

# Thirty Years of Independent Belarus

Thirty years ago, in 1991, Belarus regained independence. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet elites felt helpless. The independence granted to Belarusians was treated as a necessary evil, as it was associated with the poor economic situation. It was really hard to build the foundations of the independent state, and the new democratic system was perceived, not as an opportunity, but as a problem.

The situation changed in 1994, when Alexander Lukashenko won the first presidential election in Belarus. In his election campaign, Lukashenko promised the citizens a return to the good Soviet times. Short afterwards, he began to restore the solutions used in the communist times. The only difference was that the administrative power of the President was extended instead of party structures. In the dispute between the President and the opposition, most Belarusians generally supported Lukashenko. The President was expected to take decisive actions. From the point of view of most citizens, a stronger position of the President in the state structures of the Republic of Belarus seemed to be a better solution than excessive parliamentocracy, as they saw it.

During his reign, Lukashenko has managed to create an effective system of exercising single-person power while maintaining the façade principles of democracy. In the authoritarian Belarusian regime, nostalgia for the Soviet system was skilfully combined with the powerful authority of the President. The role of the opposition was marginalized, and all expressions of dissatisfaction were suppressed quickly and effectively.

The most recent, and so far, the strongest, wave of people's protests erupted in 2020, after another presidential election won (!) by Lukashenko. The waves of demonstrations spread across the country. After more than 25 years of rule of a single person, many Belarusians expect some changes.

In this special issue of 'Biuletyn Historii Pogranicza', published in Polish and in English, we present the papers of outstanding Polish researchers investigating the most recent history of the Republic of Belarus. We want as many Readers as possible to be able to learn about the processes occurring in Belarus in the past thirty years.

*Wojciech Śleszyński*

# Table of Contents

## 1.

### Studies and articles

- Arkadiusz Czwołek  
*Evolution of the Contemporary  
Political System in Belarus* ..... 4
- Eugeniusz Mironowicz  
*Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus  
in the Years 1990–2020* ..... 16
- Oleg Łatyszonek  
*Belarusians in Poland and Their  
Attitude to the Opposition in Belarus  
(from the Late 1980s to 2020)* ..... 28
- Ryszard Radzik  
*Who Are Belarusians (Identity Aspects)* ..... 36
- Wojciech Śleszyński  
*Between the Nationalist and the Communist  
Visions of the History. The Belarusian  
Historical Politics 1991–2020* ..... 50
- Zdzisław J. Winnicki  
*State Ideology of the Republic of Belarus* ..... 60



## 2.

### Discussions and confrontations

- Ryszard Radzik  
*The Struggle for Belarusians Dignity* ..... 78
- Jan Jerzy Milewski  
*My Friends – Belarusian Historians  
Under the Pressure of Politics* ..... 82
- Wojciech Śleszyński  
*Two Worlds: The Communist  
Factories and ‘Ajtiszniki’* ..... 88

**Editorial committee:**

Adam Dobroński, Fr. Tadeusz Krahel, Algis Kasperavičius (Wilno),  
Jan Jerzy Milewski, Alvydas Nikžentaitis (Wilno), Alexander Smalianchuk (Grodno)

**Editorial team:**

Wojciech Śleszyński – editor-in-chief  
Aliaksandr Krautsevich (Grodno) – deputy editor-in-chief  
Rimantas Miknys (Vilnius) – deputy editor-in-chief

Tomasz Danilecki, Fr. Tadeusz Kasabuła, Marek Kietliński, Cezary Kukło,  
Paweł Niziołek, Anna Pyżewska, Jan Snopko, Monika Szarejko, Sylwia Szarejko,  
Wojciech Walczak, Diana Wądołowska

**Translation:**

Anna Artemiuk, Sylwia Szarejko

**Reviewers:**

Piotr Chomik, PhD, DSc  
Grzegorz Zackiewicz, PhD, DSc

**Project:** Alter Studio

**Typesetting and printing:** Wydawnictwo Aleksander

**Editorial office address:** ul. Węglowa 1, 15–121 Białystok

bhp@sybir.bialystok.pl

ISSN 1641–0033

www.sybir.bialystok.pl (zakładka: Nauka / Biuletyn Historii Pogranicza)

The publishing house informs that it exercised due diligence within the meaning of Art. 355 par. 2 of the Civil Code in order to find current holders of economic copyrights to photographs. Due to the fact that these searches were not fully successful prior to the publication of this journal, the publishing house undertakes to pay appropriate remuneration for their use to the current holders of economic copyrights, immediately after their notification to the publishing house.

**The photograph for the front cover: The OMON units during post-election protests, Minsk, Belarus, 30 VIII 2020, Photo: Homoatrox**

Creative Commons – Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported – CC BY-SA 3.0  
modification: panning hand, free-form select, transparent, red bar

Unsigned photographs come from the private archive of W. Śleszyński and from the public domain.

The editorial team reserves the right to make changes in the submitted articles.



**Arkadiusz Czwołek**

(The Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń)

**Evolution  
of the Contemporary  
Political System in Belarus**



# 1.

## Studies and articles

In the second half of the 1980s, changes initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev augmented the erosion of the political system of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The process of liberating from the Soviet domination began in Central and Eastern Europe. Out of the former Soviet republics, changes were the quickest in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which went through accelerated transition. In the other Soviet republics the political elites often remained passive and displayed a waiting attitude to the socio-political processes they witnessed. This was also the situation in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The former Belarusian communist elites were not able to break the dependence relations with Moscow. The rapid political processes and the deepening economic crisis surprised them. The Belarusian *nomenklatura* were still waiting for the former center to solve their problems. The center, however, was also in deep crisis and was losing the status of superpower, so it was unable to meet the expectations of its closest ally. The Belarusian political elites were in a completely new situation, in which they had to make decisions by themselves. Paralyzed with fear for their future, in a way they gave in to the events taking place in

Central and Eastern Europe. The process of democratization of Belarus occurred much later than in the other countries of the region. In March 1990, the election for the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation was organized. For the first time, representatives of democratic circles found themselves in the parliament. On July 27, 1990, the declaration of the state sovereignty of the BSSR was adopted, and on August 15, 1991, Belarus announced its independence<sup>1</sup>.

**In the first years of independence, no strong national or democratic elites developed in Belarus that would be able to carry out system transition.**

The main opposition trends concentrated around the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) formed at the end of the 1980s, joined by people from various political circles who wanted democratic transformations in the country. The national slogans promoted by that group were not received well by the Belarusians and the new political powers were not able to convince the society that a system change was needed.

**Belarusians did not have any deeper democratic traditions. The mentali-**

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Czwołek, *Opozycja polityczna na Białorusi (1989–2010)*, Gdańsk 2013, pp. 94–124; R. Czachor, *Transformacja systemu politycznego Białorusi w latach 1988–2001*, Polkowice 2016, pp. 113–144.

**ty shaped by communism, involving  
subjection to authorities, aversion to  
changes and stereotypical thinking,  
promoted passivity in the society.**

In the early 1990s, most Belarusians did not trust the political, economic and social changes they witnessed. The process of development of civil society in Belarus was also much less advanced than in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>2</sup>.

In the years 1990–1994, Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, the former 1st Secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party, had the strongest political position. The political camp associated with him was mainly made up of former members of the Communist Party. The Belarusian *nomenklatura* of the time were characterized by opportunism and a lack of their own ideology. They displayed conformism and an unclear attitude to the occurring socio-political changes. At the time, that group was the main actor on the political scene. The parliamentary election in 1990 ensured the *nomenklatura* an overwhelming majority in the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation. Although the democratic circles gained several dozen parliamentary seats, they were unable to work out a coherent strategy of competing against the *nomenklatura*. After the 1990 parliamentary election, an unprecedented situation occurred, as the elected parliament functioned until 1995, which can be seen as unusual when compared with the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In most countries new parliamentary elections were soon organized, which allowed the democratic powers to take over the power. In the following years, democratic circles carried out democratic transition in those states. In Belarus the powers of the former regime blocked the democratization process. In the specific political situation in Belarus, the newly formed political parties functioned out of the parliament until 1995, when another election was organized. Within that period, they had no influence on the functioning of the state. Pro-democratic forces in the parliament had not enough seats to play an important role in the country. The *nomenklatura* had a strong resentment for an alliance with Russia, and their approach was shared by the majority of the Belarusian society<sup>3</sup>.

In August 1991, a group of Russian politicians attempted a coup in order to take over the control from Mikhail Gorbachev and prevent democratic reforms and further disintegration of the USSR. The so-called August Coup led by Yanayev ended in discrediting the supporters of restoration of the old empire. As a result, Boris Yeltsin, promoting the liberalization of the Russian political system, took over the power. After those events, the Belarusian *nomenklatura* agreed to limited democratic reforms. In the following days, a decision was made to depoliticize the state structures and suspend the activity of the Communist Party. Furthermore, Stanislav Shushkevich, known for his pro-democratic beliefs, was appointed

<sup>2</sup> A. Czwołek, *Reżim autorytarny na Białorusi. Modele transformacji*, [in:] *Kłęska demokracji? Obszar byłego ZSRR*, ed. P. Grochmalski, Toruń 2010, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup> A. Czwołek, *Opozycja polityczna*, 81–83; R. Czachor, *Elity polityczne Białorusi wobec procesu transformacji systemowej w latach 1990–1994*, 'Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne' 2014, No.14, pp. 169–173.

the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation. Soon, the system crisis of the Belarusian economy became the most serious problem. Loosening the economic relations with Moscow and the former Soviet republics led to a rapid drop in the value of the Belarusian currency. Belarusian *nomenklatura* stopped the process of liberalization of the economy. Without making structural reforms, the country could not be expected to overcome the economic crisis. In the years 1991–1995, the GDP decreased by 35%. In order to save the economy, Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich decided to reintegrate with Moscow<sup>4</sup>.

It was only in 1994 that Belarus adopted a new constitution, which introduced the institution of president elected in universal elections for a five-year term with the possibility of re-election. Even before the adoption of the constitution, the *nomenklatura* revoked Stanislav Shushkevich as the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation.

**The constitution adopted on March 15, 1994 did not differ from the European standards. It stressed i.a., the principle of sovereignty of the nation, a unitary democratic state, a social legal state, respect for human dignity and the basic civil rights and liberties.**

It guaranteed the Montesquieu's tripartite separation of powers, freedom of economic activity, and the protection of various forms of ownership. Based on the principles adopted in the constitution, a semi-presidential system developed in Belarus. The country could well become a democratic state<sup>5</sup>.

The first presidential election was scheduled for June 23, 1994. Initially, Vyacheslav Kebich had the greatest chance for a victory, as he was supported by the *nomenklatura* and the Russian elites. The democratic forces could not agree to a single candidate and proposed several of their politicians. The most popular were Stanislav Shushkevich and the leader of the Belarusian Popular Front Zianon Pazniak. Another candidate was Alexander Lukashenko, a deputy in the Supreme Council of the 12th convocation and the founder of a small parliamentary fraction 'Pro-Democratic Belarusian Communists'. He failed to form a political party. He became recognizable mostly thanks to his fight against corruption and financial frauds in the state apparatus. In 1993, he led the parliamentary committee for combating corruption in state structures. He was the main initiator of revoking Stanislav Shushkevich as the Chairman of the parliament. In his electoral campaign, Lukashenko used populist rhetoric a lot. The main motif of his campaign was the fight against

<sup>4</sup> Г. Вардеванян,

1992–2001 . [in:]

, ред. В. Н. Котков, Минск 2002, p. 80

<sup>5</sup> B. Górowska, *Ustrój konstytucyjny Republiki Białoruś*, 'Sprawy Wschodnie' 1994, No. 2, pp. 75–96; Toczek E., *Podstawy ustroju konstytucyjnego Białorusi*, Kancelaria Sejmu, Biuro Studiów i Ekspertyz, Wydział Analiz Ekonomicznych i Społecznych, Communication No. 313, May 1995, pp.1–8; J. Wojnicki, *Ewolucja pozycji parlamentu białoruskiego*, [in:] *Społeczeństwo i polityka. Doświadczenia i wyzwania. Księga jubileuszowi Profesora Alfreda Lutrzykowskiego*, eds J. Marszałek-Kawa and M. Popławski, Toruń 2015, pp. 288–289.

corruption. He was also a supporter of reintegration of the post-Soviet space.

**In Lukashenko's opinion, the dissolution of the USSR was the greatest political misfortune. In his election program he promised the society a return to the period of stabilization known from the times of the USSR. His populist campaign matched the mood of the Belarusian society very well and ensured him a victory in the presidential election in 1995.**

The choice of Lukashenko as President was not only an expression of opposition to the system transformation with the participation of the *nomenklatura*, but also a response to the collective social expectations.

That election ruined the chances of democratization of the country. The new President was clearly against the liberalization of the political system, free market economy, free media, and the civil society. Within the first two years of his presidency, he caused the most serious political crisis in the history of the young Belarusian state, only to take full control of the country. In the following years, he initiated successive nationwide referenda aimed to strengthen his presidential power. The changes introduced by the nationwide referendum in 1995 allowed Lukashenko to change the constitution if it was regularly violated by the parliament. The competence of the head of state was extended the most in the nationwide referendum in 1996, when on the initiative of Lukashenko many amendments were made to the constitution from 1994. The 2004 referendum enabled the President to hold his office virtually infinitely, although in accordance with the 1994 constitution the president should not serve as the

head of state after 1999, when two terms of office had passed. The legitimization of Lukashenko's power enhanced at the subsequent presidential elections, all of which were carried out with the violation of international standards. The results of the elections were purposefully falsified for Lukashenko to win. In the 1996 referendum, the President obtained strong attributes of executive power. From then on, he could appoint the Prime Minister and the cabinet. In the authoritarian system developed in Belarus after 1996, the government became a façade institution, because it did not bear any liability before the parliament. The President gained unlimited rights regarding the parliament, government, the judiciary, audit bodies, local government, and power structures. Pursuant to the constitution, the President had the right to issue decrees and regulations, valid all over the country. The amendments to the 1994 constitution violated one of the basic rules of a democratic legal state, i.e., the principle of separation and balance of powers. Since then on, the Montesquieu's separation of powers was non-existent in Belarus. The President exercised power personally, and the constitutional terms were only the background for his political actions.

In authoritarian systems like those in Belarus or Russia, the essence of political leadership was the possibility to influence ultimate political decisions. One of the characteristic features of such political systems is the personal interference of the head of state in the subjectivity of legislative, executive and judiciary power, much deeper than provided for in the constitution.

In Belarus there are only fragmentary forms of democratic institutions, and



political parties and non-governmental organizations do not have the conditions to develop freely. The regime does not approach positively any activity of the society. What the authorities expect is rather passivity and apathy. The foundation of Lukashenko's power is the vertically subjected official apparatus, not only at the state level but also in territorial self-governments. Lukashenko is supported by groups without their own ideologies, such as 'White Rus'. A huge role in the power system is played by the power structures (special services, police, the military, etc.), which are used to frighten and control the society<sup>6</sup>.

The Supreme Council made up of 260 individuals had been functioning until 1995. As a result of changes made to the constitution in 1996, it ceased to exist and was replaced by the bicameral National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus. The new parliament was composed of two chambers: the 110-person House of Representatives, and the 64-person Council of the Republic. Deputies were only elected in universal elections for the lower chamber. As for the higher chamber, 8 senators were delegated by the President, and the remaining 56 senators were chosen by Local Councils. In democratic countries the legislative authority serves the constitutional, legislative, creative and control functions. Although the new parliament formally retained those functions, they were considerably reduced. In recent years, it was the President who proposed changes to the constitution and effected them at nationwide referenda. The legislative

function of the parliament was also diminished, as the head of state received the right to issue binding decrees and regulations. In many spheres of life, the presidential regulations and decrees regulated the basic issues, thus reducing the legislative functions of the parliament. The President could change a law adopted by the parliament or even repeal it by means of a decree. The creative function of the parliament was reduced because the President often decided at his own discretion who to appoint for the most important state positions. The power of the President was actually taken out of the control of the parliament. One characteristic feature of a democratic state is cyclical, real contest elections. In the case of Belarus, only the first element of this description applies. After 1995, no parliamentary election has been carried out in accordance with international rules. All the parliamentary elections violated the democratic standards. The participation of political parties, including opposition ones, is delimited. Within the last twenty-five years, very few representatives of democratic circles have been allowed in the parliament. There are almost no representatives of political parties in the parliament, which does not happen in democratic countries. The aim of parliamentary elections in Belarus is only to legitimize the current political system. They are also a way to convince the international opinion that Belarus observes democratic rules. In the Belarusian political system, the parliament serves a façade function. It is just an obedient instru-

---

<sup>6</sup> A. Czwołek, *Rola i znaczenie ogólnokrajowych referendów na Białorusi*, pp. 219–220; W. Zięta-  
ra, *Instytucja referendum ogólnopaństwowego w Republice Białorusi po 1991 r.*, 'Annales Uni-  
versitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska', Sektio K, 2016, vol. XXIII, 2, pp. 140–143; K. Kakarenko,  
*System polityczno-prawny Białorusi*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 150–154; P. Usov, *Cechy odmienne  
białoruskiego reżimu politycznego*, 'Politeja' 2012, No. 22, p. 54.



The OMON standing in the cordon during post-election protests, Minsk, Belarus, 20 IX 2020, Photo: Homoatrox



ment in Lukashenko's hand, completely subjected to him and passive<sup>7</sup>.

Even the constitution of 1994 changed the position of the government as an executive authority, because the provisions concerning its functioning were placed in the chapter on the head of state. In the structure of state authorities, the government was located after the President and the parliament. Although the functions of the head of state and the Prime Minister were separated, the Prime Minister was directly subjected to the President and responsible before the parliament. In accordance with the 1994 constitution, the President shall appoint the Prime Minister with the consent of the House of Representatives. If the candidate was disapproved twice by the lower chamber of the parliament, the President could either appoint a person to serve as the Prime Minister or dissolve the parliament and set the date for a new parliamentary election. The position of the President in appointing the Prime Minister is privileged in respect to the parliament, because he has the right to shorten the parliament's term. The head of state also autonomously appoints the Deputy Prime Minister, ministers, and the chairpersons of the state committees. Even the Prime Minister has no influence on their nomination. Pursuant to the constitution, the President may revoke the Prime Minister and the government. In the Belarusian political system, the government has a very weak position and is fully controlled by Lukashenko<sup>8</sup>.

In the early 1990s, a reform of the judiciary was first discussed in Belarus. Its main assumptions were to guarantee courts and judges independence. By virtue of the constitution of March 15, 1994 and the Act of March 30, 1994 on the Constitutional Court, the Constitutional Tribunal was established for the first time. In the initial period of its functioning, the Constitutional Court considered issues and announced decisions related to the constitutionality of acts, decrees of the head of state, international agreements made by the Republic of Belarus, governmental regulations, acts of the Supreme Court, Higher Economic Court, and the Public Prosecutor General. The Constitutional Court also considered cases concerning the protection of citizens' rights and liberties. It was competent to settle cases concerning the violation of the constitution by the President. In the first years of its existence, the Constitutional Court emphasized the need to observe the constitutional principle of separation of powers. Its independent position resulted in a conflict with Lukashenko, who decided to make substantial changes in its functioning.

**The aim of the changes introduced after the referendum in 1996 was to weaken the status of the Constitutional Court. The President obtained the right to appoint six judges of the Constitutional Court, including its Chairperson, and the other six judges were to be appointed by the higher chamber of the parliament.**

---

<sup>7</sup> K. Kakarenko, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> J. Sobczak, *Pozycja ustrojowa Rady Ministrów w systemie politycznym Białorusi*, 'Nowa Polityka Wschodnia' 2011, No. 1 (1), pp. 220–231; J. Zieliński, *Rząd Republiki Białorusi*, [in:] *Rządy w państwach Europy*, Warszawa 2006, vol. 3, pp. 27–28, 37–47.

In the Council of the Republic, only the Chairperson of the Constitutional Court (appointed by the head of state) had the right to propose candidates for the Constitutional Court. This way, the President personally influenced the composition of the Constitutional Court. Before, only the Supreme Council had that power. The guarantee of judges' independence was reduced by the new version of the constitution of 1996 and by the Act on Constitutional Court. The president had the right to revoke the Chairperson of the Constitutional Court and each judge. In addition, the entities with the right to initiate the consideration of cases by the Supreme Court were limited to the President, both chambers of the parliament, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Economic Court, and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus. Later, practice showed that the President was the main initiator of cases at the Constitutional Court. In addition, the Constitutional Court no longer had the right to lodge motions for investigating the violation of the constitution by the President. In the following years, the Constitutional Court resigned from examining the conformity of Presidential decrees with the constitution. After 1996, the Constitutional Court lost its function of the guard of the constitution and became an instrument fully subjected to the head of state. Its role, just like the roles of the parliament and the cabinet, is façade. The situation is similar with regard to common courts and the judiciary, because the President has a huge influence of their functioning<sup>9</sup>.

Authoritarian regimes usually tolerate limited pluralism. This is also true in Belarus, where political parties and independent media function in a fragmentary form.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, when over 40 parties emerged on the political scene, the party system has been developing dynamically. When Lukashenko won the presidential election in 1994, he began to reduce the role of political parties.

The same happened in Russia when Vladimir Putin came to power. In the first years of Lukashenko's rule, the number of political parties decreased by more than a half. Most political groups were made illegal or discontinued their activity under the pressure of the authorities. Since the year 2000, no new political party has been registered. Currently, there are 15 legal political parties, and several opposition political groups function out of the official registers. The majority of the registered political parties support the regime; only few have kept their independence. Political parties do not play a significant part in the political system, because the regime fully controls and licenses their activity. The failure to develop a strong party system has led to a low degree of political competition. Political parties do not initiate an exchange of opinions in the public debate. Except from elections, they do not really participate in the political life. They are also poorly recognizable in the society and unable

---

<sup>9</sup> K. Kakarenko, *op.cit.*, pp. 196–218; A. Waszkiewicz, *Sąd Konstytucyjny Republiki Białoruś: przed i po referendum listopadowym 1996 roku* [in:] *Sądy Konstytucyjne w Europie, vol.4: Białoruś, Litwa, Łotwa, Rosja*, ed. J. Trzcinski, Warszawa 2000, pp. 13–31; R. Czachor, *Sądownictwo konstytucyjne na Białorusi, Ukrainie i Mołdawii. Studium ustrojowo-porównawcze*, 'Zeszyty Naukowe Uczelni Jana Wyżykowskiego. Studia z Nauk Społecznych', 2018, No. 11, p. 29.

to legally cause the alternation of power. The incumbent President has retained the functioning of a fragmentary party system, mostly due to the international opinion, to demonstrate that the principles of polarized pluralism exist in his country<sup>10</sup>.

After taking over the power in Belarus in 1994, Lukashenko began to limit the development of independent media. Under his rule, no serious transformation of the media system has taken place.

**The classic model of authoritarian media system functions in Belarus. Its main features are the monopolization and control of nationwide mass media, including television, radio, the press, the Internet, as well as printing industry and means of distribution. The regime mostly subsidizes national media, which are an instrument of indoctrination and propaganda.**

Independent media (mostly the press) function in a fragmentary form. Recently, most of them have moved to the Internet, which is the last sphere of freedom, although the authorities have made a number of attempts to limit or even liquidate it. In the national media there is no objective socio-political analytics, only power-controlled information. The authorities use various methods and techniques of limiting the freedom of functioning of independent media, i.a., liquidation or refusal to reg-

ister, frequent censorship, and limitation of printing and distribution opportunities. Moreover, the authorities make it difficult for independent journalists to access public information and apply criminal and financial restrictions to independent media. In democratic countries independent media serve as the fourth power, apart from the legislative, executive and judiciary ones. They serve the control function with respect to the other powers, preventing potential abuse on their part. They also initiate the public debate concerning important social problems<sup>11</sup>.

The functioning of civil society is one of the most serious threats to Lukashenko's regime. Political independence of non-governmental organizations often reflects the degree of democratization of a certain state. It is also an expression of civil maturity. In the first years of Lukashenko's rule, the civil sector was slowly developing, and the President did not pursue direct confrontation. Later, some symptoms of a change in Lukashenko's attitude to non-governmental organizations appeared, when they engaged in presidential elections. After 2001, a planned action occurred of limiting the importance of the civil sector, only to partially liquidate it later. Subsequently, the process of erosion of the third sector was deepening. Nowadays, in Belarus the conditions of development of the civil society are among the most difficult in Central and Eastern Europe. The main goals of the

---

<sup>10</sup> A. Czwolek, *Ewolucja systemu partyjnego na Białorusi*, [in:] *Partie i systemy partyjne Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Dwie dekady doświadczeń*, ed. A. Czwolka, M. Nowak-Paralusz, K. Gawron-Tabor, Toruń 2013, pp. 254–256;

, [https://minjust.gov.by/directions/compare\\_coverage/registration/information/?sphrase\\_id=108893](https://minjust.gov.by/directions/compare_coverage/registration/information/?sphrase_id=108893), accessed on 5.11.2020;

<sup>11</sup> A. Czwolek, *System medialny na Białorusi*, [in:] *Teoria i praktyka funkcjonowania mediów*, ed. J. Marszałek-Kawa, Toruń 2010, pp. 104–119.

regime with regard to non-governmental organizations have not changed for many years.

Lukashenko is trying to fully control the non-governmental sector and is constantly blocking the development of independent civic initiatives. In the authoritarian system functioning in Belarus citizens are deprived of the right to express their dissatisfaction with the authorities.

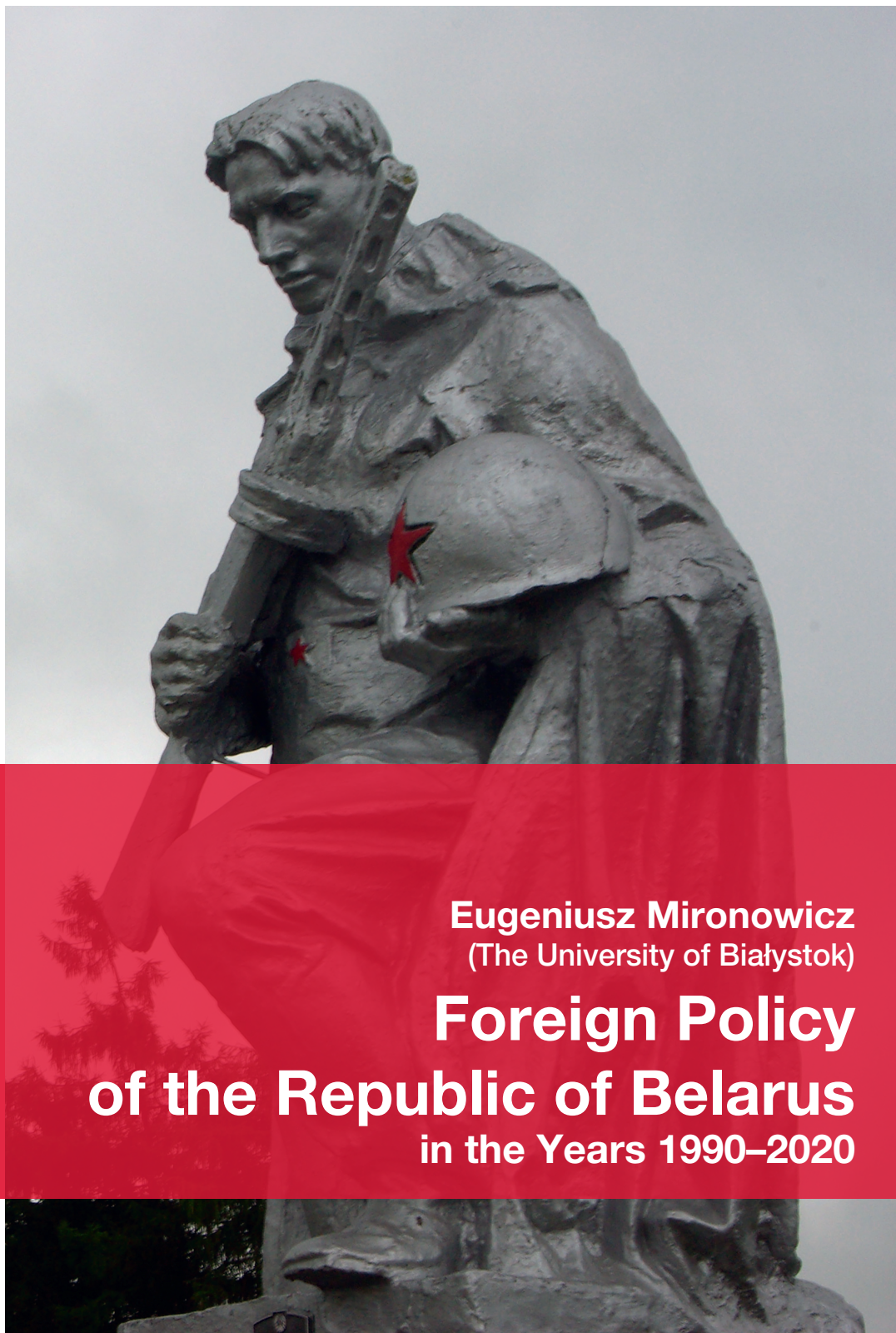
They cannot take part in manifestations, protests or strikes. All forms of protests are punished with criminal restrictions and the authorities often use force to fight them, although the right to express personal opinions is one of the fundamental civic rights in democratic countries<sup>12</sup>.

The result of over 25 years of rule of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus is tragic. His actions have led to the disap-

pearance of democratic institutions. In Belarus there is no tripartite separation of powers. The president plays the major role in the political system, exercising full control of the legislative, executive and judiciary power. All the civil service system is subjected to his authority. The president also has the power structures (the army, militia, and special services) at his disposal. Lukashenko uses violence to maintain his power. For many years, all the elections (presidential, parliamentary and local) have been carried out with the violation of the basic international standards. Their only goal was to further legitimize Lukashenko's power. Under his rule, no party system has developed that normally would in a stabilized democracy. Independent media hardly exist in the country. Any expressions of citizens' activity are nipped in the bud, and the fundamental human and civil rights, although guaranteed in the constitution, are not respected at all.

---

<sup>12</sup> A. Czwołek, *Bariery rozwoju społeczeństwa obywatelskiego na Białorusi po 2010 roku* [in:] *Pomiędzy demokracją a autorytaryzmem. Doświadczenia polityczno-ustrojowe państw współczesnych*, eds J. Wojnicki, J. Zalesny, Warszawa 2018, pp. 259–261; J. Czawusow, O. Smolanko, *Zmiany regulacji prawnych dotyczących organizacji pozarządowych na Białorusi w okresie rządów autorytarnych (od 1996 do 2000 roku)*, 'Politeja', 2012, No. 22, pp. 121–129.



**Eugeniusz Mironowicz**  
(The University of Białystok)

**Foreign Policy  
of the Republic of Belarus  
in the Years 1990–2020**



Belarus was one of the most stable pillars of the Soviet Union. Unlike in the neighboring Soviet republics, in Belarus there were no significant intellectual trends questioning the existing legal and political order with the administrative center in Moscow. The Republic was a relatively well prospering part of the huge Soviet area, and its residents accepted the political status of an administrative unit of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)<sup>1</sup>. The dissolution of the Soviet state took place without a significant participation of Belarus.

In the summer 1990, most USSR republics proclaimed declarations of sovereignty. Belarus did so on July 27, declaring the republic to be a neutral state, which renounced any membership in military blocs and the nuclear weapons it had.

The economic crisis caused by the advancing process of dissolution of the USSR and the effects of the disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant forced the authorities of the republic to seek aid out of the Soviet area. Belarus had to implement its own foreign policy while still a USSR republic, without the status of a subject of international law.

On August 24, 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist

Republic (BSSR) proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Belarus, and on December 8, 1991, the Soviet empire was liquidated by the head of the Belarusian state Stanislaw Shushkevich, president of Russia Boris Yeltsin, and president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk. On that same day, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was established as an organization that was to promote economic and political collaboration of the former Soviet republics. The idea of the CIS was shared by the majority of political forces represented in the Supreme Council.

**Most post-Soviet Belarusian elites wanted to retain the political and economic ties with Russia<sup>2</sup>. More than 80% of Belarus' economic exchange in 1992 was with Russia. The Belarusian economy was completely dependent on Russian fuels and raw materials, and Russia was the basic market for the products of Belarusian industry.**

In the situation of progressing downfall of the state's economy and finances, the Belarusian government headed by Vyacheslav Kebich tried to overcome the crisis by restoring collaboration with Russia and broadening integration within the CIS<sup>3</sup>. The Russian orientation consolidated as early as at the

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Mironowicz, *Historia państw świata w XX wieku. Białoruś*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 253–275.

<sup>2</sup> B. Шацурскі, \_\_\_\_\_, [in:] *Stosunki polsko-białoruskie. Społeczeństwo i polityka*, vol. 2, eds S. Jaczyński, R. Pękasa, Siedlce 2009, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> K. Marzęda, *Pozycja ekonomiczna Białorusi*, [in:] *Białoruś w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, ed. I. Topolski, Lublin 2009, p. 149.

beginning of Belarusian independence. That was largely the internal choice of Belarus forced by the economic situation. It gave great industrial complexes a chance of surviving and maintaining employment, and thus, allowed to limit the rapid drop of the GDP and alleviate the social effects of the economic crash.

At the same time, in the first years after the declaration of independence, the majority in the Supreme Council desired to maintain the state's neutrality in international relations. Balance in the policy of relations with the East and the West was considered to be ideal. This line of foreign policy was supported by the Chairman of the Supreme Council Stanislav Shushkevich, who refused to sign the Collective Security Treaty in Tashkent on May 15, 1992, explaining it with the Belarusian neutrality doctrine.

The authorities of the republic were very active in attempts to build a space without nuclear weapons or military blocs in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>4</sup>. After gaining independence, the Belarusian proposal was presented to neighboring countries through the diplomatic channels of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The nuclear-free zone was to include Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and could be extended to other countries of the former Warsaw Pact. Only Ukraine had a similar vision of political order in this part of Europe.

**Since Russia was not interested in extending collaboration with Belarus, Prime Minister Kebich and the Chairman of the Supreme Council Shushkevich tried to probe the possibility of changing the strategic partner. They needed someone who would have the capability and motivation to support the Belarusian economy by opening its market for the products of the Belarusian industry and granting loans for the purchase of raw materials.**

The only world super power after the dissolution of the USSR – the United States – did not attach great importance to the process of shaping the geopolitical situation of Belarus, accepting as obvious that it would remain in the zone of Russian influence<sup>5</sup>. None of the European powers displayed greater interest in Belarus, either, primarily caring about good relations with Russia.

The only country that had an idea of policy regarding the post-Soviet area at the time was Poland, but the plan of reorientation of Belarusian foreign policy based on Poland was impossible to carry out in that reality<sup>6</sup>. Poland was too weak to try and balance the Russian option on its own. Being out of Euro-Atlantic structures, it had limited capabilities of persuading Western politicians, and it was pursuing partnership relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Economic Community (EEC) itself. In Europe, nobody wanted to

<sup>4</sup> У. Снапкоўскі, „Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений”, 2001, No. 1, p 49.

<sup>5</sup> В. Кебич, „Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений”, Минск 2008, p 230; G. Tokarz, *Uwarunkowania geopolityczne polityki państwa białoruskiego po upadku ZSRR*, [in:] *Polska- Białoruś: wybrane aspekty polityczne i gospodarcze*, eds M. Wolański, G. Tokarz, Toruń 2007, pp. 195–196.

<sup>6</sup> В. Кебич, „Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений”, pp. 312–318.

additionally complicate the political situation caused by the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, and then, the Soviet Union.

At the end of 1992, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who wanted to build alliances with Belarus and Ukraine, became the Prime Minister of Russia. At the same time, Poland declared its intention to join the NATO. The Belarusian project of a neutral zone in Central and Eastern Europe was becoming increasingly unrealistic.

**In the situation of advancing economic crisis and a rapid drop in the GDP, Kebich signed agreements of economic and military cooperation with Russia. In return, Belarus received cheap energy resources and access to the Russian markets. In 1993, a short period of politics oriented at maintaining neutrality ended.**

The election of Alexander Lukashenko as President in summer 1994 strengthened the tendencies initiated by Kebich. The choice of the authoritarian model of managing the state and the society led to Belarus' isolation in Europe. The possibility of having active foreign policy was reduced to the area of the CIS. Still, the priority in Belarusian foreign policy was collaboration with Russia. On January 1995, president Lukashenko signed with President of Russia Boris Yeltsyn the Agreement on the Customs Union, on February 21, the Contract on Friendship, Neighborliness and Cooperation, on April 2, 1996, the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus.

The idea of integration was mostly used in the internal policy of power centers in both countries. In Belarus, that policy was consistent with the expectations of most citizens, and in Russia, it alleviated the effects of a specific social depression after the loss of the Russian empire.

Both presidents, Boris Yeltsin and Alexander Lukashenko, needed those new agreements. The President of Russia was running for the second term of presidency, was very unpopular, and the citizens could not forgive him for participation in the liquidation of the Soviet Union. The pompous declaration of the beginning of the process of reintegration of the post-Soviet space after the signing of the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus was to restore hope to all who missed the collapsed empire<sup>7</sup>. Lukashenko, in turn, had problems with the new Supreme Council and the Constitutional Tribunal. The agreement with Russia was the fulfilment of many promises and an action oriented at gaining the support of the public opinion in the face of the inevitable confrontation with the parliament, where the procedure of impeachment was initiated against him.

Lukashenko gained new opportunities in his politics toward Russia through the signing of the Treaty on the Union between Belarus and Russia on April 2, 1997. As one of the highest representatives of the union state, he had an opportunity to independently carry out policy in Russia oriented at building his political base<sup>8</sup>. In the face of the growing indisposition of Yeltsin, he hoped

<sup>7</sup> K. Malak, *Polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeŃstwa Białorusi*, Warszawa 2003, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> А. Федута, , Москва 2005, pp. 599–602

to gain the primary role in the Belarusian-Russian state<sup>9</sup>.

The majority of contracts and treaties signed between Belarus and Russia were never carried out. One of the factors that inhibited the integration process was the financial crisis that paralyzed life in Russia in 1998. The Russian market's potential to absorb Belarusian products decreased. In the situation of a financial crash, the signed declarations only mattered in propagandistic terms. It was the beginning of a crisis in the integration policy of Lukashenko, who accused the Kremlin elites of the lack of progress in implementing the treaty provisions.

As for the other neighbours of Belarus, Lukashenko cared the most about relations with Ukraine. He made several attempts to convince the president of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma to create a trilateral alliance with Russia. Despite many premises for close cooperation of the two countries, the Belarusian-Ukrainian relationships were correct but rather cold<sup>10</sup>. Good relations were probably more important for the Belarusian side. From the Kievan point of view, Belarus was not one of the countries whose position could determine Ukraine's position on the political map of Europe. The authorities of Ukraine felt that their country was great and had a significant geopolitical position. They tried to balance between Russia and the West. Belarus, with its pro-Russian orientation, could not be a partner in that game, as it was too clearly inclined toward an alliance with the Russian Federation.

**The relations between Belarus and Poland deteriorated from the time when Prime Minister Kebich resolved to integrate with Russia and Poland announced its intention to join the NATO. Without the participation of Poland, the Belarusian concept of security in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed, and the appearance of a powerful military bloc by its western border made Belarus a country located in a potential front zone.**

Returning to the concept of strategic partnership with Poland, which Belarus had tried to force in 1992, was out of the question. The negative attitude of successive Polish cabinets to Belarusian close relationships with Russia was actually the main factor affecting the relations between the two countries, although propaganda messages emphasized the issue of violating human rights and democratic principles and the discrimination against the Polish minority.

Since 1999, Poland was presented in the Belarusian media as an enemy of Belarus, which had lost its political independence and become an instrument of American politics after joining the NATO.

The issue of Polish national minority played an important role in Polish-Belarusian relations. The Belarusian authorities applied the same standards to Poles as to Belarusians, fully controlling all activity of Polish organizations, publishing houses, and educational and cultural institutions. In Poland it was

---

<sup>9</sup> E. Mironowicz, *Polityka zagraniczna Białorusi 1990-2010*, Białystok 2011, pp. 74-76.

<sup>10</sup> T. Kapuśniak, *Stosunki Republiki Białoruś z Ukrainą*, [in:] *Białoruś w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, ed. I. Topolski, Lublin 2009, p. 201.

usually defined as a display of discrimination against the national minority, although the titular nation was equally devoid of all elements building its identity. The manipulation with the organizational life of the Polish minority (by both sides) led to an acute crisis in relations between the two countries in 2005.

**Out of all the Western countries, most important in Belarus' foreign policy was Germany, which was its biggest commercial partner. In the case of Germany, Belarus was an important country of transit to Russia<sup>11</sup>.**

From the point of view of economic interests of Germany, the power in Minsk needed to ensure efficient transfer of goods through the territory of Belarus. Lukashenko was a guarantee of that, and despite criticism of his internal policy on the part of the leading German politicians, in practice Germany intended to strengthen his position.

The Belarusian policy toward the USA was the effect of Belarusian perception of security. As the major element of the NATO bloc, the USA was perceived by Minsk as the main architect of the new European order, and the NATO determined the zone of American political influence in Europe. The negative evaluation of perspectives of the NATO had a negative impact on Belarusian-American relations from the beginning of Belarusian independence.

Isolation of Belarus in the West caused it to seek contacts with countries in Asia,

Africa, and Latin America. The common feature of the majority of new partners from Asia and Africa was that they did not have any reservations concerning Belarusian democracy and Lukashenko's methods of exercising power, and in most cases, they had a critical or distanced attitude to the American policy.

In Asia Belarus had closest relations with China, India, Vietnam, Iraq and Syria, in Africa, with Libya, and in America, with Venezuela. The leaders of those countries willingly accepted Lukashenko as guest or visited Minsk themselves. What Belarus needed most was markets for its industrial production. The Belarusian industry had been built in the Soviet times and designed to manufacture goods for the needs of the empire and its satellite countries. Only selling abroad gave the industry a chance to survive. Therefore, president Lukashenko sought markets beyond Europe, too. As Vladimir Putin became the host at the Kremlin, Lukashenko lost the perspective of playing a significant role on the Russian political scene. Any union of two countries as equal political subjects was no longer realistic, and the new President of Russia took actions to weaken Lukashenko's position in Belarus and continue the process of integration on conditions proposed by Russia. In 2002, Putin proposed integration through incorporating Belarus in the Russian Federation, which would completely exclude Lukashenko from political life. Hence, for Lukashenko, the most important goal was to retain the Belarusian statehood, which allowed him to be the President and have real

<sup>11</sup> В. Шадурский, [in:] , выпуск 7, книга 1, Минск 2009, pp. 176–177.



Alexander Lukashenko's meeting with the president Ilham Aliyev during the official visit in Azerbaijan, November 2016, Photo: President of Azerbaijan



power over the 10-million nation in the middle of Europe<sup>12</sup>. The slogan 'integration with Russia' was no longer used in propaganda.

In order to force Lukashenko to agree to sell the strategic enterprises, Russian authorities usually demanded the valorization of prices of energy resources and limited Belarusian alimentary products access to the Russian market.

Almost every year, there were 'gas wars' or 'milk wars' accompanied by real propaganda wars. In 2002, Lukashenko responded with announcing 'a multi-vector foreign policy', assuming balance in relations with Russia and the West.

The advantages of Moscow and Brussels were analyzed in Minsk as regards the expectations of authorities and the society, economic interests and state security. It was assumed that the current circumstances would help strengthen the country's independence. The state elite emerged, and the conviction that their country is valuable was growing in the society. It was believed that in return for Belarus' cold attitude to the West, Russia would be willing to pay a lot for keeping Belarus in its sphere of influence but without the possibility to impact the decision-making processes in Minsk.

The difficult financial situation in 2008 forced Lukashenko to make some conciliatory gestures toward the West, i.e., soften repressions against his political opponents, reactivate several journals

that had been liquidated, and demonstrate his disapproval of the Russian policy. Belarus declared neutrality in the Georgian-Russian conflict concerning South Ossetia, and later, unlike Russia, it did not recognize the sovereignty of two formerly Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia<sup>13</sup>.

The paradox in the years 2008–2010 was that the President strengthened his authoritarian power by mobilizing the society through pointing out the danger of losing sovereignty to Russia with all its consequences: terrorism, organized crime, and lowering the life status of the citizens.

The clear deterioration of relations between Belarus and Russia was accompanied by improvement in relations with the European Union. Because of its Caucasian policy, Belarus was invited by the European Union to the Eastern Partnership. Thus, Lukashenko gained an asset in relations with Russia, allowing him to demonstrate the readiness to change his political orientation to pro-Western one. Demonstrating independence in foreign policy gave the European Union the basis for gradually lifting the sanctions against the Belarusian regime and offering Belarus incentives for (at least symbolic) democratization of its political system. The country was promised investments and loans in return for organizing a democratic presidential election scheduled on December 19, 2010.

Ten days before the election, the Russian authorities changed their tactics

---

<sup>12</sup> M. Maszkiewicz, *Białoruś. Zespół ukrytego paradoksu*, Warszawa 2008, p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> V. Karbalewicz, *Stosunki pomiędzy Białorusią a Unią Europejską: nowe tendencje*, [in:] *Białoruś – w stronę zjednoczonej Europy*, ed. M. Maszkiewicz, Wrocław 2009, pp. 188–192.



regarding Belarus. President Medvedev gave consent to the conditions of supplying Russian energy resources to Belarus expected by Lukashenko. The change of Russia's stand on the principles of sale of oil was to be beneficial for Belarus: the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation estimated the profit at nearly 4 billion dollars a year.

**Russia outbid the European Union as regards the extent of aid for Belarus. The Union made promises and had some conditions, while Russia gave real money in the form of cheap resources.**

In that situation, Lukashenko did not have to take Brussels' opinions into consideration and meet its expectations regarding his internal policy.

The effects of Kievan Maidan in February 2014 were assessed very negatively in Moscow. In Minsk those events were conservatively accepted, yet the initial speculations about the possible dissolution of Ukraine were strongly disapproved. Lukashenko was also consistent in the subject of territorial integrity of Ukraine. He did not recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea or the subjectivity of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.

The sanctions imposed in summer 2014 by the West on Russia and the retaliatory actions of Russia, i.e., banning the importation of food from European Union countries, were perceived in Minsk as an opportunity for great profits. Not only did Belarus refuse to join the Russian policy of banning food importation but it also quickly began to increase the purchases of fruit, vegetables and meat in countries of the European Union with the intention to re-export them to

Russia. In the situation of an acute crisis in relations between Russia and the West, Moscow treated with indulgence the disloyalty of the Belarusian ally in the form of smuggling goods from the European Union or the sale of fuels to Ukraine manufactured from Russian oil and the rhetoric of multi-vector foreign policy. Until 2019, energy resources were supplied at prices satisfactory for the Belarusian authorities.

In 2020, Russia again demanded to set market prices for energy resources. As they did before, Belarusian authorities began to ostentatiously demonstrate independence. Belarus purchased small amounts of oil from Azerbaijan and Norway. Americans also immediately offered to help in solving Belarusian energy problems. The visit of the USA secretary of state Mike Pompeo in Minsk in February 2020 was a demonstration of improvement in relations with the country that for many years had been defined as the greatest threat. On March 21, Russia again gave up and signed contracts for oil supplies at prices satisfactory for Lukashenko, who must have believed that he had powerful allies in the West and was able to dictate the terms in relations with Russia.

For many years, Lukashenko tried to persuade his listeners in public talks that Belarus did not have any difficulty choosing between the East and the West, because due to historical, economic, cultural and geographical associations, it belonged both to the East and to the West. Especially important for Belarus was the European Union, where between 30% and 40% of Belarusian export goods went in the 21st century. Belarusian authorities rightly understood that their country was an object of a game between Russia

and the European Union<sup>14</sup>. They decided to make the most of that fight, stressing the equality of both subjects and raising the price for supporting one of them. Lukashenko adopted the strategy of playing on the contradictory interests of Moscow and Brussels as long as it was possible. In the case of the Union, the relations with Belarus were part of a plan of geopolitical transformation of Eastern Europe, and in the case of Belarus, the way to solving economic problems and a means of influence on Russia. The ultimate goal of President Lukashenko was to keep his power, and good relations with the Union allowed to maintain a good economic situation and were an important part of that plan.

The relations between Belarus and the USA were worsening all the time from the beginning of Lukashenko's presidency. In 2004, the Congress issued the "Belarus Democracy Act", clearly stating that the goal of the American policy was to remove the current President from his office. However, they worked too actively to achieve that goal, and as a result, in 2009, the Belarusian authorities demanded to reduce the staff of the American embassy from 35 to 5 people. The USA ambassador was asked to leave Minsk. Ten years later, several high representatives of the American authorities visited the President of Belarus, including the secretary of state for security, John Bolton, so as to propose him to normalize the relations between the two countries. In the beginning of 2020, normal functioning of the Ameri-

can embassy was restored. Lukashenko believed in the good intentions of his interlocutors, and according to Russian commentators, kept the content of the talks secret from the decision-makers from the Kremlin<sup>15</sup>.

**He had no idea that the Americans used on him the same strategy they had used before with respect to the President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, and Presidents of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovich. 'Color revolutions' were always preceded by the improvement of relations between Washington and the respective regimes, strongly opposed a few months later by the 'civil society'.**

On August 9, 2020, a presidential election took place, in which Lukashenko ran for the seventh time. From the beginning of the year, another propaganda war had been going on, in which the Belarusian media accused Russia of an attempt to eliminate the ruling president. All the candidates perceived as Kremlin protégés, Sergei Tikhanovsky, Viktor Babaryka and Valery Tsepkalo, were arrested.

The election results announced as usual, showing a crushing victory of Lukashenko, were totally unreliable for most Belarusians. The protests were pacified with unprecedented brutality. On the first day of protests, most Russian journalists were arrested, treated as the co-organizers of the rebellion

<sup>14</sup>

[com/новости/комерсантъ-европа-готова-статья-росс.html](http://com/новости/комерсантъ-европа-готова-статья-росс.html)

<sup>15</sup>

[www.bbc.com/russian/news-49735478](http://www.bbc.com/russian/news-49735478)

, „Комерсантъ”, 23.06.2009, <http://mygazeta.com>

provoked by Moscow. Only two days later did Lukashenko realize that the 'Belarusian revolution' was coordinated by centers lying on the western side of the border. The head of diplomacy Vladimir Makei was immediately sent to Moscow. At a conference held together with Sergey Lavrov, he said plainly that he had been cheated on by his Western 'partners', who had promised him not to organize anti-government protests in return for withdrawing from integration with Russia.

On September 3, a delegation of the Russian government with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin came to Minsk, and on September 14, Lukashenko visited Vladimir Putin, often humbly calling the president of Russia his 'good friend'.

Within a month, in Belarusian policy, Russia regained the name of most reliable ally, and Russians, the 'brother nation'. The enemy countries that supported the 'revolution' were Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, considered to be carrying out instructions from Washington.

Ukraine was a new country in this group, as it had always been perceived by Minsk as a potential ally and a state that had common geopolitical interests with Belarus.

In September 2020, a lot suggested that the multi-vector policy, irritating for Moscow, would soon be abandoned in the Belarusian diplomacy. The eastern vector became dominant. However, at the end of October, Lukashenko unexpectedly announced he would continue the previous multi-vector foreign policy. Perhaps this was only a form of demonstration of sovereignty of the Belarusian authorities. But more probably, it meant the lack of consent to the model of integration expected by Russia and the belief that the ally had no choice and would have to support the current authorities in Minsk so as to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence. The actual situation and the measure of sovereignty in international policy will be evidenced by whether Belarus recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and recognizes Crimea as an administrative unit of the Russian Federation.



**Oleg Łatyszonek**  
(The University of Białystok)

**Belarusians in Poland**  
and Their Attitude to the Opposition  
in Belarus (from the Late 1980s to 2020)

The border between the Polish People's Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), established in 1945, for the first time in history divided the previously uniform Belarusian ethnos. The difference between the socio-political systems in the two countries and the fact that afterwards, the life of Belarusian minority was linked with the life of Poles, so different from the Russians dominating Belarusians in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), led to the growing diversity between the two Belarusian communities. In both countries, however, assimilation pressure was at work, as a result of which the Soviet Byelorussia could not provide any support for the Belarusian minority in Poland.

Polonization gained impetus in the 1970s. Unlike in the previous period, it was compulsory and forced by the authorities. Belarusian schools were liquidated, and the Belarusian language only remained as an elective subject. From then on, Belarusian parents had to declare each year that they wanted their children to learn Belarusian. (Actually, this condemnable custom is still in force nowadays...). The Belarusian Ethnographic Museum in Białowieża was closed, and the 'Lawonicha' ensemble, performing Belarusian music, was dissolved. In addition, the pre-war project of settlement in areas inhabited by Belarusian communities was restored. With the exception of few protests, these activities were not opposed by the Belarusians. Most of them were happy with the general improvement in mate-

rial status and individual career opportunities.

The nationwide awakening of Poles in 1980 mobilized Belarusians as well. Belarusians employed at great work establishments in Białystok initially joined the 'Solidarity'. With time, however, they became more and more disturbed by the intensifying patriotic and religious tendencies among Poles and allusions to the tradition of the Second Republic of Poland. Orthodox Belarusians perceived the patriotism and Catholicism of Polish people as nationalism, and they associated the pre-war period with poverty and oppression. The memories of dark post-war times, with the ethnic cleansing of the Belarusian nation carried out by Polish anti-communist underground, also began to come back.

**Nevertheless, there were some people contesting the reality of the Polish People's Republic in the Belarusian intelligentsia. The basic motivation for their activity was the need to oppose the communist practice of national eradication of Belarusians. That awakening was undoubtedly a reflection of moods of the Polish intelligentsia, who perceived their situation in a similar way. Clearly, the most outstanding representative of that group of Belarusian intelligentsia was writer Sokrat Janowicz.**

The activists associated with Janowicz established the Association for the Protection of Belarusian Relics and Development of Belarusian Material Culture

in Poland, as an organization independent of the Belarusian Social and Cultural Association, which had the authority-given monopoly for activity in the Belarusian minority. The ferment in the Polish circle also caused the awakening of Belarusian students, who established the Belarusian Student Association in 1981. Both associations were in the registration stage when the martial law was introduced, and then, the authorities refused to register them.

Yet, the martial law did not stop the new Belarusian movement. Sokrat Janowicz founded the Independent Belarusian Publishing House, which in the years 1982–1986 published four anthologies of ‘Białoruskich Dokumentów’ [‘Belarusian Documents’], the ‘Biełaruski Archiŭny Sszytak’ [‘Belarussian Historical Notebook’] with similar content, and several brochures. Unable to form an independent organization, Belarusian students continued their activity in the Council of Culture of National Minority Students at the Polish Students’ Association, and they began to legally publish their journal ‘Sustreczy’ [‘Meetings’]. Apart from that, they published illegally, so as to promote the Belarusian national tradition. The underground activity of Belarusian students was possible thanks to the kindness of Polish opposition organizations. In general, about 50 titles of various magazines, brochures, songbooks and greeting cards were published beyond the reach of censorship, with the total circulation of approx. 20 thousand copies. Thus, the Belarusian national minority, although criticized for passivity and the tendency to assimilate, was the only minority in Poland to develop anti-communist opposition.

The Belarusian circle in Poland also had some contacts with the Belarusian

emigration in the West, receiving nationally-oriented literature from there and imitating their ways of manifesting Belarusian patriotism.

Students also motivated their older mentors to act. Under the influence of events in Poland in February 1989, the representatives of that circle formed an informal Belarusian Club led by historian and journalist Jerzy Turonek, who was living in Warsaw. The club was to serve as the center of shaping the Belarusian political thought. Most of its members were activists from the Belarusian Student Association, who later initiated the formation of the majority of Belarusian national institutions functioning in the 3rd Republic of Poland.

That circle actually established contacts with the national opposition in Belarus. Turonek had worked with Alyaksey Kauka from Moscow before and transferred to the West i.a., his ‘Letter to a Russian Friend’. Along with Gorbachev’s perestroika, Belarusian national movement emerged in Belarus and the first trans-border contacts were established.

Constant exchange of thoughts between the Belarusian opposition in Polish People’s Republic and the Byelorussian SSR was organized by Turonek, who began to publish the ‘Kontakt’ [‘Contact’] journal. It was the first socio-political periodical that dealt with general Belarusian subjects, since all the previous magazines had mostly discussed the situation of Belarusians in Poland, especially in Białystok region. The need to publish this kind of magazine resulted from the acceleration of transformations in Belarus. In October 1988, the Organizational Committee of the Belarusian Popular

Front 'Adradżeńnie' ['Rebirth'] (BPF) was formed under the leadership of Zianon Pazniak. The first issue of 'Kontakt' was published in January 1989. The journal was issued and distributed both in Poland and in Belarus. Until July 1990, four issues had been published. The main aim of the magazine was to promote Belarusian national revival and to build a sovereign Belarus, and in the most optimistic variant, to regain independence. At the time, it played an important part in the formation of Belarusian socio-political thought.

At the same time, the political events in Poland in 1989 forced the Belarusian Club to active participation in them. Before the June election, a Belarusian Election Committee was formed, which initiated a few years of tempestuous political activity whose most outstanding manifestation was the participation in all the parliamentary and local government elections that took place in Poland in the late 20th century. In February 1990, the founding congress of a Belarusian party called 'Belarusian Democratic Union' (BDU) took place. The party soon signed a collaboration agreement with the BPF 'Adradżeńnie'. In October 1990, a conference of these two organizations was held in Białowieża. During the conference, the political and economic situation of Soviet Belarus and the potential ways toward independence were analyzed.

**Sadly, some Polish politicians considered that event to be an anti-state coup, as they associated it with the failed visit of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Krzysztof Skubiszewski in Minsk. That failure was connected with Pazniak's demand to consider the Białystok region as 'ethnically Belarusian land'.**

However, the BDU's representatives had managed to convince the politician at least not to raise the issue of changing the Polish-Belarusian border. On the other hand, in the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, nationalistic Russian deputy, 'Black Colonel' Viktor Alksnis accused the participants of the convention in Białowieża of preparing the dissolution of the USSR (which was actually true).

The anti-Belarusian campaign initiated in the late 1990 after the Białowieża conference did not intimidate the BDU activists, who organized another conference in Białowieża one year later for politicians from Belarus and Belarusian activists from Western countries. Still, the accusations of nationalism repeated in the media against the independent Belarusian circle from the BDU contributed to the failure of the Belarusian Election Committee in the parliamentary election in October 1991, and to the local government officials from the Belarusian communes of Białystok region breaking all contacts with the party. It may be said that when interfering in international political games, the BDU activists put too much at stake and had to pay the price.

Yet, it did not discourage them from collaborating with the BPF, which they considered the only organization to be fighting for national revival. Unfortunately, they also had to look helplessly as the Front activists more and more often ignored their advice. When I spoke at the session of the BPF convention, advising them to act upon the proposal of Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich to let the Front take over the ministries of education and culture (which, as some now claim, he did not really mean), I was told informally that the only reason I was not regarded as a traitor was because

I came from Białystok and did not know the situation. The greatest failure, however, was the consultations before the first presidential election in Belarus in 1994. Activists from Białystok advised those from Minsk to put forth the candidature of a young, handsome, Orthodox candidate, because most Belarusians identify Catholics with Poles. The reply was that the Belarusian society was Sovietized and non-religious, and hence, the division into the Orthodox and Catholics was unimportant everywhere except the Białystok backwater. As we all unfortunately know, the Belarusian nation elected a young, handsome, Orthodox atheist. Anyway, the activists of the BPF could not propose anyone except Zianon Pazniak.

**Soon after the election, representatives of Lukashenko's closest circle came to Białystok. They made a very good impression: they were young, elegant, and – most importantly – they assured everyone that the president was a sincere Belarusian.**

They probably did believe that, but the reality quickly proved them false and the BDU still supported the opposition, this time, anti-Lukashenko opposition. The bodies of the Belarusian Social and Cultural Association (in particular, its leader Jan Syczewski), who had collaborated before with structures subjected to Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, then began to actively support president Lukashenko and have been cooperating with his regime ever since.

Aware of their own political weakness, before the election in the fall 1997, the management of the BDU allied with the Labour United. The aftermath of the

election was the establishment of the Poland-Belarus Civic Education Center in the following year. A former deputy from Labour United, Artur Smółko (at the moment serving as the security advisor to the Prime Minister) became its president, and Oleg Łatyszonek, its vice-president. With time, they were replaced by Marcin Rębacz and Eugeniusz Wappa, respectively. The Center worked actively to overcome the division between the two national groups in Białystok region. It also collaborated, at least as actively, with Belarusian democratic opposition in Belarus. The Center became an actual forum of exchange of thoughts between the leaders of opposition in Belarus and the Polish governmental circles. In addition, it supported the development of independent press in Belarus, organizing courses for journalists. One of the manifestations of that activity was that the Belarusian Association in the Republic of Poland and journalists from *Radio 101,2* from Minsk (liquidated by the Belarusian authorities) established *Radio Racja* in 1998, mainly designed to be the radio for the Belarusian national minority but also for the listeners in Belarus. A similar role was to be played by the Białystok TVP Branch, established to carry out the same mission.

The election in the fall 2001 was won by the Democratic Left Alliance [SLD]. The Belarusian policy of that party was to differ from that of the previously ruling Solidarity Electoral Action [AWS], and the Białystok region circle supporting Belarusian opposition was considered as its local political rival, because SLD largely won in the province thanks to Belarusian votes. First of all, the financing for *Radio Racja* was withheld, so it





had to stop broadcasting in October 2002. At the Białystok TVP Branch, after a huge dispute, one weekly program for the Belarusian minority was retained. Broadcasting for viewers in Belarus was out of the question. The Poland-Belarus Civic Education Center practically suspended its activity. Furthermore, at the University of Białystok, the Senate's resolution on opening the Institute of Belarusian Studies was put aside.

But the heaviest blow to that circle hit in the middle of 2003. The Białystok Regional Branch of the Supreme Audit Office carried out an apparently routine control of the Program Council of the Belarusian weekly 'Niwa' ['Subject'], which resulted in sending to the prosecutor's office a notification of a crime committed by the Management Board of the Council with Eugeniusz Mironowicz as the leader. The prosecutor's office found them to be acting as an organized criminal group, which was punishable by an eight-year imprisonment sentence. Ultimately, ten members of two terms of the Management Board (the leaders of Belarusian organizations originating from anti-communist opposition) and an accountant were brought to court. Their process was protested by nearly all the Belarusian organizations (except the Belarusian Social and Cultural Association), as well as many circles from the Republic of Belarus and Belarusian diaspora all over the world. The only Polish politician who displayed a kind attitude to people engaged in the 'Niwa' case was senator Zbigniew Romaszewski.

In May 2006, in the political situation that had changed after the victory of right wing opposition in the election of September 2005, the court acquitted all the defendants from the charges

made by the Supreme Audit Office and the prosecutor's office. In February 2006, the Belarusian *Radio Račja* was also reactivated and broadcast its first programs before the 2006 presidential election in Belarus.

The 'Niwa process' is a clear dividing line in the history of the Belarusian national movement in Poland. As a result of that process, the circle that had been politically active from the early 1980s – first, working in anti-communist underground, and then, taking part in elections and supporting Belarusian democratic opposition – finally stopped their political activity. Since then, no candidate from that circle has run for any election. The activists who still have the desire to work do so in the areas of culture, education or science. The final end of collaboration of Belarusians from Białystok with the Belarusian opposition was the effect of the pogrom of the opposition in December 2010. Contacts with political refugees from Belarus who found asylum in Poland were also minimal (mostly through the *Radio Račja* radio station).

**The Belarusian revolution of 2020 completely surprised the Belarusian circle in Białystok. The local activists knew the former opposition members for a long time, even over 20 years. Therefore, in the opinion of this circle, the elections in Belarus ended at the moment of imprisonment of Mikola Statkevich and Paval Sieviaryniec.**

In their view, the newly proposed opposition candidates for the presidential election were clearly protégés of the Kremlin (and they are still not trusted). The only hope is the revival of the Belarusian nation represented by the white-red-white flag. However, the actions of

protest against repressions were organized here by 'new' Belarusians: economic immigrants from Belarus, who experienced national awakening as a result of the revolution. Although the 'locals' participated in the demonstrations in large numbers, they tended to do so individually. The local Belarusian Historical Society issued their declarations twice, demanding the liberation of the arrested historians. The Belarusian Association in the Republic of Poland did not even take an official stance regarding the repressions. The only positive outcome of the recent events is the establishment of contact and cooperation between the 'old' and 'new' Belarusian circles in Białystok.

Neither provincial nor municipal authorities display any interest in creating a Belarusian center that would be a kind of showroom for Belarus. The slogan 'Białystok is West Berlin of the 21st century', uttered recently in this context by a former politician who used to be engaged in Belarusian issues and now works as an expert and journalist, Jerzy Marek Nowakowski, appears as a grim joke.

To sum up, we may say that the role of Belarusians from Poland was important for the opposition in Belarus at the turn of the 1990s. That role was largely the effect of the function of mediator in contacts between Belarus and the West, between Belarusian opposition and emigration activists, served by the Białystok region. The experience Belarusian activists had in political activity, both underground and legal, was also

very useful for the political opposition in Belarus, which was only in its infancy at the time. The collaboration was only revived in the second half of the 1990s thanks to the activity of the Poland-Belarus Civic Education Center, which was the forum of meetings for Belarusian opposition and Polish politicians. In the current century, Białystok does not play virtually any role in the political life in Belarus any more, which results both from the weakening of the local Belarusian movement and from the Belarusian opposition's opening to the broad international arena.

References:

P. Chomik, H. Głogowska, S. Iwaniuk, O. Łatyszonek, E. Mironowicz, Z. Misiuk, H. Siemianczuk, *Historia Białorusinów Podlasia*, Białystok 2016.

W. Choruży, *Białoruski drugi obieg 1980–1991*, Białystok 1994.

2. S. Iwaniuk, E. Wappa, *Białoruski ruch studencki w Polsce 1981–1992*, Białystok 1995.

O. Łatyszonek, E. Mironowicz, *Historia Białorusi od połowy XVIII do końca XX wieku*, Białystok [2002].

E. Mironowicz, *Polityka zagraniczna Białorusi 1990–2010*, Białystok 2011.

A. Латышонак, Я. Мірановіч, . . .  
., Беласток-Вільня  
2010.



# МЫ – БЕЛАРУСЫ

**Ryszard Radzik**  
(The Maria Grzegorzewska University)

## **Who Are Belarusians** (Identity Aspects)

The Belarusian state created in 1991 was the first state of Belarusians ever that matched their ethnic boundaries. True, for a few centuries in the Middle Ages, the Principality of Polotsk used to exist on lands nowadays referred to as 'Belarusian', which is regarded by many contemporary Belarusians as their first political organism, later absorbed by Lithuania. With time, the Belarusian lands became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which until the Union of Lublin of 1569 had included Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian lands, where the vast majority of inhabitants were Slavs. Following three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Belarusian lands became part of the Russian Empire, and then, its Soviet continuation. Especially from the mid-17th century, Belarusian elites were undergoing Polonization, and those in Russia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Sovietization. As a result of the Bolshevik Revolution (and later, Stalinist practices), they were completely or almost completely eliminated: they emigrated or were murdered. The Belarusian society became a community of peasants. After World War II, they moved to towns in large numbers, forming there new elites of Soviet officials and white-collar workers, very few of whom were nationally Belarusian.

Independence of Belarus was developing strenuously and was approached

with indifference by the majority of the society. Independence was not something people fought for, or even dreamt of. A renowned scholar dealing with Belarus, Eugeniusz Mironowicz, writes about it as follows:

'On July 27, 1990, with a narrow majority of votes, the Supreme Soviet issued the "Declaration of the State Sovereignty of BSSR" as part of the Soviet Federation. That step was mainly motivated by the external situation, especially the forcing of sovereignty by Russia. Although the decision was not the result of belief or will of the majority of deputies, it opened Belarus the way to real independence, although it was not what the Belarusian society wanted'<sup>1</sup>.

**On March 17, 1991, a referendum was carried out in Belarus (just like in other republics of the USSR, with the exception of the Baltic republics, Armenia, Georgia and Moldova), where almost 83% residents chose to remain part of the USSR<sup>2</sup>.**

Right after the collapse of the USSR, in December 1991, according to a sociological poll, 69% respondents supported Belarus' independence and the agreement to become part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) 10% of the respondents were against. However, in February 1992, 52.6% respondents approached negatively Belarus' leaving of the USSR, while 30.7% ap-

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Mironowicz, *Białoruś*, Warszawa 2007, p. 293.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

proved of it<sup>3</sup>. This data proves the high volatility of Belarusians' attitudes to the newly gained independence.

A survey important from the point of view of identity issues was carried out in March 1991 (i.e., in the period of political thaw conducive to doing relatively reliable research) by the Soviet WCIOM (

). In that survey, as many as 69% Belarusians considered themselves to be the citizens of the USSR (predominantly identifying themselves with that state), while 24% Belarusians chose to identify with their own republic (for comparison, 63% Russians in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) identified themselves with the USSR, and 25% with their own republic, whereas in the case of Estonians, 3% identified themselves with the Soviet Union and 97% with Estonia) Among Ukrainians, this proportion was 42% identifying with the USSR vs 46% identifying themselves with their own republic<sup>4</sup>. On the basis of that study, we could hypothesize that Belarusians were the most Sovietized titular nation in the USSR and had the least developed national identity.

While in the USSR, most Belarusians were thinking (and to some extent, they are still thinking) in the categories of the 'triune Russian nation' or the 'All-Russian nation', linking Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians as

one community. This sense of community has been clearly weakening among Ukrainians since the last Maidan.

Although Belarusians by no means consider themselves to be Russians (sometimes they even distance themselves from Russians, exposing their negative traits<sup>5</sup>), they are quite strongly rooted in the Russian culture, also in terms of their emotional approach, system of values, sense of homeliness and closeness, shared (in their opinion) history of the recent centuries, and the language of the vast majority of residents.

In 1991 (when Belarus gained independence) and 1994 (when Alexander Lukashenko was elected President), part of Belarusian elites attempted to build a national, though not nationalistic, Belarus, which would be democratic and not only formally independent. The Belarusian language was introduced to schools (not only rural ones, as it was in the USSR) and the public life, and it was made the only state language. The Soviet emblem and flag were replaced with ones alluding to the pre-Soviet tradition. After the election of Alexander Lukashenko and the 1995 referendum, in compliance with the referendum results, symbols similar to the Soviet ones and the domination of the Russian language were restored. Once again in the 20th century, most Belarusians were unable to choose the national option, politically and culturally independent from Russia. The reasons for that were

<sup>3</sup> И. Бугрова, М

Курта, Минск 2003, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Л.Г. Титаренко,

, Минск 2006, p. 76 (Table 3.3).

<sup>5</sup>

, BISS, SA#01/2010RU, 1 июня 2010, pp. 4–5

related to the distant past as well as the strong Sovietization of the society within the nearly seven decades of being part of the USSR.

Sovietism was manifested on two planes. First, it systematically reduced the liberation ambitions, the pro-social, individual activism and non-conformism (being the source of success of Western societies) and promoted subjection to state-controlled collective, ensuring the sense of security and a minimum of financial security. The level of aspirations of Belarusians in the 1990s largely resulted from the ideals of the traditional peasant ethnic group.

Another plane on which Belarusian Sovietism was manifested was slightly different.

**Doubtless under the influence of Russians, Belarusians rejected the 'upper class' elite culture with its idea of national pride and the ability to display individual activism (which would be important in a society that not so long ago was still a class society, with peasants being in a state of semi-slavery for a very long time), the sense of freedom, and the honor with its roots in the knightly ethos. Belarusianness was reduced to a peasant state and the popular culture.**

Research on the local folklore and dialects at Belarusian universities was supported by the authorities and had

a much higher level than the non-privileged and strongly idealized Belarusian historiography, treating Belarus in regional categories and mostly focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, i.e., the period when the Belarusian lands belonged to Russia / the USSR.

But Belarusians were gradually getting used to having their own state, accepting the fact of its formation. While in the early 1990s they wanted to return to the USSR, within the next few years they abandoned that view. What is interesting, a study from 1996 shows that almost two-thirds of Belarusians at the same time supported the independence of Belarus and its union with Russia<sup>6</sup>. That contradiction resulted from the fact that for Belarusians, a union with Russia at least to some extent resembled the reality of the USSR, when Belarus had formally been a subject of international law as a member of the United Nations (UN). At that time, it had the characteristics of a separate state entity and was a component of a state shared with Russia, the Soviet Union. The study revealed that Belarusians wanted to draw some economic profits from the ties with Russia. Most of them rejected (probably under the influence of the Chechen War) the possibility to create a shared army, and like in the Soviet Belarus, wanted to retain separate state structures, i.e., the President (formerly, the Secretary of the Communist Party of Byelorussia), the government, and the parliament. The study repeated in 2002 demonstrated decreasing approval of renouncing the signs of their sov-

---

<sup>6</sup> "Новости НИСЭПИ", выпуск 1, 1996, p.12. The main research institution in Belarus, doing research representative for the entire Belarusian society, was the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (ИИСПС [НИСЭПИ]), functioning from the early 1990s until its forced closure in 2006. It published its quarterly newsletters from 1996 to 2016, in total, 80 issues of quite lengthy newsletters.

ereignty combined with the still clear desire to seek economic profits in the union with Russia, even if it caused the risk of limiting their independence<sup>7</sup>. In comparison to their western neighbors, the Belarusian society treated the state in a more instrumental way, recognizing fewer autotelic values.

Within the 26 years of rule of President Lukashenko, further Russification of the country occurred in cultural, especially linguistic terms and in the dominance of the Russian mass media. Belarus is not Russia, but culturally, not to mention the language, it is closer to Russia than to Western Europe; the same refers to its political culture. Belarusians differ from Russians in the absence of imperial and nationalistic inclinations in their culture, less stress on high culture, and lower degree of nationalization. Unlike Russians, the Belarusian ethnos is clearly territory-based, at least in the awareness of residents of the republic. Furthermore, Belarusians have rather poorly developed state, cultural and national tradition in the power elites; thus, both in the society and its elites there are still clear remnants of attitudes of subjection to the 'elder brother'.

**For many years, when Belarusians were asked whether they felt rather Europeans or Soviet people, they chose Sovietness. Only in the survey from June 2012 did a relative majority of Belarusians (47.2%) regard themselves as Europeans and 45.6% as Soviet people<sup>8</sup>.**

When asked whether they felt closer to Russians or to Europeans in 2010, 2011 and 2012, between 68.0% and 74.5% Belarusians chose the Russianness<sup>9</sup>. Other studies are presented in the following table 1<sup>10</sup>:

The results of the surveys show that Belarusians' attitude remained unchanged at least until 2016: they believed they were part of a larger national (Rus') entirety, which must obviously weaken their emancipation inclinations (not only in the sense of nationality and independence) regarding their eastern neighbor, considered as potential support in the new, difficult reality after the collapse of the USSR. Relations with Russia and the Russian nationality, knowledge of that reality resulting from regularly watching Russian TV (sometimes less than the Belarusian reality, treated as provincial) often cause the sense of subordination, treating Vladimir Putin as an authority more important than Lukashenko. Obviously, this approach does not occur in the whole Belarusian society, but it is shared by a considerable part of Belarusians. It results in the common ambiguous attitude to the independence of their own state as a value perceived largely in social categories. Since this understanding of Belarusian nationality (as part of the triune nation) is also typical of President Lukashenko (who values power for the sake of power and treats his function paternalistically), his long rule has never promoted the Belarusian identity understood subjectively, nationally (which he was afraid of).

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, выпуск 2, 2002, p. 27 (Table 44).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, выпуск 2, 2012, p. 23 (Table 44).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, выпуск 2, 2012, p. 23 (Table 45).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, выпуск 1, 2016, p. 22 (Table 49).



Table 1.

'Are Belarusians, Russians ( ) and Ukrainians different nations ( ) or three branches of the same nation ( )?'

	2006 August	2009 December	2015 March	2016 March
Three branches of the same nation	65.7	66.5	66.6	65.8
Different nations	28.3	30.6	27.1	28.6
No answer / I don't know	6.0	2.9	6.3	5.6

The data in Table no. 1 corresponds to the results of research done by the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, demonstrating that between 2002 and 2008, the proportion of people living in Belarus who found it hard to specify their nationality grew from 15.1% to 25.7%. It was the same with the term 'ja – russkij' ['I'm Rus']. Within the same period, the proportion of people in Belarus identifying themselves this way grew from 29.9% to 46.6%<sup>11</sup>. Obviously, it is possible to feel both Rus' and Belarusian. Then, being a Belarusian is part of a wider concept of being Rus'. Hypothetically, the strength of Belarusian identity may be greater than that of Rus' identity (and possibly, evolve in this direction). Although it is growing, however, this phenomenon does not seem to be dominant among those who opted for the Rus' identity in the years of the surveys.

In the years 1999–2016, the IISEPS asked the respondents about the potential unification of Belarus and Russia. In the studied period of seventeen years, between 23.9% and 57.5% respondents were for the unification, and between 23.8% and 58.4%, against. The unification tendencies periodically prevailed until 2008. From the following year onwards, the tendency of opposing the unification of the two countries was always dominant. It did not mean, however, that Belarusians were ready to let their state be fully absorbed by Russia as another governorate. Basically, they saw their place in the Russian Federation but with clear autonomy<sup>12</sup>.

Natalia Leshchenko, a Belarusian political scientist, stated just before the presidential election in December 2010: 'The lack of national identity in Belarus is almost physically painful'<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Л.И. Науменко,

200 (Table П.2).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, выпуск 4, 2007, p. 7 (Table 5).

<sup>13</sup> Н. Лещенко, 'Полит.ру', <http://polit.ru/article/2010/12/17/belarus/>; the author is working for the London Institute for State Ideologies.



The OMON units during post-election protests, Minsk, Belarus, November 2020, Photo: Homoatrox



**In Belarus there are active national circles, but they are far from prevailing. The identity of Belarusians has a clear negative character. Our eastern neighbors know much better who they are not (especially in relation to the West) than who they are, what makes them unique and what they have in common, although quite a positive self-stereotype of a Belarusian has already developed (but has not yet been supplemented with national contexts and emotions).**

Grigory Ioffe observed in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century that any concept of Belarusian identity was more specific in stressing who Belarusians were or were not with regard to something out of Belarus (Russia or Europe) than in defining who they themselves were. In that regard, each concept is blurry and obscure<sup>14</sup>. Well-known Belarusian intellectual Valancin Akudovich claims: 'Unless we cut the cord connecting us to Russia, we will never become a fully-fledged nation'<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, Nelly Bekus expressed the opinion that Russia is in a way 'inside' Belarus, so any political parties and movements that propose the anti-Russian geopolitical strategy for Belarus are perceived as 'foreign' and imposed by the West, so the formation of the Belarusian nation in opposition to the Russian identity is not completely right<sup>16</sup>. These determinants clearly limit the development of a strong Belarusian nation-for-

mation process. The following table 2<sup>17</sup> shows how Belarusians chose between two options, the economic situation and independence, within a decade:

The results of the surveys clearly show that Belarusians value much more the level of daily living in material terms and the possibility of improvement than the country's independence (at least, they did until 2015), which is not surprising in the context of the above-mentioned facts.

Detailed data from March 2013 shows that younger people with better education care more about the improvement of the economic situation than do older ones and those with poorer education. For many years, Belarusians did not react *en masse* to limiting their freedom, the Russification of the country, authoritarian inclinations of authorities, or repressions affecting the protesting groups of national opposition. It was naturally expected that an economic crisis would be an important factor causing mass protests.

The Belarusian society, like any other society, is not uniform as regards their political attitudes. Reflections on divisions in the political, ideological and identity contexts have been stimulated for years, though their intensity is not high. Years ago, the concept of so-called 'three national projects' was developed. A significant initiator and promoter of

---

<sup>14</sup> G. Ioffe, *Długotrwałe poszukiwanie białoruskiej tożsamości*, [in:] *Tożsamości zbiorowe Białorusinów*, ed. R. Radzik, Lublin 2012, p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> В. Акудович, "Белорусский партизан", 7 сентября 2010 г., <http://www.belaruspartisan.org/bp-forte/?page=100&backPage=13&news=67138&newsPage=0>, as cited in: G. Ioffe, *Długotrwałe poszukiwanie...*, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> N. Bekus, *Naród białoruski jako idea i kategoria praktyki społecznej. Paradoksy rozwoju postkomunistycznego*, [in:] *Tożsamości zbiorowe Białorusinów*, ed. R. Radzik, Lublin 2012, p. 337

<sup>17</sup> "Новости НИСЭПИ", выпуск 1, 2015, p. 14 (Table 27); выпуск 1, 2013, p. 32 (Table 7.1).

Table 2

'What is more important, improvement of the economic situation in Belarus or the state's independence?'

	2006 August	2007 September	2010 June	2013 March	2015 March
Improvement of the economic situation	48.5	59.4	62.3	65.2	58.8
State's independence	41.9	32.2	30.4	29.3	33.9
No answer / I don't know	9.9	8.4	7.3	5.5	7.3

the concept was a Belarusian and Lithuanian journalist Vadim Vileita<sup>18</sup>. He identified three orientations that can be described as 'identity, political and ideological': the first, national one, in his opinion is represented by 18–28% of the society (similar to the national orientations in Central Europe), the second, *homo sovieticus* by 25–35%, and the third, Western-Russian, by 33–43% of the residents of Belarus. The second and third orientations are clearly pro-Russian, which in his opinion is the right attitude.

In Polish literature we can find a version of this vision modified by Grigory Ioffe, an American scholar born in Moscow<sup>19</sup>. He rightly observes that the national ('nativist') project is pro-Western,

distances itself from the Russian identity and the current (actually, both in the past and in the present) state authorities, copying the patterns of emergence of cultural nations. It is a minority project (orientation), in my opinion even gradually weakening within the last two decades. It promotes the vision of independent Belarus based on a Westernist vision of the nation. The second (according to Vileita, or third according to Ioffe) project is a creole one (alluding to the concept by Mykola Riabchuk), Soviet-Belarusian (Vileita) and based on Lukashenko's Russian-speaking electorate, rural, and generally poorly educated. The third project is liberal/pro-Russian, rather anational and ahistoric<sup>20</sup>. The separateness of Belarusians is the most evident in the first project,

<sup>18</sup> В. Вiлейта, "Wider Europe Review" summer 2005, vol. 2, No. 3; <http://review.w-europe.org/5/3.html>

<sup>19</sup> G. Ioffe, *Długotrwałe poszukiwanie...*, pp. 97–100;

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 99–100.

and the least, in the third one. Obviously, this translates into the degree of importance attached to independence. In the case of the first project, it is assumed that 1/5 or even 1/4 of the society may be nationalized in favorable conditions, which does not mean that they already have a fully developed national identity. Clearly national attitudes are displayed by the elites of that project.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the considerations by Oleg Manaev and Yuri Drakochrust based on many years of research carried out by the IISEPS. They claimed almost a decade ago that the older generation displayed greater attachment to their country (as it is) and felt close to the Russian culture (in a broad sense, as a lifestyle and as a social system). The younger generation, to the contrary, presented much less attachment to the current Belarus and felt close to the European culture<sup>21</sup>.

**I would add that currently, the younger generation does not really distance itself strongly from the Russian culture but is largely practical. They do not focus on ideology or politics but on individually understood benefits, much more than people focused on liberties in the past.**

They were raised in independent (at least formally) Belarus, have frequent contacts with the external world and their attitude to the West and the European Union differs from that of the generation of their parents or grand-

parents, strongly socialized in the Soviet reality and treating it with sentiment. Their attitude, however, is not identical to that of Poles, who feel they are part of the Western civilization. More or less from the beginning of the new millennium, Belarus has been overcoming the economic crisis of the period of the falling USSR and the first years of independence. This is evident for external observers, especially in Minsk. The capital city has begun to change. There are new, Western cars, quite good cafés, restaurants, and recently, also hotels. The class of people has emerged who are relatively wealthy. In democratic countries, such people make the middle class, supporting political and economic liberties (ownership and stable law protecting individuals).

After the IISEPS discontinued its research in 2016, the studies are still carried out by Andrej Wardamacki, who leads the Belarusian Analytical Laboratory from Poland. The survey results show that Belarusians' attitude to the Eastern neighbor has been changing in recent years in some aspects. In the IISEPS surveys carried out in the years 2008–2016, Belarusians asked to choose between uniting with Russia and joining the European Union only twice opted for the European Union (2012–2013). In 2016, 42.0% chose Russia, and 34.0, the European Union<sup>22</sup>. In the survey done by Wardamacki in January 2018, 63.9% opted for Russia and 20.2% for the European Union, but in August 2019, 54.5% were for Russia and 25.0%

<sup>21</sup> O. Manajew, J. Drakochrust, *Właściwości współczesnej tożsamości białoruskiej*, [in:] *Tożsamości zbiorowe Białorusinów*, ed. R. Radzik, Lublin 2012, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> “Новости НИСЭПИ”, выпуск 2, 2016, p. 19 (Table 38)

for the European Union<sup>23</sup>. The results of those studies in the period of Belarus' independence fluctuate and depend on the economic and political situation and relations with Russia. Interestingly, Belarusians asked in the years 2008–2016 whether they were for or against a unification with Russia always voted against. When asked about uniting with the European Union, they were also most often against, except the years 2011–2013<sup>24</sup>. It can be concluded, not only on the basis of these studies, that Belarusians approach with some reservation both the West and Russia. Often they do not see themselves on any side, although culturally they feel closer to Russians.

His studies, mostly the 2019 surveys, show that the increased distance to Russia is caused i.e., by the growing impact of Belarusian non-state mass media on part of the Belarusian society, as well as the reflections and assessment of the processes perceived by an average Belarusian as occurring at the level of political and state elites. Very few Belarusians opt for incorporating Belarus in Russia as its subordinate component – an object, not a subject with equal rights. In the potential choice between the European Union and Russia (including various options of the union with the eastern neighbor), only young people aged 18–34 choose Europe. Research on the motivation for relationships with Russianness (Russians, Russia) demonstrates that mental relations (in terms of character and views) are more im-

portant than the economic and security reasons. The most popular answers to the question of why they are 'for Russia' refer to the shared Slavic values ('Russians are like us'), linguistic similarities, and shared history ('we lived together in the Soviet Union'). World War II ('the Great Patriotic War') was considered as less important than living together in the Soviet Union. Wardamacki believes that the positive approach to Russia is actually a media phenomenon, not only the result of historical factors and the matter of values. Media can change the geopolitical orientations of Belarusians by 10% within a month.

Negative motivations concerning Russia and Europe are similar in both cases: the fear of potential loss of independence, the dictate of either Moscow or Brussels. We can be 'either a whipping boy for Russia or a working girl for Brussels'.

Both sides are perceived as potential liquidators of Belarusian enterprises. In Belarusians' eyes, if Europe comes to Belarus, it will come with its factories, commerce etc. The same applies to Russia. Both sides treat Belarus as an object, a red flag on a map, a bridgehead against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or against Russia. It can be added that these are the effects of Russian propaganda absorbed for many generations, plus Lukashenko's propaganda, plus some elements of realism, especially in economic terms.

---

<sup>23</sup> When referring to Wardamacki's studies (carried out on samples representative for the Belarusian society), I always use: A. Wardamacki, *Geopolityczne orientacje Białorusinów. Rosyjskie wartości czy europejski dobrobyt*, Studium Europy Wschodniej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Belarusian Analytical Workroom, Warszawa, January 9, 2020 (copied).

<sup>24</sup> "Новости НИСЭПИ", выпуск 2, 2016, p. (Tables 36 and 37).

To sum up and briefly characterize the evolution of Belarusian society within the last almost three decades, we can conclude:

First, the Belarusian society, despite the remains of Sovietism (particularly in the elderly and middle-aged generations), is more open to the world, more aware of what the world is like (in economic and political terms), which was impossible in the USSR.

Second, a new generation has grown up: people who do not remember or do not know the Soviet reality, are relatively wealthy and desire economic and political liberties, and more and more often, also civil empowerment. However, they are not the majority in Belarus yet.

Third, in the discussed period, Belarusians have been subject to further Russification, especially cultural and linguistic, which they usually did not counteract, and in a larger part, even fully approved (at the level of commonly watched Russian mass media). Mentally, they are very close to their eastern neighbor.

Fourth, after the period of development in the early 1990s, the Belarusian national movement radically decreased due to the lack of social support, and currently, unlike in Central Europe (cultural nations) or Western Europe (political nations), the Belarusian community

does not have the clearly national character. Perhaps Belarusians are a nation *in statu nascendi*. In their case, there is definitely a state community with a sense of pararegional identification of some of its members with a broader Rus' (but not Russian) community, although a growing sense of separateness is emerging in some parts of the society.

Fifth, all this is accompanied by an intensifying inclination to perceive Belarus mostly in the categories of political independence, though not only: as a state between the East and the West, between Russia and the European Union, independent, neutral, not exposed to shocks like in Russia (e.g., military) or dangers occurring in the still unknown West (e.g., economic), whose negative stereotype has been formed for centuries.

Sixth, it is a society much more diverse in terms of structure (the class system), identity and views than three decades ago. Thus, it is not as egalitarian as it used to be, which has some consequences in economic and political attitudes. Slowly and partially, it is getting accustomed to thinking, and is even creating the attitudes of opposition to the paternalistic and authoritarian socio-political system.

However, the Belarusian country and society is too unstable (as regards its structures and the level of community) to even try to predict its future.







Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International — CC BY-SA 4.0

**Wojciech Śleszyński**

(The University of Białystok, The Sybir Memorial Museum)

# **Between the Nationalist and the Communist Visions of the History.**

**The Belarusian Historical Politics 1991–2020**

The historical policy pursued by the Soviet authorities in Belarus after the end of hostilities had a radical form. The entire population underwent propaganda. The totalitarian system demanded unconditional obedience to the proclaimed slogans and rules from the citizens. In the 1960s and 70s, one of the main goals of the communist authorities was to accelerate economic development. It was associated with enormous social changes. The entire education system, including the historical one, was subordinated to the supreme goal – building the Soviet nation. The rapidly modernizing Belarusian society was offered bonds based on the communist thought instead of the national idea. The vision of history proposed by the state at that time was fully accepted by Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), overwhelming the majority of citizens. An important stage in the transformations in the Soviet system was Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power. He was aware that in a rapidly changing world (the economic crisis, an arms race), it was impossible to maintain the current state of society's ignorance of the past. The conducted historical policy was not to be changed so much as to be adapted to the requirements of new challenges. A breakthrough event, which coincided with the changes in the state-citizen relations initiated by Gorbachev, was the failure of the Cher-

nobyl nuclear power plant on April 26, 1986. The lack of information about the potential consequences of the catastrophe severely damaged faith in the all-power system of the Soviet state<sup>1</sup>. The changes began to accelerated more and more. Gorbachev, wishing only to reform communism, triggered deeply hidden dissatisfaction.

The article by Zianon Paznyak entitled ' – ' ['Kuropyaty. The Way of Death'], published in June 1988 in 'Літаратура і мастацтва' ['Literature and Art'], was found by the Belarusian society unbelievable<sup>2</sup>. Readers could learn about the scale of crimes committed in the Stalinist times. On the wave of indignation with this information, among others, the Organizing Committee of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) was established in October 1988. Although the movement in Belarus did not take on the strength of similar initiatives, such as those already in operation, for example, in Lithuania or Latvia, it was the part of the current of changes taking place throughout the territory of the Soviet Union.

In Belarus, the activity of national circles met with great social resistance.

**Belarusians were genuinely attached to the vision of history propagated in the Soviet times. A characteristic fea**

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Poczobut, *System Białoruś*, Gliwice 2013, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> З. Пазняк, Я. Шмыгалёў, – , 'Літаратура і мастацтва', 3 VI 1988, pp. 14–15.

**ture of the Belarusian collective identity was its strong connection with Russian identity. This connection, constructed back in the tsarist times and modified in the Soviet period, had features characteristic for the formation of collective identity in postcolonial states.**

The dominance of metropolises – in this case of Russia, the weakness of the local elites coming from the social lowlands, and their very strong cosmopolitanism (in this case communism) – are the features that recur also in colonial and post-colonial communities. Therefore, at the time the independence was gained in 1991, the new vision of the past was blocked in the social consciousness by the ubiquitous message of the metropolis, overlapping with Belarus' own political and economic weakness. In the new political reality (that emerged after 1991), Belarusian historians were faced with the task of re-evaluating the current Marxist-Leninist image of the past. A reference point had to be found against which a new vision of history was to be built. The supporters of the national concept of history pointed to the need to implement the assumptions of '3 de' – 'de-ideologizing', 'de-politicizing' and 'de-partizing' of historical research. The national-state concept based on these assumptions assumed that although the name 'Belarus' did not exist historically in the state nomenclature, Belarusians had their own state. The overriding goal of most of the researches undertaken was to highlight Belarusianness in every possible element of the past. This concept met with criticism in the post-Soviet scientific circles at that time. Political opponents accused it of excessive nationalism. The idea of rewriting histo-

ry was criticized. As a counter-concept, an economic and social idea based on Marxist-Leninist theory was proposed. In line with its assumptions, the Belarusian state structure appeared only after the October Revolution. Proponents of the social-economic concept did not agree with most of the interpretations made by the national circles aimed at undermining the Soviet description of history.

The dispute among intellectuals did not significantly translate into the feelings of the society, where the increasingly deteriorating economic situation remained a much more important issue. Nostalgia for 'good Soviet times' was common.

The struggle to construct a historical message gained significant importance in 1994, when the presidential campaign entered the final stage of the dispute. The final result of the presidential election clearly showed the defeat of national concepts.

The election of Alexander Lukashenko as president at the level of historical communication was a specific act of opposition to the vision of the history propagated by the national circles. In the new, post-election reality, it was contrasted with the rebuilt, strong, historical union of Eastern Slavs. The return to the 'good old Soviet times' was to be activated by bringing together Belarus and Russia. The post-Soviet rhetoric became dominant in the official public historical message. The discussion around the national symbols and the Belarusian language was one of the elements of the ongoing political struggle to strengthen the president's power<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> T. Gawin, *Polskie odrodzenie na Białorusi 1988–2005*, Białystok 2010, p. 233.

**The method of resolving political disputes proposed by the Lukashenko administration, which also included the debate on the perception of history, was in fact a choice between the model of a democratic-capitalist state and an authoritarian-post-communist state.**

As a result of the actions taken, the opposition was greatly weakened and its historical message marginalized. The vision of the history proposed by A. Lukashenko was accepted by a large number of the citizens as their own. It was easy because, similarly to the Soviet era, a noticeable element of Belarusian consciousness was the relatively low character of national conflicts. As then, also now the economic aspect remained much more important. The assumptions created from the beginning of Lukashenko's rule were based on two fundamental pillars: the conviction that Belarus played a unique role as the leader of eastern civilization and the president's lasting symbiosis with the people. According to official propaganda, Belarus was able to go through the difficult economic period only because it was blessed with the genius of Lukashenko. Just as in the years of World War II, a strong leader (Stalin) united and led the Soviet people in dramatic times, so today the president of Belarus led the state in the 'rough waters' of the post-Soviet world. In the constructed image, the president was an institution personifying the state, and the entire society was consolidated around him. The cult of personality, well-known from the Soviet times, was an important element of the state ideology, and the

glorification of the leader took various forms – from a very pushy presence in all information media, to hidden messages in school textbooks, where, admittedly, Lukashenko was not directly mentioned, but a subliminal message left no illusions about who it was really about.

The marginalization of opposition groups on the level of political activities was translated into greater flexibility of the authorities in their approach to Belarusian heritage. The assumptions of the foundations of the state ideology, constructed at the beginning of the new millennium, meant that the historical message increasingly referred to slogans previously reserved for national circles. By expanding the field of interpretation of history and by inserting the modified historical message into a new, larger idea, which the state ideology had become, a significant part of the arguments with historical content was very skillfully taken away from the opposition.

The development of the assumptions of the concept of state ideology in Belarus took place at the beginning of the 21st century, along with the increasingly intensifying conflict between Moscow and Minsk. The new ruler of the Kremlin, Vladimir Putin, viewed Russian-Belarusian relations in a much more pragmatic way than his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin<sup>4</sup>. The escalating Belarusian-Russian economic conflict at the level of the internal policy of the Belarusian state resulted in the conviction that there was a need to strengthen national-Belarusian elements in the con-

---

<sup>4</sup> *Za Białoruś. Rozmowa z Andrejem Lachowiczem, [in:] Ograbiony naród. Rozmowy z intelektualistami białoruskimi*, ed. M. Nocuń, A. Brzeziecki, Wrocław 2007, p. 176.

structured historical message. It was quite an urgent challenge, because alongside national circles in Belarus, an increasingly stronger group of supporters of the liberal-post-Soviet concept was beginning to emerge, partially in opposition to the Lukashenko administration. It was created on the basis of a combination of nostalgia for the Soviet world and acceptance of the irreversibility of the ongoing political and economic changes. Some Belarusian citizens watched the changes taking place in Moscow with great interest. During the reign of Putin, Russia gained a new, attractive character.

The Belarusian milieu of Russian-speaking democrats, which did not accept the vision of history represented by the Belarusian national groups and kept a distance from the official state vision, constructed its vision of the world mainly on the basis of the Russian media.

Swiatlana Alexievich is one of the supporters of this concept, at least partially. Being in opposition to the political message spread by the Lukashenko administration, at the same time she remained deeply immersed in the Soviet heritage in her works. Criticism of the president's actions, however, does not automatically mean acceptance of the actions of the opposition, which involved distancing from the Russian, and especially the Soviet, heritage, which, in her opinion, constitutes one of the key

pillars of the contemporary collective identity of Belarusians. Criticizing the message of the opposition circles, she claimed that: 'Belarusians do not perceive Russian language as the language of the occupier (...) People from 'Arche' and 'Nasha Niva' ['Our Subject'] do not represent the Belarusian nation. They represent their own dreams about the Belarusian nation (...) In my books, it is in Russian language that I express my love for Belarus'<sup>5</sup>. In another speech, she said: 'I remember how Paźniak exhorted Belarusians to go to the forests, to fight as partisans and to drop trains from the slope in protest against reunification with Russia. And in Russia in the Svoboda Radio I was asked then: 'What are Belarusians doing now?' I said: 'They dig potatoes and close jars, and the revolution takes place only in Paźniak's head. Thanks to that our nation will survive.'<sup>6</sup>

With real strength at his disposal, Lukashenko managed to direct the actions of the supporters of the liberal-post-Soviet concept towards an ideological dispute with national circles at the beginning of the 21st century. This allowed the state administration to effectively build its own image of the history of the Belarusian state, assuming an increasingly precise form of state ideology. In this new message, Belarus and its history became a value in itself, although the heritage of the Soviet Union and attachment to the Orthodox culture remained a key and

<sup>5</sup> As cited in: G. Ioffe, *Długotrwałe poszukiwanie białoruskiej tożsamości*, [in:] *Tożsamości zbiorowe Białorusinów*, ed. Ryszard Radzik, Lublin 2012, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> As cited in: N. Mieczkowska, *Stulecie białoruskiego odrodzenia narodowego: główne wydarzenia i trendy w historii samoświadomości językowej i sytuacji językowej na Białorusi*, [in:] *Tożsamości zbiorowe Białorusinów*, ed. Ryszard Radzik, Lublin 2012, p. 155.



indisputable part of it. The Belarusian authorities realized that despite the strengthening of national accents at the level of historical transmission, one cannot cut oneself off from the common Belarusian-Russian history. It was also necessary to take into account citizens' attachment to a general, lasting picture of history.

By expanding the field of interpretation of history and inserting the modified historical message into a new, larger idea, which the state ideology had become, Lukashenka's administration very skillfully knocked out a large part of the arguments with historical content from the opposition. National circles were presented as groups unable to change, persisting with their Russophobia, unacceptable by the majority of Belarusian society. Lukashenko turned out to be much more modern against their background. Without questioning the historical links with the Orthodox-Ruthenian heritage, he did not cut off from the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the times of the First Republic neither. In the opinion of the majority of society, the national circles were not capable of such openness towards eastern heritage of Belarus<sup>7</sup>.

Sticking to the slogan of 'Belarusization', also on the level of promoting the Belarusian language, has turned out to be a politically ineffective way. The supporters of national circles did not notice that the majority of Belarusian society noticed the superiority of the Western system on the economic level, which, however, did not have to translate directly into the willingness to share the

vision of national heritage with the Belarusian language as its key element.

Some, even if they did not identify themselves with all the activities of Lukashenko, were often closer to the assumptions of the liberal-post-Soviet concept than the national-state tone.

Carrying out a simple, unambiguous division of the Belarusian society into supporters of particular concepts is very difficult, and often even impossible. It is because a part of Belarusian society is still a kind of variant of the protonation, where economic criteria prevail over national values<sup>8</sup>. This was skillfully used by the Lukashenko state administration, which successfully limited the role of the opposition in many spheres of political and social life, including the level of historical communication.

In such a description of history, the opposition, pushed to the margins of political life, was also deprived of any real influence on shaping the vision of the past among the majority of the country's inhabitants. It was not able to effectively compete with the entire state-owned industry: schools, TV, press, museums, outdoor performances, additionally supported by the Russian media.

The state authorities successfully pushed the opposition away from the mainstream historical description, adapting selected elements of the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the times of the First Republic to their vision of history. Thanks to this, it was the Belarusian state and the ad-

---

<sup>7</sup> П. Рудкоўскі,

, 'Arche' 2006, No. 3, pp. 85–95.

<sup>8</sup> J. Waszkiewicz, *Co to jest sowieckość?*, 'Studia Białorutenistyczne' 2008, No. 2, p. 92.



ministration that represented it that became the main depository of a significant part of the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, for example by initiating and continuing the state project to rebuild palaces and castles. These activities were in line with the results of sociological research showing that in 2012 44.8% of the population considered the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as the first historical Belarusian statehood<sup>9</sup>. The authorities eagerly emphasized the contribution of Belarusian culture and political thought to the development of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania<sup>10</sup>. By broadening the image of the Russian-Soviet world with Belarusian-national elements, a more universal character was obtained.

**Lukashenka's administration correctly noticed that the old value system from the Soviet period had already been significantly eroded and had to be adapted to the new times and challenges. Thanks to this, it was possible to create an eclectic picture of history, where Russian, Soviet, Polish and Lithuanian heroes appear side by side.**

At first glance, it may not seem logical, but on closer reflection it shows that in such a complicated history, the president remains the only guarantor of the state's continuity. Lukashenko and his administration managed to convince a significant part of the citizens that only he personally is able to guarantee the stability of the Belarusian state.

As the experience of the first years of the 21st century has shown, having the canon of unquestionable heritage on the basis of which the historical message was built, the Lukashenko administration gained, depending on the changing political needs, the possibility of strengthening the relationship with the Eastern heritage, and sometimes with the Western one. It gave a lot of freedom of maneuver and allowed, depending on the current political needs, often almost imperceptibly for citizens, to place accents in the conducted historical policy.

The historical message created in the independent Republic of Belarus during the last thirty years was usually of a radical form. Only in a short period of time (1991–1994) was there a search for the possibility of opening up to a pluralist concept similar to the standards of democratic states. The growing dispute between the supporters of the national-state concept and the economic and social one has, however, once again brought the historical discourse onto a radical course. After 1994, the state's historical message began to dominate. National circles have failed to build an effective alternative to the official historical policy. The image of the past, other than the state one, has been limited mainly to opposition groups with which a minority of citizens identify themselves.

The circles of the Belarusian opposition, unlike, for example, the Polish minority

---

<sup>9</sup> A. Łastowski, *The Genealogy of National Statehood in the Historical Memory of Belarusians*, [in:] *Revolt in the Name of Freedom: Forgotten Belarusian Gene?*, ed. Piotr Rudkoŭski, Kacjaryna Kolb, Warsaw 2013, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> More informations: Н. Пурьшева, М. Старовойтов, , Минск 2014; Н. Шарова, , Минск 2015.

in Belarus, failed to create a universal national vision of history on the basis of memories of traumatic events such as deportations and Stalinist repressions. These events did not take on the meaning of a symbol that unites their own community memory.

It was only partially successful in the case of the Pahonia coat of arms and the white, red and white colors of the flag. It is no coincidence that they also became a symbol of the protests taking place after the presidential election of 2020.

However, these two historical symbols are a symbol of rebellion against the current political situation rather than a real reevaluation of the way Belarusian society perceives its own history. Regardless of the current political views of the demonstrators, the victory in the Great Patriotic War is still the basis for constructing a historical message. The proclamation of the need for political change at the slogan level does not mean rejecting the Eastern interpretation of history. Using the white-red-white colors, the demonstrators want to emphasize their dissatisfaction with the current political and economic situation, but are not ready to exchange the Soviet heroes from the times of the Great Patriotic War for collaborating pro-German circles.

When considering the stages of shaping the Belarusian national consciousness and using historical issues for current politics, it should be remembered that Belarusian national life cannot be measured, for example, with Polish, Lithuanian or even Latvian measures. Belarusians are not a community that can be easily described only with the use of terms and categories characteristic of the nations of Western Europe.

The choice made by the Belarusian community results from the combination of cultural conditions and social structure as well as politics, including the historical one, carried out in today's Belarusian territory by successive state structures functioning there. Experiences started back in the 19th century and then continued in the 20th and 21st centuries strengthened the relationship with the eastern culture in Belarusian society.

**Today's sense of national consciousness of Belarusians is a conglomerate of Orthodox heritage, nostalgia for the strength and might of the Soviet Union and the product of the contemporary model of patriotism proposed and implemented by the Lukashenko administration.**

Contrary to the opposition, he eagerly displays the elements linking contemporary Belarus with some Great Russian and Russian heritage. In such a structured message, Russia is not a country bordering Belarus, but part of the Belarusian heritage. Even the recent demonstrations cannot change this perception. Eastern heritage is too deeply rooted in contemporary Belarusian culture to be easily dismissed. Belarus, unlike Ukraine, for example, does not have an alternative vision of history. In recent years, the opposition circles have been too weak to effectively break through to the general public with their own historical message.

Therefore, regardless of the demonstrations taking place in autumn 2020, where historical elements such as the white-red-white flag or the Pahonia coat of arms are used, it seems that it is the version of the historical message proposed by the Lukashenko adminis-

tration that is still much better received than the opposition's concept aimed at confrontation with a clearly anti-Russian vision of the past. Being against the president who has been in office since 1994 does not mean consent to the universal acceptance of anti-Russian rhetoric in the historical message.

Regardless of the present conditions in current politics, the picture of history constructed by the presidential administration in recent years, skillfully combining the post-Soviet message with elements of Belarusian national heritage, is an authentic and permanent part of collective memory.

Even a possible change in the position of the president of the Republic of Belarus will not mean a complete rejection of the vision of history currently proclaimed. At most, slight corrections in the interpretation of the Belarusian historical message can be expected. Even if the assumptions of the Lukashenko state ideology (which arose from the modified form of the economic and social concept) are changed in the future, the historical message will rather evolve towards a liberal-post-Soviet concept, rather than a vision of time of national Belarus, which are characteristic of the assumptions of the national-state concept.



**Zdzisław J. Winnicki**  
(The University of Wrocław)

# **State Ideology of the Republic of Belarus**

On March 27, 2020, seventeen years had passed since the announcement of the initiative of the President of the Republic of Belarus, who at a special meeting of ‘the group of people in higher positions of republic administrators’, chief editors of the main press titles and electronic media and selected rectors of higher schools gave a talk / a directive on the necessity to work out the state idea of the Republic of Belarus, which he called the state ideology of the Republic of Belarus (RB).

In the years after that seminar, an entire system of theoretical assumptions of the state ideology of the RB was developed in Belarus, together with a complex apparatus of implementing that system at every level of the state organization: from ministries, through higher and secondary education, a network of field bodies of state administration and separate administration units (army, militia), up to municipal and rural state enterprises and even social organizations (pro-governmental NGOs). That system is discussed in another monograph<sup>1</sup>.

In the monograph on the design of the state ideology of Belarus, its origin, the circumstances of introduction (adoption) and theoretical dimension of its content, we wrote:

**‘In our opinion, due to civilizational determinants, Belarusians are still going to be civilized in forms chosen by the dominant power system. They are used to it. Pro-European opposition groups of different professions will probably not influence the minds and hearts of Belarusians soon, especially that they themselves do not have ‘a uniform ideology’.**

This is the contemporary Belarusian paradox resulting from the historical experience of the Belarusian people [народ]”. Hence the questions/theses made by the representatives of Belarusian opposition elites, such as: Belarus: a state but not yet a nation<sup>2</sup>, or: Are there Belarusians in Belarus?<sup>3</sup>. The recent events connected with the mass election protests seem to be the proof that a conscious Belarusian nation has already formed. But what is the leading idea of that nation remains unknown.

The concept of ‘building the state ideology’ was strongly criticized by Belarusian opposition and independent circles. The latter group originates from opposition circles, mostly the intelligentsia, which generally question the need to ideologize the society and state, particularly in accordance with the ideas represented by the President

<sup>1</sup> Z. J. Winnicki *Ideologia państwowa Republiki Białoruś – teoria i praktyka projektu. Analiza politologiczna*, Wrocław 2013, p. 506.

<sup>2</sup> Грыгоры Ёфэ (Richard Joffe), : , // , *op.cit.*, pp. 149–164.

<sup>3</sup> Марле Давід Р. (Dawid R. Marphle), Ці ёсць у Беларусі беларусы? ( // (пад рэдакцыяй Валера Булгакава), Варшава 2006, pp. 173–178.

of the Republic of Belarus<sup>4</sup>. Instead, they propose to promote the national idea by the formation of a conscious Belarusian nation based on historical and ideological education, which even has a name (and is a university subject): ‘Белорусознавство’<sup>5</sup>.

The first information on the intensification of works on universal implementation (in public, educational and political sectors in work establishments, the military and the whole education system) appeared in spring 2003. The ‘Rzeczpospolita’ magazine announced: ‘Belarus is going to have its own state ideology. Its outline was presented... by Alexander Lukashenko during a meeting/seminar with participation of workers of central and local administration, editors of central magazines, and rectors of universities’.

He initiated the ‘action’ of building the state ideology by announcing the need to develop this kind of system based on the ideology functioning in the Soviet times: ‘not all was bad then’, and the state and the society need such an ideology to show them the objectives and unite the nation with the authorities<sup>6</sup>.

Street surveys showed that Lukashenko’s initiative was understood and supported at that time, although the respondents did not know what the essence of

that ideology was<sup>7</sup>. Only political opposition circles expressed their strong disapproval.

**At a special state discussion led by the President with the participation of all the rectors of state universities, representatives of the presidential administration and chief editors of the main Belarusian state magazines, Lukashenko outlined the principles and called for urgent work on the development of the ‘ideology of the Republic of Belarus’.**

He changed his Political Cabinet into the Ideological Headquarters, ordering to establish similar bodies at all the institutions of local administration. He also set the date, i.e., September 2003, by which the ‘ideology’ was to be prepared in the form of a book. In the beginning, the ideology was to be implemented at workplaces and schools by specially appointed political-ideological workers. As far as we know, the ideological book by Alexander Lukashenko, *Istoriczieskij wybor Bielarusi* [*Historical Choice of Belarus*], which he mentioned as the basis for preparing the concept, is still not available. The essence of the *wybor* [choice], however, is known, because the President of the Republic of Belarus presented an extensive paper on this topic at the 4th All-Belarusian People’s Meeting in December 2010<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Н. Прекьявічус, Навошта Лукашенку новая ідэалогія, “Arche. Пачатак” No. 3(26) 2003, pp. 1–8, <http://archeweb.hypermart.net/2003-3/prek303.html> [accessed on: 10.08.2009].

<sup>5</sup> I.A. Саракавік, , Мінск 1998.

<sup>6</sup> P. Kościński, *Białoruś. Ideologia państwa*, ‘Rzeczpospolita’ of 22.04.2003, p. A 9.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g., the Polish language Grodno weekly of the Union of Poles in Belarus, ‘Głos znad Niemna’, of 2.05.2003, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Наш исторический выбор — независимая, сильная и процветающая Беларусь. Доклад Президента А.Г.Лукашенко на четвертом Всебелорусском народном собрании. Официальный Интернет-портал Президента Республики Беларусь, <http://www.president.gov.by/press101732.html>, of 15.10.2011.

In the meantime, the Academy of Management under the President of the Republic of Belarus, and then, the majority of Belarusian academic institutions, developed the theory, writing textbooks on the basics of the state ideology of the Republic of Belarus. It could be expected that the ideological initiative of the President would be another, ultimately self-liquidated, 'action' – an action modelled on the Soviet mobilization of masses, such as 'all the resources to the endangered section of the front' (agricultural, educational, health, energy etc.). 'Actions' disappear as quickly as they are initiated. Did it also happen to the 'action' of building the state ideology of the Republic of Belarus?

That the formulation and implementation of the 'state ideology' had been previously discussed can be seen in the content of Belarusian compulsory textbooks on political studies used at Belarusian universities. The author of a trendsetting book in this subject, Vladimir Andreevich Melnik, devoted an entire chapter (one of three) to the issue of ideology<sup>9</sup>. In Melnik's book, the proposals of concrete ideas concerning the state ideology of the Republic of Belarus are preceded by references to 'the ideology of Belarus' in the period of 'Kievan Rus', 'the Grand Duchy of Lithuania', 'the Commonwealth', 'the Russian Empire', and 'the Soviet and post-Soviet period'. Further, it is specified what the 'ideology of Belarusian statehood' should be, and finally, there is a proposal of systematization of the 'state ideology' of Belarus. The author refers to his paper published in the magazine 'Respublika' (8.07.1996) titled 'The Ide-

ology of Belarusian Statehood (Basic Aspects)'.

The basic ideological theses of the author of that paper are simply that each nation, being a fundamental (original) subject of international relations, in the course of its development works out a sum of ideas which determine its separateness and the parameters of principles of its relations with other nations (states).

In his view, the elements of the 'state ideology of the Republic of Belarus', with consideration of the 'ideas, view, concepts, theories, beliefs and opinions' are the following spheres:

- cultural and historical (issues connected with the formation and development of the Belarusian ethnos until the moment of forming a conscious nation, as well as the place and role of Belarusians in the context of development of East Slavic [Rus'-Slavic], European and global civilization);
- political and economic (referring to the institutions of Belarusian statehood, the contemporary political system of the state and the directions of their development and changes);
- economic (concerning the ways of 'developing the national economics', in its diverse ownership and organizational forms, carried out by the state in accordance with the interests of *naroda* [the people], the division of the 'national richness' and the proper consideration of interests of urban and rural residents and of the entire nation in the global

---

<sup>9</sup> В.А. Мельник,  
, Минск 2000,

and regional process of production and commercial exchange);

– socio-humanistic (issues of mutual relations of an individual and the society providing for the individual's needs).

The ideology presented and initiated by the Head of State (as he is sometimes referred to in the media) on 27.03.2003, publicized in the media and recommended for further doctrinal works in order to implement it in the state and social practice, was based on the four foundations set by Lukashenko:

a) the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus as the legal basis for formulating the state ideology,

b) 'the Belarusian economic model' as the economic basis for the functioning of the state ideology,

c) 'the Belarusian political model', i.e., the current political system of the Republic of Belarus,

d) 'the Belarusian national thought' understood as the ideological basis for the affirmation of the contemporary state of national awareness (nation) and the current structure of the state.

With time, theoretical studies and the practice of implementing the state ideology highlighted the main issue of mutual political and cultural identification (identity) of the contemporary (here and now) statehood and society / nation of Belarus within the meaning of the essence of objectives of the state ideology of the RB, i.e., the approval of the political and economic system.

More broadly, the foundations of the

state ideology were specified as follows:

a) the assumptions and effects of popular referenda carried out on the initiative of the Head of State, resulting in amending the constitution, were added to the constitutional foundation;

b) the Belarusian economic model justified by the Head of State in his discussions on the historical choice of Belarus as a centralized system of the state economy with elements of private economic initiative, which needs the state's consent to develop;

c) the political model or the system based on the constitutional principles of the Republic of Belarus with consideration of the leading political, administrative and legislative role of the Head of State pursuant to his constitutional competencies and place in the constitutional system of the authorities of the Belarusian state;

d) the national idea with which both the Belarusian authorities at all levels and the society should identify on the basis of the Belarusian (state) doctrine alluding to the affirmation of the existence of the Belarusian nation/society as a substrate of the contemporary Belarusian statehood. The historical allusions in this concept are presented ambivalently (references to some institutions of the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the accomplishments of the Belarusian humanism of the European Renaissance period). What is stressed, however, is the phenomena of 'historical state experience of Belarusians' from different periods, i.e., the GDL or the Commonwealth, but the most important in this process is the national and state experience of the Soviet period: the Soviet Belarus (BSSR)



and Belarusians' participation in the Great Patriotic War (USSR), including the considerable share of Belarusians in the 'victory over fascism'.

An interesting diagnosis of the relationship between the achievement of the stage of state ideology by the Head of State and the consolidation of the current political system in Belarus was made at the beginning of that stage (2003/2005) by an independent Belarusian political scientist Andrei Kazakevich<sup>10</sup>. He defined that process as 'an ideological turn of the Belarusian authorities after the year 2001' (the 2000 parliamentary election and the presidential election after the popular referendum) and changes in the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus that formally shaped the principles of the 'power of authority' of the President.

According to that analysis of post-Soviet Belarus, two concepts were dominant in the first stage of building the statehood in transition from the BSSR to the Republic of Belarus: the idea of national state independence embodied by the opposition (both then and now), especially the Belarusian Popular Front of Zianon Pazniak, and as Kazakevich called it, 'revolutionary' Pan-Slavic/Rus' (Russian) – Pan-Rusist (Pan-Rusism) with Soviet elements. The latter concept dominated in the circles of the contemporary authorities and was well received by the disoriented post-Soviet Belarusian society. Actually, that ideological concept had an almost official status in the Belarusian internal policy. Its peak was in the mid-1990s. After the

year 2000, i.e., after ten years of existence of a sovereign state and development of its institutional attributes, i.e., evident stability of its geopolitical situation, the 'Pan-Rusism' proved to be an idea that was not only politically obsolete but also counter-productive for the Belarusian statehood.

**Thus, its disappeared from the political public space as an idea, and the centers of power naturally began to promote the concept of the ideology of the Belarusian state in place of the previous, useless 'imperial' system. It was not yet a specific concept of the state ideology of the RB, but a trend observed in all the post-Soviet countries of the region.**

Thus, it meant engaging in comprehensive projects aimed at specifying the principles of state and social (national) identification in the conditions of particular statehood. However, as Kozakevich points out, the very term ideology, despite similarities to the Soviet tradition (a calque?) that come to mind, should be considered in this context rather as a synonym of a contemporary Belarusian 'national idea' and/or 'state idea'. Therefore, despite the connotations and the formal nominal similarity, the author absolutely rejects the concepts of Soviet 'calque' with respect to the state ideology of the RB. But Kazakevich also stresses that the ideology is not ideologically (intellectually) connected with the traditions of Belarusian national revival of the turn of the 20th century. Moreover, the ideology is in contrast (opposition) to the

---

<sup>10</sup> А. Казакевіч,  
стр. 105–147.

// Булгакаў В. (рэд.),  
, выд. Offset-Print, Białystok, 2005,



Contemporary banner, Belarus 2012



**МЫ БЕЛАРУСЬ!**

Belarusian national heritage promoted i.a., by the so-called national history of Belarus, functioning and prevailing in the contemporary historiography in the Republic of Belarus. Thus, in the state ideology there is no Pan-Rusism or significant (characteristic of the national-democratic opposition in the RB) references to the tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania treated as the Belarusian statehood. Its central terms / concepts / issues are 'statehood' and 'Belarusian', considered only with reference to the contemporary state 'Republic of Belarus' as a phenomenon existing nowadays. In particular, it includes issues such as: 'Belarusian model of development', 'Belarusian political system', 'the way of Belarus', 'Belarusian experience of state construction'. So there are no grounds for seeking a deeper (historical) genesis of the state ideology of the RB, because – as Kazakevich explains – that ideology is a completely new, original phenomenon, which can very generally be described using traditional ideological terms characteristic of the region where it appeared. It is rather an 'operative set of concepts defining the current regime (system) and is formulated for its needs here and now', not really an exhaustive (codified) system. Its beginning or genesis is not the West-Rusism, Sovietism of the BSSR period, neither is it the idea of statehood of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

**To summarize briefly: It is the ideology of the system of power of the Head of the Belarusian State, Lukashenko. The doctrine developed on that basis is rooted in Lukashenko's vision of the state, society, economics and international relations. What facilitates its implementation and then consol-**

**idation is the so-called civilizational East-Slavic mindset of the larger part of Belarusians.**

Conceptual preparations to specifying the institutional principles of ideological sector (vertical) lasted almost one year after the ideological seminar of March 27, 2003. In September 2003 and in February 2004, the Administration of the President discussed the assumptions of the draft of the ordinance (*ukaz*) 'On the training of staff responsible for ideological work in the Republic of Belarus'. The Ordinance of the President of the Republic of Belarus (*ukaz*) no. 111 was issued on February 20, 2004.

The Ordinance issued in order to: 'improve the effectiveness of ideological work' in the RB provided for the organization of and determined the structure of a new sector (vertical), the tasks for its workers, the additional responsibilities of people in management positions in state administration, and changes to the previous regulations connected with the provisions of the ordinance.

Section 1 of the Ordinance imposed personal responsibility on the management staff of all the levels of state administration 'and other organizations' for the introduction of ideological work 'in working collectives', and deputy 'managers' (directors, chairpeople, presidents) of economic entities and other state entities (except the state field administration, where the occupational ideological departments were to function as part of the Executive Committees of Councils of Delegates, i.e., district/provincial and regional/poviat administration bodies) were obliged to perform direct supervision of that 'work'.

Section 2 of the Ordinance specified the numerical strength of the staff of Ideological Administrations:

a) in District Executive Committees and in the Minsk Committee: 15 workers of the ideological sector (vertical),

b) in Municipal and Regional Executive Committees the Ordinance provided for Divisions of Ideological Work with the staffing depending on the population of the administrative entity:

- below 20 thousand residents: 2 workers,
- from 20 to 50 thousand residents: 4,
- from 50 to 100 thousand residents: 5,
- more than 100 residents: 6,
- in municipal administrative institutions: 4.

Section 3 specified the principles of appointing and revoking ideological workers. In accordance with Section 3 item 1, the appointment or revocation of workers such as heads of Ideological Work Administrations at District Committees and the Executive Committee of the city of Minsk, managers (chief editors) of nationwide state media (except the ones appointed by the President of the Republic of Belarus), managers of local state media founded by the District Executive Committees and the Committee for the city of Minsk, deputy managers responsible for ideological work in Committees at the Council of Ministers, state organizations subjected to the government of the RB, as well as institutions responsible for higher and postgraduate education should be previously discussed with the Administration of the President of the RB.

In accordance with Section 3 item 2, the appointment or revocation of deputy managers of Departments of Ideological Work at the level of Municipal and

Regional Committees, local administration in towns, managers (chief editors) of local state media founded by Municipal, Regional or Local Executive Committees, deputy managers (mayors, directors and presidents) organizing the ideological work at state and other organizations with 1,000 or more employees, and institutions providing complete secondary occupational or specialist education should be previously discussed with relevant Municipal, Regional or District Executive Committees.

Section 4 of the Ordinance specified the schedule of tasks aimed at performing the provisions of section 3 and obliged 'state and other organizations of the Republic of Belarus' to agree by May 4, 2004 upon the candidates for deputy managers for ideological work, organizers of ideological work, assigning them functions connected with ideological work or specifying the tasks of people obliged to organize ideological work and ensuring the conditions for carrying out the assigned functions and constant raising of qualifications in that regard.

Section 5 obliged the Council of Ministers of the RB to ensure, upon agreement with the State Secretary for the Security of the RB, the implementation of the provisions of the Ordinance within three months of the Ordinance coming into force.

Section 6 ordered the obliged state administrative bodies and other organizations to approve the structures and staffing of the Administrations and Departments of Ideological Work by April 1, 2004, depending on the number of inhabitants or employees, and to ensure the properly qualified staff of ideological

entities, providing them with technological means and facilities for their work.

Section 7 introduced changes to the applicable regulations pursuant to the provisions of the Ordinance by supplementing them with these new provisions. This meant amending by supplementing, so the applicable legal acts included more and more regulations referring to the introduced system of ideological structure.

The first conceptual and theoretical attempt, in assumption exhaustive, was presented by the team of the Academy of Management under the President of the Republic of Belarus. The result is the still applicable textbook / summary / synthesis of the state ideology of the RB published in 2004, edited by one of the organizers of the Academy, professor general Stanislav Nikiforovich Kniazev – Станіслав Нікіфоравіч Князев (ред.), *Основы идеологии белорусского государства. Учебное пособие для вузов.*

In the Polish source literature the most extensive discussion of the analyzed material in the form of a review paper was presented in 2007 by a renowned Polish Belarusian studies expert Ryszard Radzik<sup>11</sup>.

Two years after the first edition, a revised textbook version was published, titled *Основы идеологии белорусского государства. История и теория*<sup>12</sup>.

The textbooks / summaries of the state ideology of the RB are particularly important because the above-mentioned Ordinance of the President of the RB no. 111 of 2004 assigned the Academy of Management the leading role in 'educating, training and raising the qualifications of the ideological staff, methodological support for higher schools, ministerial or district institutions of raising the qualifications in the issues of ideology of the Belarusian state'.

Based on the above-mentioned discussion and references, we can conclude that the theory of the draft state ideology of the RB includes:

- 1) the source content, i.e., the preliminary concept by the President of the RB,
- 2) the original content, i.e., descriptive proposals included in the first books published by the Academy of Management under the President of the RB (especially books such as the one by Kniazev, and their interpretations),
- 3) the propedeutic (basic) content, i.e., the system of academic textbooks on the basics of the state ideology of the RB (most universities have departments of ideology, publishing such textbooks),
- 4) the scientific discussion included in the textbooks on ideology theory and scientific discussion in the form of scientific and propaganda articles connected with that form and the similar 'public' discussion,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Radzik R., *Białoruska wizja ideologii państwowej*, 'Studia Białorutenistyczne/Belarusian Studies' No. 1/2007, Lublin 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Minsk, Wydawnictwo UP 'IWC Minfina' [*minfin* = Ministry of Finance], p. 312. Circulation: 2,000 copies.

5) the propagandistic content, i.e., the constantly expanded theme set of so-called Uniform Information Days (centralized monthly discussions on a certain issue, e.g., fight with alcohol addiction, or the current problems of the education system),

6) occasional guidelines and theses included in the Speeches, Messages, Talks, Interviews and other official presentations of the President of the RB,

7) ongoing supplementation and explanation connected with the practice of the ideological vertical popularized for the needs of ideological work (e.g., the content of the Plans of ideological work at particular levels of verticals and ideological services in administration, industry, education, civil service and 'other organizations').

A separate category of formulating the content of draft of the state ideology of the RB in all its seven manifestations is the propaganda work of the Belarusian state media.

**The state ideology of the RB is to shape the patriotism of the Republic of Belarus, convince the citizens of the rightfulness of the regime and methods of governance, promote increased work efficiency as part of the Belarusian economic model system, consolidate the current Belarusian political model, and shape the social attitudes in compliance with Lukashenko's slogan: for the blooming Belarus.**

Apart from the theory of the state ideology, there is also practice.

It mostly refers to convincing the Belarusian society that there is no alterna-

tive to the historical choice of Belarus, the Belarusian model, including the form of effective model of exercising power in the RB based on the constitutional system of the power of authority, the principles of state economy and the administrative system with special consideration of administration in districts (provinces) and regions (poviats). And there, in state economic, educational and service entities and pro-governmental social organizations.

The practice of the state ideology of the RB, performed by the units of the ideological vertical, is focused on promoting the ongoing and long-term socio-economic plans (programs) of the state (five-year plans), whose assumptions are presented at the General Belarusian People's Meetings: strong and blooming Belarus, plans (programs) determined on the basis of those in districts, regions and communes, as well as in departmental enterprises and other economic entities. It comes down to mobilizing the residents and workers to carry out the plans of entities and other economic and social tasks, and, obviously, to support the internal and foreign policies of the state, determined and implemented by the state bodies in accordance with the recommendations of the Head of State. Hence, it includes activation ensuring the carrying out of production plans, discipline and quality of work, plans of development of services, education and upbringing following the respective plans, development of health care services, inhabitants' rest and recreation, ensuring security and public order, organizing election campaigns, information on the objectives of state and regional policies, and explanation of the ongoing production and socio-political campaigns.



Contemporary banner, Belarus 2012





Беларусь!

The practice of the state ideology of the RB is supervised by the state ideological apparatus: the ideological 'vertical' (sector), institutionally functioning at all the levels of state administration, state institutions, and state economic entities. Ideological and legal basis for the sector.

This practice is called the 'ideological work' (идеологическая работа). The definition of ideological work is also formulated as follows: it is a targeted system of activities of authorities and power structures aiming at forming moral and psychological readiness of the citizens and the mobilization of the human capital for the performance of the ongoing and strategic tasks as part of the socio-political and socio-economic development of the state.

The system is implemented by the ideological sector, located in central and field bodies of the state authority, offices, universities (including non-state ones!), enterprises, the military, security services, and pro-governmental non-governmental organizations. The state media play an important role. The assumptions of the methods and ways of implementing the state ideology (statutes / regulations) were prepared by the Academy of Management under the President of the RB.

**In our understanding, the draft of the ideology is also the ideology or myth of the nation / people of rural origin, happy with the qualities (mindset) they are attributed, including the identification with previously unknown great people / nation**

(the national concept of the history of Belarus, not contradicting the theory of the draft of the state ideology of the

RB), which, cultivating its peasant identity, had its 'wise' – in political and state (GDL) terms – ancestors: Belarusians, and now, unlike the indolent Westernizers / individualists / consumers, it has its popular idea of good, hard-working life, for which the people (nation) do not need to care and be responsible by themselves, because they have their caring father (*batsko*), who will protect the people and show them what to do. As we can read in school and academic textbooks, and in particular, in *adradžeńnie* [revival] literature of the history of Belarus, that people has its rich, centuries-long, history, because its wise representatives controlled the state structures of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, made law, high culture, and political thought. An important characteristic of that people is collectivism. True, it contrasts the general assumptions presented in the concept of 'historical choice of Belarus' (cf. the talk of the President of the RB at the State University in Minsk), but the solution to the problem in this regard is pointing to the progressive and positive issues: the content the historical representatives presented in their speeches, output and achievements is diligently recorded in the theory of the state ideology, in this case compliant to the general theses of what we have defined as the national concept of the history of Belarus.

The practical importance of the draft of the state ideology (contrary to the prognoses of Belarusian and European liberals) strengthens the economic autarchy of Belarus, forced i.a., by the European Union sanctions. It consolidates Lukashenko's economic model, including the internal cooperation and the need to depend on the Russian market, as well as looking for the apparently exotic economic ties with China and

Venezuela, also as part of the Eurasian Economic Space created in 2012.

The economic crisis aggravating in the recent years and transforming into an undiagnosed political crisis gives the Belarusian authorities extra arguments for its promotion for the internal use of the political model(s) and economic model supported by the seemingly (from the point of view of the West) absurd draft of the state ideology in its theory and practice, because it is justified by the relatively low unemployment, stability of payments, basic but universal social welfare, relatively low prices of public utility services, state support of sports, impressive development of roads and active residential housing. This is what Belarusians en masse do like. It is associated in Belarus and promoted by the state ideology project with the effectiveness of the President / father of the nation, who roars as he punishes stubborn officials and intervenes in issues impossible to solve from the point of view of the Western method of governance. It is conducive to balancing between Russia and the EU to obtain economic bonuses (gas prices and the formal support for the Eastern Partnership of the European Union). Actually, before 2020, it had been consolidating the regime, making it difficult for the fragmentary opposition to reach wider circles of the society with their political and economic projects. And there were some different projects at the beginning of the Belarusian transition. As we will explain further, they still exist in the Belarusian social sphere.

The project of the state ideology of the RB involves treating all the expressions of public life in the RB without exception as ideological spheres that can be used to achieve the state's ob-

jectives in economy, education, management, domestic policy and foreign policy, which can be controlled – as argued by Belarusian political scientist Vitali Silitski – by the one person making decisions in Belarus, President of the RB, through the entire state apparatus of the republic, and the specialized apparatus of ideological vertical supervises the explanation of that control. Importantly, the ‘illustration’ showing the comprehensive impact of the state ideology project on the formation of awareness and attitudes of the Belarusian state also points to the saturation with the project content of, particularly, huge numbers of students – the future elite of Belarus, who each year enter all the spheres of public life of the republic, from schools, through economic administration, up to central and local public administration and organizations, pro-governmental associations and cultural institutions.

**In 2020, those students, contrary to the assumptions of the state ideology, became the avant garde of protests against the election of the author of the state ideology for the highest political position.**

In practice, the project of state ideology of the RB is implemented through the system of universal ideological work at every level of the administrative structure, industry, public services, all levels of education, public services and non-governmental organizations. So far, these activities combined with the Soviet experience and Belarusian mindset resulting from the Belarusian historical experience make the system of state ideology of the Republic of Belarus an effective means of specific autarchization of Belarus with regard to the international environment.

**We may hypothesize that if one day this system was dissolved and replaced by another, unknown to Belarusians, the successors of Lukashenko would probably try to implement a different ideology of Belarusization (what has actually occurred twice in history and what Belarusian independent national opposition circles are trying to prove in the public though rather closed debate)<sup>13</sup> and the people (*narod*) transformed into a nation (*naciju*) would probably follow.**

But so far, the state ideology project prevails, and it is unlikely to be replaced by another project in the foreseeable future. And if it does happen, we think the 'nation of partisans', i.e., careful people, will approach practically the potential new directives of the authorities.

Apart from a brief mention, in this paper we did not discuss the issue of the independent ideological role of Belarusian pro-governmental media. This role is highlighted both by the theory of the state ideology project and the technical practice (collaboration, inspiration, utilization) of the project. The ideological role of Belarusian media is huge. It is the propaganda mouthpiece of the central and local authorities. However, it is not the aim of this article to investigate the media. As we will show later, Lukashenko can see a kind of nationalization of the state ideology project by including in it the nationalistic elements, announcing the so far theoretical concept of, not state, but national ideology of the Republic of Belarus.

As we have pointed out, the state ideology of the RB has been implemented in the Belarusian state for 27 years now. It is comprehensive and universal, both as regards the theoretical assumptions and the implementation. Since 2003<sup>14</sup>, it has been using the element of nationalism, mostly by stressing the priority of maintaining state sovereignty.

Ten years after the initiation of the state ideology, Lukashenko gave a new, immediately seen mostly by Belarusian nationalists, impulse, not only social and state, as before, but reinforced with a strictly national slogan.

In early 2014, during the annual intellectual merit award ceremony (Award for Spiritual Revival as part of the Belarusian Sports Olympus contest), held since the establishment of this state and Orthodox Church award by the Metropolitan Philaret in the period connected with Orthodox Christmas in the presence of bishop Paul who had just come from Moscow to serve in 'Minsk and the whole Belarus' from the Russian Orthodox Church, Lukashenko emphasized the importance of the Orthodox faith for the state and nation of Belarus:

'Today, the Orthodox Church is undoubtedly one of the spiritual foundations of the society and the only confession with which our government has made an agreement on close cooperation'. In this context, he clearly declared: '... The time has come to identify what will become the Belarusian idea unifying all the citi-

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the conference of А.Э. Тарас (ред.), Материалы научно-практической идеологии (Минск, 3 ноября 2012 г.), Институт Белорусской Истории и Культуры, Рига 2012, p. 240.

<sup>14</sup> In the past, Lukashenko considered as the priority the closest ties possible with the Russian Federation.

zens, in which all will believe – from an academic to a peasant farmer. Obviously, it will be based on patriotism, readiness to defend our heritage, our past achievements. Such feelings are not the result of simple genetic continuation. They must be formed by referring to the history and culture of our own people [народ] ...<sup>15</sup>.

In our opinion, the utterance of the Belarusian President did not mean that any changes would be made to the essence of the previous state ideology of the Republic of Belarus. Although the ideology is labile and is often ‘adjusted’ depending on what concepts Lukashenko represents at the moment, it has one constant element: the Belarusian state patriotism of the current system of the state.

Model of the project practice in the higher education system of the RB



translated by Anna Artemiuk

<sup>15</sup> Ад прадзедаў спакон вякоў нам засталася спадчына – СБ. Беларусь Сёгодня – Советская Беларусь, no. 4 (24387) of 10.01.14: <http://www.sb.by/post/157663/> [accessed on: 8.02.14].

# 2.

## Discussions and confrontations

Ryszard Radzik  
(The Maria Grzegorzewska University)

# The Struggle for Belarusians Dignity



Post-election protests, Minsk, Belarus, 23 VIII 2020, Photo: Homoatrox



Creating Zoom avatars - Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International CC BY-SA 4.0  
Handi Task - Helping Hand

The post-election protests in Belarus – I am writing this on November 9, 2020 – surprised the Belarusians themselves, not only President Alexander Lukashenko, but also the protesters. Mainly due to a large number of participants (compared to earlier, much more modest protests), as well as their duration of several months. However, in this case we do not deal with a revolution, as is was often written, as revolutions change authorities and structures, sometimes ideologies and value systems. So far there have been no such consequences in Belarus. There are many reasons for the protests, I will just mention a few.

**Undoubtedly, the unwritten agreement between Lukashenko and the society was broken. It consisted in accepting his power in exchange for material benefits. The economic crisis has shattered the existing system. Moreover, the scale of frauds in the presidential elections has revealed that the president has lost full contact with reality.**

As it turned out, the Belarusian society had overcome a more significant change than he did. In recent years, a large gap has arisen between the authorities and the changing aspirations of the society. In people's opinion, their dignity has been strongly breached, making them once again the object of the government's actions. This was overlapped with the extremely disrespectful treatment of the coronavirus epidemic, which evoked emotions and fears in people that perhaps to some extent were also manifested in their protests for dignity.

Moreover, in the last dozen of years, layers of more affluent people, who know

the world a bit, have a growing sense of their own subjectivity and awareness of their interests, have developed in Belarus. It was not really known what Belarusians thought. It turned out that the Belarusian world had changed significantly. The scale of the protests showed that at least some Belarusians stopped being worried about a job, a salary, a position, being arrested and beaten – stopped being worried about survival. Lukashenko crossed the social and psychological line, causing an explosion of emotions that had been accumulating for some time. He did not sense them. He had been in the so-called power bubble for too long. Belarusians reacted to the occupation of Crimea and Donbas with the support of the Russians for fear of a repeated aggression on their territory, but with time, as it can be assumed, a reflection has come – rather on the subconscious level – that they are threatened with becoming the subject of the actions of others. They took a fight to be able to decide for themselves.

The protests are peaceful. They are basically not organized or institutionalized. They do not have leaders who, having obtained permanent and strong authority, actually lead them. This is what fundamentally differs them from the Polish Solidarity.

The protests were not massively supported by workers who could effectively change the government with their all-Belarus strike. Although they are numerous, they are environmentally limited to relatively young, educated people with above-average earnings from cities. In some respects (though very limited), they resemble the situation of the intellectuals' lack of agreement with workers before 1980 in the then social



outbreaks in Poland. Their only idea is actually to bring down Lukashenko and organize re-elections. At the beginning, the post-Soviet flags could also be found among the white-red-white flags. These are peaceful protests without ideology, leadership and no specific political plan. In themselves – without additional factors – they cannot change the determined Lukashenko. The protesters have not drawn conclusions from this yet.

The Internet plays a huge role in their existence. Without it, these protests would not exist on this scale for so long. It is an interesting field of observation (and conclusions) for the organizers of political life in Europe (including Poland) and around the world. However, it is wrong to believe that the current president got only a few or a dozen percent of the votes. The Belarusian society is divided. Numerous groups of business people have formed around Lukashenko, for whom the possibility of the president's departure is perceived as a threat. Among them are: the militia (OMON) – along with their families, the army, managers of bureaucratic communities (especially their elite), part of the business operating on the basis of political concessions and *kolkhozes'* workers financed by the state. Some are

worried about money, others about positions, influence and accountability for what they did.

**The protests showed that the identity of the working class (including those living in *kolkhoz* villages) has not been reformulated as much as among the Belarusian equivalent of the Western middle class (although the analogies are lame).**

In quite numerous circles of cities' inhabitants, there have been changes in awareness. Their citizenship attitudes are being borne, as well as their sense of dignity, so rarely manifested in Belarus in the past. However, the lack of traditions of a strong community, traditions of national insurrections (noble or bourgeois), class organization of the rebellious workers (free trade unions) make the protests, that have arisen so far, ineffective. I repeat, we do not have a revolution in Belarus so far, but we have a flood of dignity protests. Lukashenko, by leading hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets, arresting and imprisoning thousands of them, building, as a result of such experiences, societies of potential, active oppositionists. Belarus has entered into a turn in its history.



**Jan Jerzy Milewski**

(The Białystok Branch of the Polish Historical Society)

# My Friends – Belarusian Historians Under the Pressure of Politics

Despite the friendship and cooperation between Poland and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) declared during the communist period, this did not translate into cooperation between historians. There was some cooperation, but only at the highest level, and it concerned mainly the revolutionary movement, including delivering lectures during the holidays important at that times (subsequent anniversaries of the victory over fascism, the October Revolution, the signing of the Polish-Soviet treaty, etc.). On that basis, Stanisław Kalabiński and Paweł Korzec, Warsaw historians who as one of the first dealt with inter alia the history of the region, gained access to the archival materials in Grodno. Although in the 1970s there was a Branch of the University of Warsaw in Białystok (with a faculty of ‘History’) and in Grodno and Brest there were Pedagogical Institutes, contacts between Polish and Belarusian historians were not included in the plans of the cross-border cooperation between Białystok voivodeship and the neighboring oblasts (Grodno and Brest) of the BSSR. It was not until the summer of 1976 that a three-person delegation from the University of

Warsaw Branch (headed by a historian and vice-chancellor of the University of Warsaw, Prof. Julian Łukasiewicz) visited the Pedagogical Institute in Grodno on the occasion of the 32nd anniversary of – as it was written – the ‘Rebirth of the PRL’. The following year (September 29, 1977) a scientific session devoted to the 100th anniversary of the birth of Feliks Dzerzhinsky was held at the Medical Academy. It was attended by the rector of the Pedagogical Institute from Grodno – Prof. Alexander Bodakov and the historian Ph.D. Valery Cherepic<sup>1</sup>. As Prof. Adam Dobroński mentions, at the end of the 1970s, the then Minister of Internal Affairs Mirosław Milewski, who came from Leipzig on the Biebrza River, sought to create a precise monograph on his family town. Thanks to his contacts, he made it possible for three historians (Prof. Ireneusz Ihnatowicz, Prof. Andrzej Wyrobisz and then young Ph.D. Adam Dobroński) to go to Grodno, so that they could get acquainted with the sources in the Historical Archives there. At the border, they were welcomed ‘with a bang’ – escorts of militia motorcyclists accompanied them to the hotel. The problems started in the archive, the director of which initially

---

<sup>1</sup> KW PZPR, signature: 701, k. 82 in the collection of the State Archives in Białystok.

explained that the collection did not contain any materials about Leipzig, and then dismissed the researchers. In the 1980s, not much changed, because contacts were frozen first, which was to prevent the transmission of the 'solidarity plague', and then they were defrosted in the old style. Although – on the other hand – the border rallies of friendship that were popular since the middle of this decade somehow served to strengthen mutual contacts.

**Clear changes took place only in the 1990s, when Belarus formally regained its sovereignty. One of the most significant manifestations of the new policy was the establishment of a bilateral (Polish-Belarusian) Commission of Experts for the study of the content of history textbooks in 1992.**

Thanks to the efforts of Prof. Adam Manikowski, the then director of the Institute of History at the University of Warsaw, in the six-person Polish part of the commission there were as many as three historians from Białystok (Prof. Adam Dobroński, Ph.D. Jerzy Urwanowicz and Ph.D. Jan Jerzy Milewski). Apart from them, the commission included: Prof. Jerzy Kłoczowski (the chairman), Ph.D. Andrzej Rachuba and Ph.D. Leszek Antoni Szcześniak – known as the author of textbooks. The chairman on the Belarusian part was the deputy director of the Institute of History of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Prof. Mikhail Bich. The rest of the team, except for Prof. Vladimir Sidorov and Assistant Professor Pavel Loyka, were quite variable. I wrote about the work of

this commission years ago in Giedroyc's 'Białoruskie zeszyty historyczne' ['Belarusian Historical Papers']<sup>2</sup> and 'Zeszyty Historyczne' ['Historical Papers']<sup>3</sup>. The first meeting of the commission was held in March 1993 in Minsk and was solemn: the deliberations (opened by the Belarusian deputy minister of education) took place at the seat of the government and historians from Russia, Lithuania and Ukraine were also invited. The Polish ambassador in Minsk, Prof. Elżbieta Smułkowa, was very interested in the works. More specific substantive discussions took place only during the second meeting in Warsaw in December of that year.

The Belarusian party postulated that the Belarusian theme should be better noticed in Polish textbooks. In the case of historical figures, attention was drawn to the need to emphasize their relationship with Belarusian lands (place of birth, area of activity), and the need to display the declaration of independence of March 25, 1918, as well as to discontinue the use of the term 'Borderlands' and to evaluate the Polish policy towards national minorities more critically in this area in the interwar period. At the same time, the Belarusian side presented us with new history textbooks, which came into use in the 1993/1994 school year. Polish-Belarusian relations were presented in them quite objectively, although of course there were statements that provoked polemics on the Polish side. Most importantly, it should be emphasized that Belarusians did not cut off from the common past within the Common-

<sup>2</sup> *Polsko-białoruska komisja do spraw podręczników historii*, 'Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne' 1994 r., v.2.

<sup>3</sup> *Polsko-białoruskie komisje podręcznikowe*, 'Zeszyty Historyczne' (Paris) 1998, v. 123.

wealth, which was characteristic of the earlier period.

**The authors of the textbooks were soon criticized by their own president, who accused them of duplicating the views of immigration historians and evaluations harmful to good-neighbourly relations with other countries (he probably meant Russia). Soon he also decided that the textbooks from the Soviet times were better.**

This opinion was ridiculed even by journalists from one of Moscow TV channels – I watched this material while I was in Brest. No wonder then that at the end of 1997 the last meeting of the committee was held in Lublin. I have very good memories of its work, because the Polish-Belarusian discussions sensitized both parties to problems that had not been sufficiently noticed before. After a few years, in May 2002, I received an invitation from the Deputy Minister of National Education, Włodzimierz Paszyński, to continue my work in the ‘Polish-Belarusian Commission for History and Geography Textbooks’. I answered positively, but the restart did not take place then. Working in the commission gave me the opportunity to meet many great historians, Belarusian patriots. One of them was Prof. Mikhail Bich. I remember once he said to me: ‘Jurek, we have more in common than you think. I was born in the village of Milewskie’.

The beginning of the 1990s was a period of ‘a levy in mass’ by Belarusian historians. I remember the atmosphere during the First All-Belarusian Conference of Historians, which took place in Minsk in February 1993. At that time, the ‘Association of Belarusian Historians’ was established. They did not want the or-

ganization to have ‘Companionship’ in its name, because it was badly associated with ‘companions’. Quite recently I found on the Internet, under the Wikipedia entry ‘Western Belarus’, that during this conference Jerzy Milewski (a historian from Białystok) proposed that instead of the term ‘Borderlands’ for the interwar period, the term ‘north-east territories of the Second Polish Republic’ should be used, which caused polemics in the following years.

Apart from expeditions to Minsk, border contacts with Brest and Grodno were revived at that time. The pedagogical institutes there were already transformed into universities. An important role in Polish-Belarusian contacts in Brest was played by the head of the Department of Universal History – the late Assistant Professor Vladimir Nikitenkov, as well as his colleagues: Assistant Professor Andrei Bodak and Assistant Professor Evgeni Rozenblat. There were also many historians in Grodno willing to cooperate, who performed various functions (Assistant Professor Tatiana Badiukova, Prof. Dmitry Karev, Prof. Alexander Niechukhryn). It was not important to us (then or later) who was pro-government or who was oppositional, because we were talking about history, not politics. And so we cooperated with Wasil Kushnier, editor of the quarterly (later bimonthly) ‘Bełaruski Histaryczny Czasopis’ [‘Belarusian Historical Journal’] (I was even a member of the editorial board for several years). In the mid-1990s, I met Aliaksandr Krautsevich, presently Prof., who in 1994–1995 was the vice-chancellor of the University of Grodno. And this is how our long-term cooperation and friendship began. In addition to participating in conferences on both sides of the border (a huge role was played there by the Institute of

History of the Branch of the University of Warsaw – University in Białystok), we tried to invite our friends from Belarus to the general meetings of Polish historians organized by the Polish Historical Society. A very kind attitude of the directors of regional archives in Grodno and Brest is also worth emphasizing. I will especially remember the wonderful, prematurely deceased director of the Brest Archives – Anna Terebuń.

**The situation began to change in the second half of the 1990s. Historians from frontier universities were especially put under a particular pressure by the authorities. This was evident in Grodno, where many historians who obtained the Ph.D. degree (corresponding to the habilitation degree in Poland) were forced to leave their jobs in various ways.**

And so Aliaksandr Krautsevich started to work at various universities in Poland, while Alexander Smalianchuk, who was forced to leave the University of Grodno in 2001, soon started his work at the European University of Humanities in Vilnius (now he is an employee of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences). Both of them, working outside Belarus, were active initiators of scientific life in their own country. Supported by various foundations, they published books, organized high-level scientific conferences, and were the authors and editors of various magazines, e.g. 'Homo Historicus' in Vilnius (Smalianchuk), 'Gradzienski Socjum' ['The Grodno Society'] (both of them), 'Biuletyn Historii Pogranicza' ['Bulletin of the History of the Borderline'] in Białystok. Prof. Smalianchuk made a great contribution to the development of research on 'oral history' in Belarus by organizing many

scientific expeditions. Prof. Krautsevich, who currently heads the Center for Belarusian Studies in the Study of Eastern Europe at the University of Warsaw, is an excellent popularizer of historical knowledge, mainly thanks to Belsat Television. They were both detained in Grodno in September 2020 in connection with demonstrations in defense of democracy. On September 22, the Presidium of the Main Board of the Polish Historical Society adopted a resolution condemning the repressions against Belarusian historians and appealed to the authorities to stop these. Due to the research subject they undertake (Krautsevich – an eminent expert in the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Smalianchuk – researcher of the national idea), they should not be a threat to the dictatorial authorities. Just like other historians dismissed in recent years from the University of Grodno (e.g. in 2013, Prof. Vyacheslav Shved, who deals mainly with the January Uprising, or Ph.D. Andrei Charniakievich – the author of, among others, a very interesting biographical dictionary of inhabitants of Grodno from the interwar period). I would like to add that in the recent years Belarusian independent historians have been working closely in the field of history with the Union of Poles in Belarus, participating in scientific conferences, publishing articles in 'Magazyn Polski' ['Polish Magazine'].

Long-term cooperation between Belarusian and Polish historians is of great importance for bilateral relations – it allows us to better understand each other and to get to know the important problems of the other party. In Poland, it is often forgotten, although it does not apply to professional historians, but rather to journalists and politicians,

that the First Republic was the state common to many nations, including Belarusians, that we have common heroes. That those whom we considered Poles were also recognized as heroes in Lithuania and Belarus.

**The best example is Tadeusz Kościuszko – the leader of the uprising of 1794 and the dispute that broke out around him in 2017. At that time, the Belarusian diaspora in Switzerland, on the 200th anniversary of Kościuszko’s death, decided to fund his monument in Solothurn, with the inscription: ‘To an outstanding son of Belarus from grateful compatriots’, which was considered as controversial by the Polish ambassador.**

I will not report on the details of this recent dispute: eventually, a monument was erected with only the name of the leader, the dates of his life and the name of the founders (Belarusian Association). The unexpected effect of the conflict found its epilogue the following year. The Kościuszko Monument was unveiled in his hometown in Brest Oblast (Belarus)<sup>4</sup>. If there had not been the dispute in Switzerland, there would probably not have been a monument in Mereczowszczyzna, because, as a Polish

historian from the Belarusian minority in Poland – Prof. Oleg Łatyszonek – critically wrote, in Minsk there is a Cadet School named after General Aleksander Suworov, not Kościuszko<sup>5</sup>.

Polish historians, on the other hand, expect Belarusian historiography to break with post-Soviet patterns, especially with regard to the history of the 20th century. The authorities of interwar Poland are rightly accused of setting up a camp (place of isolation) in Bereza Kartuska (now Białystok), where Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and others were detained without a court sentence. On the other hand, the magnitude of Stalinist crimes is being diminished or even omitted, apart from independent historians. There are also controversies regarding, for example, the assessment of the Home Army’s activities in territories inhabited to a large extent by Belarusians and others. It would be easier to discuss these differences if politicians were less involved in the dialogue. However, we must wait until the main Belarusian ‘historical ideologist’ Igor Marzaluk and others passes away, until they are replaced by a new generation that understands the new times and will not punish historians for patriotism and professionalism.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Rzeczpospolita’, 13 X 2017; 14 V 2018.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting study about historical politics of Belarus appeared: K. Kłysiński and W. Konończuk, *Łączenie przeciwności. Polityka historyczna Białorusi. Raport Ośrodka Studiów Wschodnich*, Warsaw 2020.



The March of Freedom, Babruysk, Belarus, 16 VIII 2020, Photo: Ю. Камісараў





Creative Commons — Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International — CC BY-SA 4.0  
modification: panning hand

**Wojciech Śleszyński**  
(The University of Białystok,  
The Sybir Memorial Museum)

# **Two Worlds: The Communist Factories and ‘Ajtiszniki’**

President Alexander Lukashenko interviewed by the Russian television in September 2020, sought the reasons for the wave of mass post-election protests spreading across Belarus, among others, in the rebellion of the *ajtiszniki* generation. In recent years, Belarus, under the rule of the former collective farm director, has turned into one of the European information technology centers. The new generation, armed with smartphones, has been contrasted with the old one, of large post-Soviet industrial complexes.

Anachronistic communist plants still exist in Belarus. After 1994, they got a chance for a new life. In a rapidly changing world, they were to remain a mainstay of support for the newly elected president. They managed to survive the fall of communism and adapted to the new economic situation under Lukashenka's rule.

Belarus, being a part of the Soviet Union, managed to transform from an agricultural character to an industrial one within thirty post-war years. Those large Belarusian factories still remain the symbol of this communist phenomenon. It is worth to know that the Belarusian territories, which were part of the Second Polish Republic, belonged to the least developed regions of the then Polish state. There was practically no industry there, and the small factories were clearly family-run businesses. This achievement was all the greater as the state of the economy, taken over after the war, was catastrophic. The process of industrialization in Belarus was the fastest during the rule of Piotr Masherov – the first secretary of the communist party in Belarus. He held the office in the republic from March 1965 to October 1980. His rule became the best period for Belarus's develop-

ment. Thus, it is not accidental that Alexander Lukashenko always eagerly referred to the economic success of the republic of that period.

**The main goals of Lukashenko, who was elected president in 1994, was to save the post-Soviet economy, which was declining in the early 1990s. The Belarusian industry started to lose the Russian market, which had been so far considered as a natural.**

The act of dissolving the Soviet Union and establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States in its place, signed in Białowieża on December 8, 1991 by the chairman of the Supreme Council – Stanisław Szuszkiewicz, the President of Russia – Boris Yeltsin, and the President of Ukraine – Leonid Kravchuk, only accelerated the process of disintegration of the entire economic system. Most of the Belarusian society felt lost in the new political and economic situation. The dream was to return to the good communist times. In the early 1990s, Belarusian society was ready to support anyone who would ensure economic stabilization. Lukashenko turned out to be such a person, able to reach the majority of citizens with a simple and clear message. He promised to save the then existing economic system. He did not dismantle it, as it was done in other post-communist countries. Large industrial plants, although have never returned to their former communist glory, were not closed down. Most of them have survived to this day, constituting a permanent but not very attractive element of the landscape of today's Belarus.

Despite trying to preserve the old world, time was moving forward inexorably. The young generation was more and more active, and it managed to make a

kind of industrial revolution (with relatively low capital expenditure), making Belarus an important information technology market in this part of the world.

In 2018, the IT sector gave a higher GDP profit than the entire Ministry of Industry. The new IT world was replacing the old industrial one more and more effectively. The new fully IT generation began to dominate the old one, still strongly rooted in the Soviet mentality. There is a symbolic fight between two worlds in front of our eyes. The new generation is able to organize themselves very well with the help of IT tools. The power is no longer needed, because almost anyone who can control the crowd with new tools can be a leader.

**A whole new generation of IT (from Russian: ajtiszniki) grew out during the regime of Lukashenko,**

**with his permission, but at the same time contrary to his vision of the world. A generation that does not want to live with memories of the glory of the former Soviet Union. They want to build their own new world.**

They are not able to describe or define it yet, but already hold massive protests on city streets, which was previously unthinkable in Belarus. The new generation insists on taking into account the vision of their own world – not only open to new technologies, but most of all blending into globalization processes. As the results of the presidential elections of 2020 have shown, even Belarus will not become an independent island, which its president, the former director of the Soviet collective farm, would undoubtedly want.

# The Sybir Memorial Museum

the new

dimension

of museology



The mission of the Sybir Memorial Museum is not only to discover and disseminate knowledge related to the subject of deportation and the fate of Poles in the Soviet Union, but also to research the history of the former eastern territories of the Republic of Poland. The areas of the eastern borderland are an important part of the exploratory mission of the Sybir Memorial Museum, which is also reflected in the permanent exhibition. The narrative of the exhibition begins with a description of the living conditions in the multinational eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic in the years 1919–1939.

**September 17, 2021**

**the grand opening**