



Political, Economic, and Social Transformations in Post-Soviet Belarus, 1990-2012: A Research Brief and Overview

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Abstract - With the economic collapse of the former Soviet Union, Belarus was faced with new political and economic realities. In the two decades since, these new realities have also impacted other aspects on Belarusian's day-to-day lives, including their societal values and attitudes. Utilizing primary data collected from in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, along with secondary data analysis of multiple waves of the World Values Survey, this research brief and overview proposes a research agenda to examine and explore the political, economic, and social transformations in post-Soviet Belarus from 1990-2012 and these impacts on societal and work values and attitudes.

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Abstract - With the economic collapse of the former Soviet Union, Belarus was faced with new political and economic realities. In the two decades since, these new realities have also impacted other aspects on Belarusian's day-to-day lives, including their societal values and attitudes. Utilizing primary data collected from in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, along with secondary data analysis of multiple waves of the World Values Survey, this research brief and overview proposes a research agenda to examine and explore the political, economic, and social transformations in post-Soviet Belarus from 1990-2012 and these impacts on societal and work values and attitudes.

I. INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

With the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Belarus was faced with new political and economic realities. In the two decades since, these new realities have also impacted other aspects on Belarusian's day-to-day lives, including their societal values and attitudes. Additionally, it has been argued that the economic collapse of the former Soviet Union and the transformation of political and economic systems in post-Soviet Belarus resulted in a decline in the material circumstances of households, reduced social integration and social cohesion, and a decline in the ability of people to take control over their own lives (Muradyan 2011; Abbott and Wallace 2010). Furthermore, previous research has shown that labor management practices in Belarus are more negative for workers than those under the Soviet system (Danilovich and Croucher, 2011).

Building upon these and other studies, this research will utilize: (1) the results of in-depth interviews with key government, industry, and higher education stakeholders, (2) the results of multiple industry employee and higher education student focus groups, (3) participant observation, and (4) descriptive attitudinal data from multiple waves of the World Values Survey to examine and explore the political and economic structural country contextual factors impacting the labor transformation in the country, with a focus on changing societal and work attitudes and values in post-Soviet Belarus from 1990-2012¹.

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II. BRIEF OVERVIEW TO BELARUS POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND LABOR MANAGEMENT TRANSFORMATIONS

Many scholars have pointed to the extensive disrupting economic and social changes that followed the collapse of communism in the USSR in 1991 (e.g., Burawoy 2001; Sztompka 2002; Abbott and Wallace 2009; Shevchenko 2009). Furthermore, Rotman and Veremeeva (2011) examined these impacts among post-Soviet countries and argue that "Belarus's location in the geographical heart of Europe places the country in a strategically important position between Russia and the European Union (EU)" (p. 73). Despite its central geographic location and cultural and political history and current economic ties with its neighbors, to this point Belarus has largely been an understudied country, particularly within the context of the shifting political and economic landscape following the Soviet collapse.

Abbott and Wallace (2010) examined the economic collapse of the former Soviet Union on the lives of Belarusian citizens and found that a majority of the population have a poor quality of life and good reason to be dissatisfied with their lives. More specifically, they found that the collapse has not only resulted in a decline in economic security of households but also on social integration, social cohesion and the ability of people to take control over their own lives, leaving many unable to develop capabilities in order to adequately function. They state, "The economic transition from planned market economies was accompanied by economic crisis exemplified in declining GDP, hyperinflation and cuts in state welfare spending. The social impact of transition can be seen in the increase in inequalities, rising poverty, unemployment, and violent crime, a decline in trust, a decline in well-being and demodernisation with the majority of the population being 'losers'" (2010, p. 653-654; see also Danilovich 2010).

However, it was not merely the collapse of the Soviet Union that resulted in these difficulties for

¹ In-depth interviews, focus group sessions, and all participant observation were conducted between April and August, 2012 as part of a Fulbright Scholar Fellowship. The host institution was Belarusian State University, with heavy collaboration with the Belarus High Tech Park.

Belarusian citizens. Koktysh (2005) pointed out, "The overnight disintegration of the Soviet identity in August 1991, combined with the failure of the nationalization project..., left society in a somewhat complicated position. Like the rest of the post-Soviet space, Belorussia had no 'framework' ideology, no national idea that could integrate society" (p. 86), thus leaving it in an untenable position culturally, politically, and economically. Within the context of this political and economic "vacuum" and the shifting political landscape, Abbott (2007) added, "that lived experience-how people evaluate their condition-is as significant an influence on their welfare as the actual circumstances in which they live" (p. 219) and found that most Belarusians perceive the post-1991 economic and political changes negatively, and that levels of general satisfaction and happiness are comparatively low in relation to other post-Soviet countries.

The emerging political "populous revolution" and Lukashenka's authoritarian orientation towards a "social market economy" had impacts on labor management practices in the country as well (see Karbalevich, 2001). Danilovich and Croucher (2011) have explored the changing nature of human resource practices within the country following the Soviet collapse and the Lukashenka rise to power and found that "Labour management practices at enterprise level in Belarus are more negative for workers than those under the Soviet system. Welfare has largely disappeared, as has Soviet-style informal bargaining; wage payment may be in kind; training is minimal; job insecurity is extreme and trade unions perform a corporatist role" (2011, p. 241). Additionally, Sokolova and Ermakov (2005) examined the changing nature of human capital in Belarus in and found that Belarus has seen significant declines in each of three spheres of human capital (science, education, and health care), putting the future competitive nature of the labor force and growth in the economy in question. Finally, Muradyan (2011) specifically examined work values and work ethos in Belarus and found that the values of self-realization, personal responsibility, and initiative are still not a firm part of the Belarusian labor consciousness, while materialistic needs dominate the perceived needs of employees.

III. EXAMPLE COMPARISON OF ATTITUDES IN BELARUS TO OTHER COUNTRIES AROUND THE GLOBE

Below are a few interesting key areas of attitudinal comparison in looking at how Belarus "stacks up" within a comparative global context:

- Out of 81 countries around the globe (global mean is 6.51), only the 7 countries have a lower mean life satisfaction score than Belarus (4.8): Tanzania (3.9), Zimbabwe (3.9), Armenia (4.3), Moldova (4.6), Ukraine (4.6), Russia (4.7), and Georgia (4.7). Note

that general life satisfaction in Belarus is very close to the mean scores of several of its post-Soviet neighbors.

- Out of 80 countries around the globe (global mean is 6.74), only the following 4 countries have a lower mean "freedom of choice and control" score than Belarus (5.6): Pakistan (4.7), Turkey (5.3), Ukraine (5.4), and Egypt (5.5). As with general life satisfaction, "freedom of choice and control" in Belarus is very close to the mean scores of several of its post-Soviet neighbors.
- Out of 33 countries around the globe (global mean is 7.14), Belarus (5.5) has the lowest mean job satisfaction score. The next closest countries are the Ukraine (5.9), Turkey (6.1), and Russia (6.2), followed by a significant jump in mean scores before you reach the next tier of countries.
- Out of 33 countries around the globe (global mean is 6.34), only 2 countries have a lower mean "freedom of making decision in taking a job" score than Belarus (5.1): Turkey (4.5) and Lithuania (4.9).
- Out of 15 countries around the globe (global mean is 6.59), Belarus (5.5) has one of the lowest mean "satisfaction with job security" score, trailed only by Lithuania (4.6), the Ukraine (5.2), and Turkey (5.3).

One can easily see that Belarus is at or near the rear for each of these 5 key variables (and many more I have not listed here), significantly below worldwide averages for each. Additionally, within the post-Soviet/Eastern European geopolitical/cultural context, attitudes in Belarus appear to be fairly similar to several of its post-Soviet neighbors. The question to be answered is what are the reasons for these comparative differences and similarities and what do they mean for the future of Belarus and its neighbors?

IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Preliminary research demonstrates that there have been substantial shifts in societal and work conditions, attitudes and values as Belarus experienced the transition from being a part of the Soviet Union, to post-Soviet political and economic adaptation and the eventual adoption of its own government. Almost overnight, Belarus was faced with new political and economic realities, which in turn impacted labor and work realities. In the more than two decades since, these new realities have impacted other aspects on Belarusian's day-to-day lives, including their work values and attitudes. Future research needs to further explore the political, economic, and labor transformation in post-Soviet Belarus, particularly as they relate to shifting conditions, values and attitudes. Additionally, future research should explore how Belarus compares to other countries with regard to various political, economic, and social conditions and attitudinal indicators and seek for explanations of the causes of these differences and of

what they may mean for the future of the country and its interactions with its neighbors.

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