

Understanding Belarus: Economy and Political Landscape

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THE TWO EARLIER ARTICLES IN THIS THREE-PART SERIES focused on the linguistic situation in Belarus and on factors instrumental in shaping Belarusian identity. However, no attempt at understanding Belarus can succeed without examining its economic dynamics and political discourse. The analysis that follows will evaluate Belarus' accomplishments under the Soviet regime. The point is made that the socio-economic situation in Belarus does not quite fit the abysmal picture painted by the international media. It is shown that, alongside the vague and ambivalent identity of ethnic Belarusians, the current economic paradigm embraced by the Belarus political regime is rooted in some Soviet-born constraints and in the desire to avert a major downturn in the living standard of Belarusians. The Belarusian political scene is identified as bi-polar with the centrist part being least structured and organised. Because of this the democratisation of Belarus has not succeeded so far. A part of the blame for this outcome lies with the West, which seems to misread the major conflict of interests in Belarus. Finally, attempts to pigeonhole the current socio-political situation in Belarus and the personality of its leader are analysed. The questions that inform the following analysis are:

- (1) What is Belarus' standing on major economic and social indicators?
- (2) Why does Belarus maintain economic ties predominantly to Russia, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of this situation for Belarus?
- (3) Why do many Belarusians like Lukashenka?
- (4) What is the make-up of the Belarusian political scene?
- (5) Is the fact that people support Lukashenka embedded entirely in their passivity and lack of understanding of their own good? Do Westernising nationalists offer a more attractive option? Why or why not?

A substantive conclusion follows that summarises the findings of all three articles in the series.

A major Soviet success story

'Belarus really feels like the good old "shampoo paradise" of Brezhnev's 1980s',¹ writes Balmaceda. Is this scathing irony warranted? To answer this question, one must consider what was accomplished in Belarus under the Soviet regime.

Before the communist revolution Belarus was arguably the poorest region of European Russia. Belarus had meagre manufacturing and was beset with rural overpopulation. In agriculture, yields were among the lowest in the nation, in part due to acidic and poorly drained soils. The first industrialisation wave (1880s) that affected many regions of European Russia skirted Belarus. In the first decade of the twentieth century there were 800 industrial establishments in Belarus that employed 25,000 workers. Most of these production units were small and primitive wood and food processors.²

The first Soviet five-year plans conditioned faster industrial growth as the first sizable manufacturing plants were put into operation, including the Minsk, Vitebsk and Homel machine-tool factories, the Homel agricultural machinery plant etc.³ Yet the scope of Belarus' pre-war industrialisation was dwarfed by that in Ukraine and Russia, and the pull of urban centres was correspondingly small. In 1940 only 21% of Belarus' population lived in cities and towns, compared with 34% in Russia and in Ukraine.⁴ By all accounts, Belarus' location along the western frontier of the Soviet Union was deemed strategically vulnerable.

During 1941–45 Belarus experienced arguably more devastation than any other country affected by World War II. One quarter of the entire population perished. On the eve of the war the population of Belarus was 9.2 million people; by the end of 1944 it was only 6.3 million; out of 270 towns and *raion* centres 209 were demolished, including Minsk, Homel and Vitebsk, in which 80–90% of the entire stock of pre-war buildings were destroyed.⁵ According to Soviet monetary assessments of the war-inflicted damage, Ukraine sustained the largest destruction.⁶ However, pre-war industrial investment in Ukraine had been more significant than in Belarus by far, which must have heightened the value of what was then exposed to destruction. In per capita terms, the war-inflicted loss of property appears to be higher in investment-poor Belarus, which underlines the extraordinary scale of its devastation.

According to Marples, 'Soviet statistics are notoriously unreliable as an indicator of actual economic conditions [but] there is little reason to doubt the republican comparisons'.⁷ At odds with the first part of this statement,⁸ I am in agreement with Marples' pronouncement on comparisons. Of all comparisons, those with Ukraine probably make most sense. Both Ukraine and Belarus are located in Europe and along the western frontier of Russia, both are populated primarily by Eastern Slavs, and both have been significantly Russified.

Belarus' industrial spurt began with post-war reconstruction. The newly obtained *cordon sanitaire* of satellite states along the western border of the Soviet Union changed Moscow's perception of Belarus' location. It was no longer vulnerable. Belarus was now the locus of the major transit routes linking Russia with East-Central Europe. Later on, the significance of these routes increased even more, as the Soviet Union began to sell its oil and gas to the West, receiving consumer goods and food in return. From the late 1950s on, Belarus was emerging as one of the major Soviet manufacturing regions, emphasising tractors, heavy trucks, oil processing, metal-cutting lathes, synthetic fibres, TV sets, semi-conductors and microchips. Much of Belarus' high-tech industry was military-oriented.

Overall, from 1913 to 1986 the industrial output of Belarus increased 326 times;

the Soviet Union's total increase for the period was 205 times, Russia's industrial output grew 206 times, and Ukraine's 132 times.⁹ Only Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, where there had been no industry at all before the communist revolution, fared better. During the same period, agricultural output grew 4.3 times, compared with 3.7 in Ukraine, 3.5 in Russia and 4.0 in the USSR at large.¹⁰ Between 1940 and 1986 industrial output in Belarus grew 40 times, compared with 26 for the USSR at large, 23 for Russia and 18 for Ukraine.¹¹

Between 1970 and 1986 fixed assets (an indicator of the scope of completed investment projects) grew by 360% in Belarus. Over the same time, Ukraine featured 270% growth¹² and the entire Soviet Union 311%. As a result, Belarus led all the 15 republics in growth rate of national income per capita (240% in 1970–86) and was second only to Armenia in the growth of national income during the same period.¹³ Belarus also led all the republics in total labour productivity growth¹⁴ and in industrial labour productivity growth in particular.¹⁵

The Soviet leaders were conscious of the poor quality of their manufactured products. 'The technological level and quality of many products remains low',¹⁶ reads the statement in an anniversary (70 years of the communist revolution, 1987) edition of the Soviet economic data book. As with other problems intractable under the Soviet system of management, an attempt was made to resolve the quality problem through moral exhortation, singling out and publicising commendable experience. In the late 1970s the system of state assessment of manufacturing quality was introduced so the best products would be labeled accordingly. In 1986 the so-called '*znak kachestva*' (quality logo) was affixed to about 9,000 industrial articles, whose combined value accounted for 15% of Soviet gross domestic product. Belarus was number one in the entire country in terms of the proportion of products upon which the quality logo was conferred—a revealing sign of success. So, not only quantitative growth took place in Belarus.¹⁷

Given the general deficit of consumer goods in the Soviet Union, it is noteworthy that only Latvia and Estonia exceeded Belarus in per capita output of light industry.¹⁸ Thus the industrial development of Belarus was in fact more balanced than that of Ukraine and Russia, where the preponderance of heavy industry was more noticeable.

In agriculture, in the last decade of the Soviet Union's existence, Belarus led all the republics in flax¹⁹ (in the USSR flax was grown in all three Slavic and three Baltic republics) and potato yields.²⁰ Belarus' milk production was 30% of that in Ukraine, while Belarus had only one-fifth of Ukraine's population. Belarus was second to none in egg production per laying hen,²¹ and it was surpassed in grain by Ukraine by just 100 kg per hectare (2,500 and 2,600 kg respectively) despite the fact that Ukraine, with its world famous chernozem, has significantly higher natural soil quality than Belarus.²² A large swath of poorly drained soils in the Belarusian part of Polesie (home to Europe's largest concentration of marshes, it straddles the border with Ukraine) has been vastly improved by artificial drainage systems, and idle wetlands were converted into arable fields. While in the Soviet Union in general land reclamation projects used to have adverse environmental side effects and Belarus was no exception to the rule, the quality and reliability of artificial drainage systems in Belarus exceeded those in the non-black-earth part of European Russia. Also, in the 1980s Belarus led all the other European regions of the Soviet Union in both mineral

and organic fertiliser application per hectare.²³ In milk yields per 100 hectares of agricultural land and per cow, and in meat output per unit of land, Belarus exceeded both European Russia and Ukraine (yielding only to the Baltic states).²⁴ The same applied to the integral efficiency of Belarus' agriculture, i.e. aggregate returns on labour and capital inputs.²⁵

Considerable progress was made in the energy sector: five major thermal electric stations were built and two major oil refineries (in Novopolotsk and Mozyr), both threaded onto major pipelines from the Volga-Ural and West Siberian oilfields to Europe. Also, commercial exploitation of the only abundant raw material, potassium, developed near Soligorsk, south of Minsk.

In the social sphere Belarus led all the Soviet republics in per capita investment in housing construction²⁶ and in putting new housing stock into operation.²⁷ Although Minsk accounted for more than its fair share of these achievements, the 1970s and 1980s appearance of all the provincial (*oblast'*) centres of Belarus, and especially its *raion* towns, was better than their counterparts in the neighboring *oblasti* of the Russian Federation. This favourable impression was due to better maintained roads, residences and public spaces, and a relatively smaller spread of heavy drinking in Belarus. The country still lagged behind Ukraine (let alone the Baltics) in the length of paved roads per 1,000 square km, yet it exceeded Ukraine in share of paved roads in the overall length of road network.²⁸

Finally, in the late 1980s Belarus exceeded Russia and Ukraine in life expectancy at birth by 2.1 and 0.9 years respectively²⁹—a demographically meaningful lead.

On the eve of the 1990s Belarus had one of the better managed regional economies, with an unusually high share of export-oriented enterprises: more than 80% of industrial output was exported to other republics or foreign countries. In most other Soviet republics and 'socialist' countries this share did not exceed 60%, even including export of raw materials.³⁰ Belarus' industry was the most technologically advanced in the entire Soviet Union. The worn-out phrase that Belarus was an assembly workshop of the USSR is not exactly accurate. Belarus' specialisation was on R&D and assembling high-tech products. The important feature was that almost all the personnel for R&D were trained within Belarus, which among other things explains why there are so few migrants in Belarus and thus the share of ethnic Belarusians is so high. In 1986 Belarus, which 70 years before had no institutions of higher learning at all, was second only to Russia in number of college students per 1,000 residents.³¹ The quality of Belarusian institutions of higher learning was among the highest in the USSR.

A country of dismal workshops and unproductive wetlands at the beginning of the twentieth century, Belarus 70 years later was dominated by large-scale industry and vastly modernised agriculture. In the 1980s more than half of the industrial personnel of Belarus worked for enterprises with over 500 employees. Most of the large-scale processing and assembly operations were located in Minsk and the eastern part of the republic. Almost every *raion* town of eastern Belarus became a 'company town', or a town composed of a large industrial enterprise and its socio-economic hinterland.³²

Despite the ingrained flaws of the Soviet model of economic development, Belarus was an undeniable Soviet success story. All the impulses and/or driving forces of Belarus' achievements, and their side effects as well, have been of Soviet vintage. For

example, 90% of the fuel and energy that Belarus consumed in the late 1980s came from Russia. Mentioning this fact, Astrid Sahm & Kirsten Westphal claim that Belarus' 'positive balance in inter-republic trade in the USSR was possible only because of artificially low energy prices'.³³ While this statement is probably true, it does not belittle Belarus' achievement, as the authors seem to imply. Rather, it observes that the positive trade balance was made possible by Belarus being a part of a larger entity, the Soviet Union, something of which most Belarusians have always been aware. Minsk was a true symbol of this Soviet-style success. It demonstrated an astounding pace of population growth: 509,000 people in 1959, 917,000 in 1970, 1,331,000 in 1980 and 1,543,000 in 1987.³⁴ No other large city in the entire Soviet Union grew so fast.

The economy since independence

If the Belarusian authorities vacillated—after the December 1991 Soviet break-up—about whether or not they should rush into something similar to the Gaidar and Chubais privatisation schemes, this was hardly surprising. Most personal fortunes in Russia were created in extractive industries such as oil, gas and non-ferrous metals after the state foreign trade monopoly had been removed. These fortunes subsequently boosted privatisation of other economic sectors. In Belarus, however, there was only one commercially rewarding substance—potassium—and it did not compare with Russia's wealth of oil, gas and metallic ores.

Also, although El'tsin presided over the entire country of Russia, his *de facto* constituency that 'called the tune' was the city of Moscow and to some extent Saint Petersburg, where most politically active people belonged to the Westernisers' camp (to a much higher degree than now). In the entire Soviet Union minus the Baltic States that was a truly unique constituency. Muscovites subsequently came to possess the lion's share of personal fortunes created in the early 1990s. In no other part of Russia and the CIS at large were people willing to endure hardships in exchange for something as obscure as democracy and a market economy. Belarus was no exception to that rule. Belarusian industrial giants were not just production units; they ensured social stability. Not only did they provide employment for most Belarusian citizens, they also controlled much of the so-called social sphere (residential utilities, daycare centres, sporting facilities and clubs), a normal situation in company towns all around the Soviet Union.

Because by now Russia's crony capitalism has had its fair share of Western (not just communist and pseudo-patriotic) critics, with privatisation becoming a veritable swear word in Russia,³⁵ the indecision of Shushkevich and Kebich, could hardly be faulted in hindsight. But by 1994 most industrial enterprises in Belarus were about to discontinue their operations anyway because of the disruption of Russia-controlled supply lines. Many state-run processing plants had already come to a complete halt in the neighbouring Ukraine and in the Baltics.

The premonition of impending chaos and doom—in the absence of a pro-reform constituency—brought to power a strongman, Alyaxandr Lukashenka, formerly director of a state farm in Vitebsk *oblast'* and a self-proclaimed crusader against corruption. While I will characterise this leader below, a few points are in order now.

Lukashenka stopped voucher privatisation (which had barely begun) and secured subsidised transport and utilities and free health care and education. By that time (1995), most industrial workers worked barely 2–3 days a week (as plants ran out of supplies and could not dispose of their output), but they could perhaps eke out a living for a year or so at the most with the aid of their own kitchen gardens. In about a year (by 1996) most industrial giants had resumed their full capacity work schedule, mostly due to the restored ties with Russia. That was what Lukashenka had been voted in for in 1994, and that was what he made good on. Since 1996 Belarus has been featuring economic growth and has almost returned to the 1990 level of industrial output.

Doom and gloom overstated

Today, in many Russian and Western media, Belarus' economic situation is assessed as abysmal. The phraseology used by academics includes 'the myth of economic revival'³⁶ and the like. One has to be on the look-out, though, in order to separate seeds from chaff. Quite a few Western and liberal Russian writers who cast Belarus as inherently backward, wretched and dependent are on a mission to rebuke Lukashenka, 'the last dictator in Europe'. Besides being on a mission, some of them have not done their homework on Belarus.

To be sure, the economic situation in Belarus is far from serene. Agricultural output is substantially lower than before the Soviet Union's dissolution, and inflationary pressure on consumers and the tax burden on enterprises are heavy. Domestic investment is meagre and foreign investment is scarce, in part due to bureaucratic obstacles and the image of Lukashenka that he himself helped to shape. As recently as 1996 many Belarusian food products (e.g. cottage cheese, eggs and sour cream) were widely sold in Russia; today not only farmers but also producers of heavy trucks and tractors are beginning to lose Russian regional markets. Because privatisation was stunted across the board, small businesses could not pick up the slack of state-run retail and catering facilities. One clear sign of the unhealthy situation is that barter reigns supreme. According to official data, it accounts for 40% of all transactions,³⁷ and there are reasons to believe that this is actually an understatement. Even more important is the fact that some major levers of the Belarusian economy and its vitality are in Russia's hands, in particular the supply of oil and natural gas, for which Belarus currently pays significantly less than world prices. Natural gas is being sold for \$22 per 1,000 cubic metres. For comparison, Ukraine pays \$40 per 1,000 cubic metres; Moldova pays \$55 and Poland \$75. Because Belarus' government actually resells this gas to domestic industrial customers for about \$48,³⁸ Russia's natural gas is not just a fuel and/or raw material; it also props up the national budget of Belarus.³⁹ (It is also true, though, that in turn Belarus does not charge Russia for gas transit and for using Belarus' land for military bases⁴⁰ and installations.)

Last but not least, the appearance of Minsk retail outlets, especially food stores, is a far cry from what one encounters in all the four nearby national capitals: Kiev, Moscow, Vilnius and Warsaw. The few catering facilities on the Belarus segments of major transit roads contrast with all the neighbouring countries, not excluding Russia.

If it were not for the prevalence of used German cars, the appearance of Belarus would be a throwback to Soviet times.

However, as a Russian saying goes, everything is learned from comparison. Following Marples' comparability thesis, I resort to the 1999 CIS Statistical Yearbook, as it applies the same methodology to all the post-Soviet economies. Its analysis reveals that, relative to other CIS countries, the economic situation in Belarus is a mixed bag at worst. With Russia's help (particularly due to cheap fuel), Belarus in fact has fared better than most in the post-Soviet space.⁴¹

Over the 1990s the republic of Belarus retained the industrial emphasis in its economy. The share of industry in overall employment, 27.6%, is second to none in the CIS, with services accounting for only 49.2%;⁴² industry accounts for 34.3% of national income, second only to Turkmenistan with 35.3%.⁴³ This seems to be in line with the low level of privatisation that always gives a boost to service establishments in the first place. Indeed, Belarus leads other CIS countries in terms of the public sector's share in employment, 63.6%;⁴⁴ for comparison, in Russia it is 36.4%.⁴⁵

Justifying the low level of privatisation, the Belarusian authorities usually point to three major factors—lack of entrepreneurial experience, lack of desire to connive at theft from the state and scarcity of mineral resources—that make Belarus very different from Russia.⁴⁶ While the conservative attitude of the Belarusian authorities is questionable, the available alternatives are not at all clear, particularly in the absence of a pro-reform constituency in Belarus.

In 1999 Belarus's GDP was 83.6% of its 1991 level, the second smallest decline in GDP among CIS countries (Uzbekistan is the CIS leader); Russia was far behind with 62.5%, and Ukraine lags behind even more with 44.7%.⁴⁷ Belarus' share in the overall CIS production of buses is 70%; it also produces 30% of the trucks, 60% of the tractors, 50% of the TV sets and 25% of the shoes of the entire CIS. Belarus also accounts for more than half of the entire world's output of electronic microchips for watches.⁴⁸ Some of Belarus' products, notably shoes, occupy an important niche in the Russian market: they are not as expensive as Western models and not as unattractive as Russian-made shoes. Belarus is also ahead of Russia and Ukraine in agricultural output: in Belarus it declined by 32%, whereas in Russia and Ukraine it fell by 40% and 43% respectively. Belarus is second to none in the CIS in per capita output of meat, milk, butter and cooking oil. Just as before, Belarus is far ahead of other former Soviet republics in per capita potato output.⁴⁹

In summary, if the reference line is sought within the CIS, Belarus' economic standing appears to be favourable, which is in stark contrast with the picture routinely painted by Western and many Russian media alike. According to the most recent 2001 UN Human Development Report, Belarus is ahead of all the other CIS countries and some East European countries as well on the Human Development Index. It is currently ranked 53rd, whereas Russia is 55th and Ukraine 74th.⁵⁰

Perhaps even more reassuring are the international migration statistics of 1998–2000, according to which Belarus is the only country in the entire post-Soviet space (that is, the CIS and Baltic countries) with incoming migration from each and every other post-Soviet country exceeding outgoing migration to each and every other country. To be sure, the actual net influx (Table 1) is not very significant, but the steadily positive net migration is. It is confirmed by cross-sectional data (reflecting all

TABLE 1
MIGRATION INTO AND OUT OF BELARUS FROM AND TO OTHER FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS, 1998–2000

Source countries	1998 Migrants			1999 Migrants			2000 Migrants		
	Incoming	Outgoing	Net	Incoming	Outgoing	Net	Incoming	Outgoing	Net
CIS	30,355	7,195	23,160	28,372	6,811	21,561	23,492	7,249	16,243
Azerbaijan	238	24	214	186	30	156	197	23	174
Armenia	164	27	137	153	15	138	126	15	111
Georgia	162	13	149	179	11	168	208	5	203
Kazakhstan	4,242	112	4,130	3,620	95	3,525	3,590	110	3,480
Kyrgyzstan	145	10	135	103	16	87	132	6	126
Moldova	346	63	283	332	31	301	391	37	354
Russia	18,607	5,715	12,892	18,384	5,282	13,102	14,424	5,854	8,570
Tajikistan	203	10	193	147	7	140	136	4	132
Turkmenistan	331	28	303	212	206	6	295	36	259
Uzbekistan	469	35	434	413	34	379	447	22	425
Ukraine	5,448	1,158	4,290	4,643	1,084	3,559	3,546	1,137	2,409
Baltic States	1,233	264	969	764	226	538	737	169	568
Latvia	755	61	694	395	60	335	291	50	241
Lithuania	365	194	171	283	157	126	384	109	275
Estonia	113	9	104	86	9	77	62	10	52
Total	31,588	7,459	24,129	29,136	7,037	22,099	24,229	7,418	16,811

Note: Most migrants are people of working age with children. Russia accounts for 56.5% of the 1998–2000 total net migration, Kazakhstan for 18.3% and Ukraine for 16.8%. Ethnic Belarusians account for 44.5% of the 1998–2000 total net migration, ethnic Russians for 37.0%, and ethnic Ukrainians for 11.7%. Source: Research Laboratory for Migration in the CIS, Institute for Economic Forecasting, Russian Academy of Sciences.

the 15 origins and destinations) verified by the Moscow-based Centre for Migration Studies.⁵¹ Albeit declining, positive net migration was also recorded in 2001 and 2002.⁵²

Needless to say, migrants streaming into Belarus from other segments of the post-Soviet space do not read the CIS statistical yearbooks, much less the UN documents, yet they vote with their feet, thus lending legitimacy to the data obtainable from these sources. Evidently, among the prospective migrants, Belarus ranks favourably on many counts, including relatively good infrastructure, social benefits, lack of tension and more. Most probably, the fact that Belarus is not high on nationalism matters as well, as ethnic aliens appear to be more welcome (or rather, less unwelcome) in Belarus than elsewhere in the post-Soviet space.

Foreign trade

Belarus is unique within the CIS in terms of export and import operations. First, Belarus' economy is unusually open: in 1999 exports accounted for 55% of GDP.⁵³ This indicator normally tends to be higher for economically advanced countries of a smaller size,⁵⁴ and it is noteworthy that Belarus fits the pattern. Second, no other CIS country emphasises links within the CIS as much as Belarus. In 1999 61% of all exports went to, and 64% of all imports came from CIS countries. By comparison, only 14% of Russia's and 28% of Ukraine's exports went to CIS countries, while 27% and 58% of imports to these countries came from the CIS.⁵⁵ Russia alone accounts for 58.7% of Belarus' foreign trade.⁵⁶ In 1999 88.5% of all Belarus' exports to the CIS went to Russia, and 87.4% of all imports from the CIS came from Russia.⁵⁷ In 2000 Russia and Ukraine accounted for 64.3% of Belarus' foreign trade.⁵⁸ Belarus is the second-largest (after Germany) trade partner of Russia.

Third, Belarus is second to none in the CIS by per capita value of exports and imports.⁵⁹ Fourth, in Belarus' exchange with Russia, the former looks like a more economically advanced country than the latter. Indeed, over 60% of 2000 imports to Belarus from Russia consist of fuel and raw materials. In contrast to that, vehicles, equipment and machinery, textiles and plastics account for 62% of Belarus' exports to Russia. Among the most notable export articles from Belarus to Russia are tractors and heavy trucks, refrigerators, TV sets and footwear. As for TV sets, 98% of those produced in Belarus are sold in Russia.⁶⁰ While TV sets made in Belarus are not widely seen in Moscow, which is awash with TV sets of the world's renowned brands assembled in China and Southeast Asia, they sell well in Russia's provincial centres. The same is true for refrigerators; 87% of Belarus' output is exported to Russia.⁶¹ In summary, exports to Russia are composed of higher value added products than imports from Russia.

Tsygankov, who compared the emergent foreign trade ties of Latvia with those of Belarus, writes that the latter 'was ill prepared psychologically for conducting foreign policies and has chosen a path of normalising and strengthening relations with Russia without investing too much effort into seeking out new trading partners'.⁶² Tsygankov showed that while the Latvian economy used to be every bit as complementary with respect to Russia's as the Belarusian economy was, Latvia went along a different path. Tsygankov attributes this policy 'choice' by Belarus to the fact that it had been

‘incorporated into the Russian empire without having a clear sense of being different’.⁶³ This qualification is certainly correct, and given that Belarus’ value added products are much less competitive in the West than they are in Russia, there appears to be no incentive for the Belarusian authorities to attach high priority to the re-orientation of its trade connections. According to Tsepka, though, export connections with Russia allow Belarus to acquire scale economies that would ensure cost reduction and thus facilitate Belarus’ activity on Western markets. The case in point is the production of Belaz super-heavy trucks for the mining industry. Belaz is the world’s third-ranked producer of these trucks (after Caterpillar and Komatsu). The minimum acceptable profit margin requires Belaz to produce no less than 400 heavy trucks a year. Maintaining production capacity above this level is possible only due to purchases by the Russians. As a result, Belaz is now establishing its presence in Latin America.

However, Belarus is also active on Western and Asian markets on its own. Muzlova noted that potassium fertilisers account for only a small share of Belarus’ exports to Russia and Ukraine. This is because the output of the Soligorsk Potassium Combine (Minsk *oblast’*) is for the most part sold on Asian markets and in the Americas.⁶⁴ Also, there is a significant share (16.9%) of machinery and equipment in Belarus’ exports to Germany, which is Belarus’ third-ranked trade partner (5.16% of the entire trade exchange in 2000). Germany also buys Belarus’ textiles (24.6% of its entire 2000 exports to Germany), timber and other products of the pulp and paper industry (22.2%).⁶⁵

The Belarusian economy is currently at a crossroads. Strapped for investment and beginning to lose in competition with Russian firms on Russian soil, the major industrial plants can realistically hope to be ‘rescued’ by selling substantial stakes to Russian companies. The control over Russian oil, gas and rail transit that some analysts call a ‘state-forming function’⁶⁶ of Belarus is of particular importance. Lukashenka made repeated promises of turning it over to Russia as well, in exchange for Russia’s support during the 2001 elections and for securing his own political future in the Russia–Belarus union. However, not assured of his future role in the midst of his second—and last—presidential term, Lukashenka has not been in a hurry to make good on his promises, thereby irritating the Big Brother. At the time of writing Putin’s irritation had come to boiling point twice: in May and August 2002. In October 2002, that is, at winter’s commencement, the Russian colossus Gazprom, 37% of the shares in which belong to the Russian government, cut the daily supply of natural gas to Belarus by half. Apparently this was done in retaliation for Lukashenka reneging on his promises to sell the shares of Beltransgaz, the organisation in charge of gas transit.⁶⁷ During a televised meeting of the Belarus government, Lukashenka went berserk over what he called the ‘Kremlin’s political decision’. The supply of gas was soon restored in exchange for new promises by the Belarusian president.

Liberal Russian media maintain that most if not all of them are not likely to be kept. The evidence cited in support of this assertion (Lukashenka first agreed the sale of shares to Russian magnates and later changed his mind) is indeed impressive.⁶⁸ However, Belarus’ strategic position as a transit country is a strong trump card, which will become even stronger when the Yamal–West Europe pipeline now under

construction is completed,⁶⁹ and Russia understands this. The situation looks paradoxical indeed: the tail is wagging the dog. So while some analysts recognise Belarus' economic success but reason that it cannot be sustained because 'economic theory and practice would predict a number of less welcome effects'⁷⁰ associated with Lukashenka's economic policy, I am not persuaded by this reasoning.

First, until recently the idea that Belarus even had a positive economic dynamic was discounted as a myth. Second and more important, any prediction of economic sustainability makes sense only for an entity that performs its vital functions on its own with only marginal outside aid. However, there is little to suggest that Lukashenka's vision of Belarus fits this template. Because in times of need his homeland stretches from Brest to Vladivostok, he clearly counts on the continuation of Russia's huge subsidies, direct and indirect, and he views his industrial assets as bargaining chips. Under this scenario, sustaining positive trends in the small entity Lukashenka presides over is quite possible.

The introduction of the Russian ruble as universal tender is planned for 1 January 2005. Linked to that important integration step is yet another significant Russian loan, which will allow Belarus to bring its corporate taxes down to the Russian level, and yet another promise to sell a controlling block of shares in Beltransgaz to Gasprom. At the time of writing, speculation abounds that Lukashenka will hold the 2005 monetary unification hostage to Russia's approval of a third term in office for him.

The electoral victory without congratulations

In my pilot survey the most frequently quoted 'historic event that shaped the Belarus of today' was the September 2001 presidential election: 38.3% of respondents mentioned it as one of three such events, the dissolution of the Soviet Union being a distant second with 20%.

According to the official count, Lukashenka got 75.65% of the vote. His principal opponent, a lacklustre trade union leader, Vladimir Goncharik, got 15.65%. Initially, the opposition had put forward five candidates, of whom only one (Syamion Domash) could speak fluent Belarusian. However, to improve the electoral chances of Goncharik, deemed the most electable contender, the four opposition candidates collectively withdrew from the race.

Upon winning the race, Lukashenka was not favoured with routine congratulations from major Western leaders, an extraordinary humiliation considering that the US, Britain and other Western powers maintain diplomatic relations with Belarus. To be sure, Lukashenka had tarnished his image in the West long before the 2001 election. There were several major causes, Lukashenka's autocratic and indeed clumsy political behaviour being one of them. In 1996 Lukashenka dismissed the parliament but later replaced it with a hand-picked one, and he extended his first presidential term on what is believed to be the flimsy basis of the 1996 constitutional referendum. In the summer of 1998, in a heavy-handed manner, he evicted several Western ambassadors from their residences in Drozdy, a suburb of Minsk, because he had his own residence established there and did not want foreign ambassadors just across the fence. Following these events, Lukashenka and 131 other high-level Belarus' bureaucrats

were declared *personae non grata* in the US and the EU. The Lukashenka regime has a poor human rights record in the eyes of the West, and its treatment of political opposition and opposition media is considered objectionable. By far the gravest charges have been a) the regime's alleged role in the 'disappearance' of five prominent people, including Yuri Zakharchenka (a former minister of internal affairs), Viktor Gonchar (a former vice-premier), Anatoli Krasovsky (a businessman) and Dmitri Zavadsky (a cameraman of the Russian TV network ORT), and b) the alleged sales of sophisticated weaponry to rogue political regimes, notably to Iraq. Needless to say, Lukashenka flatly denies both charges.

This is more than human rights

By all accounts, Lukashenka's authoritarianism and human rights record and even his undercover dealings with rogue regimes are not the only factors that have led to his ostracism by the West. After all, the 'service record' of the leaders of Azerbaijan and at least three of the five Central Asian nations is certainly no better—if not worse—and yet they are welcome in Western capitals. Even the staunchest Lukashenka haters inside Belarus admit that 'he is no more a dictator than Shevardnadze, Niyazov or Aliev',⁷¹ an opinion shared by better-informed Western Belarus watchers.⁷² Also, the impartial observer in Minsk cannot help but admit that the opposition-led and Western-funded media lambasting Lukashenka are available, no restrictions on access to international news exist,⁷³ while fear of indiscriminate repression or eavesdropping is simply not there or, if it is, it is a far cry from what one can come across in Tashkent or Ashgabat. Also, Belarusian citizens wishing to visit the West are restrained only by the Western countries' visa policies, not by domestic security agents. My Minsk-based acquaintances routinely spend their vacations in the West. They are scholars and journalists, not government officials or wealthy businessmen. When Lukashenka complains that the West uses a double standard in its treatment of Belarus and other countries,⁷⁴ he is not entirely off the mark. In my view, along with Lukashenka's human rights record, three more factors are instrumental in his dismal image in the West.

First, Lukashenka frustrated Western expectations of the geopolitical reorientation of Belarus. To be sure, these expectations had been unfounded⁷⁵ to begin with, but the realisation of one's near-sightedness only exacerbates the frustration. Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine may in fact be accused of the same misdemeanour, as his economically and culturally predicated leaning to Russia has become more pronounced. However, compared with Lukashenka, Kuchma projects a more balanced image, he is more versed in politesse, and the political spectrum of Ukraine is broader and more colourful, so it could meet even the most contrasting expectations at the same time.

The second reason behind Lukashenka's ill favour in the West has been the nature of the West's information channels on Belarus. When Lukashenka complains about the West 'lacking objective information about Belarus and, more importantly, lacking desire to obtain this informations',⁷⁶ he may not be off the mark either. A few opposition-minded intellectuals who have failed miserably to gain popular legitimacy at home have easily outmanoeuvred the clumsy and immature Belarusian officialdom

abroad by posing as the only trustworthy interpreters and indeed uncontaminated sources of Belarusian news in the West.

Finally, an attendant reason is the nature of Belarusian immigration. In the West, particularly in the US, well-established immigrant communities had long influenced their adoptive countries' views in regard to their 'homelands'. Ethnic Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian immigrations have been multi-wave and numerous, involving many social strata. Despite being avowedly anti-communist, the immigrant groups from all the countries surrounding Belarus had long maintained versatile relationships with these countries. However, the Belarusian immigrants had been profoundly estranged from their homeland until the break-up of the USSR, with no mutual reconciliation in sight. Emigration from Belarus was numerous, but virtually all those who had left it before the end of the 1920s, when the Soviet regime made leaving the country for good impossible, were not 'nationally conscious' Belarusians, so they blended into kin immigrant groups—Russian, Polish and Jewish—depending on their religious background. As a result, the only nationally conscious Belarusians who had established themselves in the West prior to 1991 were the Nazi collaborators who left Belarus in 1944 with the retreating German army. Because of the extreme Nazi-inflicted damage on Belarus and because so much in the dominant version of the Belarusian national mythology (see my previous article) derived from the glorification of the underground partisan war, those collaborating with the occupiers were deemed the worst scum and did not dare pay a visit to Belarus at the risk of being tried and sentenced for treason. As far as I know, it was no sooner than 1992 that a few well-known Belarusians who moved to the US from Western Europe in the 1950s visited their home country for the first time (since 1944). Considering their successful careers in US intelligence during the Cold War era, their vehemently anti-Lukashenka stance seems to be part of their own self-affirmation as life-long fighters against Russian colonialism.

How much of a fraud?

In regard to the September 2001 presidential election (which resulted in Lukashenka's second term as President), many commentators concur that it was falsified, even though about 1,000 international observers never furnished definitive evidence to this effect. The media organs controlled by the Belarusian opposition do not question Lukashenka's popularity, yet they also maintain that the electoral results were rigged. The most detailed and matter-of-fact analysis leading to that conclusion was published by the weekly *Belorusskii rynok*. It is based on two polls using different methodologies, conducted by the Minsk-based Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) in cooperation with Wirthlin Worldwide, a Washington-based consulting firm. The first methodology involved a small stratified random sample of 200–300 people and daily polling from 1 July to 16 September 2001 (the election took place on 9 September). For each polling, a new random sample was put together, and the ensuing trends were analysed. The second methodology involved one-time post-election polling of 1,465 people at least 18 years old (the sample error is within 3%). Both methodologies led to similar results:

Lukashenka was favoured by 57–58% and Goncharik by 28–29% of the electorate.⁷⁷ The authors of the ISEPS analysis believe that the official election results (75.65% for Lukashenka vs. 15.65% for Goncharik) were indeed doctored out of a desire to avoid a second round of voting, which would have been conducted had no one gained at least 50% of the vote in the first round. However, no doubt is expressed in regard to the eventual Lukashenka victory one way or another. The authoritative *Economist* concurs, stating that ‘Mr. Lukashenka could perhaps have won the election without cheating’.⁷⁸

According to the ISEPS analysis, Lukashenka actually received 60% of the rural vote; also 78% of retired people and 55% of women voted for him. In Minsk, where the opposition candidate had by all accounts enjoyed the friendliest electorate, 36.3% voted for Lukashenka and 34% for Goncharik. The dominant groups in the pro-Goncharik constituency were 18–20 year-olds (39.3% of whom voted for Goncharik versus 23.4% for Lukashenka), students (35.4% vs. 21.1%) and small businessmen (37.5% vs. 16.7%). Among those who favoured Lukashenka, 71% believed that the economic situation of their family either had not changed during his first term or had improved, whereas 61% of those in favour of Goncharik said their situation had worsened.⁷⁹ According to the ISEPS analysts, ‘the explanation is simple: \$50 per family member is being earned through hard work by Goncharik voters, who compare their situation with that of their European neighbours, whereas the overwhelming majority of Lukashenka voters receive their \$40 from the state in the form of pension and various allowances’.⁸⁰

Soul searching after the election

Another perceptive piece of post-election analysis, titled ‘Learning from mistakes’, appeared in *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta (BDG)*. Published by the daily whose stand vis-à-vis Lukashenka could not possibly be more negative, this material is inward looking: it is about learning from *one’s own* mistakes. The authors’ interpretation of the distribution of electoral preferences is most certainly arbitrary. It is based on the results of unnamed sociological surveys conducted in the winter of 2000, well in advance of the elections. According to those surveys, Lukashenka had the guaranteed support of only 30–35%, whereas the potential opposition candidate (not yet named at the time) could count on 15% (which is what Goncharik ultimately got in September 2001), while the share of those completely or partially dissatisfied with the ruling regime was about 40% and the rest were undecided. According to the authors, for the opposition candidate to win, he would have had to muster the majority of those loyal 15% plus engage the dissatisfied 40% and at least some of the undecided—altogether a minimum 60% of the vote.⁸¹ Inconsistent pre-election statistics notwithstanding,⁸² the narrative is particularly revealing when it comes to the perceived causes of the opposition’s defeat in the 2001 election. Not a word is mentioned about tampering with ballot boxes—the first battle cry of the opposition immediately after its defeat. Instead, a list of the opposition’s perceived weaknesses is offered. Here it is in my almost verbatim translation:

the opposition failed to come up with an attractive and positive programme of its own even though they had years, not months, at their disposal; in the eyes of Belarusian society, the opposition looks too belligerent, it is simply feared; boycott and blanket rejection were its major tools; the opposition propagated a black and white vision of society; this sort of vision was proclaimed valiant and democratic; instead of acting on behalf of the electoral majority, the opposition created the impression that it acted on behalf of a special caste of the initiated and was in no way connected with the majority of the people, on the grounds that this majority was composed of the 'nationally indifferent' (literally, *nesvyadomi*, which is the opposite to *svyadomi*, a code word designating all those in favour of promoting the Belarusian language and Belarusian ethnic and national identity in opposition to those of the Russians); the views of the opposition candidate should have been left of centre, which in and of itself could have attracted at least 40% of the electorate bent on seeking the support of Moscow (a highly controversial argument); also, this could have promoted the candidate's access to Moscow media outlets, which would have been important in view of Lukashenka's tight control over Belarusian media;⁸³ the potentially undecided voters perceive Belarusian politics through the prism of Russian TV channels and pay special respect to the Russian president; these voters are intensely irritated by the rhetoric about return to the Belarusian national symbols (like the white-red-white flag and the emblem 'inherited' from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), the Belarusian language and NATO expansion.⁸⁴

Rarely do the opposition-controlled media publish revelations concerning the true stance of many rank-and-file Belarusians in regard to their alleged national symbols and language. All the more important is the evidence quoted above.

Sultanism and neo-communism

Writing about the underpinnings of the Lukashenka regime, Eke & Kuzio refer to 'mass psychological marasmus',⁸⁵ assigning the situation in Belarus to the category of inexplicable and bizarre, a Looking Glass world of sorts. Yet there have been at least two attempts to categorise the socio-political situation in Belarus by applying certain 'ism' labels and justifying them by a set of normative-looking criteria. The first such attempt, incidentally, belongs to Eke & Kuzio themselves. They use the term 'sultanism' to describe the Lukashenka regime. According to these authors, sultanistic regimes exhibit seven characteristics: extreme patrimonialism, fusion of public and private domains, lack of any ruling ideology, authoritarianism unencumbered by rules, political plurality being frowned upon, a disorganised and weak opposition and forcible overthrow of the regime as the only way to put an end to it.⁸⁶

These criteria seem vague and are as debatable as the label itself, imbued with a distinct oriental flavour. It is highly unlikely, for example, that Lukashenka may end his tenure as president only if violently overthrown. In the absence of any indication that the 2001 presidential election was falsified to the point of changing the winner, the assumption is simply too far-fetched. Admittedly, Lukashenka's tenure in office

could end once Russia decides it is time to cultivate an alternative to Lukashenka, and one cannot rule out the possibility that this process has already been set in motion. Secondly and more importantly, because of its oriental flavour and explicit reference to Central Asia and the Middle East, the sultanate concept lacks discriminating power, though it can surely be used as an effective journalistic hyperbole. The differences between Belarus, on one hand, and, say, Central Asian and Middle Eastern states, on the other, in regard to crucial aspects of the polity are simply too discernible for anybody with exposure to both realms.

For example, in Belarus opposition is indeed ‘frowned upon’, but in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan it is overwhelmingly ‘jailed’ and/or not tolerated at all. In Belarus, Russian TV stations and media routinely mocking and humiliating Lukashenka are available. To be sure, some broadcasts from Russia have been restricted, but the newspapers printing anti-Lukashenka material have not. Belarus’ own opposition media are freely accessible; one can go to the *BDG* website with its literally daily Lukashenka bashing or read *Literatura i mastatsva*, the official organ of the Writers’ Union. An April 2002 representative opinion poll by the IISEPS revealed that 32% of Belarusians were never afraid to discuss their political views openly, while 26% said they were afraid sometimes.⁸⁷ This is in line with my own observation in Belarus, where it is usually not a problem for anybody to vent his or her disapproval of Lukashenka to a stranger. A random survey of citizens of any state in Central Asia about their governments and leaders will produce a very different outcome. With the possible exception of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan, the prospective respondents will keep their mouth shut. In 1999 the US State Department hired a local public polling firm to gain insight into different societal issues in Belarus (as in Ukraine.) It would be futile to attempt anything like this, in, say, Turkmenistan. First, such a thing as a public opinion firm would not even exist. Second, nothing would be revealed anyway without the interference of the government.

The second known attempt to categorise the situation in Belarus belongs to Stanislau Shushkevich, Belarus’ first leader after independence, whose government was terminated by the Lukashenka victory in the 1994 presidential election. Shushkevich’s personality is a far cry from that of any Soviet leader and most post-Soviet leaders within the non-Baltic bulk of the former Soviet Union. Shushkevich is an intellectual (a reputable physicist and university administrator), not an *apparatchik*. Shushkevich is soft-spoken and cerebral. He speaks good Russian and good Belarusian, and he does not mix them. He is also fluent in Polish and has some knowledge of English. However, such background, appearance and demeanour are not kingmakers in what was a peasant country just a couple of generations ago. To be sure, Shushkevich never enjoyed any tangible popularity among the Belarus’ rank and file and never won a popular election. In 1994, at the helm of power, he received a meagre 9.9% of the vote! Today, he heads an obscure Social Democratic Party with headquarters in a two-bedroom apartment. In my 2002 pilot survey only three secondary school teachers (out of 60) mentioned Shushkevich among the five most well-known Belarusians who had left an imprint on world history. Kastus Kalinovsky was named three times as frequently. This is despite the fact that Shushkevich has his name inscribed in the annals of world history as one of the three leaders who did away with the Soviet Union, whereas Kalinovsky’s name recognition outside Belarus

is confined to the narrow circle of the initiated. All the more instructive is Shushkevich's current oblivion, which does not even come with a consolation prize: his nemesis, Lukashenka, was mentioned by eight respondents (13.3%) in my pilot survey.

In his 2002 book⁸⁸ Shushkevich uses the term 'neo-communism' to categorise the present-day socio-political reality of Belarus. According to Shushkevich, the four basic tenets of communist ideology (aversion to private property, emphasis on social equality, negation of individual freedom, belligerent atheism and dismissal of Western values) have not been eradicated from the popular mindset, in part because communism had maintained its grip on Belarus for such a long time. Thus the roots of whatever is 'neo' in Belarusian public life are stunted: considering that Lukashenka came to power in 1994, they span only three years (1992–94), and no deeper roots are sought by Shushkevich. His diagnosis, however, not only leaves much to be desired in terms of its heuristic power but comes across as inconsistent. Throughout his book 'neo-communism' is used interchangeably with 'authoritarianism', 'authoritative populism' and some other labels. Like 'sultanism', both 'neo-communism' and 'authoritarianism' lack discriminating power, especially when applied to Central Asian polities and those of the Trans-Caucasus: Shushkevich purposely appends to his analysis of Belarus an overview of the 'authoritarianism' in all the other CIS countries.⁸⁹ The notion of 'neo-communism' in regard to Belarus also appears to be elusive and ambivalent. On one hand, 'the republic of Belarus does not have an official ideology',⁹⁰ and yet on the other hand, 'following several centuries of Russian yoke, 73 years of communist tyranny and after three years of political thaw, Belarus again set itself on the way to *communist dictatorship*' (emphasis added).⁹¹ At the same time, Shushkevich admits that 'compared with the classically totalitarian states, totalitarianism in Belarus is limited in nature'⁹² and that the 'Belarusian authoritarian regime tolerates elements of civil society'⁹³ though with important qualifications effectively minimising its effect.

To me, digressions and informal observations contained in Shushkevich's book are more revealing than the book's central theme—a reasoning that leads to the socio-political diagnosis of the Belarusian regime as neo-communist. For example, Shushkevich mocks Belarusian post-independence bureaucracy, whose susceptibility to corruption 'remained at the old Soviet level and bore a "primitive character" compared with Russia or Ukraine: a high-ranking official could not allow himself anything more than receiving a free apartment from the state or building a small mansion (rarely two) while registering it for a figurehead owner'.⁹⁴ (Curiously, in an attempt to establish how corrupt Lukashenka himself is, another author asserts: 'Lukashenka satisfies his personal "needs" at the expense of this [extra-budget] fund. Among other things, he built a new house for his mother, repaired his wife's house, buys many expensive suits for himself and gives presents'.⁹⁵ The 'magnitude' of corruption just described would be considered laughable in Russia and in many other countries.) Indeed, the last (2002) ranking of 102 world nations on 'perceived corruption' by Transparency International has Belarus as number 36, tied with Lithuania and less corrupt than Poland (ranked 45), not to mention Russia (71) and Ukraine (85).⁹⁶

In his book Shushkevich also castigates the opposition-controlled media for

‘demonising Lukashenka, thereby effectively inflating his stature, whereas in fact the most efficient antidote to any dictator is laughter’.⁹⁷ He admits that independent media in Belarus ‘do not ultimately disappear only due to international foundations for the support of democracy and human rights’.⁹⁸ Yet he rebukes authors defending the current regime and those who due to their previous criticism of the Soviet regime ‘have been by inertia sheltered by Western grants’, for their attacks on the Belarusian opposition.⁹⁹

The outlook on Belarus that emerges from Shushkevich’s narrative is dismal: there is hardly any personality or group in the entire country whose moral authority is high enough to promulgate positive change. ‘In contrast to neighbouring Poland, where the Catholic Church became one of the principal vehicles of social progress and greatly facilitated the development of civil society, the Russian Orthodox Church, which has the largest mass following in Belarus, has become a bulwark of the communist comeback and continues to support an amoral and inhumane dictatorial regime’.¹⁰⁰ Against this spiritual vacuum, the ‘high professionalism’ of the Russian media is mentioned, based on which they are more popular in Belarus than Belarusian TV.¹⁰¹

Shushkevich portrays a society overwhelmed by extraordinary amnesia: ‘The majority of Belarus’ residents perceived the communist leadership and the Soviet regime not as a modified variety of Russian colonialism but as part of *their own* history’.¹⁰² However, because the inflow of able and patriotically inclined people into the Belarusian *nomenklatura* was not stemmed completely, special precautions were taken. These patriots were ‘simply transferred to positions in Moscow or higher posts in other parts of the Soviet Union. There they quickly assimilated, absorbed the great-power ideology and often became even greater chauvinists than their Russian mentors’.¹⁰³ This kind of pliability at the hand of ‘colonialists’ cannot help but invoke the already quoted¹⁰⁴ replica of one Yanka Kupala character, the one who ‘learned from reliable sources that Belarusians are very pliable’.

Is national consolidation possible in the de-nationalised Belarus?

In contrast to Eke & Kuzio and to Shushkevich, I will not attempt to reduce the socio-political situation in Belarus to any ‘ism’. No such attempt can succeed in principle until and unless Belarus becomes a self-sustained cultural entity that can be understood in and of itself, external influences notwithstanding. This may materialise in the future, but so far it has not, which makes me believe that the Belarus of today simply cannot be understood and categorised on its own. To be sure, it does possess some defining socio-cultural features, but each of them can be discussed sensibly only in conjunction with Russia, which for Belarus appears to be much more than just its eastern neighbour.

The Belarusians’ vague sense of ethnic and national identity is definitely one such feature, and it possesses great explanatory potential for the dominant political culture and preferences. Needless to say, ‘sense of identity’ for the majority of Belarusians effectively means ‘sense of being different from Russians’.

After Vladimir Putin’s snubbing of Lukashenka at an August 2002 joint press conference in Moscow, when Putin suggested that the six *oblasti* of Belarus be accepted in the Russian Federation as its ‘subjects’ (thus eliminating the very notion

of Belarus from Europe's political map), Aleksandr Yaroshuk, the leader of the largest agrarian trade union went on record protesting against 'the propaganda campaign that becomes insulting to Russia'. Yaroshuk suggested that while personally he was not in favour of the type of integration favoured by Putin, 'a significant number of Belarus' citizens' were. 'I believe', Yaroshuk added, 'that these citizens' viewpoint also has to be expressed in the media, and the reasons they are ready to sacrifice our national sovereignty ought to be understood'.¹⁰⁵ Even Valeriya Novodvorskaya, *enfant terrible* of Russian politics, vehemently anti-Putin, avowedly pro-Western and eager to support anybody's claim for independence from Russia, could not help but admit that 'indifference of a significant part of Belarusian society to its own national history and national dignity'¹⁰⁶ must share the blame for the possible annexation of Belarus by Russia. 'Otherwise', added Novodvorskaya, 'no juggling of election results would have brought Lukashenka to power; nobody would have voted for him, and he would have been showered with rotten tomatoes'.¹⁰⁷

Soon after Putin's remarks and their dismissal by Lukashenka as being insulting to Belarus,¹⁰⁸ a suggestion was floated by some political commentators that a unique point of convergence between Lukashenka and Belarus' 'pitiful' opposition might emerge.¹⁰⁹ Such a suggestion did not sound entirely unrealistic despite bitterness and strong personal animosity between Lukashenka and many of the opposition figures. In late May 2002 Aleh Trusau shared the following unorthodox view: 'Granted, Lukashenka and I are at loggerheads politically, but who knows, maybe we will end up erecting monuments to that person. Look how tenacious he is at not yielding chunks of Belarusian property to Russia'.¹¹⁰ This was a reference to Lukashenka renegeing on his earlier promises to effectively surrender a natural gas pipeline, an oil refinery and a major brewing factory to Russian corporate control—the chain of events that actually enraged Putin. Also, Uladzimir Arlou suggested that Lukashenka had probably long forgotten and probably regretted his erstwhile pronouncements on the inferiority of the Belarusian language.¹¹¹ Perhaps some lines of communication between the nationalist camp and Lukashenka remain open and may be put to use at an opportune moment.

At the time of writing it is hard to judge the ultimate effect of the lingering Lukashenka–Putin tensions. It may be that, acting on the assumption that Belarus has nowhere to go, economically speaking, other than into the embraces of Russia, Putin has inadvertently spurred national consolidation in Belarus. Indeed, it was leaked to the Russian liberal press that the state-owned media outlets of Belarus were inundated by letters of indignation over Putin's remarks and of support for Lukashenka. When asked why they did not publish these letters, those responsible allegedly replied: 'We are scared. What would happen if the Russians thought we had launched an information war?'¹¹² Available opinion polls do not furnish much evidence in support of the national consolidation idea. According to Table 2, based on the two representative national surveys by the ISEPS conducted in 1999 and 2002, the pro-integration with Russia stance has gained in strength in Belarusian society, but the pro-independence stance has weakened. The top three rows of Table 2 feature only the extreme response options to the question, 'Which type of relationship with Russia do you consider the best?' In the survey there was also an intermediate option—a confederation of the two states—which in 2002 was favoured by 32% of respondents,¹¹³ that

is, effectively the same share as that of those in favour of a single state (31.9%). According to Oleg Manaev, the IISEPS director, ‘both strong and moderate defenders of Belarus sovereignty have been marginalised’¹¹⁴—a far-reaching description. The fourth and fifth rows of Table 2 are especially revealing: whereas in 1999, among those willing to live in a single state with Russia, Lukashenka supporters outnumbered Lukashenka opponents by a factor of four, by 2002 the situation had reversed, and many of those in favour of a single country with Russia had turned their backs on Lukashenka. ‘It appears’, asserts Manaev, ‘that now many people who hold democracy and market reform dear associate their hopes with Russia. I would like to underline that such are the data that we have received. My team and I are in favour of Belarus’ sovereignty’.¹¹⁵ The bottom rows of Table 2 speak for themselves: the president of what formally speaking is just a neighbouring country has a much higher rating than Belarus’ own president.

In a subsequent, April 2003 national poll the gap between two the presidents became smaller: 18.1% would now vote for Lukashenka versus 42.2% for Putin. Also, the number of those in favour of Belarus and Russia becoming one state declined significantly to just 25.6% of those polled (from 53.8% a year earlier),¹¹⁶ while the number of those in favour of a looser integration with Russia increased. On the other hand, even fewer people than before rejected the idea of integration with Russia in principle. Observers have linked the above changes with an anti-Kremlin campaign launched in Belarus’ state media in September 2002, after Lukashenka’s second run-in with Putin. These changes, however, scarcely smack of a swing toward national consolidation. Rather, just as before, Belarusians allow their leader to have it both ways: to be in favour of full integration with Russia (when gains are anticipated) and of full sovereignty (when losses are envisaged). Apparently, more believe the gains of integration still outweigh its losses: in April 2003 45.5% of those surveyed said the quality of life would improve in the event of joining Russia, while 30.1% said it would decline.

The taproot of the Lukashenka phenomenon

If there is another trait—along with a vague sense of separate (from the Russians) identity—a trait with a similar potential to influence the socio-political situation in Belarus, it is arguably the delayed but precipitate urbanisation. Again, it makes sense to discuss urbanisation only in conjunction with Russia.

Andrei Okara shrewdly attributed Lukashenka’s popularity to the fact that ‘his rhetoric, behaviour and politics match a Belarusian peasant archetype’.¹¹⁷ While ethnologists would probably point to some differences between the ‘peasant archetypes’ of Russia and Belarus, these do not appear significant in the larger scheme of things and at least as far as the Belarus’ Orthodox majority is concerned. Other authors analysing Lukashenka’s personality also attributed his mannerisms, particularly his habit of thrashing members of his government in front of TV cameras, to a communal peasant ethos. ‘When he designates himself as “father” (*bats’ka*)’, says Rainer Lindner ‘... we note the presence of the family unit of the Russian village’.¹¹⁸

Yurii Bogomolov, a columnist writing for the Russian daily *Izvestiya*, likened Lukashenka to a buffoon character in a satirical short story by the late Vassili

TABLE 2
ATTITUDES TO RUSSIA-BELARUS INTEGRATION

<i>Selected responses</i>	<i>Percentage of Respondents</i>	
	<i>March 1999</i>	<i>April 2002</i>
Prefer that Russia and Belarus remain just friendly neighbours	43.2	29.6
In a possible referendum would rather vote for a single state with Russia	41.8	53.8
In a possible referendum would rather vote against a single state with Russia	40.3	23.0
In a possible referendum would definitely vote against a single state with Russia	28.3	16.3
Share of Lukashenka opponents strongly opposed to one state with Russia	9.7	32.8
Share of Lukashenka supporters in favour of one state with Russia	40.7	18.6
Share of Lukashenka opponents among the supporters of one state with Russia	57	73
Share of Lukashenka supporters among those strongly opposed to one state with Russia	7.5	2.9
If the post of President of Belarus and Russia were created, I would vote for Putin	N/A	50.5
If the post of President of Belarus and Russia were created, I would vote for Lukashenka	N/A	14.0

Note: Polled: 1,464 people in 2002 and 1,666 in 1999; error \pm 3%.
Sources: compiled by the author on the basis of Ol'ga Tomashevskaya, 'Lukashenka ostalsya bez opory', interview with Oleg Manaev, Director, Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, BDG, 27 August 2002; http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/08/2002_08_27 and <http://www.itseps.by/press.html>.

Shukshyn, a legendary connoisseur of peasant life. The character in question is a hillbilly upstart described as he sets out to snub and frustrate a lecturer—an urban outsider—by barraging him with a string of essentially senseless but provocative questions. The goal is to distract the lecturer and publicly humiliate him. According to Bogomolov, when Lukashenka snubs prominent foreigners, as in his infamous 1998 treatment of Western ambassadors, he resorts to the same pattern of self-assertion in the eyes of his fellow countrymen that Shukshyn's character did. By doing so he appeals to basic instincts of the inferiority-ridden peasants: 'Look, people, how I slapped this reputable guy, look and gloat, as we are every bit as important as him'. (The Shukshyn episode occurred in a rural club, to which local authorities invite urban lecturers to enlighten the local community about the achievements of modern science.¹¹⁹) The article in *Izvestiya* is accompanied by a long list of Lukashenka's most ludicrous gaffes.

Why on earth would this matter in a country whose population is 67% urban? In his classic study of the Soviet *nomenklatura* Voslensky pointed to the very high percentage of rural-born among the higher echelon of the Soviet leaders. Among others, he cited the example of Minsk *oblast'*, where in 1946 there were 855 persons in leadership positions, 709 of whom were former peasants.¹²⁰ Vishnevsky writes that the share of urban-born Soviet leaders was at its highest during the first years after the 1917 revolution, when the country was primarily rural. This reflects the fact that the major Bolsheviks were recruited from the nation's intellectual elite. However, as the rate of urbanisation went up, the share of rural-born leaders began to grow, thus beginning to more accurately reflect the overall population composition. Yet as urbanisation progressed, the tradition of promoting former villagers to positions of prominence did not subside. For example, among the new members of the Communist Party Politbureau, the Central Committee (CC) secretaries and members of the CC Organisational Department who first occupied their posts in 1970–79, as many as 63.6% were rural-born. Out of 100 people who came to leadership positions in the party over the period 1950–89, 47 were born in villages and 17 in the so-called PGT, a semi-urban type of settlement. Only 22 were born in major cities, including just two from Moscow and no one from Leningrad; nine out of 22 full-fledged urban dwellers came to leadership positions only under Gorbachev.¹²¹

Vishnevsky does not find these statistics accidental. Regardless of what Marxism was really worth, when it 'stepped out of the elitist circles and got in touch with the peasant masses or, still worse, the masses of the *lumpen* or marginals already no longer rural, yet not quite urban, this revolutionary school of thought could not help but regenerate into something else'.¹²² Vishnevsky believes that the communist revolution in Russia matched Schpengler's notion of a 'conservative revolution' that set out to modernise Russia by medieval means. The Russian peasantry with its primitive communal instincts and redistributive ethos¹²³ could not help but have a crucial impact on the Soviet pattern of development.

The facets of the Russian communal ethos—this, according to some scholars, is the true cradle of Russian communism, apart from Marx's creative mind—have been thoroughly researched. Among them are the ability to tolerate inherited inequality and at the same time an aversion to inequality due to personal ingenuity and the labour ethic; a cult of a strong leader who would make a decision for the rank and file and

thus relieve them from making personal choices; a Manichaeic world view, whereby the utmost evil wages a perennial tug of war with the utmost virtue without a sense of anything whatsoever in-between those poles; abiding by moral reasoning rather than by legal norms; and a cult of patience. What Shushkevich attributed to the communist ideology (see above) had been in fact long nurtured by the peasant commune, with the possible exception of belligerent atheism. But even this exception does not seem to matter, because communists put forward a new brand of idolatry in place of traditional religion.

Vishnevsky points out that Soviet urbanisation was accomplished in record time, too quickly for the acculturation of archaic peasant masses gushing into the cities. In contrast to Western Europe, where swift numerical urban growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was preceded by centuries of gradual qualitative change of urban life, the Soviet type of development led as much to the ruralisation of the urban places as it did to the urbanisation of rural villagers. The archaic rural culture came to dominate the entire urban milieu, not just enclaves of village huts inside cities—a persistent trait of Soviet urbanisation. To be sure, the type of socio-cultural control that befits urbanisation was emerging under the Soviet regime, but very slowly, which was also due to such inherently Soviet elements as lack of a recognised housing market, rampant standardisation of residential blocks, a restrictive policy of urban residence permits (the so-called *propiska*) and a lack of self-governance.

Vishnevsky's stance falls into a school of thought founded by Nikolai Berdyaev. In his *The Origin of Russian Communism*¹²⁴ Berdyaev attributed communism's most essential features to Russia's oriental affinities, not to Marxism. Whereas the latter had come to be the source of communist symbolism, the former provided human capital susceptible to social engineering and made it possible to muster the energy of the entire nation. The school of thought that promoted this perspective was off to a bumpy start because the ideologically indoctrinated audience was not ready to listen. When Vakar (who earlier wrote a still unsurpassed volume on Belarus) published *The Taproot of Soviet Society*, in which he showed that the Soviet polity was essentially a reincarnation of the Russian peasantry's traditional arrangements now extended over the entire society under a smokescreen of Marxist symbols,¹²⁵ the audience was even less impressed. Vakar's book was deemed eccentric and fell into oblivion. The Cold War was in full swing, and it came to a head during the 1962 Caribbean crisis. At that time, touting some shadowy *cultural* roots for communism was too much for the *politically* agitated reader. Communism did not only look ominous from afar; the Western 'agitprop' viewed it entirely as a product of erroneous and misleading *theory*. The fact that Marxism swayed quite a few people in the West aggravated ideological excitement. It was only much later, when communism had retreated from the forefront of international affairs, that Berdyaev's cultural approach began to gain ground; in fact, it now carries the day in the intellectual discourse in Russia itself.¹²⁶ In the meantime, for the Russian communists, history has come full circle; today their most ardent supporters are peasants from Russia's south, not industrial workers.

According to this peasant theory, communism did not collapse under the burden of economic and political problems endemic to it. Communism came to an end when the tenacious mentality nurtured by the redistributive peasant commune had weakened its grip over the majority of people in a few principal urban areas. The urbanisation of

TABLE 3
PERCENTAGE OF URBAN POPULATION

	1800	1900	1950	1970	1990	1999/2000
W. Europe	12	41	59	67	79	79
USA	5	42	57	66	74	75
Euro-Russia	6	13	42	62	74	75
Belarus	6	13	21	43	65	67

Sources: Paul Bairoch, *Cities and Economic Development* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 221, 290; Population Reference Bureau, *The Demographic Yearbook of Russia, 2000* (Moscow, Goskomstat, 2000); Ministerstvo Statistiki i Analiza Respubliki Belarus.

the people's mentality, a cosmopolitan trend, had finally grown through the cracks in the Soviet system, like grass shoots through asphalt. The end of communism was thus based on the newly emerging socio-cultural situation at least as much as on overt political indoctrination and/or economic imperatives. Perhaps the confluence of all three factors, cultural, economic and political, determined it.

However, this occurred only in a few principal urban centres, notably Moscow and Saint Petersburg, which became the *loci* of the crucial constituency for the change in regime.¹²⁷ For the far-flung Soviet regions, change of this nature could not be expected to occur at once. In 1990, when urban residents made up 66% of the entire Soviet population, only 15–17% of those who were 60+ had been born in urban areas; of those in their forties, about 40% had. Only among those 22 and younger did the percentage of urban-born exceed 50%.¹²⁸

What has been just said about the Soviet Union in general pertains especially to Belarus. The urbanisation of Belarus was even more delayed than that of Russia and even more precipitate (Table 3). In Belarus the redistributive peasant commune existed up to the late 1920s, although Catholics in western Belarus disposed of it several generations earlier. Yet the peasant roots of the infamous Belarusian conservatism are as apparent as they are in the provinces of the so-called Red Belt of southern Russia. And in both cases the first economic success took place under traditional-turned-Soviet forms of collectivism.

Aleh Trusau called attention to the fact that authoritarianism is inherent in peasant tradition and that 'all peasant countries initially promoted dictators to the helm of power. Look at Hungary's Horthy, Portugal's Salazar and Poland's Pilsudsky'.¹²⁹ When in the late 1980s Ales Adamovich, a Belarusian author turned Moscow-based publicist, called his native country the Vendee of *perestroika*,¹³⁰ the crux of the matter was deeply entrenched rural conservatism. Lyavon Barshchevsky, a member of Belarus' Supreme Soviet (disbanded by Lukashenka in 1996), stated that in Belarus during the 1991 coup 'the majority were unfortunately not averse to supporting the GKCHP'.¹³¹ Those in Belarus who embraced the views of Moscow liberals as well as Belarusian nationalists posing as democrats did not have much of a following, nor do they today. Whereas the cosmopolitan liberals have not managed to gain a critical mass, the predicament of the Westernising nationalist camp is even tougher: in Belarus there is no tradition of couching popular demands in nationalist terms.¹³²

Musings of the elite

Unable to elicit popular support, some Belarusian nationalists professed disaffection with the man-in-the-street and retreated to an elitist way of thinking. Some, notably Zyanon Paznyak, show signs of losing touch with reality: in September 2002 Paznyak reached out to his compatriots from across the border, calling on them to set up 'armed committees of civilian defence against Russian aggression'.¹³³ The sheer recklessness of that appeal is matched only by its impracticality. Marples once cautiously stated that Paznyak's 'writings have a tendency toward hyperbole'.¹³⁴ It seems that now he is past that point and largely irrelevant.

The bitter musings of Irina Khalip, a prominent journalist who was beaten by police during a 1997 rally against the Belarus–Russia union and became an opposition icon, illustrate the elitist way of thinking. Khalip is a regular contributor to RFE/RL and is affiliated with *Ekho Moskvy*, a liberal Moscow-based radio network, for which she presents round-ups of Belarusian news. Two months after the September 2001 presidential election Khalip bemoaned the deficiency of moral leaders in Belarus.

I tried to recall the other day somebody genuine, bright and gifted—a personality to be proud of in this cheerless world. But however hard I tried, only Bykov and Borodulin¹³⁵ came to mind. But how long can one exploit these names? It is high time to allow these remarkable people to rest and resign the honourable post of this nation's conscience. They could have long returned to literary work, but who has come to replace them during all these years? And so we are used to mumbling their names ... here they are, the national pride of Belarusians ... And that is it? For a ten million-strong people with a history that spans many centuries? Are these enough? One could hang oneself over the paucity of the Belarusian national pantheon. Oh, sure, there were also Chancellor Sapiega, Kosciuszko and Kalinovsky, Kolas and Kupala. But all of them have been lost in this colossal universe of time ... It is foolish to accuse ordinary people of inability to make a choice or at least commit themselves to action. Ordinary people ... do not make history. It is made by the few. As for the masses, they are docile and would follow anybody's lead; one has to float a couple of not very sophisticated ideas so everybody could grasp them. It is no less foolish to accuse the opposition of weakness and helplessness. Opposition is as abstract a notion as are masses. It is also in dire need of those few who can now be discovered only in the annals of history ...¹³⁶

Khalip's manifesto reads like a crude variation of the famous Pushkin stanzas: 'Zachem skotam dary svobody/Ikh nado rezat' ili strich' (Why would cattle need rewards of freedom? They have to be slaughtered or sheared).¹³⁷ Yet criticising the opposition for its helplessness may not be foolish after all: it is helpless precisely because it is elitist and out of touch with the despised 'masses'.

In another article Khalip derides a member of the Belarusian parliament with the suggestive surname Kholopik (little lackey). At a German conference on 'Political prospects for Belarus' this MP bluntly explained why he supported Lukashenka. Here is Khalip's rendition of Kholopik's speech:

In our country, it is dangerous to support the opposition. This is not because you are going to get killed or jailed, but because you would fail to get re-elected. You see, I represent a working class precinct of Minsk. In my precinct, the highest percentage of pro-Lukashenka voters was recorded during the presidential election. So you expect me to support the

democratic camp now that I know that my voters don't give a damn about democracy? People come to me and I see that they are content, they don't want changes and they are crazy about Lukashenka, so why would I support the opposition if I know that hard workers from my constituency [read: cattle] would then turn their back on me?¹³⁸

Khalip says this MP should be ashamed because 'he joined the parliament not to participate in the legislative process and try his best to improve life in the country or at least life in his constituency, but exclusively for personal gain'.¹³⁹

It is hard to present a more suggestive and convincing legitimisation of Lukashenka and his regime both in letter and in spirit. Lindner is on target when he says that 'in the end, Belarus is not ailing because of its president, but rather because of the lack of the genuine functional elite that with its political and economic knowledge can free the state from the psychological and structural shackles of the past'.¹⁴⁰ So when Lukashenka holds his opposition in contempt by saying that it 'does not present any threat to' his regime,¹⁴¹ he may, sadly enough, be on target as well.

Conclusion

This third article has shown that Belarus was a major Soviet success story: its economic progress and modernisation were particularly impressive during the decades following World War II. Belarus' economic dynamics after the Soviet break-up have been mixed. The country lags behind Russia significantly on systemic transformation, yet Belarus fares better on many counts (e.g. magnitude of economic decline, role in output of several major products, foreign trade and social indicators). Because of its *relatively* high quality of life, Belarus is attractive to migrants from all over the former Soviet Union. This attraction may in part be attributed to the lack of nationalist sentiment among the rank and file, in light of which 'ethnic aliens' remain more welcome than almost anywhere else in the former Soviet Union.

Although Belarus is now heavily urbanised, the urbanisation of the people's mindset is still in progress. Lukashenka's popularity has roots in the rudimentary conservatism of rural masses just as much as in the Russophile sentiment of the general public. For quite some time Lukashenka successfully positioned himself as the prime mediator and enforcer of his countrymen's love affair with Russia. However, as Lukashenka's fight for his own survival antagonises part of Russia's political class and its president, the aspirations of Belarus' rank and file are beginning to bypass Lukashenka and look to an 'unmediated' union with Russia, whether in a single state or a confederation. This deepens the divide between the nationalist camp and the de-nationalised majority.

The conclusion from the series of three articles must be that understanding Belarus does not come easily. While analysts are diligent and act in good faith, the object of analysis is unusually elusive. No nation or *ethnie* is exempt from external influences, and hardly any is immune to them. But what is truly unusual about Belarus is the *degree* to which external factors control every fibre in its national fabric, every facet of Belarus' ethno-national setting: the economy, politics and indeed language and identity. After seven decades as a republic of the Soviet Union and following 11 years of full-fledged statehood, Belarus has not yet found its bearings. It is therefore

impossible to understand Belarus without immersing oneself deep into history and the current affairs of Belarus' neighbours.

In theory, national awakening is linked to modernisation. But what this term subsumes—industrialisation, advancement of the capital city and other urban centres, acquisition of statehood and more—all came to Belarus from without and/or were conditioned by stimuli originating in a larger entity of which Belarus was long a part. In contrast to what happened in Iran under the Shah, these external influences were not deemed hostile and were therefore organically absorbed. No wonder that the majority of Belarusians did not perceive that larger entity as the epitome of alien colonialism but as *their own* homeland.

Smith acknowledged how 'tempting [it is] to conclude that "ethnicity" is in the eye of the beholder, that it is all "situational", a matter of time and context'.¹⁴² This is because 'even ethnic communities, so easily recognisable from a distance, seem to dissolve before our eyes the closer we come and the more we attempt to pin them down'.¹⁴³ More of an allegory intended to underline the relativity of one's perspective on ethnicity than a statement of the obvious, this pronouncement could be taken literally when it comes to Belarusians. They are, in fact, *not* easily recognisable from a distance and never speak in one voice, so coming closer and sorting out forces instrumental in their collective evolution only renders their image fuzzier and harder to categorise.

As a group, Belarusians seem at first glance to be uniquely selfless and immune to national pride. Upon a closer look, one begins to realise that Belarusians possess vicarious patriotism that derives from their affection for and historical ties to Russia, Poland and Lithuania. But as one's insight into Belarus deepens, this finding becomes dubious as well. Because most Belarusians do not show evidence of perceiving themselves as a nation apart, their Russian or Polish patriotism is not vicarious but mainstream: it is no different from what people feel on the other side of Belarus' borders, the people with whom Belarusians tacitly *identify*.

The above, however, is not the end of the story, the story of understanding Belarus. There is a peculiar schism on the most basic and crucial issue of Belarusian identity. A small group of intellectuals attempted to provide what Lindner called 'the historical reasoning behind the Declaration of Independence that was more of an accident than the result of internal ... demand for sovereignty'.¹⁴⁴ Despite posing as successors of Lithuania's Grand Duchy, these people set out to promote their own version of history, which is not Lithuanian or Polish, let alone Russian. However, their rendition of history does not resound among the majority of 'passport Belarusians', whose vision of history is inseparable from that of Russia.

Because of this 'split identity disorder', unusual for a modern European ethnic group, Belarusians underwent an anomalous kind of transformation over the course of the twentieth century. Once a demotic *ethnie*, that is, an ethnic group without the upper strata, by the end of the century Belarusians had evolved into a peculiar two-tier formation whose upper tier is a tight-knit circle of the initiated (aptly calling itself the 'archipelago Belarus'), while several million rank and file at the structure's base have barely any connection with the top and many seek spiritual guidance abroad. This is what Guthrie so fittingly called an 'elite without a constituency'.

Yet it would be a mistake to say that in Belarus the nationalist message falls

entirely on deaf ears. It has multiple effects on Belarusian society. First, the number of converts to the nationalist cause has been growing slowly but steadily, mostly among college students of social sciences and humanities.

Second, because most rank and file Belarusians (those without college degrees, graduates of technical colleges, and most people in all walks of life in eastern Belarus) remain impervious to national agitation, they are irritated when the nationally conscious censure people for being unpatriotic. Persistent moralising with more than a hint of reproof may get on one's nerves even if the reproof is perceived as justified. But it irritates even more if it is deemed unwarranted. The broad masses *are* in fact patriotic; it is simply that for some, like Filaret, Belarus' Orthodox leader,¹⁴⁵ the motherland is extended Russia, stretching from Brest to Vladivostok, while for others it is extended Poland.

Third, irritation leads to alienation. The messengers become bitter at times and resort to an elitist, holier-than-thou mode of thinking that antagonises common people even more. It appears clear that in Belarus the cultural elite and the masses have different aspirations and speak different languages, both literally and figuratively.

Fourth, this mutual alienation of denationalised 'masses' and nationalist 'elite' shapes Belarus' political landscape. In contrast to Russia, in Belarus nationalists have invariably posed as democrats—although it is hard to think of a more glaring misfit. Yet this spurious association has become a public cliché. As a result, the best structured parts of the country's political spectrum are 1) nationalists, a.k.a. democrats and 2) empire savers who rallied around an authoritarian populist with special appeal to rural mentality. Until recently, when Belarusians' love affair with their leader showed signs of abating, they appealed directly to Moscow with ever-increasing frequency. Wives of vanished politicians sit in Kremlin officials' waiting rooms. Russian TV and newspapers receive more letters from Belarus than from some Russian regions, as if there were no centre of authority in Minsk.

Because of a bitter conflict between two sets of national symbols and narratives glorifying them, the political scene of Belarus is bipolar. One's public persona is best discernible if one is either fervently pro-Russian and anti-Western or vice versa. The middle, the space between these two extremes, has been politically invisible so far. Not that there is no one in the middle. In fact, this might be a very important niche where the constituency for true democratic change may ultimately develop. Those in the middle include the so-called technical intelligentsia—thousands of graduates of technical schools, small businessmen and scores of medical and education professionals. These people normally do not take Lukashenka seriously, and some despise him, yet their attitude to nationalist preaching is chilly at best. They speak Russian, yet are not willing to sacrifice Belarus' sovereignty. Recent surveys suggest that such people may account for 50% of the potential electorate, considering that the nationalist stance is not shared by more than 12%, and support for Lukashenka has reportedly dwindled to 26%. The much bemoaned lack of moral leaders in Belarus is largely due to the fact that the advocates of a non-nationalist democratic agenda have limited outlets for self-expression. They find it difficult to articulate their stance in a situation where all the tokens of valiant public posture (motherland, nation, democracy etc.) are already put to use by the demagogues who represent either the government¹⁴⁶ or the radical opposition.

The fact that the centrist part of the political spectrum is the least organised results from the persistent actions of the most active players, the current ruling regime and those radically opposed to it (the BPF in the first place). In part, this is also due to the fact that Western aid has so far favoured almost exclusively the Westernising nationalists, even though these self-proclaimed spokesmen for Belarus have had a meagre following. This may be a strategic error on the part of Western policy makers, whose reading of events in Belarus often hinges on Cold-War clichés and biased interpretations.

Though speaking Russian and leaning to Russia culturally, Belarusian technocrats value Belarus' sovereignty much more than most Lukashenka supporters, and they would be less willing to sacrifice it. That these people reach out to Russia for help is not surprising, as it is the only place where they could possibly count on being helped. After all, the West has not been able or interested in discerning what may be the most promising political constituency in Belarus, a constituency for democratic change. After the European Union's humiliating rebuff of Ukraine,¹⁴⁷ a country which is arguably more important in the eyes of the West than Belarus, Belarus' geopolitical destiny in Russia's embraces seems to be even more assured than before.

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The author wishes to acknowledge support of the International Research and Exchanges Board (Washington, D.C.) through a short-term travel grant (summer 2002) as well as invaluable advice and help from Drs. Zhanna Zaenchkovskaya and Galina Muzlova (Moscow), Isaac Khasdan (Minsk), and Donald Samson (Radford, VA).

¹ Margarita M. Balmaceda, 'Myth and Reality in the Belarusian–Russian Relationship', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 46, 3, 1999, p. 12.

² 'Belorusskaya Sovetskaya Sotsialisticheskaya respublika', *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopedia* (Moscow 1969–78), accessed via www.rubicon.ru/bse.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Naselenie SSSR 1987* (Moscow, Finansy i Statistika, 1988), p. 16.

⁵ *Posledstviya Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny dlya Belarusi*, www.president.gov.by/gosarchives/vov/spravpos.htm.

⁶ *Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR za 70 let* (Moscow, Finansy i Statistika, 1987) contains the following monetary estimates of damage: Ukraine, 285 billion rubles and Belarus, 75 billion rubles in 1941 prices (p. 45). According to *Naselenie SSSR* (Moscow, Finansy i Statistika, 1987), the 1940 population of Ukraine was 41,340,000 and Belarus was home to 9,046,000 (p. 9).

⁷ David Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Amsterdam, Harwood, 1999), p. 20.

⁸ The Soviet statistics were hard to interpret accurately without insider experience, while the only other option at hand—making sense of them from the Western perspective—was conducive to erroneous conclusions simply because the phenomena in question were often substantively different from their Western counterparts. In fact, the Soviet regime generally withheld statistics rather than falsify them. Ironically, falsifications stemmed more often from ill-advised interpretations.

⁹ *Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR: yubileinyi statisticheskii ezhegodnik* (Moscow, Finansy i Statistika, 1987), p. 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹² Only in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which had low initial (1970) levels of industrial investment, was growth in fixed assets more pronounced (380% and 397% respectively); see *ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²³ G.V. Ioffe, *Sel'skoe khozyaistvo nechernozem'ya: territorial'nye problemy* (Moscow, Nauka, 1990), p. 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR: yubileinyi statisticheskii ezhegodnik*, p. 514.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 357

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 409; in Russia the 1985–86 life expectancy was 69.3, in Ukraine 70.5 and in Belarus 71.1

³⁰ Yuri Guralyuk, 'Novyi Lukashenko: schastlivaya obrechnennost' pobezhdat' ', *Evraziiskoe obozrenie*, 2001, 3, <http://eurasia.com.ru/eo/3-12.html>.

³¹ Calculated on the basis of *Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR: yubileinyi statisticheskii ezhegodnik*, pp. 548 and 389–392; in 1986 in Russia there were 20 college students per 1,000 population, in Ukraine 16.6 and in Belarus 17.9.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Margarita M. Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 271–272.

³⁴ *Itogi vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1970 goda* (Moscow, Statistika, 1972), p. 50; *Naselenie SSSR 1987*, p. 38.

³⁵ Incidentally, at the same time it became something like a swear word in much of Latin America. This is all the more interesting since liberal Russian social scientists have long likened Russian society and the Russian polity to those of Latin America.

³⁶ Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, p. 40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ At the same time consumers cover only a tiny fraction of gas costs. For example, in October 2000 they paid only 6.8% of what it cost Beltransgaz, the Belarus natural gas distributor (Balmaceda *et al.*, (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, p. 296).

³⁹ 'Protivorechivye zhelaniya Lukashenko', *Vesti RTR*, 15 September 2002, <http://www.vesti7.ru/news?id=1190>; Konstantin Ugodnikov, 'Prem'er-ministr Belorussii byl ne v kurse gazovykh dolgov', *Strana.Ru*, 11 November 2002, <http://www.strana.ru/print/163705.html>.

⁴⁰ The most important military objects belonging to Russia are located in Brest *oblast'*; these are the submarine monitoring station in Pinsk and the early missile detection station in Baranovichi.

⁴¹ This statement echoes a similar assertion by Patricia Brukoff (Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, p. 110).

⁴² *Osnovnye pokazateli po gosudarstvam sodruzhestva v 1999 godu* (Moscow, Statkomitet SNG, 2000), p. 74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Valeri Tsepalo, 'The Political and Economic Situation in Belarus Following the Presidential Election', presentation by Belarus' Ambassador to the US at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, 9 October 2001.

⁴⁷ *Osnovnye pokazateli po gosudarstvam sodruzhestva v 1999 godu*, p. 13

⁴⁸ Tsepalo, 'The Political and Economic Situation ...'.

⁴⁹ *Osnovnye pokazateli po gosudarstvam sodruzhestva v 1999 godu*, pp. 135–138.

⁵⁰ *Human Development Report 2001*, 'Human Development Indicators', pp. 210–212, <http://www.undp.org/hdr2001/back.pdf>.

⁵¹ Personal correspondence with Dr Zhanna Zaenchkovskaya, Head of the Migration in the CIS Laboratory, Institute of Economic Forecasting, Russian Academy of Sciences.

⁵² According to *Belorusskii rynek*, accessed on 30 January 2003 at http://www.br.minsk.by/archive/2003-03/_sc769.stm, net immigration from January to November 2002 was just 4,900, a 40% drop from the same period one year earlier. However, the above number reflects migration from and to all foreign countries, including the so-called 'far abroad', net migration from which (mostly Germany, Israel and the USA) is negative. The article cited confirms Belarus' positive net immigration from every post-Soviet country in both 2001 and 2002.

⁵³ Galina D. Muzlova, 'Belarus na fone stran tsentral'noi i vostochnoi Evropy: spetsifika regionalizatsii vneshnei torgovli', *Regionalizatsiya i tsentralizm v territorial'noi organizatsii obshchestva i regional'nom razvitii* (Moscow, IGRAN, 2001), p. 167.

⁵⁴ Dean M. Hanink, *Principles and Applications of Economic Geography* (New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1996), pp. 341–342.

⁵⁵ *Osnovnye pokazateli po gosudarstvam sodruzhestva v 1999 godu*, p. 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53

⁵⁸ Muzlova, 'Belarus na fone ...', p. 167.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 167–168.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁶² Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Defining State Interests After Empire: National Identity, Domestic Structures and Foreign Trade Policies of Latvia and Belarus', *Review of International Political Economy*, 7, 1, 2000, p. 116.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶⁴ Muzlova, 'Belarus na fone ...', p. 169.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ 'Bumazhnyi korol' ili komu signaliziruet Putin', *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 22 August 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/08/2002>.

⁶⁷ Elena Novozhilova & Vadim Smekhov, 'Gazzavat po-Gazpromovski', *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 6 November 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/11/2002>.

⁶⁸ See for example Natalya Kornelyuk, 'Belorusskii kolobok', *Gazeta SNG*, 18 June 2003, <http://gazesng.ru/print.php?id=44049>.

⁶⁹ A detailed analysis of this pipeline is offered by Astrid Sahm & Kirsten Westphal in Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, pp. 270–301.

⁷⁰ Patricia Brukoff, 'The Belarusian Economy: Is It Sustainable?', in Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), p. 113.

⁷¹ 'Bumazhnyi korol' ...'.

⁷² For example, Rainer Lindner notes that 'Lukashenka is not an aggressive troublemaker, like Saddam Hussein or Milosevic; he is a noisy critic of Western politics ... who embodies the particular heritage of his republic'; see Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, pp. 78–79.

⁷³ This fact is corroborated by the IREX 2002 report on Media Sustainability Index, www.irex.org/msi/, p. 104; accessed 19 June 2003.

⁷⁴ Lukashenka's February 2002 interview to *The Wall Street Journal*, full text accessed through www.president.gov.by/rus/president/speech/02wall.shtml; the precise date of the interview is not listed.

⁷⁵ The reasoning leading to this conclusion was presented in the previous article in this series.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ 'Pobediteli ne poluchayut nichego', *Belorusskii rynok*, 24 November 2001, <http://www.br.minsk.by/archive2001-46/sk14944.stm>.

⁷⁸ 'Belarus' Bitter Election', *The Economist*, 10 September 2001, accessed through <http://www.economist.com>.

⁷⁹ 'Pobediteli ne poluchayut nichego'.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Dmitrii Vereshchagin & Sergei Lozhkin, 'Rabota nad oshibkami', *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 13 November 2001; <http://bdg.press.net.by/2001/11/2001>.

⁸² *Ibid.*: in one paragraph of the article the authors claim that the share of undecided was 20% at the very least, whereas according to another paragraph it could not be more than 15%.

⁸³ *Ibid.*: this argument recognises the reality of Russian media being highly influential in Belarus but fails to take heed of the fact that while short of enthusiastically supporting the Belarusian opposition the same media were full of Lukashenka thrashing. For example, just two days before the election, one of the most popular Russian journalists and a prime time TV anchor, Maksim Sokolov, published a column in *Izvestiya* (currently the most influential Russian daily read by many in Belarus) titled 'Nash syn'. In it, he criticised the Russian authorities for failing to cultivate 'mentally sound' opposition in Belarus. Instead, they throw their support behind a buffoon on the assumption that though he is in fact a 'son of a bitch' he is 'our son of a bitch'. Further substantiating his point, Sokolov reasons that such support is shortsighted and miscalculated: 'a political pendulum, once swung to one extreme, may swing to the opposite extreme, compared with which even Zyanon Paznyak will look like the utmost Russophile'; see *Izvestiya*, 7 September 2001,

<http://www.izvestia.ru/rubr.cgi>. Sokolov is a self-proclaimed conservative and a pro-government figure, and his views typically echo those in influential circles inside Russia. Another example is the now Gazprom-owned NTV, a Russian TV channel watched in Belarus, which ridiculed Lukashenka in its acclaimed show 'Kukly': a Lukashenka puppet begins his speech in familiar *trasyanka*, then it becomes gibberish, and eventually it evolves into a monologue by the all too familiar Third Reich leader speaking with the Austrian accent.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Steven Eke & Taras Kuzio, 'Sultanism in Eastern Europe: The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarian Populism in Belarus', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 52, 3, 2000, p. 536.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 532–533.

⁸⁷ <http://www.iiseps.by/press.html>.

⁸⁸ Stanislau Shushkevich, *Neo-Communism in Belarus* (Smolensk, Skif, 2002).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 139–208.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹⁵ Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, p. 134.

⁹⁶ 'Table of the Tarnished', *The Economist*, 19 April 2003, p. 45.

⁹⁷ Shushkevich, *Neo-Communism in Belarus*, p. 130.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ See the previous article in this series.

¹⁰⁵ A. Yaroshuk, 'Pust' Putin otchitaetsya', www.bdg.by/newsnews/news.shtml?0871,1, 23 August 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Yuri Rabchuk, 'Uchites' srazhat'sya za svoyu nezavisimost'!', interview with Valeriya Novodvorskaya, *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 29 August 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/08/2002>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ On 21 August 2002 Lukashenka's exact words were: 'Even Lenin and Stalin did not get as far in their thoughts as splitting Belarus and including it that way in the Russian Federation or the USSR'; see www.smi.ru/02/08/21/683530.html.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Personal interview, 23 May 2002.

¹¹¹ Personal interview, 22 May 2002.

¹¹² Aleksandr Feduta, 'Lukashenko skazal: "Krugom!"', *Moscow News*, 17 September 2002, <http://www.mn.ru/printver.php?2002-36-10>.

¹¹³ http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/08/2002_08_27; the respective 1999 response is unknown to this author.

¹¹⁴ Ol'ga Tomashevskaya, 'Lukashenka ostalsya bez opory', interview with Oleg Manaev, Director, Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research, 27 August 2002, http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/08/2002_08_27.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ 'Nekotorye rezul'taty natsional'nogo oprosa obshchestvennogo mneniya, provedennogo NISEPI v marte-aprele 2003 goda', <http://www.iiseps.by/press.html>, accessed 24 May 2003.

¹¹⁷ Andrei Okara, 'Belarus v otsustvii tret'ei al'ternativy', *Russkii zhurnal*, 14 November 2001, <http://www.russ.ru/politics/20011114-oka-pr.html>.

¹¹⁸ Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, p. 98.

¹¹⁹ Yurii Bogomolov, 'Narodnyi pomazannik', *Izvestiya*, 9 October 2001, <http://www.izvestia.ru/rubr.cgi>.

¹²⁰ M. Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: gosподstvyuyushchii klass Sovetskogo Soyuz* (Moscow, 1991), pp. 140–141.

¹²¹ A.G. Vishnevsky, *Serp i rubl'* (Moscow, OGI, 1999), pp. 98–99.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹²³ A peasant commune annually adjusted the distribution of land between member households so acreage would stay proportional to the number of mouths. In such a way economic equality would be maintained. A large body of literature exists on Russian redistributive peasant communes; see for example G.T. Robinson, *Rural Russia under the Old Regime* (New York, Macmillan, 1932); G. Ioffe & T. Nefedova, 'Persistent Features of the Russian Countryside: Communal Attachment and Reform', *GeoJournal*, 3, March 1997, pp. 193–204; and many others.

¹²⁴ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (London, The Centenary Press, 1937).

¹²⁵ Nickolas Vakar, *The Taproot of Soviet Society* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1962).

¹²⁶ The most influential books written in a corresponding tradition are A.S. Akhiezer, *Rossiia: kritika istoricheskogo opyta* (Moscow, FO, 1991); Vishnevsky, *Serp i rubl'*; A.S. Akhiezer, A.P. Davydov *et al.*, *Sotsio-kul'turnye osnovaniya i smysl' bol'shevizma* (Novosibirsk, Sibirskii Khronograf, 2002).

¹²⁷ The driving forces for regime change in the Baltics were different: anti-Russian sentiment and the awareness of once being cut off—by the Russians—from the Western civilisation in which they rightfully belong.

¹²⁸ Vishnevsky, *Serp i rubl'*, p. 94.

¹²⁹ Personal interview, 23 May 2002.

¹³⁰ I do not know when this pithy formulation was coined; however, it has been frequently referred to; see for example *Ad Tuteshahchi do natsional'nai dziazhaunasti* (Warsaw, Embassy of the Netherlands to Poland, 1999), p. 12.

¹³¹ Vadim Labkovich & Dmitrii Drigailo, 'Kursom nezavisimosti', interview with L. Barshchevsky, *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*, 23 August 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/08>.

¹³² David Marples & Uladzimir Padhol make an interesting point: even the leader of the Belarusian Narodnyi Front finds it necessary to prove to the public that ' "narodnyi" in the name of the party signifies popular, rather than national'; see Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, p. 76.

¹³³ Dmitrii Drigailo, 'Lider BNF predlagaet sozdat' "komitety" ', *BDG*, 3 September 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/09/2002>.

¹³⁴ Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, p. 49.

¹³⁵ Vasyi Bykov (Bykau) and Ryhor Borodulin are Belarusian prose writer and poet respectively.

¹³⁶ Irina Khalip, 'Chtoby bylo muchitel'no bol'no', *BDG*, 20 November 2001, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2001/11/2001>.

¹³⁷ Pushkin's untitled 1826 verse in full is:

Pasites', mirnye narody!
Vas ne razbudit chesti klich.
K chemu stadam dary svobody?
Ikh dolzhno rezat' ili strich'.
Nasledstvo ikh iz roda v
Yarmo s gremushkami da bich.

¹³⁸ Irina Khalip, 'Mandat—ne roskosh', a sredstvo peredvizheniya', *BDG*, 25 January 2002, <http://bdg.press.net.by/2002/01/2002>.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Balmaceda *et al.* (eds), *Independent Belarus: Domestic Determinants, Regional Dynamics, and Implications for the West*, p. 83.

¹⁴¹ Lukashenka's February 2002 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*; full text accessed through www.president.gov.by/rus/president/speech/02wall.shtml; the exact words of Lukashenka pertaining to the opposition are as follows: 'The opposition movement in the republic is 1,500 people strong. These people present no threat to power. If we had a dictatorship, then even for the most zealous dictator, it would not make any sense to dispose of them by such barbaric methods'. The allusion is to the disappearance of five prominent Belarusians.

¹⁴² Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nation* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1999), p. 2.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Rainer Lindner, 'Besieged Past: National and Court Historians in Lukashenka's Belarus', *Nationalities Papers*, 27, 4, 1999, p. 632.

¹⁴⁵ While Filaret himself is a Moscow-born ethnic Russian (Kirill Varfolomeevich Vakhromeev), his perception of native land is effectively shared by many Belarusians.

¹⁴⁶ When in September 2002 the Russian arch-nationalist newspaper *Zavtra* obtained a tape of a telephone conversation between Boris Nemtsov, leader of the Russian liberal party SPS, and Anatolii Lebed'ko, leader of the Belarus centrist party OGO, the eavesdropping had most probably been organised in Belarus. In that conversation Nemtsov related to Lebed'ko his successful efforts at organising a meeting between Lebed'ko and some prominent members of Putin's administration. The tape revealed nothing extraordinary; even the amount of foul language used was petty by Russian

standards. Yet the entire episode was designed to compromise the stance taken by centrist politicians seeking support in the Kremlin. Another attempt to engage 'the middle' is being undertaken by the newly-organised parliamentary faction Respublika headed by Major-general Valerii Frolov. Some analysts are already touting him as the most probable presidential contender; see Oleg Manaev, 'Novaya sila', *Beloruskii Rynok*, 28 April–3 May 2003.

¹⁴⁷ This rebuff took place on 16 September 2002 at the European World Economic Forum in Salzburg, Austria, with president Kuchma of Ukraine arguing that Ukraine should be incorporated in the EU as 'a big Christian nation belonging to a united Europe' and Guenter Verheugen, a top EU official in charge of enlargement, telling the conference there was little chance of Ukraine even getting a time schedule for accession; cited in <http://famulus.msnbc.com/FamulusIntl/reuters09-16100427.asp?reg=Europe>.