

Belarus: Self-Identification and Statehood

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After the collapse of the USSR, Belarus attempted to achieve national statehood, non-nuclear status, neutrality, an open society, and a liberal economy. Today it is a zone of communist revenge. To what extent is the situation special, and what are the country's prospects for becoming a democratic and sovereign nation?

Way to Independence

Belarus is one of the oldest Slavic nations in Europe. Belarusian statehood began at the beginning of the second millennium, and Belarusian Christianity is more than a thousand years old. For a long time, Belarus was an influential part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, where Belarusian was a state language. In the sixteenth century, the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, one of the first constitutions in Europe, was written in Belarusian.

Powerful neighbors always intended to conquer Belarus. Some two hundred years ago the territory of Belarus was incorporated into the Russian empire. The Belarusian language was forbidden, and rebellions of Belarusians against Russians were brutally suppressed. Anti-Belarusian pressure weakened for a short period at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the revolutionary movement in Russia began to endanger the monarchy. On 25 March 1918, Belarusians declared themselves an independent state: the Belarusian People's Republic. However, it was soon destroyed by Bolsheviks, who in 1919 formed their own Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, which became in 1922 one of the founding republics of the USSR.

In the 1930s, Bolsheviks started a planned destruction of the Belarusian intelligentsia. In 1937–39, tens of thousands of the most educated Belarusians were killed or deported. Documents prove that more than 370 poets, writers, journalists, philologists, and historians who wrote in Belarusian were shot. The same number of intellectuals were killed in both Ukraine and Russia; however, their populations were respectively five and fifteen times larger than Belarus's at that time.

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But even this wasn't the climax of Belarus's trials: During World War II, Belarus lost a quarter of its citizens. Belarus lost more lives per capita in the Afghan war than any other Soviet republic. After the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion, more than 70 percent of radioactive materials fell on Belarus.

For many years Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, and Jews have lived on Belarusian land, and Belarusians have never blamed them for their own difficulties and problems. However, this tolerance has been purposely abused. Russians in prewar Belarus equaled 3 percent of the population, but this number grew to almost 20 percent by 1990. At the same time, Belarusian youths have been permanently moved to "build communism" in Kazakh virgin lands, Siberia, the Far East, and the Far North.

A new attempt to revive Belarusian statehood was made on 27 July 1990, when the Supreme Council (parliament) adopted the Declaration on State Sovereignty. Independence *de jure* was established in December 1991 when the country was formally recognized by Russia, which ratified the Belovezh agreement. Belarusians returned to sovereignty with an emasculated national intelligentsia and a population that to a large extent has lost a feeling of national self-identification, mainly because of compulsory Russification.

Russian Pretensions

Russia's interest in Belarus is formulated directly in the theses of the Council on Foreign and Defense Politics of the Russian Federation. A union with Belarus would help Russia "to oppose the NATO expansion to the East"; "remove the potential threat of creating the so-called Black-and-Baltic Sea Belt which would isolate Russia"; "improve our military potential by integrating with the Belarusian army"; "remove Kaliningrad's special defense region from military and strategic isolation"; "ensure the integration of the two armies into a single system with a single command and control structure"; and "develop a unified, powerful military industrial complex".

Russia does not hide its intention to incorporate Belarus, though it calls it "unification." It has said directly and cynically that "there should not be any delay in this matter" and that "one should even pay a certain economic price for such a profitable geopolitical union." And "since the processes of restoring national self-consciousness are being accelerated in Belarus, time is working in favor of the opponents of 'integration.' So, the unification process should be sped up." It has also suggested that leaders amplify main sources of anxiety among the Belarusian people, such as the country's low economic security, increase in crime, and the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, because they "divert the attention of the people from the main idea of the integration processes." Russia wants to expand the Russian empire by suppressing the national self-awareness of Belarusian people and using Belarus's impoverishment for Russia's benefit.

Unfortunately, this is only one example of the general approach to the problem of Russian statehood. All Russian politicians wish to see Russia in the forefront of civilized humanity, but none of them has the courage to say that first it

is necessary to restore, or more exactly, to create the grandeur of Russia, and only then to point the way to others.

One cannot deny that Russian society has retained the great-power consciousness of a unitary state with imperial intentions. There is some hope that the new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, will depart from the imperial statements he made. In his New Year's article, Vladimir Putin admitted that the standard of living of the average Russian is ten times less than that of the average American, that the Russian GDP is five times less than that of China, that under the most favorable conditions the average Russian will reach the current standard of living of the average Portuguese in fifteen to twenty years—and still he pretends that Russia will become a model of economic progress.

Russia's imperial attitude is based today solely on nuclear weapons. But to maintain and modernize weapons to support a level of mutually assured destruction, it is necessary to tax an ordinary Russian to such extent that any progress in economics or any growth in standard of living will be impossible. Therefore the underlying idea of Putin's article is either well-being, or imperial grandeur with poverty. But if Putin had claimed this idea directly and rejected imperial intentions for the sake of the well-being of Russians, then his chances of being elected president of Russia would have been minimized. Such is the psychology of the Russian voter.

On 10 January 2000, Putin signed Decree 24, which confirmed a National Security Concept of the Russian Federation. According to it, Russia will oppose domination by Western countries led by the United States; it also threatens that attempts to ignore Russia's interests "can undermine international security and stability." In clearer terms, it means, "We are weak, we are poor, but we are great, and therefore we can be an example of how to live. Anyone who does not understand this undermines international security."

Power that relies on such controversial postulates and at the same time preserves internal political stability in a country can be only a dictatorship.

What is the probability that, after securing his power by elections, a dictator will follow the course of developing a peaceful economy for the benefit of ordinary Russians? Strangely, there is some hope that during Putin's presidency Russia will emerge into a market economy and civil society. One positive aspect of Putin's KGB background, as pointed out by Andrei Sakharov, is that KGB agents are less corrupt and more professional than other Russians, since in the KGB professionalism is necessary.

However, doubts remain, and Belarusian experience only strengthens them. Some people who backed Lukashenko thought that he could be manipulated into doing what they wanted because he is ignorant of the rudiments of politics and economics. The opposite happened.

Belarusian Society and Power

Adherents of independence in Belarus have never been adversaries of Russia. They understand that real societal relations in Russia are more democratic today than in Belarus, and the real economy is more liberalized. But they know well

that to embark on economic reform hand in hand with a huge and poorly governed Russia is like joining a herd, and no one knows where it will turn.

Belarus's political regime is a dictatorship, though the so-called constitution of 1996, which established parliament, protects legal opposition and freedom of speech and even proclaims the principle of the division of powers. Political opposition and independent media exist in the country, but they are not effective because the regime suppresses their activity by violence, intimidation, and undisguised political terror. Belarus has become a police state: it has 125,000 militiamen and 85,000 military servicemen. With a population of ten million, Belarus proportionally has the most soldiers per capita in Europe. Known political leaders are disappearing; members of parliament, who have parliamentary immunity, are arrested; independent attorneys are deprived of the right to defend their clients in court; legal procedures are turned into a farce. And Russian leadership actively supports this.

A set of six treaties signed between April 1996 and December 1999 concerning integration, creating common institutions, and finally, forming a union between Belarus and Russia, are, strictly speaking, a collection of statements of intention. However, the sound of bells and breaking crystal goblets in the Palace of Facets in the Kremlin dulls anxiety about the war in Chechnya, and neglect of economic difficulties furthers general Russian disorganization.

Belarusian Economics

The regime declared that in 1997 there was a 10 percent growth in GDP, 17.6 percent growth in industrial production, 19.5 percent growth in investments, and 5 percent growth in real income. Economists soon understood that it was a bluff, and the "miracle of 1998"—supposed GDP growth of 11 percent—has not been taken seriously by anyone.

It is impossible to hide the economic crisis in Belarus. In 1999, inflation was 350 percent. The Belarusian ruble has depreciated by more than 225 times that of Russia. Lukashenko's regime declared that in 1998 the number of citizens with less than a living wage income fell from 83 percent to 27 percent. This was simply a propaganda bluff; the reduction was made by introducing a newly decreased norm. Actual monthly minimal income per capita in 1998 was equal to U.S. \$2, and an average income was U.S. \$37. In neighboring Lithuania, in June of the same year, they were equal to \$105 and \$250 respectively.

Russian leadership continues to support the regime in Belarus despite Russia's own economic difficulties. The dream of incorporating Belarus into the Russian Federation has become the only factor, uniting political forces and movements in Russia that would otherwise be at loggerheads with each other, from communists and fascists to democrats and market adherents. The amorality of this approach is evident. Lukashenko flirts with both Russian "reds" and "browns." Many times he insulted Yeltsin publicly, and people close to the Russian president had to pacify him with the traditional words, "It is not a tsar's business to pay attention to the vanity of low-level leaders."

Road to Democracy

There are three main models of transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The fastest—displacement—presupposes an essential preponderance of opposition to the government; an example is the “velvet revolution” of 1990 in Czechoslovakia. This is improbable in today’s Belarus since one can get the support of the majority of population only by an offensive propaganda campaign, which uses electronic media outlets inaccessible to the opposition. Moreover it is weakened by a stratum that turned opposition into profitable business through the grants of Western foundations. Furthermore, the economic crisis and its consequences have brought on mass impoverishment, which is usually hostile to democracy.

Another model is transformation, which is possible even when the opposition is weaker than the government. A considerable stratum of reformers in the ruling circles is necessary, as was the case in Spain in 1975–77. Unfortunately, such a group does not exist in Belarus, where there is no party of power and a reforming wing is absent. The Lukashenko regime relies

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not on thoughtful specialists, but on people who either are personally loyal to the dictator or depend on him. Those who threaten the regime are expelled from the government immediately; the dictator himself will never accept democratization.

A mixed model seems more promising. Opinion polls confirm that confidence in the government is decreasing. Poor economic prospects make many in the state bureaucracy feel unprotected and insecure. At the dictator’s whim, any functionary can become jobless or even find himself in handcuffs. Under conditions of international isolation and without Western economic assistance, Belarus will never be able to overcome the crisis. Therefore, an overwhelming majority of state civil servants are interested in the dictatorship’s failure. This is true of military employees as well. Should the opposition shake up an active part of society, and should the bureaucracy understand that the regime is not eternal and that they have to think about their own future, then the situation could change radically. Under these circumstances, support of democratic transformation in Belarus from the international community will become the most important factor.

International Efforts

On 18 September 1997, the Standing Committee of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) established in Belarus the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG). It began its work in Minsk in January 1998. The situation in Belarus of human rights repression and media monopolization by the state was harshly condemned at the OSCE summit in Istanbul by the leaders of some countries and in the Istanbul OSCE Declaration as well.

The OSCE member states have agreed that elections in Belarus can be recognized only if Belarus adopts electoral legislation that ensures dialogue with the opposition and provides independent electoral commissions with pluralistic membership. However, the OSCE Rules of Procedure do not effectively influence the regime, which is against democratization. The AMG efforts brought about a common approach to negotiations, but this has had the effect of distracting the opposition parties' attention from other forms of confrontation, and therefore it has become counterproductive.

Perspectives

A nation such as Belarus, that has its own language, culture, literature, and traditions, including a legacy of statehood, can hardly be stopped from becoming a legal democratic state with a developed civil society. However, without a break in the information blockade, the process will take too long. The international community has been sparing in assistance with its resources, and in fact left Belarus for mauling to the Russians.

Belarusian democratic opposition is aware of how difficult it is to overcome economic deadlock. We know that acceleration of economic development can take place only with large foreign investments. Several factors in Belarus favor highly profitable investments: an excellent geographical location, and inexpensive, highly qualified, and disciplined labor. The political forces in Belarus, with Western support in education and training, should ensure the transition to democracy and political stability. We may then try to convince the West to introduce a new Marshall Plan for Belarus.

The less-optimistic prediction takes into account that Russia intended to return Ukraine and Belarus back to the Russian empire from the beginning of their independence *de jure*, or since Yeltsin signed the Belovezh agreement. For Yeltsin the main incentive for signing was a desire to become a rightful Russian president. It is possible that he was sure that the other CIS states would not be able to survive without Russia, and sooner or later they would return to it. Ukraine has rejected this option definitively.

In Belarus, pro-Russian imperial forces took power by a rough Russian intervention. Today they are convinced that the preparation for incorporating Belarus into the Russian Federation is finished, inasmuch as

- six treaties concerning integration, though they do not represent a legal basis for the incorporation, quantitatively demonstrate how far the process has advanced;
- 1,560 kilometers of the Belarus-Russian border are absolutely porous;
- the Belarusian economy is in crisis and completely dependent on Russia;
- all key people in the government—the prime minister, vice prime minister for economics, ministers of defense, interior, and foreign affairs—are Russians;
- practically all political forces in Russia are adherents of the incorporation, including Yabloko, which assisted in forming one of the most anti-Belarusian nongovernmental organizations—Belarusian Yabloko;

- all electronic media and the overwhelming majority of printed media are monopolized by the regime.

Predictions of political scientists for the future of Russia itself can be reduced to the words, "Dictatorship is coming." And it will need tangible achievements and victories to promote it. There will be no victory in Chechnya; it is impossible to make Chechens love a country that has brought them only suffering or to suppress a partisan movement supported by the population. Russian intellectuals will not help. For two hundred years they have transformed each "ill-natured Chechen with a dagger" into a bandit, since he was fighting without adhering to the norms of war. And how do the salvos and bombings of populated areas keep to these rules? There also will be no quick achievements in national economy; it will be extremely difficult to unite the Duma's politicians around the reformer team and deprive oligarchs of the ability to plunder.

Finally, only Belarus remains. It is possible that Belarus will either declare unification by a decree or hold a referendum, the results of which will be like the results of Hitler's referenda with respect to Austria or the Czech and Slovak Republics.

What next?

To draw another state into their own huge, unregulated mess, Russia will assume fault for the complex problems that will arise in the subject country. And just as the postwar imposition of Russian socialism made Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Hungarians, Czechs, Romanians, and even Bulgarians cease to love Russia, perhaps unification with Russia will give Belarusians the same disease. Many Eastern European countries became independent as the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Belarus will gain real independence as a result of the disintegration of Russia. The incorporation of Belarus will only accelerate that disintegration.