



The Confluence of Television and Money Flows in Belarusian Authoritarianism

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Abstract: From the very beginning, Lukashenko's regime was aimed at creating the 'television society', in which the vertical unilateral communication should have resulted in the multitude of the obedient viewers deprived of political agency and mesmerized by the spectacle of power. 2020 protests in Belarus manifested that the internet model of horizontal community started to prevail over the television society. The main argument of the article is that the relative stability of the regime can be explained not only by total political control and loyalty of the state repressive apparatuses, but also by the interweaving of television and money flows. The concept of TV flow (elaborated by R. Williams, J. Fiske) reveals the imminent connection between mass media and authoritarianism (J. Habermas, P. Bourdieu), whereas the specificity of the post-Soviet network of money flows explains both the functioning of this connection and the adaptability of the semi-feudal political regime in the context of the postmodern global world. The state media employ the tools of marketing campaigns, promoting Lukashenko's personalist regime as a specific brand. The rhetoric of the Belarusian authorities about building a social model of the state, protecting traditional values (which also includes Soviet ideologemes) in the face of world capitalism serves as a disguise, the analysis of which can clarify the specifics of the existing political regime.

Keywords: Television flow, money flows, ideological fantasy, television vs internet models of society, media and authoritarianism

The focus of scholarly analysis of Belarusian regime has been mostly on its post-Soviet nature. The study of the regime's media policy, in particular, has revealed how the old Soviet mechanisms of censorship, authoritarian forms of government, statist ideologemes have been revived in modern Belarus in order to retain Lukashenko's personal unlimited power.

This negative conservative trend of re-Sovietization is more or less clearly opposed to the positive conservative trend of the renewal of the Belarusian nation, rooted in the grand duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This opposition is a leitmotif of Belarusian studies from the classic works of Nicholas Vakar and Jan Zaprudnik (Vakar 1956; Zaprudnik 1993) all the way to modern discussions about identities in Belarus (Gou-

jon 1999; Marples 1999; Sahm 1999; Bulgakau 2003; Leshchenko 2004; Babkou 2005; Ioffe 2007, etc.).

In the 21st century academic debates on Belarus have gradually been changing to focusing on the so-called ‘third path’ between national and Soviet identities. Some researchers analysed the way of the reconciliation of two extremes (Leshchenko 2004). This route is also called ‘Creole’ (Ioffe 2007) and includes acknowledgment of the accomplishments of Soviet Belarus (the economic progress during the Soviet era, victorious war against Nazi, etc.) along with more widely admitted ethno-linguistic vision of national identity. Thus, the more civic than ethnic concept of nation got into the focus of theoretical reflection. A number of researchers were inclined towards different versions of this ‘third path’ (Furs 2007; Bekus 2010; Hoffman, Renee (eds.) 2013). The political crisis after the 2020 presidential elections gave a new impetus to this controversy. The Belarusian protests of 2020–2021 tend to be considered as a moment of birth of a new civic nation against the background of a regress of Belarusian regime to Stalinist-like repressive machine (Wilson 2021).

This article attempts to take a new angle on the matter in order to obtain a more complex picture. The hypothesis is that the Belarusian ideological regime is not so much a phenomenon of the conservation of the Soviet one (with all the absurdities of imitating its external rituals and real cruelty in suppressing dissent), but also the specific form of capitalism in the ideological core of which the fantasy of money functions (and not the Soviet struggle of bureaucratic elites for power, in which money practically did not play a role). This ideological reality is based on the complex interaction of the contemporary mass media (TV flow) and the economy (money flows). To ignore its complexity, to reduce the Lukashenko regime to a vulgar version of the Soviet regime (‘kolkhoz-style *sovok*’) means to limit our understanding of the phenomenon of its persistence.

1. Belarus: Politics as a TV show

In the summer of 2020, the rating of state-owned media in Belarus began to decline. If earlier it was steadily decreasing, now it began to rapidly approach the ‘ground’ and, it seems, no manoeuvre is capable of saving this ideological apparatus any more. As Belarusian sociologist Andrei Vardomatsky argues, ‘there has been a sharp change in the media behaviour of Belarusians, which affected the level of trust in the press. Confidence in the state media began to fall, in particular, it changed from 17 percent in March to 4.2 percent in July, and to non-state publications, on the contrary, began to grow, increasing from almost 13 percent in March to 27 percent in July’ (Kalinina 2020)

The switch to networked forms of communication became the point of transition from quantity to quality. Structural changes in Belarusian society in the 21st century (generational change, the growth of the number of people with higher education, an increase in those employed in an immaterial economy which is essentially global) manifested themselves in the political form of mass protests, triggered by unprecedented election fraud.

If the question of why Lukashenko lost the election to a political neophyte, woman, remains controversial or requires more detailed consideration then the figure of 80 percent of the active internet audience opposed to the current government, most likely, will not cause

fierce controversy. This is so obvious that even Lukashenko, not yet fully aware of the degree of rejection of his figure in society, allowed the fact of defeat (immediately ‘explained’) of the official ideology in the network media: ‘We have lost the battle on the internet. [...] We, the state, will never win this battle on the Internet because it is “yellow”’ (‘Message to the Belarusian...’ 2020).

Image 1. Lukashenko’s visit to the Gomselmash plant in 2018.



Image description: A photo of Lukashenko with a microphone standing in front of a crowd of people in a semicircle in an industrial setting.

Source:

<https://www.sb.by/articles/lukashenko-uveren-v-vozmozhnosti-podnyat-gomselmash-na-bolee-vysokiy-uroven-razvitiya.html> (30.03.2021).

The failure of state television was accompanied by the flight of both iconic figures and ordinary employees from it, resulting in the landing of a ‘propaganda team’ from Russian television. And it is more than a defeat in a separate segment of the mass media. Political life as such in Belarus is built according to television logic. Starting with the statements of Lukashenko at the very beginning of his presidency that politics in the country is what happens 20 meters around him. It is worth understanding this not as a metaphor, but as a plausible description of the political sphere, which has been narrowed down to the format of a television studio, in which everything happens on exactly this scale. In this ‘studio’ Lukashenko acts as the main TV presenter, TV analyst, director, and producer. This televi-

sion show can be shot both in specially prepared ‘studios’ (interiors of official buildings), and in various locations including open air (farms, etc.). Since the late 1990s, public political life began to rapidly turn into one continuous television hybrid show around one character – the official president’s speeches, reality shows of the disciplining of careless local bureaucrats, sports and music events involving the head of state. In the 21st century, the typical picture broadcast by the state media still looks the same: Lukashenko’s in front of the workers of villages and cities dressed in uniforms and placed in a semicircle with respect to the irreplaceable ‘presenter’ with a microphone.

We can see the same ‘studio’ stage (November 20, 2020), when Lukashenko visited Gomselmash plant where he gave his famous commentary on the leaked telephone conversations of persons allegedly involved in the death of the iconic figure of the Belarusian protests Roman Bondarenko. When asked about this, he replied: ‘If you are hinting at the latest leaks in Telegram channels, individual conversations, negotiations related to the death of this guy [...] If this is the case, then I must tell you and everyone: it’s not time, be patient, next week we will tell you everything. Believe me, it will be very interesting’ (‘Lukashenko on the latest...’ 2020, see Image 2).

Image 2. Lukashenko’s visit to the Gomselmash plant in 2020



Image description: A photo of Lukashenko with a microphone standing in front of a crowd of people in a semicircle in a similar industrial setting.

Source: <https://www.gomselmash.by/press-tsentr/lukashenko-posetil-gomselmash> (30.03.2021)

The last words, uttered with a specific emphasis, became an internet meme – ‘it will be veery iinteresting...’. But no further announcements were made the following week. Moreover, the case of Roman Bondarenko practically disappeared from the official mass media. And when, it would seem, everyone began to forget about this intriguing phrase of Lukashenko, after 4 months (!) a way to reveal the meaning of this announcement was finally found on Belarusian TV. In a propaganda blockbuster about the Operation of the KGB ‘Mankurt’ (2021, ONT channel) a story was told that the leaks of telephone conversations were an operation of the security forces themselves (sic!). In so doing, the long-promised revelation was only about secondary conversations. It was said, the investigation continues, much has remained behind the scene. In fact, instead of the disclosure, we got a more detailed announcement of a possible future disclosure. It is this endless chain of promos of promos that is the most important structural characteristic of the television flow (Gornykh 2013: 292–330).

2. Commercials in TV flow

Raymond Williams’ classic definition of television as ‘a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings’ (Williams 2003: 92) looks especially relevant in relation to contemporary Belarusian television. Belarusian television long ago turned into a continuous flow of propaganda pictures where one is swiftly replaced by its opposite image (from Russian militants with weapons in Belarusian sanatoriums and forests to Polish tanks on the border and Lithuanian jeeps with machine guns ready for heading to Minsk). Of course, Williams’ understanding of television is not limited to a simple moralizing about the fact that television, unlike literature or cinema, essentially loses its ethical, narrative, semantic dimension, turning into a continuous irresponsible spectacle.

On the one hand, the television stream is a cultural form, which is based on the systematic undermining of narrative schemes and logical connections, making an endless flow of unconnected fragments its only content. Television resembles a scattered puzzle, fragments of which are mixed with fragments of other scattered puzzles so that it becomes impossible to imagine any holistic general picture (‘reality’). But on the other hand, as Williams points out, this flow is ‘planned’. The programming of the television stream as a porous, discontinuous one is carried out with the pragmatic goal of making it as convenient as possible for advertising inserts. So that they are less and less perceived as an annoying hindrance, a break in the narrative, but as another picture in a common row with other pictures connected by external associative links. The paradox of the television flow, therefore, is that this seemingly continuous spectacle has a very segmented structure. We can say that its continuity is the effect of constant interruptions.

John Fiske defines the notion of ‘flow’ as an ‘associative sequence of images in which any realistic sequence within films or programs is constantly interrupted by commercials, by news breaks, by promos’ (Fiske 2001: 99). Television constantly promises that a qualitative leap in our life is possible at any moment of time. That change is on the threshold: something is about to happen. This promise is inscribed in the fate of soap opera heroes and participants in various TV shows. But the main thing is television advertisements. Here, this general

promise comes true: it occurs without any delays taking up the main 'content' of the TV flow and happens for everyone.

A happy ending for the heroes of a television series or reality show is rather an exception (or it is possible in the last moment of the story). It sets off endless catastrophes, crimes, scandals, deceptions, betrayals within the flow. The main content of the flow mostly consists of various accidents – everyday and political, fictional and real, small and large ('good news is bad news'). The main content of the flow is a never-ending story about the approach of a certain denouement, which never comes. From endless quarrels and fights in soap operas and TV-show characters to whipping up political tensions in news and analytics. And if one conflict finds its resolution (in the plot of the series or in political reality), then it just serves as a pretext for a new conflict in the endless meta-series of the TV flow made of a mixture of imaginary and real stories. The television advertisement is a spectacle of instant resolution of any tensions and conflicts with the help of a mass brand. It is, as it were, in relation to pre-established harmony with the narrated content of TV programs. A TV commercial is not an external insert into the programs' content but a structural part of the latter. It allows the viewer to get out of this vicious circle of disturbing events and to coincide with oneself.

'But I don't watch ads!', the viewer can say, 'I switch from commercials to another channel or go to make myself a coffee'. Gone are the days when ads were really watched, when they were fresh, bright, ironic (especially for the post-Soviet TV viewer of the 1990s). But postmodern television employs soft violence to get our attention by synchronizing ad blocks across different channels, inserting ads in the most dramatic moments of a show or series (so that we, by inertia, continue to watch at least some time), increasing the volume of advertisements, etc. In the contemporary hybrid forms of television on YouTube and other video platforms, advert resorts to even more tricky soft violence – compulsory viewing of commercials (or part of it), high frequency of the same ads (dozens of times during the film or broadcast), contextual advertising which is constantly present in the shot, etc. Ultimately, we cannot evade ads, no matter how much we want it.

Moreover, hybrid forms of television watch us, monitor our interests, so that we consciously or unconsciously stage unscripted commercials by ourselves performing that 'work of being watched' which makes up truly Ultimate Television (Andrejevich 2004: 64). Advertisement becomes that big Other who not only tests our consumer reactions, but under whose gaze we are drawn into that endless spectacle in which we try to become 'ourselves' (from the innocent repetition of ads' slogans to the obsessive demonstration of signs of success). Television in this context is not even a 'golden frame' for advertisement, but endless advertising storytelling. The advertisement demonstrates the main event of the TV flow: victory, overcoming, re-gaining of the strong, whole Ego. This is a long lasting happy ending as the common denominator of all stories. This event in standard TV advertising ceases to be an external, exotic, serial-like one requiring an effort to identify by means of projection with this or that character. This event directly mirrors the viewer, easily recognizing himself or herself in ads' 'ordinary people', enjoying drinks, sweets, and the like.

At these moments the TV screen serves as a mirror for the viewer. And this mirroring gives rise to the effect of flickering of the strong Ego in 'the same place' behind the ghostly surface of the TV spectacle. It is this mirroring flickering that provides TV flow with a hypnotic cohesion. Thus, the main event of the flow turns out to be an acquisition of a strong

Ego by the viewer himself against the background of all the imperfections of the ‘external’ world. By using advertised shampoos, creams, drinks, etc., the individual becomes ‘himself’ – whole, self-sufficient Ego, that can resist any harmful impact from outside while being irresistible for others (causing feelings of admiration and love). Strong Ego obtains understanding, love, happiness ‘automatically’, thanks to his or her appearance (and does not acquire his or her self actively by seeking for the recognition of others).

In this sense Fredrick Jameson’s description of postmodern concept of cultural ‘flux’ – as ‘the terror and exhaustion of radical difference without markers or signposts, without moments of rest or even those spatial folds into which, like the bull into its *querencia*, we withdraw to lick our wounds and to know a few instants’ peace’ (Jameson 1996: 16) – corresponds perfectly to the concept of TV flow with one reservation: the advertisement constantly generates that ‘moments of rest’, pacifying scenes of wholeness and security that function not so much as ‘spatial folds’ but as visual traps for viewers. The advertisement can be considered as a repeated ‘prayer’ that serves as a point of eternal return in an unstable and dangerous world (even if there are wars and disasters around – but my hair remains lush, and my teeth remain white).

The work of Belarus TV ideological apparatus exploits these properties of the flow. Typically, the flow of disasters and scandals in a certain rhythm alternates with the moments of order and stability of ads, creating the necessary background for a sacred egocentric homeostasis. However, on Belarus TV, pictures of the peace and order in Belarus are cut with the horrors and threats of the outside world. This is a typical ideological idealization of everything that is our own and demonisation of the alien and foreign. But in so doing, Belarusian TV serves as an example of how an authoritarian leader can appropriate the structuring function of advertising in the flow. The figure of the ‘irreplaceable’ president within TV flow performs the function of a *brand* that contributes to the instant and final resolution of all tensions. Lukashenko is a ‘brand’ that during live broadcasts resolves complex socio-economic problems, ‘executes’ officials, rescues those in need. Yet we do not see the ubiquitous ‘promotion’ of the Leader (as in classical totalitarianism) – from huge street portraits to miniature formats of propaganda like little red books of Chairman Mao’s quotations (but, of course, one can see his portraits in most offices).

The media style of the Belarusian ideology, which developed in the 2000s, uses connotative signs like brand logos instead of the Leader’s mimetic representations. So, for example, the red-green letters ‘FOR’ with a characteristic curved line of separation of colors – for a long time acted as a rigid designator of Power, organizing other ideological meanings around itself – ‘FOR Belarus’, ‘FOR rich Belarus’, ‘FOR Belarus for the people’, ‘Belarus FOR Stability’, etc (see Image 3).

Image 3. “FOR Belarus” posters

Image description: Four images. On the top left, a woman with a white rural headscarf in front of haystacks, on the right, seven men in black and blue overalls in front of several white trucks. On the bottom left, marching soldiers in uniform, and on the right, a man in a traditional white costume holding a pie in the right hand and a straw hat in the left one.

Source:

<http://www.websmi.by/2010/11/socialnaya-reklama-belta-atakuet-bilbordy-stolicy/> (30.03.2021)

Notably, there was an internal crisis of the television ideological apparatus in the summer of 2020. The figure of the president ceased to function as a universal brand of the TV stream. Lukashenko from the ‘inner core’ of the stream of Belarus TV began to turn into one of the superficial characters. Having ceased to be an ‘event’ himself, he turned into one of the talking heads that constantly announce some fateful upcoming events, keeping the audience on the ‘TV channel’. So, for example, at the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic in Belarus, Lukashenko mysteriously spoke on the topic: ‘When this coronavirus ends, and not a virus, but psychosis, I’ll tell you a lot of interesting things. Lots of’. Then he suggested thinking about the question: ‘Is the coronavirus a man-made infection or did it accidentally appear out of thin air, who needed it and who took advantage of it?’ As a result, we did not learn ‘a lot of interesting things’, even when the first wave ended and everything was epidemiologically calm (‘Lukashenko promised...’ 2020).

Then the ‘announcements’ started to increase: stories of conspiracies (from the ‘Wagner fighters’ sent by the Russian authorities to Belarus to influence the elections in 2020, to the assassination attempt on Lukashenko, ‘prepared’ by the US authorities), about the fateful agreements with Russia, about political reform, etc. Each new announcement only supplanted the old one and was soon supplanted by a new one. The promised outcome never came, the universal ‘brand’ ceased to fulfill its functions.

The entire structure of the ‘television society’ began to collapse. The internet, Telegram channels became the embodiment of Evil in the eyes of the authorities. Hence Lukashenko’s

incantations against the internet: ‘Look, even during my lifetime, not to mention yours, you will see the fading of this flashing fireworks – the internet. I am urging you not to give up the classic. TV is a way of life, it is a way of thinking. Yes, today many have taken out and started poking into this iPhone, telephone and so on, of different brands. But as soon as you entered the dining room, you pressed the button – and you look at the screen. You came to visit someone – the TV works there for sure. This must be preserved’. This wishful thinking of a person who is far from the world in which the new generation lives is a symptom of a desperate struggle for the control over information flows.

One can say that such a political ‘brand’ reveals the authoritarian potential of TV flow as a cultural form. As early as in 1962 Jürgen Habermas warned about the destructive potential of modern mass media in relation to the public sphere, speaking about such specific forms of monopolistic manipulation of public opinion as homogenization of news:

The homogenization of news services by monopolistically organized press agencies was soon followed by the editorial homogenization of smaller papers [...] The degree of economic concentration and technological-organizational coordination in the newspaper publishing industry seems small in comparison to the new media of the twentieth century – film, radio, and television’. (Habermas 1991: 187)

In general, the question of the internal connection between ‘mass media and authoritarianism’ has become the focus of media research thanks to the tradition of critical theory of the Frankfurt School, and today, according to a number of researchers, the rise of the Internet ‘has not changed the underlying economic patterns that Habermas identified’ (Tworek 2019: 3).

Williams came up with the term ‘flow’ in 1974, when, ‘in the United States the three-network oligopoly was still intact, video cassette recorders were an emerging technology, cable had not yet penetrated many television households, and the internet was unheard’ (Kackman et al. 2011: 1) But in 1996, Pierre Bourdieu in *On Television* described the same deepening dominance of oligopolistic logic as the production of media events. In a situation where the market is shared between several large players, it becomes possible to establish quasi-monopoly rules of the game that provide super-profits. In these conditions, the main goal, rather than getting ahead, is not to lag behind the competitor, which ensures the reproduction of the status quo without great risks. Hence the endless game of mutual reflections inside the oligopolistic structure: ‘This sort of game of mirrors reflecting one another produces a formidable effect of mental closure’ (Bourdieu 1998: 24). In conditions when the stakes are too high, the main thing is not to make a mistake, taking the lead, to act with a constant eye on the competitor.

Of course, with regard to Belarus, we are not talking about the oligopolistic competition of TV channels. Belarusian TV channels are rather different ideological departments of the presidential administration, which are under constant tight control. The political-economy constellation is broader and more complex. First, we can talk about a ‘cartel agreement’ of the political elites of Russia and Belarus. Without financial and informational support from the Kremlin, the Belarusian protests of 2020 would have every chance to lead to a fair election of a new president. For official Moscow and Minsk, despite all the disagreements and competition, the main thing is to maintain the status quo (the project of the ‘union state’, etc.)

– an important factor that provides the elites with stable control over main financial flows and correspondent super-incomes. Secondly, both in Belarus and in Russia there was a merger between the authorities and the media, primarily television. Television acts not as a ‘fourth power’, but as the most important ideological apparatus that permeates all state power. Television is not just the main channel of everyday aggressive propaganda. This is the place where the rituals of public demonstration of loyalty to the authorities by the bureaucracy and business are carried out, where, in the end, political leaders exist, being turned into television pictures.

The ‘television society’ in Belarus has recently been moving towards a radical form, thanks to the total cleansing of the entire media field and broadcasting of all information in the country from a single centre (‘The Belarusian authorities...’ 2021). The whole history of the endless negotiations between Lukashenko and Putin in 2020–2021 is one big political track stand, in which, apparently, not a centimetre is moving forward the solution of any of the issues (from the release of the candidate for presidency, the manager of Gazprombank Babariko, to the transit of power). Does this not mean that the ruling groups are trying to squeeze every last out of the favourable conjuncture that developed back in the 2000s and any change in the situation will only affect their position for the worse? The conjuncture here is understood not narrowly as economic factors (oil prices, etc.), but political and economic factors. Namely, the ability to control financial flows.

3. Reality of the flow

And here, various political events – the example of which, as political analytics have repeatedly noted, is the Russian-Ukrainian conflict – serve as a means of compensating for the deteriorating economic situation and maintaining at least a minimal legitimacy for the disposition of a disproportionately large share of social wealth by narrow ruling groups. As a result, even after the fall in oil prices, Western sanctions, etc., the ability to control the financial flows of the regimes both in Russia and in Belarus not only did not weaken, but even strengthened (the growth of Putin’s rating after the annexation of Crimea, image of Lukashenko as a ruler who maintains peace in the country against the background of a severe destabilization in the region, his international recognition as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian negotiations on the Donbas, etc.).

The closest example is Ukraine, where the difficult, but progressive democratization processes reveal this hidden reality of financial flows. So, for example, journalist Dmitry Gordon talks about the information he received directly from the head of the Ukrainian customs that the shadow income of customs officials from smuggling exceeds foreign borrowings of the whole of Ukraine: ‘I said it publicly 16 times. The reaction of the authorities is zero. What is happening continues to happen. Theft and smuggling are going on at customs. The country receives less money, but borrows it from the IMF’ (Gordon 2020).

One can only guess the size of the financial flows that run through the Belarusian smuggling ‘channels’, if only the smuggling of cigarettes has reached industrial proportions. Lithuanian or Polish customs officers have been finding millions of packs of cigarettes hidden in exported reinforced concrete structures, wagons with fertilizers, etc. The Lithuanian

authorities cite statistics – up to a third of the cigarettes smoked in Lithuania are contraband, the share of Belarusian cigarettes from them is approaching 100 percent (‘The parliament...’ 2021). But there are also flowers, seafood, weapons, oil products, etc. These startling facts can raise new questions. Is the Belarusian economic model not a relic of the ineffective Soviet economy, which is constantly talked about, but a new ‘hybrid’ economy (official and shadow), effective for the ruling group, in which it can control the lion’s share of financial flows? What are the consequences of the rule of the ‘people’s president’ in Belarus for working people? Here are just the most characteristic features (which the neighbours from both the West and the East do not have). Almost total contract system. Most employees work on 1–2-year contracts, which means that they are not protected from the main employer – the State (the possibility of dismissal upon the expiration of the contract, etc.). The bonus system, when up to 60–70 percent of the salary are ‘incentives’, which depend on the employer. This also increases the dependence of the employee on the good or bad will of the latter. Profitability indicators, the implementation of which the state strictly demands from enterprises, de facto mean a rejection of social spending (for health improvement, culture, etc.). At the same time, the responsibility for the political consequences of liberalization is shifted to the lower-level managers, who find themselves in the position of employees with double oppression. Not to mention low salaries, fear of punishment for initiative, persecution of free trade unions, and the eradication of political dissent. And the situation continues to deteriorate (‘Officials have introduced...’ 2021).

Such is the price for ordinary people for the control over the financial flows by not just a ‘handful of oligarchs’, but of the oligopolistic transnational group of the Russian-Belarusian elites. In this reality, everything has a price. And the problem is that civil society has practically no idea about the logic of these prices. It seems to us that Lukashenko plays the fool – ‘oil in exchange for kisses’ formula – with the Russian leadership, starting with Yeltsin. But in the reality of flows one can rather talk about bargaining. About bargaining, which by inertia we call ‘political trade’. In this reality, Putin, for example, is not a simpleton who buys up ‘securities’ with dubious value at exorbitant prices (from statements about a strategic partnership of the Belarusian regime to oaths of loyalty of Caucasian regional leaders). He resells these ‘securities’ to the Russian electorate, unfolding pictures of strength, unity, and stability. And he buys up ‘political assets’ – the ability to control the main money flows (primarily exports and government orders). Behind all these ideological signs of Russian sovereign democracy or the Belarusian social model is the same authoritarian capitalism.

In the case of Belarus, embodiment of this invisible political reality is primarily those transport routes and energy lines, oil pipelines and gas pipelines that pass through, freely crossing various borders. At the nodal points of this international network, clusters are formed of people who, in ordinary life, may seem to be in no way connected (officials, politicians, businessmen, criminals), ensuring the circulation of budget money and shadow income. As, for example, an investigation with a small fragment of this reality – the oil pipeline Prykarpazapadtrans – has shown (‘Investigation: what connects ...’ 2021). In general, recently the word ‘schematosis’ (grey financial schemes) has become widespread to describe Belarusian economic algorithms, describing the anomalous nature of government profit-making schemes, which turns the Belarusian economy into a gray transit zone between west and east, north and south (economic basis the notorious ‘multi-vector’ politics). In this

reality of flows, many actions of politicians, which seem to us unmotivated, if not irrational at all, have their own logic. Even with regard to the forced landing of Ryanair plane at the Minsk airport on May 23, 2021, among other things, this could be a move in the big game around the Nord Stream-2.

But it would be an oversimplification to say that the main function of the Belarusian television flow is to replace political and economic reality with a television picture. Television is not just an ideological screen for financial flows, but also a flow itself.

‘Flow’ as a kind of common denominator grasping different dimensions (culture and economics) refers to a general and final ‘reality’. The one that Slavoj Žižek calls the Real of Capital. This dimension lies on the other side of the screen of cultural representations, on which the play of imaginary forms unfolds. Here TV flow proves to be not a stream of pictures going to infinity, but the pulsation of the drive at a ‘dead point’ beyond any appearances. Capital as the drive is an invisible ‘black hole’ around which a ‘solipsistic’ turnover of value takes place. Thus capital ‘pursues profitability with a blessed indifference to the way its movement will affect social reality’ (Žižek 2000: 15).

The ‘value’ in Marx’s *Capital* is a substance in which concrete labour of a person is dissolved, turning into abstract labor as a part of the working force. At this level of social totality of the system of division of labour individual being (the unique temporality of the use of the forces and talents of a particular person) is transformed into a homogeneous, infinitely divisible substance (man-hours of labor force), which can be mixed in any proportion with the same abstract labour of other people to materialize in the form of commodities. This ghostly, alienated, post-individual, one might even say ‘beyond the grave’ existence of people (Marx calls abstract labor ‘dead labor’) acquires an autonomous life in capital.

The oligopolistic ‘double’ of Belarus – Russia, the cult of pure money in the 1990s was replaced by a more moderate ideology of ‘doubling the GDP’, and then by quasi-political constructs like ‘liberal empire’ or ‘sovereign democracy’. In Belarus, the figure of \$500 of the average salary in the country came to the fore against the background of increasingly meaningless slogans such as ‘spirituality’, ‘stability’ or ‘order on our land’. These \$500 are almost the only specific thesis of the Belarusian ideology, the main reference point of social policy and a popular meme ‘pa-pizzot’ (a transcription of the phrase ‘500 for each’, pronounced with Lukashenko’s accent).

How did this magic figure arise? For some reason (for example, the economic threshold beyond which the growth of the middle class leads to political demands) or by accident? It is unknown. But since the beginning of the 21st century 500 US dollars could be said to serve as a principal announcement of the television flow in Belarus. In presidential interviews and speeches at national meetings, in state offices and in the open air, Belarusian television regularly broadcasts the ‘good news’ about \$500 (Karpeko 2019).

The entire political and economic history of modern Belarus is a history of asymptotic approximation to \$500. Political rhetoric (more or less aggressive and conspiratorial) is dependent on these cycles. Belarus state is like Sisyphus – it pushes the ‘stone’ of the economy up, but upon reaching the top it is doomed to slide down and start all over again. But Albert Camus’ parable of a blind fate to which Sisyphus is subjected is replaced by an ideological image of the external Enemy. It is he who throws Belarusians off the top of their \$500. Such an ideological transformation brings double benefits. Firstly, it allows to make the existence

of the Enemy empirically perceptible for everyone – a rollback of \$50 or \$100 from \$500 conveys a specific force of the Enemy at the moment, throwing back from the desired aim at a greater or lesser distance. This is all the more necessary since the Enemy has lost the Soviet ideological outlines of world imperialism. The enemy is now like a pale succubus – it does not have its own form, but can take on different guises. What he is doing in the ideological space with staggering speed – it is the American military hawks, the Russian oligarchs, then the Polish nationalists, then the Ukrainian traitors, etc. Secondly, it gives meaning to the ‘Sisyphian labour’ of Belarusian workers as a personal struggle with this Enemy. This is an important point in understanding the hegemony of television propaganda among Lukashenko’s electorate. A whole gamut of negative properties – from laxity to unprofessionalism in state industry – can be disavowed as Enemy’s impact. And if my efforts do not bring the proper satisfaction – neither in the process, nor in the result – it is because I am going ‘against the wind’. This compensatory illusion paints monotonous reproduction of gray life in tones of heroic accomplishment.

As various ideological narratives about the Belarusian social state were being worn out – even a relatively stable electorate of power (public sector employees) began to face the senselessness of circling around \$500. Endless ideological incantations like: ‘The average salary for the next year should reach \$500. This figure is sacral’ – turned against themselves (Nekhaychik 2020). And behind this circling appeared the pulsating point of the Real, bypassing various advertising images or ideological fantasies of the Belarusian TV – namely capital turnover concentrated in the hands of a few beneficiaries. Popular economic analytics of independent internet journalism that received a significant boost in 2020–2021 especially on Telegram contributed considerably to that (the most popular product of this trend was the film *Goldmine-2: In the Shadow of the Dictator* (2021, NEXTA)).

The victory of the internet model (horizontal, open society) over the ‘television society’ (vertical, authoritarian) is not just about getting things off the ground with \$500 and, having provided economic dynamics, moving on to \$700, \$1000, and so on of average salary. The true victory would consist in the traversing of the fantasy of money itself. In Belarus, state control (personified by the figure of Lukashenko) over financial flows, so to speak, the possession of all the country’s money – determines the obscene pleasure of the Father as a pivotal point of the Belarusian ideology of the social state. And \$500 is not just a quantitative benchmark for ‘decent wages’. This could be grasped as a qualitative ideological gesture of the payment to the exploited:

What psychoanalysis can do to help the critique of ideology is precisely to clarify the status of this paradoxical jouissance as the payment that the exploited, the servant, receives for serving the Master. This jouissance, of course, always emerges within a certain phantasmic field; the crucial precondition for breaking the chains of servitude is thus to traverse the fantasy which structures our jouissance in a way which keeps us attached to the Master – makes us accept the framework of the social relationship of domination. (Žižek 2008: 59)

The state (president), as the owner of the Belarusian economy, does not just promote Belarusian goods in the markets of third-world countries, bargains for energy resources from Russia, etc. Ultimately, it ‘produces’ Belarusian money in an ideological, not a narrow-eco-

conomic sense. It accomplishes the miracle of transforming the concrete labour of Belarusian worker into exchange value, ‘sublimating’ his working time (arrhythmic and random, insufficiently effective or even completely unprofitable) into a universal equivalent, into real money (US dollars), for which one can buy products of any labour and ultimately can get access to the ‘sublime matter’ of money as such (Slavoj Žižek). In this context, Lukashenko’s mission statement about money acquires a deeper meaning: ‘Money should be looked for everywhere, made wherever possible’ (‘Lukashenko: “Money...”’ 2012). Here the state essentially appropriates the Hegelian subjectivity of the market System (generating money that provides commodities with value) in that strange hybrid of ‘market socialism’ that serves as the ideological cover of capitalism without democracy.

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