

Belarus Will Soon Be Liberated

INTERVIEW WITH STANISLAU SHUSHKEVICH

Stanislau Shushkevich, a nuclear physicist by training, is currently the chairman of the Hramada party. He was chairman of the Supreme Soviet and head of state of Belarus, from 1991 to 1994. During this time, he presided over the summit attended by leaders of the three Slavic Soviet republics in early December 1991 at the Belovezhsky Forest. This summit brought about the decision to dissolve the USSR. As the leader of an independent Belarus, Shushkevich oversaw the transfer of the nuclear weapons in Belarusian territory to Russia, the construction of basic institutions of state, and economic and political reforms—despite inheriting a legislature overwhelmingly dominated by the communist *nomenklatura*. Since the reestablishment of a dictatorship that followed his fall from power in 1994, Shushkevich has become active in opposition politics and dissidence and has attempted to unify the democratic opposition to the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime. In November 2003, Shushkevich was in Washington, D.C. and Toronto to participate in two panels organized by the American Enterprise Institute and the University of Toronto, respectively, in honor of ten years of *Demokratizatsiya*. In this interview, Shushkevich speaks about possible paths to liberation, the unifying of the opposition, Russia's meddling, the West's indifference, and possible reform models for a free Belarus. He also reminisces about the summit at the Belovezhsky Forest, meetings at Novo-Ogarevo, and teaching Russian to Lee Harvey Oswald in Minsk. This interview was conducted in Toronto on November 22, 2003, and translated by *Demokratizatsiya* founder Fredo Arias-King.

Demokratizatsiya: Today, Belarus has the unique position of being the only open dictatorship in Europe. But after the fall of Slobodan Milošević, of Vladimír Mečiar, of Franjo Tuđman's regime and other despots, how do you think that Belarus will free itself for a second time?

Shushkevich: It is quite difficult to predict these events. I would like to say, there is one thing also that differentiates Belarus from these cases. That is the amount of time it has spent under Moscow's influence. But in the opinion of the international community and in the foreign policy of Russia, Belarus is in a special situation. The thing is, and this was mentioned in our panel yesterday, it is obvious that Belarus is located in a zone controlled by Russia, and all the summons, all the pleas—lately I am getting acquainted with that term—are

answered with basically, “Yes, it’s a dictatorship. Yes it’s awful.” But there is really no activity by the international community to limit Russian meddling in Belarus. . . . Many Russian politicians condemn the dictatorship in Belarus, [and especially] President [Boris] Yeltsin, who would give strong remarks about [President] Lukashenka, but then follow a policy of practically supporting this person. Some structures make a shy effort to explain their previous activity as an attempt to reform Belarus, with the help of the strong hand of the political will of Lukashenka, then force him to allow in democracy. This is the naive explanation that I heard the other day in the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy of Sergei Karaganov.

I think that for the educated people of Russia, the educated politicians of Russia, it has become clear that keeping Lukashenka is not a good idea. To predict what is the next step is sufficiently hard. He expelled from his inner circle those who were capable of logical thought [and] were capable of historical facts, and left the opposite types, who then took over him. And that type of company is only capable of awful things. In the meantime, leading politicians disappeared without a trace. It is clear that this was the doing of the hand of the regime, because it is not possible that other criminal structures carry this out in Belarus. But what will be next? Hard to say. The regime constantly exists in a state of agony. Today it enjoys significantly less support than the united opposition. That is why, like a wounded animal, it is ready to carry out with us the aforementioned activities. The opposition has no intention to act with such strong-arm methods. It has no intention of acting so that Belarus would become significantly worse, in that sense that the worse the better. Belarus needs to return to the democratic course that it had found before 1994.

Demokratizacija: But Russia also supported Mečiar, supported Milošević. And nonetheless, they fell. Do you think it is worth looking for inspiration in those events?

Shushkevich: Of course it’s interesting to note that despite the support given by Russia to anti-democratic regimes, apparently on the reasoning of Slavic unity—at least without understanding that pan-Slavism, by the way, is a concept that borders on chauvinism—they fell. But understand what the tragedy is. In the territory of Europe, Russia could not provide assistance to those regimes. Let’s take the act of deploying the Russian peacekeepers [to the Pristina airport in Yugoslavia]. It was a comical act. This “we will act tough” scares nobody. Or take the act by [then Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny] Primakov when he ordered his plane to turn around, back to Russia [when the NATO attack on Yugoslavia began] and other acts to demonstrate non-standard opinion to the world. And now Primakov writes these long essays in Russian political journals arguing that the world is not unipolar and that the United States is not a superpower. That is not serious for a person of that level. That is the carrying out of political assignments for those forces that would like to harm the United States.

In Belarus, we have a specific tragedy. On the one hand, it is good that we have such a long border with Russia, since we have never had a conflict with the Russian people. But on the other hand, the influence of an open border of five hundred

to six hundred kilometers on Belarus is very strong. In the territory of Belarus there are two Russian bases, and that is not based on market conditions, since Belarus gains nothing from them. And ecologically they are not entirely clean, so the influence is stronger than those other examples in Europe. But nonetheless, the world tendency is unambiguous. There is really no other way for Belarus than the democratic way of development. But there is no need to overstep that border when there will be a complete breakdown in Belarus [brought about by people] closing [their] eyes to a dictatorial outrage and Russia supporting the falsification of the elections in Belarus. Before the elections, several Russian figures came to Belarus, such as economists and academics that consider the planned economy the best thing, and political activists such as [illiberal nationalist politician Vladimir] Zhirinovskiy and [Communist Party leader Gennady] Zyuganov, and all supported Lukashenka. I hope that this godless mess will stop, and that with fair elections the policy in Belarus will strongly change towards democratic course. And as for the talk that Belarus is following a unique course, [it] is simply stupidity, even though this is being uttered at the level of Russian academics of high recognition and rank. Nobody has refuted the words of [former British Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher that the third way is the way to the third world.

Demokratizatsiya: Maybe you are right that the events in Yugoslavia and Slovakia do not influence events in Belarus so strongly. But what about Ukraine? If Viktor Yushchenko were to win the elections in October 2004, what influence would that have on the events in Belarus?

Shushkevich: You know, it is even harder to predict what [the] influence on us will [be from] the events in our good neighbor Ukraine. And second, it's probably not good to intervene in the internal affairs of a nation that is looking for a worthy path of development. But when I look at Ukrainian developments, they remind me of Soviet times. On the one hand, the president [rewards] Ukrainian heroes, toilers of agricultural production, in meetings. He says that we will produce a lot of grain, that "we will procure a lot," that Ukraine has become the breadbasket. But on the other hand, there are the developments in Sumy and in Donetsk, and how Lviv reacts in turn, with violent acts. And those criminals that agitate political emotions have never brought anything good. It seems to me that, in Ukraine, it is possible to organize in a secure way such events as political activities, and probably this does not provoke very much the government in Ukraine.

In Belarus, fear rules. But the majority of the people in Belarus have, nonetheless, overcome that fear. That 28 percent of the people that support the united opposition have overcome fear. In Crimea, where all the time it is loudly claimed in Moscow that the majority of the people there are Russian-speakers and not Ukrainians, this has to be a special position. But on the other hand, Ukraine formulates its own position towards relations with Moldova. Fortunately it is declared well, as [Ukrainian President Leonid] Kuchma said, and I like what he declared, that Moldova should be a unified state. And nowhere does he talk about some new structure, of the type that Russia is attempting to implement there—a federalism type state. But it is good that Kuchma, and even Ukraine, adopted that

policy, that he was for democracy, that it is necessary to look for diverse opinions, to carry out political events. In my view, Ukraine is in a state of liquidating that state of fear in the population. This despite events such as that with [slain journalist Georgy] Gongadze [where Kuchma was suspected of taking part]. That is why to predict what will happen in Ukraine is sufficiently hard.

Historically speaking, Ukraine's development will be democratic. It is a great European nation that will find its way. But how long [must we] wait for that development is hard to say. The Soviet mentality there is very strong, poor people are many, the situation is not improving, [as evidenced by] the tragic situation of the miners that are living hand to mouth and with uncertainty. It seems to me that Ukraine did not concentrate its attention on reforms [or] on the market, which is why Ukraine fell further and further behind. But the gross national product began to grow when [Viktor] Yushchenko was prime minister. I am not sure what is happening with him since, because I have not seen the statistical data and what perspective is developing for him. The situation very much resembles what had developed during the Soviet times. So it is hard to say. But I hope that in the very near future, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova will go the way of democratization.

Demokratizatsiya: Let's hope. Do you have a plan after the new liberation of Belarus? You know, of course, very much about the difficult situation in Belarus and the challenges—you were chairman of the Supreme Soviet for about four years. But is there a model for you, so to speak, that you would like to follow after Belarus's liberation? For example, what Mikulaš Dzurinda is doing in Slovakia, what Zoran Djindjić did in Serbia, Mart Laar did in Estonia, or Ivan Kostov did in Bulgaria?

Shushkevich: First of all, I was chairman of the Supreme Soviet for a bit less than three years. If I had had a fourth, things would have been different. You know, to [end] the difficult situation, in Belarus a non-standard way is being sought. We attempted such non-standard way, but it did not work. We can speculate as to why, we worked poorly, there were many factors. But now in Belarus, five parties have united. It is called "five plus" even though since then yet another party has joined. Each one of those parties has its own program, and we can hardly say that those programs are perfect. Of course we can form a pro-market cabinet among these five parties, a social market for example, with attention to the workers, and to try to correct that situation where people who worked all their lives according to the law, even the Soviet law, now have nothing.

You understand that to adopt a classic market model is absolutely excluded. And those models which are recognized—good models such as the Polish one, where they managed to carry it out (and it was quite painful) . . . the main work had already been done by then. At first it was shock therapy, or almost shock, but it did not turn out that way. Shock was separate from the therapy. We can perhaps approach such a condition. I repeat, each party has its own political program, but we have united. So we can expect that the best effect in exiting the state of dictatorship will be this coalition government and a compromise program—a compromise platform that will be adopted by those parties that end up

having a majority in parliament. They will need to formulate that program. Without question, that program will be market-based. All five parties stand on that principle. But which will be the social program, which will be the policy on taxation on medium-sized businesses—which is a big worry of mine—the problem of the formation of a middle class in Belarus, those questions will develop with much difficulty. But those parties that united with us, they agree to establish a middle class and to serve a middle class in Belarus, not this “criminal capitalism,” which, to a certain extent, exists in Russia, but such a capitalism which serves the people, and I would not like to idealize things since it will be quite difficult as our philosophy is not a capitalistic one, but the attempt must be made to create it. I still think that to awake interest in agriculture is also difficult. Look at what is happening in Poland. We are attempting, even if theoretically, we are organizing conferences, discussing this issue, to look for a way to normalize the situation in agriculture.

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In Belarus there are contrasts—there are *oblasti* such as Hrodna and Brest—which will find their way through a trade-based economy. But in other *oblasti* there will be more difficulties. And here it seems to me that we need to remember those politicians, namely the German ones, that correct the political economy of the state on the basis of indexes or indicators. We need to create a normal stock exchange, [and] a normal assessment of economic conditions through a securities exchange. But in Belarus that is a novelty; it is delicate. Not like here in Canada where this has been happening for two hundred years. We need to do this from scratch and very quickly, since we do not have time for the establishment of new relations, capitalist ones namely. That is why you have given me a very difficult question. However, in the “five-plus” we understand well enough the essence of the problem. We can discuss this issue, the meaning of the essence of the question. We survived the attempt to exit the situation through communist methods. And even those Communists that have joined us understand that this exiting through central planning that we have today, and through the centrally directed economy, is not possible. That is why inviting professionals of a high rank from other countries needs to be done, such as people from Harvard, or from [Polish economist Leszek] Balcerowicz’s clan, or even people who are close to Yushchenko or [former acting Russian Prime Minister Yegor] Gaidar. And together with those who understand in more detail our internal situation, we need to work out a program, which will not necessarily be like the Five Hundred Day Plan of [Russian economist and political leader Grigory] Yavlinsky. But yes such a program we need to find. And I would like to emphasize one more time: there is understanding, there is the desire, and the debate is a friendly and constructive

one in the formulation of a common platform among these five parties. The challenge is to communicate that to the electorate in an understandable language, and I think we will be successful in finding that way.

Demokratizatsiya: To Washington you brought a message of hope, that Belarus can once again liberate itself on the basis of the union of those five parties and several NGOs. What is the latest on that? I heard from you that the popularity of Lukashenka is declining, whereas the popularity of your coalition is increasing.

Shushkevich: Those figures from the sources that are quite professional and can be trusted, are such. Before the presidential elections, [around] September 2001, about 45 to 48 percent of the electorate supported Lukashenka. He could not obtain a majority of the vote on the first round. But falsification was such that he got 80 percent of the vote. Those kinds of things just don't happen in the world, and that is why he just demonstrated to everyone that he is a swindler, he and his inner circle. So it [actually] approached 50 percent, and only on the second round could the protest vote have swept aside Lukashenka. But in the second round there was total falsification.

But today the situation is categorically different. The political scientists were saying that you can have a victory if that victory is convincing. The tendency of change is such that today the adherents to the united democratic opposition, even if it is not well known since the media is in the hands of the state, are 28 percent. And the adherents to Lukashenka are 20 percent. And those figures continue to change. The thing is, there is such an electorate for Lukashenka that is in the dark, that is cowed, that does not understand what is happening. [That electorate] apparently is from 16 to 20 percent. This is not yet our favorite electorate. The remaining electorate we need to turn [it] around, and we will turn around. And in those regions that were for Lukashenka, for example Homel, there are some incredible statistics coming out. For example, it was reported that 89 and 90 percent of the voters in Homel, from an opinion poll conducted with 2,300 people there, declared that under no circumstances would they vote for Lukashenka. You know, by profession I am a physicist, and I am afraid that such opinion poll that was conducted was not very professional. It could have been off by 10 to 20 percent. These figures are almost unreal. However, what is clear is that the majority of the population of Belarus under no circumstances will vote for Lukashenka.

That is why if the international community acted with conviction—countries such as the United States, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia—if they truly insisted that Belarus implement its international obligations as signed by Lukashenka [at the 1999 OSCE summit] in Istanbul, those four conditions, or even just one of them, namely verified and just elections, they will instantly solve the problem at hand. But there is also another postulate, that a dictatorship is never destroyed through elections, and conditions were never really similar to ours.

A dictatorship is always self-isolating. Belarus is strongly isolated from the rest of the world. But now it is difficult to be in that kind of isolation. The tragedy is that even if the rest of the world would support democratic princi-

ples in Belarus, what concerns Russia is a big problem, and that is the biggest border for us. And I still hope that Russia would [support democratic principles in Belarus]. As Sergei Karaganov said at that council (at which I asked him if I could quote him, and he said of course) . . . that the third presidential period will be a tragic one for Belarus, as well as for anyone who will take it. I think that that is a serious prediction, and keeping in mind the status of that council in the Russian state, its chairman cannot make a light declaration. I think it should make those who surround Lukashenka think carefully. You know, the tragedy here is also that it is a criminal organization, and it is obvious that the path on which Milošević traveled is the same path that Lukashenka is traveling on. He understands this, and he will do everything possible so that it will not happen to him.

Demokratizatsiya: Or Nicolae Ceaușescu's path?

Shushkevich: It will be more modest with us. Belarus is a more northern country than Romania. The emotional factor will be weaker.

Demokratizatsiya: Your theory, when you were chairman of the Supreme Soviet, was that it was necessary to build a national self-awareness in Belarus before the country and the state could be built. You mentioned that it was necessary to increase the level of what can be called "Belarusness" before other steps could be made. Do you believe that was the correct course, or do you believe it could have been done differently?

Shushkevich: You know, Fredo, I never spoke of "Belarusness" or the need to strengthen a tendency to be more Belarusian than whatever else. I said that the people who are Belarusian, who want to think of themselves as Belarusian, who wanted to teach their children their national language, they could find in Belarus such possibility. Moreover, this policy was identical for Belarusians as for Russians, as for Jews, Poles, and whoever else lived in the territory of Belarus. Many times when I speak about Belarusians, I am speaking about the citizens of the Republic of Belarus.

And you know, the most amazing thing, that this factor of oppressing Belarusians, of closing Belarusian language schools and the absence of the former Belarusian educational establishment, does not only bother the Belarusians. It also bothers the Russians that live in Belarus. Look at what is going on. Realistically speaking, only a certain percentage of the people speak the Belarusian language well. But in opinion polls, and even in the referendum that Lukashenka carried out, to the question "Which do you consider your mother language to be?" more than 73 percent of the citizens of Belarus mentioned that Belarusian is their mother tongue. This shows that people are indignant toward those that are pathetic plebeians, those who enslave themselves before Russia. He that wants to show that he is more Russian than all the children of Russian culture and who attempts to impose this horrid point of view on the rest. That is called a protest. And if he is not capable of learning his Belarusian language to a decent level, then the rest will demonstrate that this can be easily done.

Incidentally, I was shocked at what I saw in Canada. I saw the people here that I have known for a while. They organized my meeting with President Clinton. In that meeting, we attempted to find some young people who understood English so they could do simultaneous translation, people who were able to study the language to the point of understanding it plus the essence of the issue. And the tragedy is that these people, very talented people by their own volition, emigrated, because here they can obtain a worthy education, and here they can perfect their Belarusian language. That is a paradox. In Poland, Canada, and the United States you can study. But in Belarus a person cannot obtain an education in Belarusian. The world understands this situation. And about this education about which we speak, which some in Belarus degrade as “capitalist” or “chauvinistic” and so forth, is really normal and pluralistic. And our present Belarusian leadership has finally realized it, because the person that was appointed as procurator finished three courses at the law faculty. Very odd. The person that was appointed as the main banker and who confuses inflation with investment acquired a light financial education. Though of course they are all very devoted, and that’s why we have this effect. Think about it. Today, one Russian ruble is more than 70 Belarusian rubles, if you consider denomination. They both came out of the Soviet ruble. The loss of value of the Belarusian ruble was 700 times more than loss of value of the Russian ruble. The heads of foreign governments often note that this is simply a disease, which you have to treat in a surgical way and heal. And yet we have those that simply, in a burlesque way, say that Belarus is on the right track. That morass is with us. But fortunately it has also become clear with the majority of the population.

Demokratizatsiya: Historically speaking, if you could go back to 1991 and do the reforms all over again, what would you do differently?

Shushkevich: I think we took an absolutely correct course, given the situation. And we tackled a series of serious economic and political problems. First of all, a government of laws. Second, getting rid of the nuclear weapons without any conditions [and] the introduction of private property in the land—which was a very difficult question indeed. And the *sovkhos* and *kolkhos* communist majority in the Supreme Soviet supported [it] for a year and a half. This is what we were fighting for. Also, we had international recognition, including the visit of President Clinton to Belarus. So not bad for less than three years. I think we even surpassed Russia and other former Soviet republics in that time frame. And we somewhat sowed for the future.

But we did not think that those unreasonable people, who do not understand anything about economics, except for what they did at the *sovkhos* and *kolkhos*, would have the ability to unite and impose their unreasonable project on society. They are all the same people. These people managed to keep their role in society, and once again they rule Belarus. This *sovkhos-kolkhos* communist Belarus. The real Communists, who do things by the book, defend the working class, are a party of the parliamentary type. They separated themselves from the Communist Party, another party that continues to exist in Belarus, a party that is more Marxist than the CPSU in my opinion.

That is what happened. I don't think that more could have been done. Maybe we could have done more consolidation. Besides, we did not attack them, we just had separate incidents. People that all the time suffered because of the repression of Belarusness, they demanded more, they demanded punishment against those that carried out the reprisals against Belarusness. But we did not go the way of lustration. We were brave enough to understand that you cannot do this in Belarus.

Demokratizatsiya: No lustration?

Shushkevich: No, this was not the Czech Republic, where there was a clear national treachery by the top leadership. It was also not the Baltic republics. In Belarus there was a different system. And we developed certain restraints. More than anything, we achieved independence without shedding a single drop of blood after 200 years of Russian domination. That is why I don't think we could have gone any further. But probably we did not pay enough attention to explanation—it was difficult to explain. Two or three years are not enough. That is why we need to continue that course, that course of allowing the sale of land, of the introduction of mortgages, the possibility of credit for agriculture. These are elements in the programs of those parties that have unified.

I do not want to be idealistic, I foresee important difficulties. I foresee those youngsters that will tear forward and ask, "why are reforms proceeding so slowly?" But they forget that we have more than two and a half million pensioners in a population of less than ten million. And under those conditions, reforms can be effective under the establishment of guarantees to foreign investors, the possibility to establish those guarantees when foreign investment begins to appreciate the value of Belarus. But today, shamefully, nobody can go and invest in a country where anything goes, where there is no rule of law. That is why I think Belarus can become a hopeful place for foreign investment, because we are a disciplined people who love to work, not driven by heated emotions. That is why that capital that will be invested in Belarus will quite quickly increase the market conditions for further investment. And you know, in that five-party coalition [that] we unified not even half a year ago, we were for a long time together, though a larger quantity of parties. In the end, we have partners [and] we can invest in this kind of business or even organize a round table. Then we can calmly discuss how to reform Belarus, all of us—from the Belarusian Popular Front to the Communists.

Demokratizatsiya: As I recall, at the beginning of the 1990s, there were two big problems in Belarus that made it more difficult for you to reform [there] than in other cases. First, authority was not well defined. There was this Soviet-era Constitution, a Soviet-era parliament of which you were chair, and then there was a *nomenklatura*-type, Vyacheslau Kebich, in the office of prime minister. Maybe you simply did not have enough power to carry out the reforms as you saw fit? Second, there seemed to be a big fight between all the democratic factions, arguing between you and Belarusian Popular Front leader Zianon Pazniak, for example, on the speed of reforms. Maybe you did not pay enough attention to your

common enemies, the communists still entrenched, the parliament with a large communist majority, etc.?

Shushkevich: Of the paradoxes, first and foremost was the one of Belarusian government structure. I was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet according to a Constitution that has no such thing as division of powers. In the Constitution there was a situation, where the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia—and later in the Republic of Belarus itself—has the right to consider any question and take all the final decisions. So it was a sort of executive and judicial and other power collectively, and I was chairman of it. The second paradox, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet and the chairman of the Presidium

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of the Supreme Soviet—that was also me—plus the head of state, which was also me, does not have practically any power to speak of. Because the decision on a question goes before the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, those seventeen people of which I would rather work with four or five, and then to the Supreme Soviet, where 82 percent were of a pro-commu-

nist conviction. And after the August 1991 coup, it was an obligatory question.

Kebich took out his name from the running when he could not get a majority. Because according to our Constitution then, and also according to the regulations of the Supreme Soviet, if my candidacy failed once again, then it could not be reconsidered. But neither could Kebich's. At that time began this mess, this insane asylum without power. Kebich in fear withdrew his candidacy, and I was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet. Such was the situation. So I remained as the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, but having absolutely no personal power, not even to achieve what I wanted in the bureaucracy. I could only be an adviser, and that took place with people who also had no power. So I had to do things by myself. Moreover, decisions had to be made in a Supreme Soviet where the majority was not of my thinking. As far as patience and steel temper were concerned, I displayed enough of them. Any radicalism would have been very dangerous.

You speak about enemies. Let's better refer to them as opponents. These opponents were very serious. They were from the Right and from the Left. From the Left were the communists, the majority. And from the Right my opponent was the Belarusian Popular Front. It went to an unbelievable scale, that in a month we adopted the declaration of independence. The Belarusian Popular Front, which all its life had embodied the best traditions of the fighters for independence of Belarus, staged a sign of protest by walking out. Why? Because there is an article in that declaration that we will continue working on a Union Treaty. That article was the result of a compromise. The declaration of independence was put forward by a communist. And from thirty-eight articles, twelve were amended. I

implemented the editing of five articles. And in that assembly where I was were all the old former communist hacks. And we found a compromise, where we included sufficiently precise articles where the independence of Belarus was safeguarded. And under those compromise conditions, the communists voted in favor. But the Belarusian Popular Front walked out. And today, the farce of Zianon Pazniak and of his colleagues is that they walked out, and for what? The communists were the ones that voted for it. It was a farce, and there is no other way to describe it. They walked out because they wanted to demonstrate that they were more radical toward the independence of Belarus. Such giant steps are not warranted. We will achieve nothing if we go on the offensive that quickly. However, a year later, when the question was about converting that declaration into constitutional law, they all said, "we adopted the declaration then so we will vote for this now." Even I already had doubts as to whether it would pass. Because I understood that this was dangerous, this compromise that was taken with the communists, I was not sure which position the Belarusian Popular Front would take. I had begun to doubt. But in the end they all voted for it, without emotions.

The second position, about which we also readily forget, is the signing of the Belovezhsky Forest agreement. When I went back to Minsk, there was one person speaking against it, Valery Tikhinia, saying that it was bad. He is a competent legal expert. He had risen to the level of the ideology secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of [Soviet] Byelorussia, so he believed that he had already achieved perfection and now all this would be liquidated. So he spoke against. And Zianon Pazniak and his colleagues also absolutely condemned the Belovezhsky agreement—forgetting that for the first time in two hundred years, Russia recognized the independence of Belarus—saying that the agreement smelled of some kind of Union Treaty. There were a series of things that were to be decided later, such as the armed forces, etc. But they screamed, "this is a new Union Treaty," true, a weaker one. They wanted to show that they are holier than the Pope. I hope that in Belarus today there is a recognition that this situation finds its place. This is similar to Lukashenka, where there is a part of the electorate that will not change him for anything, and they are, in my opinion, an unhappy sort of people who don't know what a good life is, a life as a human being. They are victims of our communist past. In this vein, at the Popular Front there were also fanatics who believed Pazniak to be a saint, and that everyone else was bad. How to find an exit to this, when it is difficult to liquidate this logic? And in the world they understood this recipe, and we knew this recipe, and attempted to achieve this recipe, and we have the conviction that it will work, which is a proportional electoral system. At least partly so. Look, in the last more or less democratic elections, the Popular Front did not obtain a single seat in parliament, even though their support was then about 14 percent in society. Why? Because the electoral system was a first-past-the-post type. So the portrait of society and the portrait of the parliament are different. And we have to strive for one thing, for that open debate to be reflected in a government composed by proportionality, for those people with different opinions to debate inside parliament and not in the streets. A parliament that would be accessible. That is the ideal variant,

but I am an idealist, a romantic maybe. But I hope that within my lifetime I can witness it.

Demokratizatsiya: I think so, I am sure of it. Witnessing Belarus liberating itself for a second time. My question is, a major event in recent history was the Belovezhsky Forest agreement. What details, anecdotes, or other interesting moments that are not very well known can you share with us?

Shushkevich: There have been already many anecdotes shared, it is hard to think of new ones. There are many people that ask questions, such as Leon Aron the other day, on whether there was any drinking. The agreement was the result of a scribbling work. We did not have a pre-prepared agreement. Throughout the night worked a very strong team, such main figures as Gaidar, as [Yeltsin adviser Sergei] Shakhrai, and also serious people from the Belarusian and Ukrainian governments. They worked all night, but not a single article there was pre-prepared. We met with clear ideas of what to do, but ended up with something different. And all day, literally every ten or fifteen minutes, we returned to the articles that in the end we had not adopted, that kind of work under such extreme conditions that I cannot to this day, nor any international legal expert, make any reprimands against that agreement. It turned out to be a perfect, a very perfect document. And when the communists at first started to scream that how dared we destroy the Soviet Union, I told them to read it, and asked what they proposed instead. I took an article and read it. What are they trying to achieve? So the question was practically decided. It was in that variant.

There was the work based on the cooperation of people who were split on the basis of beliefs and approaches. And of course, each of the main participants there was pursuing his goal. Neither [president of Soviet Ukraine Leonid] Kravchuk nor I ever said we wanted independence for Ukraine and Belarus, but that was very well understood. Yeltsin never said he wanted to get rid of Gorbachev and become the undisputed leader of Russia, but that was very well understood. But Yeltsin underestimated what a high price this would have. He would later have to bathe in his guilt as a person who had dissolved “great Russia.” I think that the dissolution was correct. Not a drop of blood was spilled. We made a civilized divorce, and there was no other way. To glue together that system, as was Gorbachev’s goal, to create a federation or other things, he lost that moment at the beginning of 1991. I think that if he had proposed that at the beginning of the year it would have been possible, a more substantial confederation than the CIS—the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Well, that’s about it for anecdotes, since most of my anecdotes are about the divorce program. But I do have one more anecdote that I think is interesting. I invited Yeltsin and Kravchuk to go hunting. Yeltsin likes to hunt, but then he did not come, he did not want to. Kravchuk and [Ukrainian prime minister Vitold] Fokin came hunting. But Fokin shot a little wild boar. And when I asked how the hunting had gone, Fokin mentioned, “Yes, Kravchuk is a very good hunter, he cut the rope that was holding the boar.” I don’t know if the story was true of made up by the lead hunter. I was [told] . . . that he successfully shot the pig. Later there

was an interesting event when [Lithuanian anti-Soviet leader and later President Vytautas] Landsbergis came . . .

Demokratizatsiya: What? Landsbergis was there too?

Shushkevich: No, he came half a year later. He was very interested to see the Belovezhsky Forest. He asked if we had been concerned for our security, and how we had taken that risk during the December 1991 summit there. Karaganov also asked if we were not afraid of Gorbachev, and how could we not be afraid, knowing who was Gorbachev. But we also had good guards, and if Gorbachev sent two regiments of soldiers, so to speak, we could have opposed them with four well-qualified ones. The security conditions had been considered, by Yeltsin and his colleagues and also by our own people, by Sherkovsky, who died around that time, I would approach him and ask how things were, and he would say, "I guarantee your security here."

Demokratizatsiya: You have mentioned before that Gorbachev did not want to permit a summit between you, Kravchuk, and Yeltsin.

Shushkevich: No, I mentioned that he apparently knew we were meeting, and he apparently did not like it.

Demokratizatsiya: But he did call for a meeting of the State Council for that day in Moscow, which was unusual.

Shushkevich: Yes, but we did not go because that was illogical. So I told him: "You know Mikhail Sergeevich, thank you but we have other business to attend. I cannot go. That day I am busy." That was the answer. Yes, that happened, but that was a factor that does not deserve serious attention. [Communist Party leader and president of Soviet Kazakhstan Nursultan] Nazarbaev did go to Moscow to see Gorbachev, even though we had invited him also to the Belovezhsky Forest, and at that time I regretted that he had not come. But later he made many declarations that he was happy that he had not signed the Belovezhsky agreement, which I think is a rather absurd political argument. He said that the *troika* signed this but not the fourth, that the three Slavic republics are in opposition to the Muslim republics. In that case, thank goodness he did not come. But even later in [the summit of] Alma-Ata, he said that we should not consider it as the Belovezhsky agreement, but as the Alma-Ata agreement. So having included an additional five republics, we signed that it was there where the CIS was formed. But the world did not really take note of that, nobody did, since it's not possible to achieve this twice, you understand.

Demokratizatsiya: I do remember when Nazarbaev had been upset after the Belovezhky agreement.

Shushkevich: Yes, and he said that, "How, if we all have equal rights?" So it was clear that there was no other way. It was a logical way for the dismemberment of the Union.

Demokratizatsiya: There are two historical variants of the Belovezhsky agreement. One is that the three leaders met there already with the idea to dissolve the USSR and become independent republics. The second variant is that you met without this idea, and only then the idea arose spontaneously in the course of the discussions.

Shushkevich: Look, the story went like this. All those defamers and sympathizers of imperial communism put forward this version, that we met with suitcases full of money, or even better, suitcases full of money gotten from the West, and sat by the Polish border since we were afraid that indignant people would drive us out, and escape to Poland, and that we knew in advance that we would dissolve the Soviet Union. That is absolute rubbish. It is the fruit of a sick communist declaration. We met in order to discuss how to together solve the most difficult problems. One of them was how to survive the winter. Being a sympathizer of the market economy, and Gaidar even more so, but to go through the market way, as Yegor Timurevich [Gaidar] proposed, a person I very much admire, then for us it would be simply ruin. And that is why we had a very representative group, our delegation, that wanted to persuade Russia to continue the supply of energy, despite the fact that much of it was wasted, and despite that we had no money. They argued that we needed to still live together.

But when we began to discuss this question, I met with Kravchuk right before the meeting and spoke to him a bit. "If we decided to get together, it does not make sense not to go further." "To go further" meant to decide a political question. That question was hanging in the air, but people were afraid to point it out. So when the three of us met and asked what is to be done, it was needed to declare that the USSR would stop its existence, as a geopolitical reality. You know, it is a controversial question. I was sure that the first to say that phrase was [Yeltsin adviser Gennady] Burbulis. But he is such a person that is very flexible, more flexible than playdough. But today Leonid Kravchuk says that he came up with that phrase first. I don't want to argue. A cunning journalist gave twenty-six identical questions at the same time to Kravchuk and to me. And he obtained twenty-five identical answers on the issue of the Belovezhsky agreement. But as to the twenty-sixth question, as to who said that phrase first, I answered that I was not sure 100 percent, but presumably it was Burbulis. But Kravchuk said that he had said it. But when we were with Burbulis in a show called "How it Was" in Russian television, I said, "You know Burbulis, I think it was you who said that phrase." And Burbulis answered, "No, no, no, it probably was not me, I don't recall." You know, the political situation in Russia was such that it was better for him not to remember. But as far as I am concerned, I am 99 percent certain that Burbulis uttered that phrase.

You know, all there immediately agreed. The question came to me, "Are you ready to sign this?" and I said, "Yes, I will sign." Then Kravchuk, "Yes, ready to sign." "Well then, guys, let's formulate the concept of the Belovezhsky agreement." So we created the bones, upon which we needed to place some meat. And those thirteen articles are that meat, and the fourteenth is the declaration of intent. And I will always very well remember that phrase, that the USSR as a geopolit-

ical reality of the present time is stopping [*prekrashaet*]. Not “has stopped” [*prekratil*] nor “stops” [*prekratit*], but *is stopping*. So it was in a state of the stopping of that condition. And when we finished ratifying that agreement, then it had stopped that existence. This despite the mentality. You know, there are old people that are not convinced that they do not live in the Soviet Union.

Demokratizatsiya: Novo-Ogarevo was also a historical process that almost built a new USSR. Of course, shortly thereafter came the coup and the collapse so we understand very little about Novo-Ogarevo. But speaking frankly, this was also a major historical moment for all the countries of the former Soviet Union. We had a big historical article

in *Demokratizatsiya*, “Chess-Like Diplomacy at Novo-Ogarevo” [Spring 1994] written by Yuri Baturin, then a legal expert participating there and later Yeltsin’s national security adviser. Do you have any anecdotes about Novo-Ogarevo?

“I was not a member of the nomenklatura, never finished Party school, did not have a Marxist education, even though I did have to take many courses at the university on Marxism-Leninism.”

Shushkevich: You know, I do not really have anecdotes, but I was there. My status there

was as a member of the USSR state council, at that time the state council had gathered, it was very peculiar. I was not a member of the *nomenklatura*, never finished Party school, did not have a Marxist education, even though I did have to take many courses at the university on Marxism-Leninism, which was our required condition at that time. There was no other way. And there at Novo-Ogarevo, as far as I could tell, the only other university type there, I mean as a member of the state council, was [president of Soviet Armenia Levon] Ter-Petrossian. There was nobody else. Because if we were to speak about [president of Soviet Kirgizia] Askar Akayev, he had been the president of the Academy of Sciences [of Kirgizia], which is *nomenklatura* of the Central Committee of the CPSU, whereas I was not a member of this one.

And to Novo-Ogarevo came Gorbachev, came [Gorbachev adviser Vladimir] Kudryavtsev, who was the chairman of the all-Union society “Knowledge,” and I was the chairman of the Minsk city “Knowledge.” An academic, a legal expert, I think that he was a person of very high intellect. Also came [Gorbachev adviser Georgy] Shakhnazarov, who unfortunately passed away recently, whose son is a famous cinematographer. But unfortunately there really isn’t that much I can say about these people. Some of them wrote some memoirs, such as Shakhnazarov. So they gave us the new project for the Union Treaty. I skimmed through it, and said, “Esteemed Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev], you are calling a confederation what according to the books I have had access to, is really described as a strict federation, and that’s why let’s call things as they are. It will not be comfortable to report this at the [Belarusian] Supreme Soviet. I can only

report this to the Supreme Soviet as your own personal opinion, which I, I am sorry to say, do not rightly share. I am used to logical thought.” Gorbachev was listening to this. Then Yeltsin stood up and said, “Generally speaking, this treaty is good for nothing.” Then Gorbachev stood up and left. Then, and I remember this exactly, it was [Communist Party leader and president of Soviet Uzbekistan Islam] Karimov who first said, then other representatives of other republics followed, “Stanislav Stanislavovich, you and Boris Nikolaevich [Yeltsin] are pitting us against Mikhail Sergeevich.” So Yeltsin said, “Let’s go, Stanislav Stanislavovich. Let’s go to Gorbachev.” And so we went. And on the way, I invited Yeltsin to go hunting sometime to the Belovezhky Forest. So we approach Gorbachev, who was offended with us, and said, “Mikhail Sergeevich, this is an open, transparent dialogue.” Gorbachev served us some very nice cognac, which I liked very much and saw it like some kind of salvation because I wasn’t spoiled by good cognac. So we drank a glass of cognac and Gorbachev came back. The conversation continued in such course as “our people are disciplined, I will take back this variant of the Treaty, introduce it at our Supreme Soviet the next day.” The reaction was such. What shocked me then was the old Soviet style which was at work there. It shocked me, but it also made me sad.

You understand, I absolutize the academic mindset. For me, academics [and] physicists are saintly people. I personally knew well academic [Aleksandr] Prokhorov, the Nobel laureate. He was a great physicist, a supreme teacher. I was personally well acquainted with Nikolai Nikolaevich Semyonov, the great physicist and chemist. For these academics I would be ready to do anything. I spent months with academics in Tomsk, for example. And here [in Novo-Ogarevo], the academics, such as Kudryavtsev, and those in high government near Gorbachev, such as Shakhnazarov, they would quietly say, “Mikhail Sergeevich, you are formulating a political concept, but we need to ensure this legalistically.” That is shameful. How can you ensure this legalistically if it does not correspond to the law? Then I understood that these people behave almost like those surrounding Lukashenka. What he says goes with those around him, such as the chairman of the constitutional court, the procurator general, even our academics. They immediately say it is according to the law, it is right, and that he’s always right. This analogy continues. That is when I understood what a great abyss lay between the hard sciences and the humanitarian sciences in the Soviet Union. I cannot reproach any academics of the hard sciences—the greatness of [Soviet physicist-turned-dissident Andrei] Sakharov, for example. But the humanitarian sciences, well, that’s a different story. That is why I am not surprised by Primakov’s article. They are devoid of a healthy sense. I am also not impressed by [Soviet-era economist Leonid] Abalkin’s article. It seems to me that he is a good economist. I heard his speeches many times during the Soviet era—a very progressive person. But now, his ideas seem from an elementary textbook. It is obvious that when political attachments take precedence over scientific considerations, that is terrible.

Demokratizatsiya: Last question. It is quite coincidental that today is the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It appears that you were

[part of] many historical moments. And in one of those, you taught Russian to Lee Harvey Oswald when he lived in Minsk. I know you have spoken about all the details to the mass media and others, but I cannot avoid asking you if there are other anecdotes you would like to share with us about that episode?

Shushkevich: Fredo, you know my level of English . . .

Demokratizatsiya: You understand much better than you admit.

Shushkevich: I very poorly understand and speak English actually. Maybe then I understood a little better. Because at that time I was finishing my graduate studies and all the time I was translating articles from English to Russian. I had to for my dissertation. The story went like this. I finished my graduate studies, but I had not yet defended my dissertation. I was not striving for that yet, and that is why my salary for scientific work was very small. Then they invited me to a factory for a big salary—big by Soviet standards at the time. So I agreed to go. It turned out that at the section in the plant where they manufactured electronic goods. I happened to speak the best English there—which says a lot about how the level of English of everyone else was. And around that time Lee Harvey Oswald appeared, I am not sure from where. It was understood there that every person had to engage in social work. I did not really like that kind of noisy social work. I had an assignment of this kind, which was a proposal to improve operations. When the workers believe that the engineers are working badly, I advised them what to do. I had to give evaluations, which was very uncomfortable since they often would burden me with really stupid things. And then came this Party official—I was not in the Party—and told me they would give me some other social work, that they would entrust me with something: “We have this American, he knows a little Russian. We would like for you to teach him Russian. Together with you will work another person.” I never was left alone with Lee Harvey Oswald. That other person was Aleksandr Rubenchik, this person that four years after me also graduated from the physics department, though I had already finished my graduate work and was therefore more higher-up, but Sasha [Rubenchik] knew English more or less like I did.

So we were busy with Lee Harvey Oswald. He would come around 6 PM after work, from the EKB—the Experimental Construction Bureau—and we would teach him Russian. Generally speaking, we did not understand each other badly, and we had textbooks, dictionaries, cards, things like that. Conversationally, he knew Russian more or less. He would not get the emphasis on the words correctly . . . he knew Russian sufficiently weakly. For me it was forbidden, as it was with Sasha, they would say: “Don’t ask where he came from, who he is, why, just discuss Russian language.” That’s how it was in those days, Party business. In the course of a month, the lessons were about six or eight, probably less than ten, two or three times per week. Later, he began to use declensions and conjugations okay. And the emphasis on the words got better. He had begun with “*Ya dumáyu, on dumáet, my dumáem*” and later became “*ya dúmayu, on dúmaet, my dúmaem*.” We had clarified the relations, and that was all. He was a very careful person. It was obvious he did not look like our people, because even with the most primitive Sovi-

et military clothing, for example a Russian hat, the cheapest hat that could be bought, he would always be in very good shape, always all in its place. Where he lived, with whom, how, all those questions, we did not know and we did not ask anybody. But if you want to know my opinion, I don't believe that he shot anybody. I cannot believe that it was this person, with whom I had these short and private lessons. I spent in company with Sasha, with him, for eight to ten hours, maximum. We read such simple texts in Russian, things like the city, like nature, the weather, such textbook things. That's the story.

Demokratizatsiya: When you realized he had shot Kennedy, what then?

Shushkevich: I had not stayed in that job for long. [I had been invited] to a very high and relatively well paid position to a new educational department, set up by a nuclear physicist from Leningrad, and under that department was organized a laboratory of nuclear electronics. [I was] invited to be in charge of this laboratory, and wanted me very much to involve the young good colleagues there. And so I did and we formed a very capable laboratory and capable department, and then I created such a department when from Leningrad came a very active and interesting person. So I worked in this department and by then worked in another plant in Minsk, a defense plant, where we were always commissioning things one way or another, since we did not have a manufacturing facility. And suddenly by radio they reported the story and mentioned Lee Harvey Oswald. And I thought, "That can't be." I was not even aware that he had returned to the United States. But then they reported it again and again, that he had killed President Kennedy. But then when I saw the television, it became clear. Then my acquaintances began with all these jokes. You know, that Party official that I had mentioned, Lebeden, they would tell me, "You know Stanislav, they have already taken Lebeden, and you are still free?" Such were the jokes. But as for me, nobody ever called me or asked me anything. Later came this American writer, Norman Mailer, already when I was chairman of the Supreme Soviet. He already knew the story and requested a meeting with me. But honestly speaking, you know I very much respect writers, but I had never read any of his books. When they told me a famous American writer wanted to meet with me, I right away asked my assistant on culture and science matters, to tell me who is this Norman Mailer. He was very capable, this Sergei Palkovsky, and he told me right away that Mailer had written *The Naked and the Dead*, about war. I asked him to get me his book since I only had one night to read it and he answered that in Minsk there was only one copy and probably the library would not give it out. So I wrote on a piece of paper a request to borrow that book and return it the next day, and so he went next door to the Lenin Library and brought it, so I looked it over that night. So the next day I spoke with this Norman Mailer as a person who really knew his works, and told him that he writes very well about war and that we also had an author that writes very well about war. I asked if he had read *Zhivye i myortvye* [The Living and the Dead], but he had not. I also asked him if he knew about our [writer Vasily] Bykov, but no. Then I understood that I knew more about American literature than he about Soviet one. So we had the interview, and he asked if

I would allow him to take a look at the KGB files on Lee Harvey Oswald. I told him that I could not answer that question but told him the next day I may be able to do something. So I invited a KGB official, introduced him, and asked if it did not interfere with national security. His request had been sufficiently narrow after all. When [Mailer] wrote his book and sent me a copy of it as a present, it was called something like *Oswald's Tale [An American Mystery]*. In the page where he wrote about the interview with me . . . well, there was another author, Richard Rhodes, who in his book about the Holocaust he wrote everything 100 percent as I had told him, he did not change half a word, nor the meaning of half a word of what I said. But about Norman Mailer, he did not write as I said. It looked like he had his own preconceptions. So I have my own peculiar view of modern classics of American literature.