

The Walls That Have Yet to Fall

Belarus as a Mirror of CIS Transition

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Ten years ago several Eastern European communist regimes fell, and the countries of the former Warsaw Pact were freed from Soviet dominance. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 has become the main symbol of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. At that time, most people, whether “key players” (such as George Bush and Helmut Kohl) or ordinary demonstrators in the streets, “were by no means certain of the outcome.”¹ Today, all the ups and downs in the process of transition notwithstanding, there are no doubts that Eastern Europe is “moving West.” It might be debatable whether it is a return to Western Europe or a “new direction” in the development of this region; however, it is a move away from communism and out of Russia’s influence. These countries established democratic freedoms and market economies, had freely elected governments, and proclaimed the priority of liberal values. Three of them joined NATO last spring. It is still unclear how successfully a particular country is undergoing this transition or when a given country will join the European Union, but apparently there is no going back for any of them. The point of no returns lies somewhere behind.

In the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries, the transition is much more complex and in certain aspects contradictory. Officially, all of the countries proclaimed choosing the democratic way and undertook the appropriate first steps—multiple-candidate elections were held, several political parties were founded, independent media were established, and liberal freedoms were declared. However, an enormous gap is evident between the “front stage” and the “back stage” of their political performances.

First, there were alternative models of transformation: the fifteen post-Soviet republics selected different paths and strategies. The Baltic republics turned West and changed rapidly, but that was not the case for Central Asia where “post-Communist leaders promised gradual reform, postponing full democratization

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and privatization until appropriate institutions were in place.”² Those countries have “little reform, continued despotism, and . . . much poverty and corruption.” Some republics received substantial financial support from international organizations (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other financial institutions) and private Western investors; others had to rely on their own exhausted resources.

Second, the desire for transformation and its practical implementation differ greatly, so that actual results do not coincide with theories. CIS-style democracy does not meet Western standards. Even the countries that are under strong U.S. influence—such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine, or Georgia—recently held presidential and/or parliamentary elections marked by numerous violations of rules and democratic norms, and dirty and unfair election campaigns.³ Opposition leader and former prime minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin says that Kazakhstan “suffers from despotism and corruption,”⁴ and the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*’s observer opines that “nobody believes in Nazarbaev’s democracy any more.”⁵

Third, after the first wave of anticommunism, some of the post-Soviet republics are experiencing a “renaissance of Communist influence”: the Ukrainian Communist leader Petro Symonenko ran for the presidency in 1999 and finished second in the runoff, as did Russian Communist Gennady Zyuganov in 2000.⁶ Perhaps, in more substantial terms, it should be considered more as a protest on slow reforms and miserable economics than a vote for Communists. Anyway, present-day Communists have become a more acceptable part of the political scene in several FSU republics.

Fourth, almost all the republics are engaged in the process of nation building, and their politics is characterized mainly by a struggle between civil society-oriented and nationalist forces (parties, movements, and leaders). Because of that, the old division between left and right is not as relevant as it was in 1991.

Fifth, the transition from authoritarianism to democracy led to the growth of political instability and the weakening of state power. As *Izvestiya*’s observer points out, “there are practically no stable states on the territory of the CIS,”⁷ that is, in no state where elections take place on schedule and strictly in accordance with the law, and where law prevails over the personal will of the country’s ruler.

Sixth, as the *Washington Post*’s observer bitterly noted, there is disappointment both in the United States and Russia (and, one might add, in the FSU as a whole) that, instead of a prosperous, capitalist democracy, Russia suffers “continuing poverty, declining lifespans, malign instability, sickening corruption and ruthless robber barons masquerading as reformers.”⁸ Because of these unpredictable results, a great many people are deeply dissatisfied with the current situation and complain that they are missing their former, better life—their life under socialism. This is a general trend that can bring some unpredictable results and slow the post-Soviet transition even more.

Given these trends in the development of the FSU republics, it is not surprising that the Republic of Belarus has been affected in much the same way, showing a clear pattern of all the contradictory processes of postcommunism transition. Belarus is a mirror that reflects the process of transition in the CIS and

demonstrates its pluses and minuses with some local specifics. On one hand, like the other republics, Belarus has become an independent state and chosen democracy and market reforms. Political parties and NGOs were founded, independent media appeared, and people started to enjoy civil freedoms. On the other hand, like many other FSU republics, Belarus experienced a deep economic crisis, a rapidly dropping standard of living, and the loss of its original optimistic hopes for a better market future as the population somehow adjusted to the new, gloomy reality. Belarus's path is a typical case of post-Soviet transition.

However, there are at least two major differences between Belarus and the other FSU republics, which are often discussed in the Western media: the personality of its president, Alexander Lukashenko, and the Belarus–Russia union. Since July 1999, when the internationally recognized official five-year presidential term was over, Western as well as Belarusian opposition media have considered Lukashenko an illegitimate ruler. Lukashenko is also viewed as an enthusiastic promoter of a union or confederation of Belarus and Russia. In effect, Belarus is the first (and so far the only) country openly moving “back toward the past”—toward unification with Russia and, allegedly, toward the restoration of the USSR under another name. Some Russian political leaders said that the Belarus–Russia union treaty signed by Lukashenko and Yeltsin in December 1999 was not legitimate because Lukashenko had signed it on behalf of the people of Belarus.⁹ The key question is what the governing factors influencing such political and social development in Belarus are, and to what extent these factors may be at work in the other republics of the FSU.

In this article, I will (a) describe the current situation in Belarus, (b) compare and contrast it with the situation in neighboring countries, mainly Russia and Ukraine, and (c) explain the underlying factors in current Belarus development that in many aspects are similar to such factors in the other FSU countries.

One theory is that “the most important wall” that fell in Eastern Europe ten years ago—“the invisible wall of fear inside people,” as Joachim Gauck, a former East German dissident, called it and the wall of social inertia still have not fallen in Belarus.¹⁰ Because of these “invisible walls” the situation is still uncertain. The remaining barriers have significantly cooled U.S.–Belarus official relations in the last few years and may determine the character of those relations in the near future. As U.S. Ambassador to Belarus Daniel Speckhard said in Minsk in November 1999, if “Belarus tears down the remaining walls, the United States will be ready to forge new and enduring ties between our people, societies, and economies.”¹¹ However, it is unclear whether or not this will happen in the foreseeable future.

The second theory is that only the new younger generation socialized under perestroika and later (those who were approximately fourteen or fifteen years of age or less in 1985) are capable of viewing positively the dramatic changes in post-Soviet society and of taking responsibility for their own lives. Those middle-aged and older, the theory goes, either reject the transition altogether because they still have a socialist mentality (the worst scenario), or reluctantly accept the transition and more or less adjust to it (the best scenario).

The Paradox of the Current Situation

The Major Issue for Belarus

The major problem in analyzing the current development of Belarus is that it is difficult to single out one overarching problem, embracing all the other related issues. On the surface, Belarus seems to be moving back toward the Soviet past but there are significant signs of revolt against that trend among some groups of the population. (It is not exactly a move back toward socialism, because the move may actually return the country to a point even earlier than the late Soviet period of its modern history.) Public opinion polls conducted by Western and Belarusian scholars have found much passivity and political indifference among the population.¹²

Polls usually give a static picture of a particular period of development, or as Herbert Blumer stated, they tell us “where people stand.” Surveys are descriptive; they do not disclose the causes of trends or probe deep into the underlying processes. One needs special epistemological tools to analyze poll data within an appropriate theoretical framework. To some extent, the results will be a reconstruction of social reality, as the data will be interpreted within a definite methodological approach and therefore cannot pretend to be “absolutely objective and unbiased.”¹³ However, this is the traditional method of interpretation of empirical data in social sciences. Our comparative approach combining economic, social, political, and cultural elements seems to be useful for analysis of the complicated and interrelated problems of transition in the FSU. It makes clear that it is impossible to resolve any political issue (for example, fair and free elections) without taking into account related economic and social issues in the CIS (social security, employment, historical tradition, and so on).

Going back to present-day Belarus, the comprehensive approach suggests that the real problem of transition cannot reside in a personality, even a powerful president or a prime minister. The real problem is the social and political postcommunist aftermath that has not yet been overcome either in Belarus or elsewhere in the FSU. Perhaps the social legacy of the previous era will go away for good only when the older and middle-aged generations—carriers and social forces of the past—also go away once and for all.

Public Opinion Polls as Measurement of Public Opinion

From 28 April to 7 May 1999 the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) conducted the first national survey in Belarus.¹⁴ In total, 1,012 face-to-face interviews of adults (eighteen years and older) were conducted; the overall estimated margin of error was 2.8 percent with a 95 percent confidence level. Unlike many other surveys in the FSU, the IFES results are available to the public for further discussion. I will analyze the results of that survey and compare them (where possible) with the results of a similar IFES survey conducted in Ukraine in June 1999 (there the national sample was 1,200 interviews, and the margin of error was 2.9 percent at 95 percent confidence).¹⁵ I will also use for comparison some published results of surveys conducted in Russia and Belarus by the Unit-

ed States Information Agency and VTsIOM (the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion). Such comparisons help put the Belarusian experience in the context of the experiences of other FSU countries.

Some of the results of the Belarus survey are surprising: Much of the population support Lukashenko; some are satisfied with the country's situation and even consider Belarus a democratic country.¹⁶ Can we accept these answers as reflecting reality? Do they mean that Belarusians are enjoying their life and approve of the current social changes (that is, the reverse movement)? To some extent, the answer will depend on when the survey was conducted and how the questions were formulated. To be sure, Belarusians are not satisfied with many things in their life, but the level of their satisfaction is still higher than that in some neighboring republics.

General Situation

Let us briefly look at how Belarusians evaluated their general situation in 1999. Like other republics of the FSU, Belarus is still suffering from an economic crisis: its GDP is lower than in 1989. It is estimated that the standard of living is four to five times lower than in Russia and roughly comparable to the standard of living in Ukraine. A Soviet-style planned economy still prevails. According to official data, the state owns all but 20 percent of industry and businesses (private industry is mostly limited to the service and trade sectors). The majority of the population reports having difficulty making ends meet; the average monthly salary is approximately \$40. In such an environment, it comes as no surprise that the majority of respondents report being dissatisfied with the current state of Belarus.

Those who are very satisfied with the situation represent a group with specific characteristics. Among them, 60 percent are over the age of sixty-five, 38 percent assess themselves as being of a moderate income level, and 33 percent are

TABLE 1. Satisfaction with Situation in Belarus (%)

	Belarus, 1999 (n = 1,012)	Ukraine, 1999 (n = 1,200)
Very satisfied	5	0
Fairly satisfied	21	2
Somewhat dissatisfied	40	29
Very dissatisfied	27	65
Don't know	6	2
Refused/NA	1	—
	100	98

Source: Larissa Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 11.

Note: The question asked was, "Are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with the situation in Belarus, at this time—would you say you are very satisfied, fairly satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?"

in the lower-than-moderate income bracket; 50 percent live in villages or small towns. Among those who report being fairly satisfied, 28 percent are older than sixty-five. In addition, more women than men report being fairly satisfied. Unlike the group reporting that they are very satisfied (those who reside mostly in villages or small towns), the members of the group reporting that they are fairly satisfied are almost as likely to come from the city as from a village.

A close relationship exists between the age of the respondent and his or her level of satisfaction with the current situation. Thus, among the respondents aged eighteen to twenty-four, 18 percent are satisfied with the situation. Among twenty-five to twenty-nine-year-olds, 16 percent report being satisfied. Among thirty to thirty-nine-year-olds, the level of satisfaction is also 16 percent. Given a statistical error of approximately 3 percent, all three groups are roughly equal in their level of satisfaction with the current situation in Belarus. For people between the ages of forty and forty-nine, the level of satisfaction is close to the average (22 percent). For respondents older than forty-nine, the level of satisfaction steadily increases with age: 30 percent among fifty to fifty-nine-year-olds, 42 percent among those age sixty to sixty-four, and 44 percent among people over age sixty-five. These findings support our statement that the post-communist legacy will be overcome only when the old and middle-aged generations have left the social arena.

Although the majority of Belarusians reported being dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, a larger percentage of them report being satisfied than did Ukrainians asked the same question in 1999. The average wage in Ukraine is approximately \$50 (higher than in Belarus), and the country seems to be more democratic. One possible explanation for the difference in the level of satisfaction might be the issue of back wages. Only 10 percent of Belarusians report being owed back wages, and none were owed more than six months' worth of wages. In contrast, it is not uncommon for workers in Russia and Ukraine to be owed back wages for several months, or even years. According to a recent USIA survey, Russians cited wage nonpayment and delays as the single most serious problem facing Russia today.¹⁷

Unlike Russia or Ukraine, where many people receive material goods in lieu of their salary or wages, in Belarus, only 3 percent reported receiving goods instead of pay. The subject of wage arrears receives extensive coverage on Russian television, which is viewed in many Belarusian households. That may explain why Belarusians are assessing their situation favorably as compared to the situation in Russia and Ukraine. Absence of wage arrears also helps to keep the social order. Russian economist Leonid Gordon states that it is much safer for a state to reduce wages than to postpone payments: In the first case the chance for social revolt among the workers, or for "raising the social temperature," is one tenth of that in the second case (assuming that the amount of money involved is the same).¹⁸ If correct, Gordon's theory explains why, unlike Russian and Ukrainian workers, the majority of Belarusian workers tolerate low wages and refrain from strikes and political protests.

It is questionable whether Belarusians actually live better than Ukrainians or

Russians, but they give credit to the Belarusian government for paying wages on time.¹⁹ Although the minimum wage is low in all three countries, Russia has higher wages and a higher standard of living. However, Belarusians are more positive in their opinions about the country than people in Russia and Ukraine. According to the 1999 USIA polls, three-quarters or more people in Russia and Ukraine say things are going in the wrong direction; in Belarus 40 percent say things are going in the wrong direction, versus 39 percent who say that things are going in the right direction. It is interesting that in Belarus young people are more likely than their elders to say that things are going wrong; in Ukraine and Russia, the elderly most often give this response.²⁰ One possible reason is that reforms are much slower in Belarus, so that the younger generation is less satisfied than in Russia with this fact (they give high marks to the market in all three countries). Another possible reason is that the real standard of living cannot be calculated from distorted statistics. One can only guess that the elderly people in Belarus still have some material goods from Soviet times: in Soviet days the standard of living in Belarus was higher than in other republics, so that the elderly could be holding extra goods and relying on this additional source of income.

Economic statistics are very poor in all post-Soviet republics; therefore nobody knows the size of the shadow or black economy nor the proportion of declared recorded, to undeclared unrecorded personal income. As German economist Friedrich Schneider estimated, the shadow economy in rich countries is, on average, 15 percent of GDP, and about one-third of GDP in emerging countries.²¹ If so, Belarusians also derive some additional income from the shadow economy. The majority of Belarusians probably live relatively better than the majority of Russians or Ukrainians because of the absence of wage arrears, their previously acquired goods, and the remaining social welfare and social security systems. Psychologically, Belarusians experience less-dramatic changes than Russians and Ukrainians, and polls show the result: they are more generally satisfied than their neighbors.

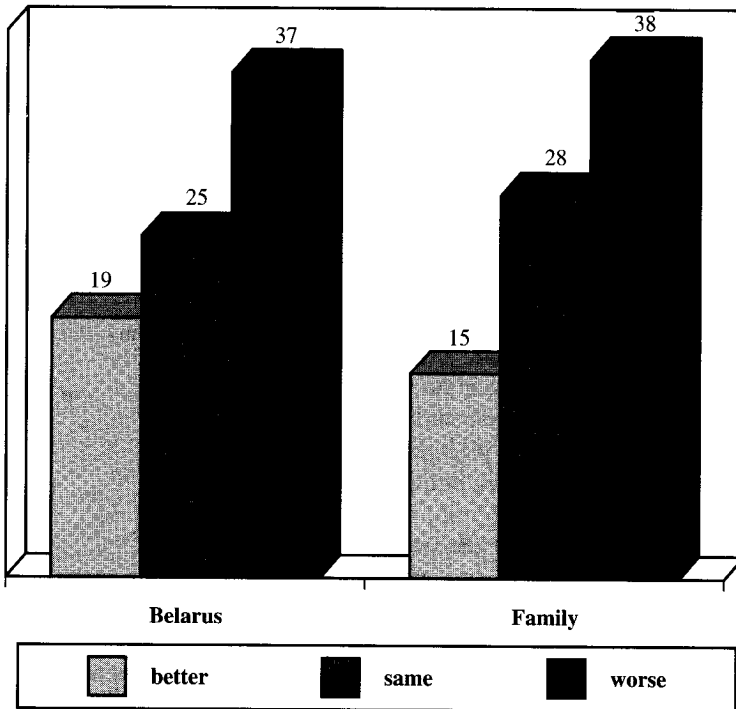
Hard Times Ahead

However, Belarusians do not describe either the country's future or their own as promising any miracle. When evaluating their economic future for the coming year, only 19 percent were optimistic. Almost a quarter of respondents thought that in a year the economic situation would be the same, and almost 37 percent thought it would be worse. Notably, 19 percent of respondents said they were unable to evaluate whether the economic situation in Belarus would be better or worse in a year.²² Naturally, many respondents found it difficult to predict the future. Russia's unforeseen financial crisis of August 1999 destroyed many ordinary people's hopes for economic recovery. Keeping the Russians' experience in mind, it is likely that Belarusians do not want to overestimate the Belarusian government's daily reports of positive economic growth. In addition, Belarusians do not see any tangible economic improvements, so more of them evaluate the economic situation as bad than good. The Ukrainian economic outlook is even more pessimistic: only 7 percent think the economy will improve in a year, 44 percent say it will be worse, and 35 percent say it will be the same.²³

Expectations for personal finances are similar or worse. Overall, 15 percent of Belarusians believe their family will be better off one year from now; 28 percent believe their family's situation will be the same as now. More than one in three (35 percent) believe their family's financial situation will be worse one year from now.

Older respondents are more likely to state that the economic situation will be better one year from now. Among eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds, 10 percent believe the economic situation will be better in a year, and among twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds, 8 percent. Among thirty-five to forty-four-year-olds, however, 16 percent believe the economic situation will improve; among forty-five to fifty-four-year-olds, the percentage climbs to 21 percent, and among those fifty-five and older, 29 percent state that the economic situation will be better in a year.

FIGURE 1. Belarus and Family Economic Situation in One Year (in percentages)



Source: Larissa Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, Washington, DC: IFES, 1999, 14.

Note: The question asked was, "In your opinion will the economic situation in Belarus (of you and your family living with you) in a year be better or worse than it is now, remain the same, or get worse?"

The percentage who state that the economic situation will worsen in a year generally declines with age: 39 percent for eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds, 49 percent for twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds, 44 percent for thirty-five to forty-four-year-olds, 37 percent for forty-five to fifty-four year-olds, and 26 percent for those age fifty-five and older.

Support for a Market Economy from the Younger and More Educated

When asked about their preferred economic system, on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being a *totally free market economy*, and 7 being a *state-controlled economy*), most Belarusian respondents preferred an economy somewhat or totally controlled by the state.²⁴

Table 2 shows the responses, presenting a clear picture of limited support for a market economy. If one compares strong supporters from both sides of the scale (those who answered 1 or 7), the number of planned economy supporters is three times the number of market economy supporters (6 percent versus 19 percent). Although 6 percent of those who favor a market economy are "very strong supporters," it is reasonable to look at the group of market economy supporters in general and distinguish between them and the "strong supporters of a planned economy." The first group includes people who support reforms and any steps toward a market economy. This group would most likely support the efforts of international donor organizations, while the second group would regard these efforts with suspicion.

Once again, the data show that demographic differences exist between opponents and supporters of economic control. In general, respondents who are older, female, of a lower income level, or living in rural areas support strict economic control more than those who are younger, male, of a higher income level, or living in urban areas.

The survey indicates that the two most significant factors are age and education. Support for a market economy decreases as the age of the respondents increases: among eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds, 61 percent support (at least to some extent) the market model; among twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds, 60 percent; among thirty-five to forty-four-year-olds, 50 percent; among forty-five to fifty-four-year-olds, 34 percent; and

TABLE 2. Preferred Belarusian Economic System (%)

(n = 1,012)	
1 Free Market Economy	6
2	7
3	10
4	19
5	11
6	11
7 State Control	19
Don't Know	15
Refused/NA	2

Source: Larissa Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 18.

Note: The question asked was "Think about our economic future, how should it develop: free from state control, (RO-TATE) under strict control of the state? Now you see the scale where 1 means that the economy must be free from state control, and 7 means that the economy should be under the strict control of the state. Mark on the scale how you think the economy of Belarus should develop."

among those fifty-five and older, 21 percent. Likewise, the percentage of those who support a strictly controlled economy dramatically grows with age: 28 percent among eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds, 31 percent among twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds, 40 percent among thirty-five to forty-four-year-olds, 45 percent among forty-five to fifty-four-year-olds, and 72 percent among those fifty-five and older.

Similar distinctions are apparent when considering respondents' levels of education. Among those with a primary or some secondary education, 31 percent support a controlled economy, compared with 15 percent of those with a secondary education and 8 percent of those with at least some university education. Similarly, only 7 percent of those with a primary, or less than secondary, education are strong market supporters, versus 12 percent of those with a secondary education, 15 percent of those with some university education, and 20 percent of those with a university degree.

Ukrainian data also strongly underline the importance of age difference: support for a market economy declines steadily with increasing age (from 43 percent among those age eighteen to twenty-four to just 9 percent among those age sixty-five and older) and support for central planning increases with age (from 24 percent to 40 percent respectively among the same age groups).²⁵

Economic Decision Making: Belarus and Ukraine

Because of the high concentration of real power in the hands of the president and the executive bodies (the Presidential Administration and government), it is not surprising to find that the majority of Belarusians feel that the president, or at least the government, should take responsibility for solving the economic problems facing Belarus in the coming year (see table 3). These answers show that the population takes into consideration real power instead of theories regarding "balance of power" and supposed equal participation in the decision-making process. Thus, ultimately these results reflect the real distribution of power in Belarus, where the parliament, unlike those in Russia or Ukraine, now plays no meaningful role in social and political life.

The comparison with the Ukrainian data is not precise because the 1999 Ukraine survey had only four institutions from which respondents could select: executive branch; parliament, or Supreme Rada; judiciary; and local government, or local administration. In the Belarus survey there were six institutions instead of four. Nevertheless, because three of the listed institutions were the same, and a fourth (the executive branch) was more or less similar to the president and the government (which were listed separately in the Belarus survey), one can roughly compare the results. Of course, because of these differences, one cannot discuss the role of the president or the government in Ukraine separately, as they were listed as one entity. However, the differences between Ukraine and Belarus are rather clear:

- The Ukrainian population relies on the parliament to a greater degree than does the Belarusian population; the Ukrainian public has become aware of the

TABLE 3. Institution Trusted to Resolve Economic Problems (%)

	Belarus, 1999 (n = 1,012)	Ukraine, 1999 (n = 1,200)
President (Ukraine—Executive Branch)	40	26
Government	17	NA
National assembly (parliament)	3	19
Local administration	2	11
Courts	—	3
Local soviets	3	NA
None	15	18
Don't know	20	22
Refused/NA	1	—
	101 ^a	99 ^a

Source: Larissa Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 18.

Note: The question asked was "Thinking of the President, the government, the National Assembly, local Soviets, local administration, and the courts, which of these, in your opinion, is the most likely to resolve the economic problems facing Belarus in the next year?"

^aRounding error.

role of the Supreme Rada in an emerging democracy, while in Belarus the population is aware of the National Assembly's lack of power.

- The Ukrainian population relies on the local administration much more than the Belarusian population.
- The Ukrainian population relies on the courts and judiciary somewhat more than the Belarusian population.
- The Ukrainian Parliament plays a much more important role than the Belarusian parliament (19 percent versus 3 percent). This indicates that the population is aware that the systems of decision making (both in the economic sphere and in the political sphere) in Ukraine and Belarus differ greatly, even if the economic outcomes are not tremendously different (both countries are stagnating and the standard of living is rather low).

In addition, age and education levels account for some differences in opinion concerning who will resolve economic problems. For instance, in Belarus,

- the oldest generation, those sixty-five and older, look mostly to President Lukashenko for the resolution of economic problems (28 percent), compared with a mere 7 percent of twenty-five to twenty-nine-year-olds;
- the middle-aged groups, ages thirty to thirty-nine and forty to forty-nine, feel the most strongly that the government will resolve the nation's problems (21 percent and 27 percent respectively), and also demonstrate above-average levels of pessimism—23 percent and 30 percent feel that no level or branch of government will be able to resolve the current situation;
- 53 percent of those who say that the president will resolve the economic

situation have only a primary and/or some secondary schooling. (Interestingly, those with the highest levels of education were clearly divided between a belief in the president's ability to resolve the situation and the feeling that no level or branch of government will be able to resolve the current economic crisis.)²⁶

Support for Lukashenko: Desire for Order or for Communism?

The legacy of communism is evidenced in the strong support for order and stability visible in all post-Soviet republics. The weaker the central authority and the state, the more the population supports stability and "strong authority." In 1996, General Alexander Lebed used the "order and stability" slogan in competing with Yeltsin in the Russian presidential elections (he did not win, but many voters supported him). Vladimir Putin received 52 percent of the vote in the 2000 presidential election, partially because of his hard-line stance against Chechnya where he "fights terrorists."²⁷ Lukashenko's strong personality also contributed to his high rating among Belarusians: it always exceeded the ratings of any other political leader, and even some Western authors pointed out that "Lukashenko remains by far the most popular politician in Belarus."²⁸ Despite the economic crisis and the repressive political environment, more people supported him in the spring of 1999 than rejected his candidacy for the next presidential election in Belarus (see figure 2).²⁹

Lukashenko's Supporters

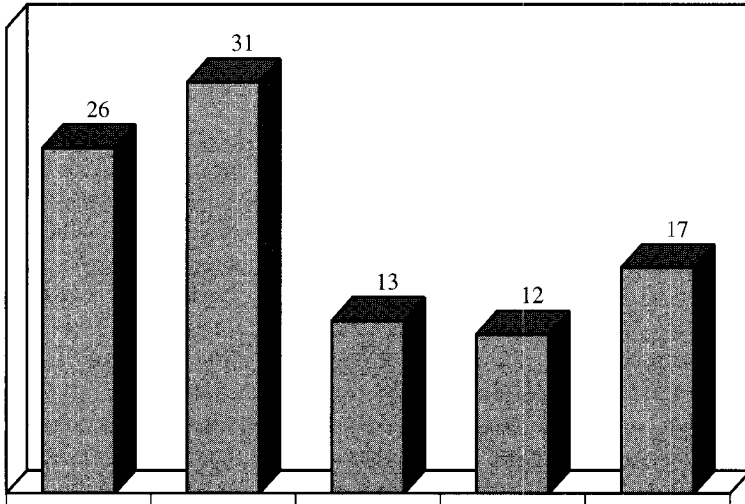
Asked about President Lukashenko, 57 percent of the respondents said they would vote to reelect him. About 26 percent strongly want to reelect Lukashenko. They support him for psychological, social, or political rather than economic reasons, and thus it would be extremely difficult to change their opinion. The data show that approximately one-quarter of the population supports Lukashenko unconditionally, probably because he represents a strong populist leader in whom they trust—the strong authority they need to rely on whatever the problem at hand. People who have lived under socialism and always knew that they were "under the protection of the party and government," would never like freedom and would not take responsibility for their lives—they simply do not know how to. They seemingly appreciate the social conditions provided by Lukashenko's regime: social order (almost no protests or strikes, a crime rate lower than in neighboring countries), social security and social welfare (timely paychecks, social benefits for several groups of people as under socialism, very low level of unemployment, etc.).

Almost one-third of the respondents (31 percent) profess moderate support for Lukashenko. As they pointed out, their support is dependent on Lukashenko's ability to maintain the current economic situation and political stability. Lukashenko, therefore, cannot afford further deterioration of the conditions in the country; his supporters may change their votes if their economic condition worsens.

As the phenomenon of a strong populist leader is typical for all the CIS countries, it is worth noting the major characteristics of Lukashenko's supporters:

- over fifty-five in age

FIGURE 2. Re-Elect Lukashenko (in percentages)



Source: Larissa Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, Washington, DC: IFES, 1999, 14.

Note: The question asked was, "In general would you say that A. G. Lukashenko has done his job as President well enough to be re-elected for the next term?" (n=1,012)

- educated to only the primary (77 percent) or secondary (56 percent) level
- from the low income groups (72 percent of the lowest economic group and 62 percent of the "lower than moderate" group)
- residents of rural areas, especially villages (66 percent) and small towns (63 percent)
- from the regions geographically close to Russia (Vitebsk, Gomel, and Mogilev oblasts);
- supporters of a state-controlled economy (57 percent of strong supporters and 80 percent of those who fairly strongly support it)
- those who say "Belarus is a democracy" (78 percent)

The following are characteristics of Lukashenko's opponents:

- those who oppose him regardless of the economic situation in Belarus
- younger: 72 percent of strong opponents are age 18-44, and a majority of those at least somewhat opposed are 18-54;
- university-educated (42 percent) or have a university degree (45 percent)
- residents of Minsk (42 percent)
- those who think Belarus is not a democracy (51 percent)
- strongly (51 percent) or at least somewhat (35 percent) pro-market

The Uncommitted Voters

Uncommitted voters, those who did not give a clear answer in regard to Lukashenko's reelection, represent 19 percent of the respondents. On average, they are very concerned about the national economy: 45 percent want their candidate to do something about the economy. However, they are more skeptical about political candidates in general: 10 percent report that they do not believe the promises of any candidate, and another 20 percent state they "do not know" which questions will be important to them in the 2001 elections. This group consists of people who simply do not want to disclose their true opinions about Lukashenko or the upcoming elections in general. However, they also do not see appropriate candidates among the opposition (and this is one of the major political challenges for the future of Belarus—a weak and divided opposition). If there are strong alternative candidates to Lukashenko in the 2001 elections, it is quite possible the uncommitted will support them.

Post-Soviet Mentality

Social Inertia

One of the significant reasons for a low level of support for market reforms in the FSU countries, but one that is rarely considered in polls and in the media, is social inertia. This inertia developed in the era of late socialism when "the people pretended to work, and the authorities pretended to pay them." Ever since, social rights and social guarantees have been taken for granted. People simply never learned the real cost of "free medicine," "free housing," or "free education," but enjoyed these rights without caring about any corresponding responsibilities. They never learned how to compete for a job. It was by no means their fault; rather, it was the effect of the socialist legacy. It is unrealistic to expect the people's values and norms to change quickly and a capitalist/protestant ethic to take root. Social inertia may be as strong a barrier to reform as the Berlin Wall was. People affected by it will not accept the new value system (competition, hard work, personal responsibility, liberal freedoms) while they still believe that the state should provide them social rights together with social guarantees. Such people populate all post-Soviet countries, but in Belarus where market reforms have almost stopped, they dominate and enjoy the state's support.

The older people are, the stronger their inertia, and the more they like populist leaders who promise "to keep all the social achievements" at no cost to the "ordinary people." The new generation should understand that it has to pay for all social rights and achievements and so be willing to work hard and take responsibility for their lives. Until that occurs, there will be no radical change in mentality and social structure: the majority will remain poor, enjoying a bare minimum of guaranteed goods and services and relying on state and community support.

Inertia is one of the main reasons for the support that the Belarus–Russia union enjoys in Belarus. All the polls show that more people (especially the middle-aged and the elderly) support the idea of the union than reject it. This is not a matter of "brotherly love." It is a habit, acquired over a long period of

time, for Belarusians to live together with Russians; there is no tradition of Belarusian independence.³⁰

Between Fear and Obedience

People socialized under socialism always knew about the necessity of being obedient to the state: be like everybody, follow prescribed norms, and you will be all right. Soviet citizens knew from family stories and later from literature and textbook stories of repression under Stalin that as soon as dissidents appeared they were severely punished by the state. Obedience to authority was encouraged by the whole system of education and political socialization and became the norm in Soviet society.

There is nothing surprising in this fact. Even people who live in democratic countries by and large remain obedient and even are willing to show cruelty toward other people if this is “by order of the authorities,” or if it is “necessary” for some “good reason.” Worth mentioning are the famous Stanley Milgram experiments on “Obedience to Authorities” in the United States in the 1970s, during which “normal” people simply conformed to orders on how to treat a person classified as deviant by a “scholar” (a low level of authority).³¹ These people knew for sure that they would not be penalized if they disobeyed, but a significant number of them were willing to obey anyway and to cruelly punish “deviant” behavior. Why should Belarusians be any different, especially if they are threatened by their authorities and will definitely be severely penalized for disobeying?

All Soviet people knew that those who rebelled usually disappeared. This has always been true under Stalin and under Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Andropov. Old Belarusians were not surprised when some opposition leaders (General Zakharenko, chairman of the Election Commission Victor Gonchar) disappeared under Lukashenko in 1999. For those who had historical memory it was a clear sign not to even contemplate any antiregime activities, as dictated by authoritarian tradition dating back to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. They think they cannot influence the authorities or change the “rules of the game.” Many people are now afraid of even talking about the opposition let alone participating in protests that always bring about arrests.

Those who protest against the regime are young people who have less fear of the authorities. They are real revolutionaries, but they are a minority. As USIA polls and IFES data show, the opposition is not popular among the people at large; and ordinary people do not support it openly.³² Only a few people have confidence in opposition leaders, while the others trust neither Lukashenko nor the opposition. The election of Vintsuk Vecherko as head of the Belarus Popular Front, the main opposition party, instead of Zenon Poznyak is a challenge for the opposition to become stronger and more attuned to the needs of the people, and to win more support.

The same social fear partly explains why many people support the Belarus–Russia union. Alexander Lukashenko always stresses that Belarus is totally dependent on Russia’s natural resources. As he says, Belarus may lose electricity, gas, and oil without Russia. Because people would rather not lose

everything, they strongly support the economic aspect of the union, which they think will help them survive, and avoid speaking about its political cost, presuming that both countries will stay independent. Russians see no economic benefits from the union but stress its geopolitical value; that is why polls show much lower support for the union in Russia than in Belarus.³³ In Belarus, two out of three support the union (35 percent strongly support it),³⁴ and almost a quarter do not. In Russia, only a little over half the population support the union in one or another form.³⁵ Although it is still unclear whether the union will force Belarus to become a part of Russia, the union may help Belarus carry out radical economic and political changes, because Russia is far ahead of Belarus in political and economic transformation.³⁶

Desire for a Strong Authority?

The president of Belarus changed the constitution in 1996 to postpone new presidential elections, concentrating almost all power in his hands. Western observers believe that Belarus has become “one of the most repressive states of Europe”;³⁷ still, some Russian high officials do not see any significant violations of human rights in Belarus.³⁸ This difference in evaluation is due to the fact that almost all the other post-Soviet republics have adopted a system in which the president’s powers exceed the legislature’s; in most cases, the president’s powers have become almost overwhelming. Many people do not protest against that and even support the political leaders who seem to be more powerful and promise greater stress on law and order. This is the case with former Russian president Yeltsin and President Putin, and with leaders of other Eurasian nations. It is no surprise that former Soviet leaders Andropov and Brezhnev received the highest ratings in the current Russian polls.³⁹ If the economic situation rapidly deteriorates, it is highly possible that the population will vote for a “strong authority” that has the ability to “impose law and order.” Lukashenko is not as strong as Putin, but he is stronger than any other Belarusian political leader, and therefore part of the population (especially in the rural areas) believe in his will and ability to keep order in the country. If the economic situation improves, more liberal leaders may have a chance to win. From this point of view, there is no big difference between Belarus and other FSU republics. However, there is no clear sign whether Lukashenko will be re-elected in 2001.

Conclusion

It follows from what was said above that:

- Some FSU republics are moving back (not necessarily toward the Soviet Union, but perhaps toward a nationalist Slavic state or confederation), and Belarus is the first among such countries. Of course, this is the choice of the powers that be in Belarus. At the same time, the people at large do not fully disagree with this decision either.
- A “strong authority” clearly has widespread appeal in many post-Soviet republics. This means that a man wielding personal power (rather than a man rely-

ing on political or ideological appeal) who can support the state and even strengthen it, who can ensure social order and fight crime, is held in high regard.

- If the current economic situation gets worse, the likelihood will increase that strongly authoritarian regimes will be established everywhere in the FSU. Such regimes may follow the Belarusian pattern or be quite different, but they will reflect the popular trend toward “law and order.”

- Social rights and guarantees seem to be more important for the post-Soviet people than human rights; they prefer being employed, enjoying free education and medical care to enjoying civil rights and getting poorer.

- People who survived Stalin or who know how Stalin’s regime worked would rather stay away from dangerous politics now. They fear dictatorial power and fear being punished for nothing. This “wall of fear” is much lower in Russia or Ukraine, but it is rising in Lukashenko’s Belarus. People are afraid of expressing their opinions freely, of criticizing the authorities, of doing anything at variance with official norms. Double morality has returned, people again prefer to talk in the kitchen rather than in public. The new younger generation will break this wall finally when it comes to power.

- With generational change, the power of inertia and the post-Soviet legacy will be finally overcome. However, there are no guarantees that the younger generation will be in a position to make the changes soon. Hence any support the West can provide for the transition can make a difference for the better—in Belarus as in other FSU countries.

NOTES

1. Andrew Nagorski, “Behind the Wall,” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1999, 42.
2. Fred Hiatt, “Stumbling in Russia,” *Washington Post*, 29 August 1999.
3. For example, see: Lily Hyde, “Monitors Evaluate Ukrainian Elections,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague, Czech Republic. *RFE/RL Newslines*, 3 November 1999, and “OSCE Notes Violations during Georgian Elections” in the same publication; “Kazakhstan’s Parliamentary Elections,” *OSCE Report*, OSCE, Washington, DC, 10 October 1999.
4. A. Kazhegeldin, “Kazakhstan v pautine despotizma I korruptsii,” *XXI Vek*, 28 October–3 November 1999, 4.
5. Juri Chubchenko, “V demokraticnost’ Nazarbaeva bol’she nikto ne verit,” *Kommersant*, 2 November 1999.
6. Janina Sokolovskaja, “Ukraina progolosovala po-rossiyski,” *Izvestiya*, 11 November 1999; Janina Sokolovskaja and Juri Raihel, “Ukraina protiv kommunistov,” *Izvestiya*, 15 November 1999.
7. Sergei Bablumyan, “Territoriya terrora,” *Izvestiya*, 29 October 1999.
8. Fred Hiatt, “Stumbling in Russia,” *Washington Post*, 29 August 1999.
9. See Novosti, *PolitRu, Information-Political Journal On-Line*, 18 October, 1999; Misha Fishman, “Ljubov’ zla. Duma vyzvala Lukashenko na publicnoe svidanie,” *PolitRu, Information-Political Journal On-Line*, 20 October 1999.
10. Andrew Nagorski, “Behind the Wall.”
11. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague, Czech Republic. *RFE/RL Newslines*, 10 November, 1999.
12. For example, the 1999 USIA-sponsored Belarus national survey showed that most Belarusians felt they had little control over events and were wary of getting involved in politics. See “Most Belarusians See Hard Times Ahead, but Still Back Lukashenko,” *Opinion Analysis* (Washington, DC: U.S. Information Agency, 1999), 5.

13. See Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 206, 197.

14. Larissa Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999* (Washington, DC: IFES, 1999).

15. Gary Ferguson, *Public Opinion in Ukraine 1999* (Washington, DC: IFES, 1999).

16. Four in ten say that Lukashenko is the figure most likely to resolve the economic problems Belarus is facing in 2001; 56 percent say they intend to vote for Lukashenko in the 2001 presidential elections, and almost a third of respondents say Belarus is a democracy. See Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 3, 5.

17. "Who is to Blame? Pointing Fingers for Russia's Wage Arrears Crisis," *Opinion Analysis* (Washington, DC: U.S. Information Agency, 1999).

18. V. Kosmarsky, ed. "Sotsial'naya politika v RF: problemy i perspektivy," *PolitRu, Information-Political Journal On-Line*, 13 November 1999, 8.

19. In accordance with Gary Ferguson data, Ukrainian respondents say that irregular payments (27 percent) and unemployment (29 percent) are major reasons of citizens' dissatisfaction, while in Belarus only 3 percent mentioned unemployment and no one mentioned back payments. See Ferguson, *Public Opinion in Ukraine 1999*, 5; Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 13.

20. "Most Belarusians See Hard Times Ahead," 1.

21. See Arnold Beichman, "Underground with \$9 Trillion," *Washington Times*, 12 September 1999.

22. Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 13.

23. Ferguson, *Public Opinion in Ukraine 1999*, 9–10.

24. Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 16.

25. Ferguson, *Public Opinion in Ukraine 1999*, 6.

26. Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999* 18–19.

27. *Novosti, Izvestiya*, 15 November 1999.

28. David Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 124.

29. Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 36.

30. There are attempts to consider the medieval Great Duchy of Lithuania as the Belarusian nation state, for example. V. M. Ignatovski, *Karotki narys histor'ii Belarusi* (Minsk: 1992); Jan Zaprudnik, *Belarus: At the Crossroads in History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Georgy Galenchenko, "Shljahetskaja demokratija v belikom knjazhestve Litovskom XYI-XVIII vekah," in *Belorussia i Rossia: obshchestva i gosudarstva*, D. Furman, ed. (Moscow: Human Rights, 1998); but even if it is the case, one should agree that Great Duchy of Lithuania was not a democratic state so that it is impossible to use this historical experience in the twentieth century. As for the legacy of the Belorussian People's Republic in 1918, it is also debatable whether or not it was a democratic and independent country.

31. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

32. "Most Belarusians See Hard Times Ahead," 3.

33. Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 3. Also see VTsIOM poll, "Otnoshenie k sojuzu s Belorussiej," *PolitRu, Information-Political Journal On-Line*, 21 October 1999.

34. Titarenko, *Public Opinion in Belarus 1999*, 22.

35. VTsIOM poll, "Otnoshenie k sojuzu s Belorussiej."

36. David Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 124.

37. *Ibid.*, 125.

38. Russian Commissioner for Human Rights Oleg Mironov, who visited Belarus from 8-11 November, 1999 did not find any violations of human rights and even said that the situation in Belarus is better than in Russia. See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague, Czech Republic. *RFE/RL Newslines*, 15 November.

39. Valeri Vyzhutovich, "Tretii posle Brezhneva, pervyi pered Luzhkovym mozhet vernut'sja vo vlast'," *Izvestiya*, 30 October 1999.