

Belarus: To Democracy through Neo-Communism

STANISLAU SHUSHKEVICH

Since the Belarus presidential elections of 1994, there have been numerous attempts to impose on the Belarusian public the notion that only strengthened and centralized rule will make acceleration of the progressive reforms possible. The obvious inconsistencies of the chosen ruler's actions have been justified by citing the difficulties of finding acceptable means for reform and the notorious complexities of the transition period in this former Soviet republic that only recently was relatively prosperous. The difficulties have been further exacerbated in Belarus by a significantly higher concentration (than in the other CIS states) of military and retirees, the majority of whom are opposed to any transformation.

Seasoned Western diplomats and various emissaries of parliaments and governments of the democratic states, as well as of the all-European institutions, have insistently advised the Belarusian opposition to search for ways of tactful influence over the insufficiently enlightened president, assuming that even he can be convinced of the necessity of following the path of transformation to a lawful democratic state respecting values common to all humankind.

However, the chosen leader's lust for power and his desire to reign (as opposed to govern) have only grown stronger. His sentiments have been accepted and supported by the old communist nomenklatura of both Belarus and Russia, as it became clear that, thanks to his purely Soviet-style education (Department of History of a provincial pedagogic institute and a military school of political instructors), Alexander Lukashenka would indeed resurrect the Soviet "communist" kind of order.

The regime in Belarus has become increasingly authoritarian and (to the degree allowed by an open border with Russia and a rather transparent one with the Ukraine) quite totalitarian, crudely imposing on and regulating every public realm, without exception.

A number of opposition politicians have had to leave the country, among them the chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, Zianon Pazniak, and the chairman of the Supreme Council, Semyon Sharetsky. Members of Parliament Andrei

Stanislau Shushkevich was chairman of the Supreme Council of Belarus, 1991–1994. He is still active as an opposition figure and democracy activist in Belarus.

Klimov and Vladimir Kudinov, former chairman of the Council of Ministers Mikhail Chigir, former member of Parliament Vasily Leonov, and many others have been thrown in jail on charges that were clearly trumped up.

In the sovereign state of Belarus, several former secretaries of the regional and city party committees have publicly denounced the Soviet communist ideology, declaring themselves avid supporters of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the country's path of nonnuclear neutrality. They subsequently have assumed high positions in the new state structures of independent Belarus. However, it appears to have been difficult for them to learn new ways of functioning. With Lukashenka's rise to power, the same people have just as readily denounced the market economy, democracy, rule of law, and the constitutionally guaranteed policy of non-nuclear neutrality. They considered it more profitable to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime and the old communist principle of bureaucratic self-preservation: "You are the boss, and I am the fool."

The most outstanding members of that cohort are former deputy chairman of the Supreme Council Vasily Novikov and former minister of foreign affairs Pyotr Kravchenko. They rather quickly substituted for their democratic and market incantations ones proclaiming their devotion to the regime, striving to please their ruler with the same zeal with which they once propagated the ideas of the Communist Party.

In addition, most appalling things have been taking place. Following the mysterious disappearance of several well-known criminal figures, the brightest and most charismatic politicians, such as Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Council Viktor Gonchar and former minister of internal affairs Yuri Zakharenko, also vanished. Another deputy chairman of the Supreme Council, fifty-year-old Gennady Karpenko, suddenly passed away under obscure circumstances.

Dmitry Zavadsky, a television cameraman who had filmed a number of pieces exposing the activities of the ruling regime, was kidnapped from an airport in Minsk. The government has since announced that his kidnappers had been brought to trial, with their leader, Ignatovich, receiving a life sentence and the others receiving various terms of many years. However, neither Zavadsky's family nor the public has been informed of his fate nor of the proceedings of the closed trials. It has become common for journalists, including Russian television commentators, to be deprived of accreditation and deported from the country.

The Belarusian ruler is perhaps the world's only head of state to permit himself to make disapproving and even offensive remarks concerning the language and culture of the country's leading ethnic group. However, sensing a lack of response to such an approach on the part of young people, he has recently attempted to retract and made—that is to say, read the text of—several speeches in Belarusian. He even forwarded a welcome address to participants in the gala ceremony marking the 120th anniversary of the birth of Yanka Kupala, a genius of Belarusian literature and a bard of national self-identification. The reader of the address regretfully remarked that the president would not be able to attend the event himself because of a busy schedule. Indeed, during that time, Lukashenka was at a session to select "Miss Belarus 2002."

Another embarrassing incident occurred during the president's live interview on NTV, a Russian television station. Lukashenka denounced the accusations that he had ill treated Vasily Bykov, proclaiming that he had been brought up on Bykov's poems. This was especially touching in light of the fact that Bykov had emigrated to Germany precisely due to the activities of Lukashenka's regime. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that that renowned prose writer and great man of Belarusian literature has never written any poems.

The regime has methodically produced reports on the country's achievements, such as production growth, lack of unemployment, and political and economic stability. Some have believed in the "progress" of Belarus. Certain economists and politicians have begun to praise the social-collective "market," claiming that at last the "third way" has been found, one leading not to the Third World, but to prosperity.¹

All of this has not become possible because of some character defect of the Belarusian people. As any other nation, Belarus was not immune to making mistakes, but even in the transitional, post-Soviet period, it used to possess the legal tools necessary for correcting them. However, when in November 1996 the recently elected Lukashenka faced a realistic threat of impeachment on grounds of abuse of power, the top Russian leaders of pro-communist affiliation visited Minsk. Chairman of the Federation Council Yegor Stroev, Chairman of the State Duma Gennady Seleznev, and Chairman of the Council of Ministers Viktor Chernomyrdin arrived in Belarus under the pretense of providing assistance in establishing a dialogue between the president and Parliament. In the course of their visit, they signed a document endowing Lukashenka with unlimited power; that is, essentially conducted an anticonstitutional coup d'état in Belarus, in the name of Russia.

Stroev and Seleznev, along with Yevgeny Primakov and others, had also tried to divert their own country, Russia, from the path of progressive reforms, citing among other things the "accomplishments" in Belarus. Certainly none of them was so naïve as to believe the propaganda about an economic miracle; however, all of them realized that Belarus was resurrecting the old communist order so dear to their hearts. Under such order, they and those similar to them would likely remain a part of the privileged elite.

As for the economic "accomplishments," the most important of them—a gigantic inflation rate—cannot be hidden by any propagandist tricks. During the post-Soviet time, inflation in Belarus has surpassed that in Russia several hundred times over. The Russian ruble and the Belarusian "bunny rabbit," as the local currency is popularly known, both descended from the Soviet ruble. In June 2002, one Russian ruble was worth fifty-nine Belarusian ones. However, the multiplicity of denominations in Belarus was ten times greater, which has made the depreciation of the Belarusian ruble 590 times higher than that of its Russian counterpart, even in the wake of the economic upheavals in Russia, including "Black Tuesday."

According to the data provided by the CIS Statistical Committee, Belarus is *hors concours* in the commonwealth as far as the growth of consumer prices is

concerned. Between January and May 2002, the index grew by 46.1 percent. It is this figure that has determined the relatively high average consumer price growth rate in all of the CIS (13 percent); meanwhile, it was 2.9 percent in the Ukraine, 1.4 percent in Armenia, 1.7 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 5.4 percent in Kazakhstan, 6.4 percent in Moldova, and 6 percent in Georgia.²

It is even easier to debunk the myth regarding human achievements. At the beginning of perestroika, 10.3 million people resided in the territory of today's Belarus. According to UN forecasts, by the middle of the current century a mere six million Belarusians will remain. Some Belarusian demographers and sociologists consider even that forecast overly optimistic. Unless decisive measures are implemented at the state level, they believe that only four million will remain by the time specified.³

From 1994 to 2001, the population of Belarus decreased by 253,100 people, or 2.5 percent. In 2001, there were 1,000 men for every 1,131 women, and the asymmetry of the gender structure in Belarusian society has continued to grow. One of the causes of the demographic crisis may be related to excessive alcohol consumption. The cost of vodka in Belarus is considerably lower than in any of the neighboring countries: Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Meanwhile, the cost of provisions and manufactured basic commodities is higher.

In 1993 the country's population decreased by 11,200 people more than in 1992; in 2000 it decreased by 41,200 more than in 1999. In 1990, 109,600 people died in Belarus; in 2000, 134,900.⁴

Nevertheless, a significant part of Russian society is convinced that Belarus is following a better course than Russia as it gradually reforms the economy under the political stability of the presidential authority.⁵ Furthermore, the confusion in the creation of official documents and agreements (including the intergovernmental ones) has also turned out to be contagious. The six intergovernmental agreements regarding the establishment of something like Russobelia or Byelorussorussia, consecrated by the ringing of the Kremlin cathedral bells and osculation of the leaders, are glittering with contradictory provisions on political integration with preserved sovereignty, military cooperation with a neutral Belarus, and so forth. Mordant Russian journalists have labeled these agreements "letters on the oil and gas supplies in exchange for kisses."

At the end of 2002, Putin considered it impossible to remain a participant in the windbag verbiage. In his public addresses, including the yearly presidential press conference, Putin said that it was necessary to do away with the confusion of contradictory terms and to separate "the hamburgers from the flies." He also made it clear that there was only one way to achieve integration of Russia and Belarus (whose economy is about 3 percent of the size of Russia's): for Belarus to become a Russian province, the ninetieth subject of the Russian Federation. The second type of integration, "à la the European Union," was not explained in Putin's addresses. In fact, the Russian president was still quite vague on whether Belarus and other CIS states should strive for integration according to the European Union model, or create an Asian Union of their own based on rules developed by Europe.⁶ However, the suggestion of making Belarus a subject of the Russian Federation was quite distinct.

If Putin had asked his advisers to search for historical analogies, he would have noticed that the suggestion of turning Belarus into a Russian province corresponds directly to the Nazi motivation for the 1938 *Anschluss* with Austria: linguistic intimacy, fraternal nations (“in essence, one nation”)—why have two states?⁷ However, Hitler’s reasoning has turned out not to be to the liking of Yuri Luzhkov, Primakov, and Gennady Zyuganov.

It is also notable that Putin has not mentioned, in either of his addresses, the violations of human rights in Belarus or the Belarusian regime’s criminal actions of worldwide reputation. Therefore, in my opinion, the cheerful hopes of certain Belarusian politicians regarding Moscow’s desire to contribute to democratization in Belarus appear to be somewhat premature.

Immediately following Putin’s statements, Boris Yeltsin visited Belarus, to “rest for a week or so” in Viskuli, the place where the Belovezh Forest Agreements had been signed. It is striking that the first Russian president’s trip to Viskuli was on Lukashenka’s invitation. The latter had repeatedly cursed “the spot where the Soviet Union collapsed,” reflecting in a most offensive manner on one of the destroyers of the USSR, Yeltsin. Meanwhile, Yeltsin continued to rally for the union of “the sovereign Russia and Belarus,” still without clarifying what was meant by that.⁸

Today’s Moscow is quite content with the dictatorship in Belarus. It would be hard to find a more loyal subject. As for Minsk’s official talk of “sovereignty,” it is meant to entice and make zombies out of the marginal Belarusian electorate.

The electronic mass media, being completely monopolized by the ruling regime, continue to beat into the people’s minds the fear of reforms, market economy, and even the very word “democracy.” It is suggested to the people that the “constitutional act” regarding a union of the “fraternal nations” of Russia and Belarus must be adopted by means of a referendum. For some reason, the non-Russian ethnic groups of the Russian Federation are not counted among the “fraternal peoples.” Meanwhile, the “elections” and “referendum” technology is being polished in Belarus to the degree that the organizers of these events only have to formulate the desired outcomes and entrust the so-called Commission for Elections and Referendums with their realization.

In this regard, it is enough to simply mention the reviews that the commission has received from the election observers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission. During a 10 September 2001 briefing, OSCE representatives declared that they did not recognize the official presidential election results. In the view of European observers, the election campaign had not adhered to international standards and the election could not be characterized

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as “fair” and “honest.” The OSCE representatives also emphasized that their monitoring of the elections had been of a forcedly limited nature. Independent observers have come forth with even more impressive statements: “Such scale of falsifications has not been heard of even in the African countries,” said Aaron Rhodes, executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights.⁹ The official thirty-seven-page Final Report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Mission on the limited election observation leaves no doubt about the justification of its nonrecognition of the official elections results.¹⁰

Russia’s position virtually obliges the other CIS states to disregard the militant obscurantism of the Belarusian authorities. The last ally in the struggle for “Slavic integration” in Europe, Slobodan Milosevic, who had declared his support for the Belarus-Russia union and the desire to join it, is whiling away the time in a prison cell. Meanwhile, after the events of 11 September, even Lukashenka does not venture openly to make common cause with Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi. As for the other European states, as well as nonstate institutions, they have not always coincided in their views regarding the dictatorship in Belarus. For instance, the German Social Democrats have openly expressed their support for the collaborationists destroying the unity of the Belarusian opposition.

However, the majority of the Western countries—most importantly, the United States—have built their relations with Belarus on respect for democracy, human rights, and adherence to the law. The U.S. Department of State has repeatedly issued statements concerning the more flagrant human rights violations by the ruling regime in Belarus.

The current situation calls for the West to consider what should be done with a country that, although a member of the OSCE, is ignoring all international agreements it has signed, including those at the highest levels. According to the Istanbul Summit Declaration, adopted in October 1999, Belarus has accepted the following four conditions necessary for bringing the country to a remotely acceptable level in regard to human rights:

1. to make changes to the electoral code, to make it more democratic
2. to broaden the authority of the representative power, granting the parliament the right to adopt legislation
3. to take steps toward establishing an atmosphere of confidence and trust in the country, to abolish the ban on rallies and demonstrations, and to investigate the disappearances of well-known politicians and inform the public of the results
4. to eliminate censorship and grant the opposition access to the state-controlled mass media

But Belarus’s signature on the Istanbul Declaration has not brought any positive changes in the country. In fact, the restrictions and repressive measures became even harsher, and no representatives of any democratic opposition parties were included in the electoral commission.

The Belarusian dictator's undisguised hypocrisy and actions incompatible with his status as the head of state have finally caused a strong reaction from prominent U.S. senators and congressmen.¹¹ On 7 November 2001, Senator Jesse Helms submitted to Congress a bill proposing extremely tough sanctions on the Belarusian government, accompanied by assistance to the democratic opposition and independent media in Belarus. The document went through two hearings and was subsequently forwarded to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, but did not receive any further action. Apparently, international organizations had begun to express their hope for cooperation from the Belarusian authorities following the presidential elections of September 2001. However, after the OSCE mission was virtually expelled from Belarus, it became clear that cooperation was not possible.

On 27 June 2002, Christopher Smith, an influential congressman and the cochairman of the Congressional Helsinki Commission, introduced to the House of Representatives the Belarus Democracy Act (H.R. 5056), "intended to help promote democratic development, human rights and the rule of law in the Republic of Belarus, as well as encourage the consolidation and strengthening of Belarus' sovereignty and independence." If the act is adopted and the United States prohibits strategic exports and financial assistance to Belarus, and if U.S. directors of international financial institutions also manage to curtail financial assistance to Belarus, except for loans and humanitarian assistance, then in Congressman Smith's opinion, that "will help put an end to the pattern of clear, gross and uncorrected violations of OSCE commitments by the Lukashenka regime and will serve as a catalyst to facilitate Belarus' integration into democratic Europe in which democratic principles and human rights are respected and the rule of law prevails."¹² Like the bill introduced by Helms, the Belarus Democracy Act includes support for radio and television broadcasting to Belarus, support for the democratic forces in the country, and free and fair elections.

Those initiatives by U.S. legislators inspire the Belarusian democratic public and assist in developing a unified position of the world community on Belarus. I am also convinced that these initiatives compel influential Russian politicians to search for ways other than imperial ones in dealing with Belarus.

In this respect, one may view as indicative the commentaries of people whose personal opinions seem to coincide with those of the Presidential Administration. Dmitry Ragozin, chairman of the Duma Committee for International Relations, labeled by Belarusian journalists "the songbird of the Kremlin," has undergone a profound transformation from an avid supporter of integration agreements to a man of Putin's own views. As for his assessment of Lukashenka, he has gone much further than the Russian president. Among Ragozin's comments during an interview in Strasbourg in early July 2002 were the following:

Alexander Grigorievich [Lukashenka] should not try to blend together with the people. . . . He, too, must descend from King Louis, if he assumes that when one rebukes him, the entire Belarusian nation is also thereby rebuked. . . . Politicians must be guided by the sense of pragmatism, and stand up for the interests of the state they represent. Alexander Grigorievich wrongfully identifies himself with the progress

of integration between Belarus and Russia. One may not gamble on these high values. . . . A common currency is only applicable where common economic laws are established. . . . I don't like much of what Lukashenka is doing, and I certainly would not want to see such a leader as irremovable."¹²

Officially, Russia continues its efforts at legitimizing the Belarusian regime. During the 6–10 July 2002 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Berlin, Russia was again in a minority when twenty-eight states voted in favor of the resolution to refuse the so-called Belarus National Assembly a seat in the OSCE Assembly. Three countries, including Russia, voted against the resolution. In the resolution, the OSCE Assembly “urges the Belarusian authorities to cease harassment of independent media, NGOs and human rights activists, to end politically motivated arrests and detentions, and mount a full and transparent investigation into the death or disappearance of opposition leaders . . . to end its self-imposed isolation through the holding of free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in a manner consistent with longstanding OSCE commitments.”

Meanwhile, Russia continues to pursue the policy followed in similar cases by the USSR. Its representatives have not uttered a word nor admitted that Russia had officially sanctioned the grossest human rights violations in Belarus, inasmuch as the unobstructed debauchery of Lukashenka's vices became possible only because of the pardon that Seleznev, Stroev, and Chernomyrdin signed in November 1996, thereby saving him from impeachment and granting him dictatorial powers. The essence of this document has remained a guideline for the bureaucratic officials of both countries.

Conclusion

Russia's relations with the West have undergone positive changes since the tragic events of 11 September. The Russian political elite has paid lip service to its changing attitude toward Belarus. However, in reality, Russia, guided by its External Policy Affairs Doctrine of 2000,¹³ continues to support the antinational Belarus regime. Unless that changes, Belarus's inevitable path to true independence and sovereignty, democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights will be long and painful.

NOTES

1. Y. Godin, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, no. 54, 2002. A detailed bibliography concerning the issues discussed here is given in my book, *Neo-Communism in Belarus* (Smolensk: Skif, 2002).

2. N. Gak, *Narodnaya Volya*, no. 131–32, 2002.

3. V. Orgish, *Narodnaya Volya*, no. 118, 2002.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Godin, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

6. A. Cherkizov, *Ekho Moskvy*, 24 June 2002, <<http://www.echo.msk.ru>>.

7. M. Malko, *Narodnaya Volya*, no. 130, 2002.

8. As with the majority of Yeltsin's trips, this one did not avoid a humorous incident. During the visit to Brest, the Belarusian censors threatened to revoke the accreditation of those journalists who would venture to include in their television reports Yeltsin's statement that, while being the president, he, too, was sensitive to many views expressed in the

media, yet he never imprisoned any journalists for that.

9. A. Starikovich, *Narodnaya Volya*, no. 197, 2001.

10. *Republic of Belarus Presidential Election*, The Final Report of the OSCE/ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights).

11. O. Tomashevskaya, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, no. 95, 2002. See also A. Lukashuk, <<http://www.svaboda.org/news/articles/2002/06>>.

12. "Introduction of Belarus Democracy Act," 27 June 2002, <<http://www.csce.gov/crs.cfm>>.

13. M. Irkho Khalip, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, no. 98, 2002.

14. "The Concept of National Security of the Russian Federation," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, no. 11, 2000.