Burkhardt, 2015, p. 166). Indeed, since the last few years, Belarusian authorities tolerate independent civil society initiatives aimed at promotion of the Belarusian language and strengthening of national identity, such as the Budzma campaign, and even encourages the usage of Belarusian language 19

The so-called “soft Belarusization” has especially intensified after the outbreak of crisis in Ukraine with more attention given by the state to the Belarusian language and promotion of cultural and historical heritage. Accordingly, official attitude towards the interpretation of history was again adapted to the new circumstances. Whereas previously most of attention was concentrated on the achievements of Belarusians during the Great Patriotic War, now earlier periods of Belarusian history, such as Grand Duchy of Lithuania have gained prominence.20 This shift goes parallel to the rapidly improving relations between Belarus and the West and an increasing distancing from Russia. The new “soft Belarusization” is still very young and its foundations are rather fragile. The Belarusian state has demonstrated that it can relatively quickly adopt its orientation along with cultural and educational policies to the new geopolitical circumstances. In any case, as time goes by, it will be increasingly difficult for the Belarusian regime to maintain the narrative of the Soviet glories.

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