

---

# The Phenomenon of Belarus: A Book Review Essay

Grigory Ioffe<sup>1</sup>

A native and citizen of Belarus, Yuriy Shevtsov (2005) has written a book for the purpose of introducing that country to the intellectual communities of Russia.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Russians *are* aware of their western neighbor. Recent surveys (IISEPS, 2005) have shown that when foreign countries are ranked according to degree of friendliness, Belarus tops the list in Russia, and Russia in Belarus. Since 1997, the two countries have been building a union. Although it is still unclear what shape this union will eventually take, efforts to achieve it have generated publicity.

Thus while Belarus is not *terra incognita*, all too many Russians do not recognize it as an ethno-national entity in its own right. Limited recognition of Belarus' separateness is caused in part by the overwhelming dominance of the Russian language in Belarus. Also, adept at stereotyping *all* former republics as inherently backward and vitally dependent on Russia, many Russians do not view Belarus as an exception. Another problem is that in Russia, President Aleksandr Lukashenka of Belarus' is a polarizing figure, a "divider, not a uniter." Despised by liberals, he is praised by national patriots for his allegedly Pan-Slavic pronouncements and loyalty to the Soviet legacy, including Stalinism. Yet neither end of Russia's political spectrum seems likely to take Lukashenka for what he most likely is: the president of a sovereign country whose aspirations may have something to do with that country's own peculiarities and mindset. This, in a nutshell, is the context that Yuriy Shevtsov confronts in his book. "We, Belarusians, are a separate people, and we are different from you" is the message this book sends to its Russian readers.

A historian by training, Shevtsov is a gifted author with experience in journalism. In the introduction, he acknowledges that to refrain entirely from discussing Belarus' leader in a book devoted to that country may be a failing proposition. So much, however, has been already said about Lukashenka, "irritating quite a few people and almost everybody in advanced countries" (p. 8), that the country over which he presides has all but disappeared from view. "A leader, though, cannot but draw from the socio-economic structure of his society, cannot but be part of its people's culture and part-and-parcel of local political tradition. . . . However, just because Alexander Lukashenka derives from the phenomenon of Belarus, the analysis of this phenomenon may avoid too intent a look at this politician" (p. 9).

Shevtsov transforms this statement into a commitment, so that Lukashenka's presence in the book is reduced to a minimum. This, however, does not mean that components of Belarus' success under his leadership are spared attention. According to Shevtsov, one such component is the stability of the country's political system and another is its economic growth. Growth has been recorded annually since 1996, and in 2004, it was 11 percent (World Bank, 2005).

---

<sup>1</sup>Professor of Geography, Radford University, Radford, VA 24142.

<sup>2</sup>Shevtsov, Yuriy, *Ob'yedinyonnaya natsiya: Fenomen Belarusi (United Nation: The Phenomenon of Belarus)*. Moscow, Russia: Yevropa, 2005, 239 pp. ISBN: 5-9020-4820-7.

For a long time, this post-1995 spurt was shrugged off by Western Belarus-watchers. The question that concerned them was whether the economic growth reported by the country's national bureau of statistics was contrived or genuine. Recent Belarus reports by the World Bank (*ibid.*) and IMF (2005) were watershed events confirming the latter,<sup>3</sup> after which the key question became whether or not Belarus' could sustain such growth. Already some experts have opined that it cannot, which may well be the case, but the change in the key question about the country's economy is stunning. Among other things, it shows that a campaign to rebuke the "last dictator of Europe" should not be the sole focus of Belarusian studies.

Alongside questions about the underpinnings of economic success and stability, Shevtsov poses others. Why is the Belarusian opposition so weak? Why is Belarus the only post-Soviet and (more broadly) post-communist country that has rejected the policy of national revival? Why are Belarusians generally opposed not only to Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian, but also to their own Belarusian nationalism?

### ETHNIC HISTORY AND IDENTITY

"Belarusians are that rare people in Europe any talk about whom still must begin with the proof that this people exists," writes Shevtsov (p. 34). He avers, however, that "by all indications accepted in ethnography" (p. 37), Belarusians have long been a separate ethnicity. Any lingering doubt is attributed to Russians' inferior knowledge of Belarusians (*ibid.*) and to Belarusians' aversion to manifestation of their identity.<sup>4</sup>

Belarusians are reluctant to advertise who they are because of their peculiar history. Early on, northward-migrating Slavs settled in a marshy region with poor soils and assimilated local Balts, thus giving birth to an autochthonous group, the forebears of today's Belarusians. Although from the 9th century on, few outsiders other than Jews (not mixing with the locals) migrated to this region for good, it was repeatedly ravaged by military campaigns waged by external powers. Following each war, cultural self-identification of the region's upper classes changed. This happened so frequently (once in every 150 years) that no cultural form ever had sufficient time to crystallize before it was replaced by a different form. The word *tutey-shiya* ("locals") became the token of self-identification among peasant survivors of these military campaigns. At the same time, the higher and even middle strata of people identified with neighboring Poles or Russians, and most cities became dominated by Jews, as the region became central to the Jewish Pale. This panoply of identities, with would-be Belarusians remaining a demotic ethnic (a folk without an upper strata), existed until the 1920s.

As Shevtsov notes (p. 18) only under the Soviets did "locals" become Belarusians. Facilitating this conversion was a revolutionary change of the 1940s, when Jews and Poles who once dominated the middle and high strata in the region vacated their social niches.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of relatively few Nazi collaborators, Belarusians did nothing to force Jews and Poles out; Germans (in regard to the Jews) and then the Soviet leadership (in regard to the Poles) accomplished that. As a result, the gates of upward mobility were thrust wide

---

<sup>3</sup>The World Bank team observed that "economic growth in Belarus was genuine and robust, especially in recent years" (World Bank, 2006), whereas the IMF reported that "bolstered by rapid real wage growth policies as well as decelerating inflation, consumption continued its rapid rise" (IMF, 2005, pp. 3).

<sup>4</sup>"Belarus is there to comprehend, not to manifest," notes Shevtsov (p. 71).

<sup>5</sup>The phrase "revolutionary change" can be found in an earlier version of Shevtsov's narrative (Shevtsov, 2001), still available via the Internet under the title "Strana Bazirovaniya" (A Country as a Location Setting). The essence of Shevtsov's previous explanation, nevertheless, remains intact.

open for many rank-and-file Belarusians. Consequently, Belarusians enjoyed as much of a “heyday” in post-war Soviet Belarus as did Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians during their short-lived inter-war independence.

During the war, a clash between two competing versions of Belarusian identity ended in a triumph of one and the near-annihilation of the other. The victorious Soviet version is rooted in West-Rusism, a late 19th century concept according to which Belarusians are a separate ethnicity belonging, however, to Russia’s cultural universe. The defeated alternative version, named “pro-European and anti-Russian” (p. 72), claimed Belarusians as descendants of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, a European entity that waged wars against barbaric Russia. Whereas the proponents of the defeated version were a minority collaborating with the Nazis,<sup>6</sup> the majority of rank-and-file Belarusians joined Soviet-led partisans or aided them.

The World War II death toll in Belarus was second to none: more than one-quarter of the entire population perished. Yet after the war, Belarus became one of the true Soviet economic success stories (see below) and the most “Russified” union republic.

Because both personally and as a group Belarusians are accustomed to the idea that success is achieved as part of the larger and multi-ethnic polity (e.g., the Great Duchy, Russia, Soviet Union) they, according to Shevtsov, developed what he calls *uniinost’*, i.e., a proclivity to enter alliances with outsiders to achieve Belarusians’ own goals and yet avoid becoming diluted in those alliances. From this perspective, Shevtsov sees Lukashenka’s drive to integrate with Russia and yet retain independence as entirely natural in the Belarusian political tradition. At the same time, mutual integration without the smaller partner yielding its statehood is unnatural for the imperial tradition of Russia. From the perspective of Belarus’ however, integration exclusively with Russia is not an imperative but rather situational, and rooted in a common industrial legacy and an understanding of Belarus’ own national interests at the present.

From the same perspective (of Belarusians’ utmost cultural flexibility and pragmatic appetite for unions), Shevtsov explains the failures of Belarusian “nationalists.” Their popularity among ordinary Belarusians is low for several reasons. For example, “nationalists” speak only Belarusian and urge all to switch to it, whereas ordinary Belarusians are bi- and poly-lingual. “Nationalists” also are committed to manifesting their identity, whereas most Belarusians are averse to it. Finally, “anti-Soviet and anti-Russian interpretations of East European cultures and identities usually imply readiness to reconcile with Nazi collaborationists and Nazism if only to some extent,” and this arouses Belarusians’ consistent aversion to Nazism (p. 77).

## RELIGION

Shevtsov examines the religious communities of Belarusians on the basis of a 1970–1995 regional time series of the number of parishes, prefacing his analysis with somewhat contrasting statements. On the one hand, “most people of the region changed their religious affiliation voluntarily, without foreign conquest, approximately every 150 years, under the influence of political considerations” (p. 44). On the same page, however, he interprets such

---

<sup>6</sup>According to Shevtsov (p. 75), the proponents of the non-Soviet version of Belarusian identity were killed or left the country, forming the core of Belarusian emigrant communities in the West. The enmity of proponents of the victorious version of Belarusian culture toward the collaborationists is usually automatically transferred to [pre-Soviet] historic Belarusian symbols that those collaborationists used to everything not linked to the Soviet version of Belarusian identity and ideology, including literature and (sometimes) the Belarusian language. There is also reciprocal rejection by Belarusian emigrants in the West of all aspects of Belarusian life after the war.

a pragmatic attitude toward religion as part of a geopolitical strategy to ward off foreign invasion. Also, in apparent contradiction with the asserted “religious pragmatism,” Shevtsov hypothesizes that frequent changes of religious affiliation had to do with the mainstream religion of neighboring states losing moral high ground in the eyes of their Belarusian co-religionists. Be that as it may, “by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, only two out of twenty five senators of the Great Duchy of Lithuania were Catholics, the rest were Protestants. In the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, no more than 5 percent of the population of today’s Belarus was Orthodox. From 1596–1839, Belarus was a Greek-Catholic and Catholic country for the most part” (ibid.). After 1839, it became predominantly Orthodox, however, with significant Catholic influence in the west.<sup>7</sup>

In January 2005, in Belarus there were 1315 Orthodox, 433 Catholic, and 983 Protestant parishes, with the number of Evangelical Protestant communities growing explosively in recent decades. The gravity centers of all three religious groups are in western Belarus. When the Red Army entered western Belarus (under Polish jurisdiction from 1921–1939) on September 17, 1939, there were about 700 Orthodox, more than 200 Catholic, and about 100 Protestant (mostly Baptist) churches there. By that time, religious life had been severely undermined in eastern (Soviet) Belarus, with no more than 10 Orthodox and one Catholic church remaining. Although quite a few churches were reopened after 1941, the east has never quite overcome the atheist onslaught of the 1930s. The collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s in eastern Belarus also boosted migration from the countryside and undercut rural demographics for decades to follow. Today, the highest concentration of Catholic parishes in Belarus is at the crossroads between the Grodno, Minsk, and Vitebsk regions, along the border with Lithuania and Latvia. The highest concentration of Orthodox parishes is in Brest region, and the southwestern Brest region, contains the historical core of the Baptist community.

Shevtsov underscores the presence of a “concentration of Catholics in the ranks of Belarusian opposition of various ideological strands” (p. 52). Nevertheless, *rural* areas with a high share of Catholics display only slightly less enthusiastic support of Lukashenka than do other rural regions. Some tension within the Catholic Church in Belarus has emerged between the Polish and non-Polish strands of religious life. Although most educated Poles left Belarus for Poland soon after the war, even now, no fewer than 70 percent of Catholic priests and monks are citizens of Poland. At the same time, the Polish character of the Catholic Church would seem to have quite limited prospects outside the Grodno region, and Russian as a language of Catholic parishes is gaining ground.

According to Shevtsov, Poland as a funding and spiritual base for Belarusian Catholics is more powerful than is Russia for the country’s Orthodox. Another major problem of the Orthodox Church in Belarus is its overly cordial relationship with the state.<sup>8</sup> Shevtsov believes that overt state patronage of a single religious community is against political tradition in Belarus, and is fraught not only with growing tensions between Orthodox and Catholics but also with an outflow of believers from the Orthodox to Protestant churches.

Protestants have made inroads into traditionally Orthodox areas, and nothing, according to Shevtsov, can thwart their further expansion over the next 10–15 years. Shevtsov believes that Protestant expansion “strengthens Belarus’ state organism” (p. 83). Although he does

---

<sup>7</sup>In contrast to Russia and Poland, no religious denomination of Belarus has promoted the Belarusian national idea. Religious tolerance is what sets Belarus apart from Russia.

<sup>8</sup>Indeed, Lukashenka speaks of himself as an “Orthodox atheist” (an atheist with an Orthodox background) and demonstrates his friendship with Filaret, the Orthodox leader of Belarus.

not elaborate, one can attribute this assertion to the fact that, in contrast to Catholicism and Orthodoxy, Evangelical Protestantism has not encroached on Belarus from core areas of neighboring states; rather Protestant missionaries are either locals or those who previously left Belarus for America and Canada and have now returned.

## ECONOMY

Among all the former Soviet republics, Belarus benefitted most during the Soviet period, gaining both a unique industrial complex in its eastern regions and highly mechanized, large-scale animal husbandry in the west.<sup>9</sup> The industrial core of eastern Belarus consists of 10 manufacturing giants<sup>10</sup> and dozens of their subsidiaries so that almost each rayon seat of eastern Belarus is a company town. Four industries constitute the industrial core: mechanical engineering, petrochemicals, radio-electronics, and ferrous metallurgy. Mechanical engineering is represented by six giant firms.<sup>11</sup>

The petrochemical industry is based on two refineries, located on two different major pipelines from Russia: NAFTA in Novopolotsk, Vitebsk region, and Mozyr NPZ in Mozyr, Gomel region. NAFTA is the largest refinery in Europe, with a processing capacity of 20 million tons of crude a year, while Mozyr NPZ can process up to 12 million tons a year. The products of NAFTA are further transported through pipelines from Novopolotsk to a Baltic Sea oil terminal in Ventspils, Latvia. The Mozyr NPZ receives crude from the *Druzhba* pipeline (via Ukraine); gasoline and other products are then delivered to Western Europe by tanker-trucks and rail. The combined capacity of the two Belarus refineries exceeds domestic demand by a factor of three; thus export has been their major function from the outset. Several chemical plants connected with the major refineries by local pipelines operate in Novopolotsk, Polotsk, Mozyr, Mogilev, and Grodno.<sup>12</sup>

The leading radio-electronics enterprise in Belarus is Minsk-based *Integral*, offering a broad array of automotive and power electronic products (e.g., monochip voltage regulators and temperature sensors), timers, sensors, microcontrollers, LCD-drivers, plasma-panel drivers, and integrated circuits for consumer electronics and other uses. Yet another industrial giant is the free-standing Belarusian Metallurgical Plant in Zhlobin, Gomel region (a mistake on p. 114 places this plant in Zhodino), whose principal products are steel cord and steel wire.

Other components of Belarusian industry, mostly based in eastern Belarus, are textiles and the production of potassium fertilizers. The latter is the only example of the production cycle nested in and controlled by Belarus in its entirety, as the potassium raw material is

---

<sup>9</sup>The two parts of Belarus, east and west, reunited in 1939 but remain quite different. Eastern Belarus accounts for about 60 percent of the republic's population (6 of 10 million people) and territory. It includes the regions (oblasts) of Gomel and Mogilev in their entirety, as well as two-thirds of the Vitebsk region and more than half of the Minsk region, including Minsk city.

<sup>10</sup>The Soviet legacy in eastern Belarus has been described as hyper-industrialization. In the late 1980s, more than one-half of all industry personnel in Belarus worked for enterprises with more than 500 employees.

<sup>11</sup>These are: MTZ (Minsk; tractors), MAZ (Minsk; trucks), MoAz (Mogilev; excavation and earth-moving equipment), Gomsel'mash (Gomel; agricultural equipment, such as combines), MZKT (Minsk; an offspring of MAZ; heavy-duty tractor trailers), and BELAZ (Zhodino, Minsk region; heavy trucks for mining operations).

<sup>12</sup>Shevtsov points out the commercial complementarity of Belarus' mechanical engineering and petrochemical industries provided, of course, that they are centrally managed. During periods of soaring oil prices, profit margins on petrochemical products rise and those for mechanical engineering products fall. The opposite prevails when oil prices decline. Hence the necessity of profit redistribution that would keep both industries afloat regardless of market fluctuations.

mined in the Soligorsk district of the Minsk region. All industries are deeply integrated with Russia and to some extent Ukraine: they either process raw materials from Russia (petrochemical industries) or depend on parts from Russia and Ukraine. Some Belarusian industries are linked to major consumers in Russia (factories producing electronic and optical devices for the Russian army, and enterprises producing household appliances such as refrigerators and TV sets). The degree of export orientation of Belarus' industrial complex is impressive: in 1990, 80 percent of the entire output of Belarus was exported either to other parts of the Soviet Union or abroad.

The industrialization of western Belarus was planned to accelerate during the final decade of the 20th century, when new electronic and petrochemical factories were to be constructed in Grodno and Brest. In the meantime, western Belarus contributed migrants to the industrial enterprises of the east and developed into an advanced agricultural region. Post-war collectivization in western Belarus was not nearly as destructive of rural communities as pre-war collectivization had been in eastern Belarus, and the survival rate of locals during the war was higher as well. The west even experienced a post-war baby-boom, a rarity in the non-Muslim regions of the Soviet Union. In western Belarus, rural population decline commenced only in the 1980s, decades later than in the east.

For a long time, the main obstacle to agricultural development in the southern part of the republic (both west and east) was the prevalence of marshes in the poorly drained Polesseye lowland, accounting for 40 percent of the entire land area of Belarus. Here patches of dry land on the few elevated areas between tributaries of the Prip'yat' River (the axis of the entire lowland) used to shrink significantly during high water periods. A costly state program of land improvement was launched in the 1960s. A massive artificial drainage system proved to be particularly successful in the western part, in the region of Brest, because land reclamation was implemented in areas with still vibrant rural communities.<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere in western Belarus, in the Grodno region, with a much smaller scale of land improvement, 16 giant cattle-fattening and pig farms were constructed in the late 1970s and 1980s. A large segment of the local population came to depend on this highly centralized animal husbandry, which came to resemble industrial operations more than traditional (seasonal) peasant farming. In terms of quality of life in the countryside, intensity of land use, and output per unit of land, western Belarus in the 1980s was on a par with Baltic Republics (the USSR leaders in agricultural productivity).

Shevtsov argues that the socio-spatial and functional structure of the economy that Belarus inherited from the Soviet Union did not leave much freedom of maneuver to the leaders of post-Soviet Belarus. Any responsible regime would have been "doomed" to conduct the same policy that became associated with Lukashenka.

First, the share of large and super-large industrial enterprises and the lack of raw materials (except potassium) did not make rampant de-industrialization a sensible option for Belarus. When, even before the USSR's dissolution, it became clear that Moscow was experimenting with the idea of abandoning central planning, Belarusian enterprise directors looked to Minsk for guidance. Even by 1990, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of Belarusians retained a vital interest in sustaining large industry, a fact not lost on Lukashenka, the winner of the 1994 presidential election. By the latter time, however, most

---

<sup>13</sup>Shevtsov compares the Belarusian Polesseye with ancient Egypt. There, the very existence of civilization depended on the quality of irrigation systems managed from a single center. So it is in Polesseye, where maintaining the land newly reclaimed from Prip'yat' marshes depends on centralized upkeep of the drainage canals and dikes, as no single farm or even a group of them can accomplish this independently.

enterprises already had been forced to scale back operations and payroll because of the disruption of Russian-controlled supply lines; empty store shelves and a sudden rise in the cost of living resulted in huge rallies in usually calm Minsk. By 1996, however, and a concerted government effort to restore ties with Russia, most industrial giants had resumed full-capacity operations, as promised by Lukashenka, the presidential candidate. Since 1996, as noted above, Belarus has registered economic growth, and by 2004 industrial output exceeded the 1990 level by 40 percent.

Shevtsov insists that mass support of strong central power in Belarus has been motivated by a sheer survival instinct rather than by any adopted form of ideology. This instinct necessitated elements of a mobilization economy, with redistribution of profits and consolidation around the central government. Considering Belarus' economic growth and the fact that most Russian and Ukrainian counterparts of Belarusian industrial enterprises have either closed down for good or significantly shrunk their operations, Belarus' strategy should be considered a success.

The village has supported government policies with no less enthusiasm, despite a seeming paradox: although entrepreneurial spirit among the peasantry is more alive in western Belarus than in the east, individual family farming is more widespread in the east. This is because in the west, people see their interest in preserving Soviet-style socialized farming operations; hence there is no vacant land. In contrast, in the east the socio-demographic erosion of rural communities transformed local collective farms into wards of the state. Here, land abandonment is rampant, so those willing to establish a family farm have the opportunity to do so.

It is no accident that Lukashenka's popularity is overwhelming in areas where several factors conditioning public support for his regime overlap, as in the triangle Gomel–Mogilev–Slutsk in southeastern Belarus, where extensive rural drainage systems exist side by side with large-scale urban industry. In this area, however, one more factor should be considered: Chernobyl'.

### CHERNOBYL'

Seventy percent of all radionuclides discharged by the accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant (7 km south of the Belarus-Ukraine border) on April 26, 1986, were deposited in Belarus. Although 1.8 million hectares of farmland (about 19 percent of Belarus' total) were contaminated, only 264,000 hectares were removed from cultivation in 1990. Consequently, according to Shevtsov, Belarusians still consume large quantities of contaminated food. In 2005, 1,840,951 people lived in areas with more than 1 curie (Ci)/km<sup>2</sup>, including 483,000 children.

A common refrain in Shevtsov's account of the impact of Chernobyl' is that a specific community of Chernobyltsy—i.e., those affected by the catastrophe—has formed, and its identity transcends ethnic and denominational lines. The psychological complex of Chernobyltsy includes feelings of insecurity and abandonment, as well as a proclivity to self-segregation and opposition to the rest of society. According to Shevtsov, the crime rate in the areas with a high concentration of Chernobyltsy in Gomel and Mogilev regions is twice as high as in the regions with a limited number of Chernobyltsy. Also, the community in question is characterized by high levels of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, staunch anti-market attitudes, and extremely high support for Lukashenka despite the fact that much of the country's post-1996 economic growth has been achieved at the expense of scaling down post-Chernobyl' recovery programs (p. 145).

Shevtsov's narrative becomes expressive in its account of Chernobyl'—e.g., “the Chernobyl' catastrophe gave to Belarusian culture moral justification for its independent existence and the right to evaluate the degree of morality of other cultures, particularly those of advanced countries” (p. 138). Moreover, “today's spiritual self-isolation of Belarus from all of Europe is to a large extent conditioned by Chernobyl'” (p. 178). The tension between Belarus and the West could be relieved, according to Shevtsov, if the “West commits itself to very significant spending in order to remove the prerequisite for the continuing existence of Chernobyltsy community” (ibid.). Scaling down of recovery programs and the now widespread assertions that much of the Chernobyl'-affected area is no longer unsafe are not acceptable to Shevtsov.

### CONTEMPORARY BELARUS AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Belarus occupies a central location within the network of trans-European transportation corridors, which makes every responsible political player in Europe interested in its stability. According to Shevtsov, the significance of these corridors, which include rail, highway, and above all, pipeline connections, portends a good investment climate in Belarus irrespective of political relations with the West. Already, Belarus is among Europe's leaders in terms of the number of transportation projects per unit of its territory, such as the new pipeline to transport natural gas from Russia's Yamal Peninsula to Europe.

The author makes four observations concerning contemporary Belarus and its foreseeable future. First, it is unlikely that Lukashenka's regime will be uprooted any time soon. This is not only because it has been successful in social and economic areas but also because no one is seriously interested in destabilizing a country vital for energy transit to Europe's heartland. Indeed, recent steep growth in Belarus' trade with the EU (which now accounts for 44 percent of Belarusian exports) appears to corroborate Shevtsov's predictions.<sup>14</sup>

Second, in contrast to most Belarus watchers in the West, Shevtsov claims that Belarus-Russia integration has been pursued by Belarus' regime unilaterally, and therefore does not derive from Russia's desire to recreate its empire. Rather, it is the realization of Belarus' aspirations to sustain itself as a separate entity with the aid of any political circles within Russia that Belarus can possibly rely on. “This is truly phenomenal,” observes Shevtsov, “that whereas the national interests of other East European countries demanded their distancing from Russia, the peculiarities of Belarus' socio-economic structure dictated the opposite for Belarus” (p. 214). Realizing its national interests, Belarus' political regime managed to create its own lobby in Moscow, and close relationships with Russia have paid dividends. Not only has Belarus extracted benefits from late-Soviet investment policy (preventing a drastic decline in standards of living), but it has also managed to get Russia to write off Belarusian debt, and secured low prices on natural gas imports. As long as Belarus retains both these benefits and its statehood, there is no need for Belarus–Russian relationship to become any closer than it already is.

Third, much economic growth in Belarus has thus far been based on consuming Soviet-era investments. Only in 2005 did the country embark upon technological modernization, the financial resources for which (and for enhancing the quality of life) became available due to steep growth in exports of gasoline and other oil-based products to the EU. Fourth, in the

---

<sup>14</sup>This growing trade appears to run counter to the trend in political relations, the low point to date being the EU's imposition of travel restrictions on President Lukashenka and 30 other Belarusian government officials in the wake of “election tampering and violent crackdowns on dissent” (e.g., *New York Times*, April 11, 2006, p. A12).

foreseeable future, Belarus will become even more economically tied to the EU, as Belarus' large-scale industry proves ideally suited to the new role of Eastern Europe as the EU's bridge between Europe's heartland and its "Africa" (Shevtsov's term for Russia).

### DISCUSSION

Shevtsov's contribution to Belarusian studies cannot be overemphasized. His perspective, that of an informed insider, is rare in this area, and his effort to avoid politicized statements is commendable. The book, however, is uneven. The part devoted to religion is illuminating, and much of it should be taken at face value. Much of the remainder is debatable, with the coverage being more solidly grounded on economic and social welfare issues. He is equally convincing in uncovering the latent geopolitics of the relationships between Belarus and the West, which allows one to separate seeds (the real interests of international players, and what is likely to happen or not to happen) from the chaff (ritual Lukashenkabashing). Shevtsov is less convincing in his interpretation of Belarusian identity, the issue whose importance for Belarus' statehood may be second to none.

The part devoted to Chernobyl' creates a mixed impression. On the one hand, it contains a factual account of background contamination and a vivid description of the Chernobyl'tsy. On the other, the marriage of social science and journalism so successful in the other chapters is absent in the chapters devoted to Chernobyl', where journalism holds sway. That the exposé of Chernobyl's impact is expressive and apparently reflects the author's deep convictions does not compensate for this shortcoming. Although no one seeks to belittle the scope of Chernobyl's horrendous effects, almost 20 years have elapsed since the disaster, and the September 2005 joint report of the International Atomic Energy Agency, World Health Organization, and United Nations Development Programme, which appeared simultaneously with Shevtsov's book, would easily win a credibility contest.<sup>15</sup>

The problem involving more convincing parts of the book, on economy and social welfare, is different. Shevtsov's analysis of the preconditions of economic growth nicely dovetails with both the World Bank (2005) and IMF (2005) reports, but his assertion that the Soviet industrial legacy in Belarus inexorably and single-handedly shaped its policies in the economic sphere, not leaving any freedom to maneuver, raises doubts. Whereas reliance of the Belarusian economy on super-large industrial enterprises was more pronounced than that of Estonia (an example Shvetsov contrasts with Belarus [p. 201]) and many other former Soviet republics, some crucial features of national identity appear also to have exerted influence on economic policy. In Belarus (and elsewhere in Eastern Europe), the deindustrialization-in-the-name-of-market option was fraught with social stratification, joblessness, evaporation of long-time savings, and rising crime. But in much of Eastern Europe, titular ethnic groups were keenly aware that they were very different from Russians. This did not eliminate their frustration with abrupt socio-economic change, but gave them a modicum of relief, in the expectation that once they "returned to Europe" where they "rightfully belonged," life would normalize. Belarus was and remains different. In the words of one researcher, in Belarus, "the European idea and what it encompasses is not the common

---

<sup>15</sup>The report states that "poverty, 'lifestyle' diseases now rampant in the former Soviet Union, and mental health problems pose a far greater threat to local communities than does radiation exposure" (IAEA, WHO, UNDP, 2005). The report is also reassuring in that, "except for still closed 30 km area surrounding the reactor and some closed lakes and restricted forests, radiation levels have mostly returned to acceptable levels" (ibid.). Also, the projected number of deaths (4000) attributable to Chernobyl' in the most contaminated areas contrasts with Shevtsov's alarmist projections.

people's project, and they have no 'European self' to 'recollect'" (Gapova, 2002, p. 646). This brings us to Belarusian identity, Shevtsov's treatment of which comes across as most controversial.

Shevtsov's analysis of this identity rests on three pillars: autochthony of Belarusians and lack of significant migrations of outsiders to Belarus, notably Russians and Poles; frequent changes in cultural self-identification, religious affiliation, and even language by the upper classes; and Belarusians' aversion to manifestation of their identity. The description of each of these underpinnings contains puzzling statements, like "autochthony of Belarusians is a momentous feature of Belarusian identity" (p. 20) [not ethnic history, but identity (!)]; "Belarusianness is . . . a technology of living in this specific region; sometimes it is the technology of survival. . . . In that sense, only in Belarus can one be a Belarusian" (p. 72). Because statements like these mystify the reader (perhaps on purpose), a temptation to rationalize the entire subject of Belarusian identity becomes irresistible.

To accomplish this, one has to fill noticeable gaps in Shevtsov's reasoning. For example, if there has been no significant inflow of *neighboring* ethnicities, it would be important to know where Belarus ends and the ethnic fields of, say, Russians and Poles, begin. After all, Belarusian statehood is new, and in the not so distant past its borders changed. Even the western border of *today's* Belarus, which was the Soviet Union's border for 52 years, is not a cultural discontinuity, as Belarusian identity is embraced by some to the west of the border and Polish identity by many to the east of it. Other borders of Belarus are even lesser cultural frontiers. The division lines between rural dialects in the Polish-Belarusian, Belarusian-Russian, and Belarusian-Ukrainian contact zones have never been distinct.<sup>16</sup> It is quite possible, in fact almost certain, that such borders can only be drawn arbitrarily. But without drawing them somewhere and somehow, the autochthony thesis simply does not hold.

A larger problem with Shevtsov's treatment of identity is his conviction that nation comes first, and nationalism later or not at all. This seems to accord with how Soviet history textbooks construed nation, and starkly contrasts with the views of leading scholars today. Defined as imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), nations are thought of as inventions of nationalist movements, rather than vice versa. According to Anderson, Gellner (1983), and Smith (1986), nationalism creates myths, a kind of virtual reality that may or may not be favorably received by the mass audience. Thus, no nation can emerge without nationalism of some sort, and Belarus is no exception. The issue of borders is resolved accordingly: "Where . . . meanings, myths and symbols cease to strike a responsive chord—because of other competing ones—there [lie] the cultural boundaries of the nation (Smith, 1999, p. 136)."

By all accounts, including Shevtsov's own references to different versions of Belarusian identity, Belarus' major predicament has been with multiple and conflicting national ideas. Each of the available national projects fails to generate a critical mass of followers precisely because Belarusians are divided and some are simply confused by the ongoing contest for their hearts and souls. The people whom Shevtsov happens to call "nationalists" adhere to just one strand of a Belarusian national idea. That strand was indeed dealt a blow during World War II, but it did not die. It may be that the negative connotation of the word "nationalism" in Russian and its traditional equation with chauvinism prevented Shevtsov from discerning the full scope of the problem and led him to believe that nationalism somehow may

---

<sup>16</sup>For a more consistent account of this reasoning, see Ioffe (2003). Analyses by Skropnenko (2000) and Woolhiser (2003) lead to a similar conclusion.

be switched off on demand, as we do home appliances. This, however, is hardly possible, and the realization of this brings us one step closer to solving another of Shevtsov's mysteries.

Why indeed are there multiple versions of a national idea in a 21st century European country? And why were all those identity makeovers by its upper classes occurring so often? There seems to be only one rational response to both questions. While Belarus' borders are not cultural frontiers, one such frontier does run *across* Belarus. In a more narrow sense, this is a zone of contact between western and eastern Christianity, exemplified and promoted by Poland and Russia. This discontinuity and its landscape implications have long fascinated cultural geographers. In a broader sense, this is what Huntington calls a civilizational fault line (Huntington, 1996).

According to Eberhardt's (2004) research into delineating this divide, a strip along the northwestern and northern border of Belarus is part of "Western civilization," whereas the rest, including the Brest region, should be assigned to the Byzantine-Orthodox realm.<sup>17</sup> Apparently Belarus has been much affected by ebbs and flows in Polish Catholic and Russian Orthodox influences, as well as by numerous clashes between them. Changes in cultural self-identification of educated local residents find convincing explanation in historic shifts of the cultural frontier. Although such changes have not left much of a trace in the collective memory of the local peasantry, they tormented local intellectuals, some of whom became true martyrs, agonizing over conflicting Russian and Polish leanings (Weeks, 2003, p. 217).

It therefore should come as no surprise that no sooner had the Belarusian national idea been packaged for popular consumption (in the early 1900s) than it bifurcated down the old division line. On the one hand, a historical tradition emerged that cast Belarusians as an inherently Western group, the descendents of the Great Duchy of Lithuania (e.g., Lastouski and Gritskevich, 1910; Dovnar-Zapolskii, 1919). The alternative position, West Russism, was advocated by, among others, Yauchim (Yevfimii) Karsky (1904), the renowned Belarusian linguist and one of the most ardent Russifiers of Poland, not just Belarus. Needless to say, most historical accounts of Belarus published under the Soviets embrace the latter view: that Belarusians constitute one prong in the three-prong Russian ethnicity that gave rise to three East Slavic nationalities—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians.

As if to complicate matters further, today there is a *third* national project, so-called Creole nationalism (e.g., Bulgakau, 2001; Abushenko, 2004; Babkou, 2005).<sup>18</sup> Many Belarusians who speak "trasianka," phonetically Belarusian and lexically Russian, are quite patriotic and nationalistic. For them, things Russian no longer yet belong in "we," but cannot be assigned to "they" either. Similar ambiguity typifies their attitude toward things Belarusian. Creole consciousness is interpreted as an extrapolation of *tuteyshasts*, i.e., a Belarusian variety of localism (Abushenko, 2004), and Lukashenka has been referred to as the president of Creoles (Bulgakau 2001).

The above leads to the conclusion that Belarus is still a cultural crossroads. When construed this way, the enigmas of Shevtsov's account of Belarusian identity unravel. It becomes clear, for example, that Belarusians are averse to manifestation of their identity not because this is an innate trait, but because of a bewildering array of national ideas that have been contested since the time the first *tuteyshya* became Belarusians. Many Belarusians have not decided which national idea to embrace, and are additionally confused by politicians who

---

<sup>17</sup>Eberhardt (2004) also portrayed historic shifts in this cultural frontier from 1500 to the present, and identified hallmark years and events conducive to those shifts.

<sup>18</sup>A summary of the three national projects can be found in Ioffe (2005).

seek to wrap their diverging cultural affinities in white-red-white and green-red fabrics.<sup>19</sup> In marked contrast to the title of Shevtsov's book, Belarus is *not* yet a united nation.<sup>20</sup>

Unfinished nation-building is Belarus' major predicament, by far more profound than anything associated with Lukashenka. In fact, many facets of his regime derive from Belarus' condition as a "denationalized nation" (Marples, 1999). Lukashenka's personal input into Belarus' triumphs and failures, however, should not be downplayed. While Shevtsov steers clear of both praise and criticism of Belarus' leader (observing, for example, that Lukashenka did not create Belarus' economic strategy but only consistently implemented what had been decided upon in the early 1990s), the ensuing verdict from his entire narrative is nonetheless on the side of praise. The meaner streak of the Lukashenka regime is downplayed, and this may be almost as short-sighted as unconditional criticism of Belarus' leader.

Although some of the best informed Belarus-watchers have until recently denied that Belarus is a full-fledged dictatorship (Marples, 2005; Timmermann, 2005) "despite the general use of this appellation in the international media to describe Belarus" (Marples, 2005, p. 905), the country seems to be moving rapidly in that direction. The March 19, 2006 Presidential election ended, officially, with 83 percent of the vote cast for Lukashenka (e.g., *New York Times*, March 22, 2006, p. A3). No opposition activist or Western observer will support the authenticity of this result, although few indeed would suggest that Lukashenka gained less than 50 percent.<sup>21</sup> And yet in their post-election clashes with police and security forces, Lukashenka's opponents have gained a measure of high moral ground that they have not held for a long time. Many Belarusian youths are not on Lukashenka's side. And the fact that he has failed to co-opt most Belarusian intellectuals is no less telling than his success in gaining support from much of the rest of society. In this area, sheer numbers do not tell the entire story, nor do they usually portend its finale. The latter may not be happy news for Lukashenka despite some genuine achievements associated with his regime, so eloquently described by Yuriy Shevtsov.

## REFERENCES

- Abushenko, Vladimir**, "Kreol'stvo kak Ino-Modernost' Vostochnoy Yevropy (Creole Consciousness as the East European Version of Modernity)," *Perekriostki*, 1-2:124-160, 2004.
- Anderson, Benedict**, *Imagined Communities*. London, UK: Verso 1991 (original edition, 1983).
- Babkou, Igar**, "Genealogyia Belaruskai idei (The Genealogy of the Belarusian Idea): *ARCHE*, 3:136-165, 2005.
- Bulgakau, Valerka**, "Vybary Prezydenta Kreolau (Elections of the President of Creoles)," *ARCHE*, 4, 2001 [[www.arche.home.by/2001-4/bulha401.htm](http://www.arche.home.by/2001-4/bulha401.htm)].
- Dovnar-Zapol'skii, Mitrofan**, *Osnovy Gosudarstvennosti Bielorusii (Foundations of Belarusian Statehood)*. Grodna, Belarus: Ministerstvo Bieloruskikh Del, 1919.

---

<sup>19</sup>A white-red-white flag is the symbol of the Belarusian National Republic declared by the enthusiasts of the Belarusian idea in 1918 under Germany military occupation; it was also used during the German occupation during World War II. From 1992 to 1995, it was the official flag of the Republic of Belarus. The current red-green flag of Belarus, adopted in 1995, represents a slightly modified version of the Soviet-era banner.

<sup>20</sup>To this reviewer's knowledge, the title of Shevtsov's book manuscript was simply *The Phenomenon of Belarus*, the *United Nation* part of the title being added by the publisher.

<sup>21</sup>Of the multitude of pre-election forecasts, perhaps the most accurate was issued by Alexander Potupa, Chairman of the Belarus Union of Entrepreneurs. In a September 14, 2005 interview with the Latvian Russian-language newspaper *Telegraf*, Potupa asserted that "in 2006, Lukashenka's victory is as assured as it was in 2001. He will win no less than 80 percent of the vote. But one has to understand that he would win 2:1 (or about two-thirds of the vote) even without sneaky fiddling technologies" (Martovskaya, 2005).

- Eberhardt, Piotr**, "The Concept of Boundary between Latin and Byzantine Civilization in Europe," *Przełąd Geograficzny*, **76**, 2:169-188, 2004.
- Gapova, Elena**, "On Nation, Gender, and Class Formation in Belarus . . . and Elsewhere in the Post-Soviet World," *Nationalities Papers*, **30**, 4:639-662, 2002.
- Gellner, Ernest**, *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Huntington, Samuel P.**, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 1996.
- IAEA, WHO, and UNDP**, "Chernobyl: The True Scale of the Accident," press release, September 5, 2005 [[http://www.who.int/ionizing\\_radiation/a\\_e/chernobyl/PR\\_English.pdf](http://www.who.int/ionizing_radiation/a_e/chernobyl/PR_English.pdf)].
- IISEPS (Independent Institute of Socio-economic and Political Studies)**, National Survey of September 2005 [[www.iiseps.org](http://www.iiseps.org)].
- IMF**, *Republic of Belarus. Selected Issues*. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, IMF Country Report No. 05/217, June 2005.
- Ioffe, Grigory**, "Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language," *Europe-Asia Studies*, **55**, 7:1009-1047, 2003.
- Ioffe, Grigory**, "Culture Wars, Soul-Searching, and Belarusian Identity." Paper presented at the symposium on The Arts, National Identity, and Cultural Politics in Belarus, Harvard University 14-15 October 2005 [<http://www.radford.edu/~gioffe/October%202005C.ppt>].
- Karsky, Yevfimii**, *Bielorussya (Belarusians)*, in three volumes: *Vil'na (Vilnius)—Vol. 1; Warsaw—Vol. 2; Moscow—Vol. 3*, 1904-1906.
- Lastouski, Vatslau and Anatol Gritskevich**, *Karotkaya historiya Belarusi (A Brief History of Belarus)*. Vil'na (Vilnius): Martsin Kukhta, 1910 (reprinted in 1992 by the Minsk-based publisher Universitetskaye).
- Marples, David**, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999.
- Marples, David**, "Europe's Last Dictatorship: The Roots and Perspectives of Authoritarianism in 'White Russia,'" *Europe-Asia Studies*, **57**, 6:895-908, 2005.
- Martovskaya, Svetlana**, "Pochemu Belarus' golosuyet za Lukashenko (Why Belarus Votes for Lukashenko)," *Telegraf*, September 14, 2005 [<http://www.inosmi.ru/translation/222228.html>].
- Shevtsov, Yuriy**, *Strana Bazirovatiya (A Country as a Location Setting)*. Minsk, Belarus: Belyi Svet: 2001 [<http://zvezda.ru/geopolitics/data/belarus.htm>].
- Shevtsov, Yuriy**, *Ob' yedinyonnaya natsiya: Fenomenon Belarusi (United Nation: The Phenomenon of Belarus)*. Moscow, Russia: Yevropa, 2005, 239 pp.
- Skopnenko, O.**, "Movna situatsiya v Bilorusi i problemi norm Bilorus'koi literaturnoi movi (The Language Situation in Belarus, and the Issue of Norms of Belarusian Literary Language)," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on The Official Status of the Ukrainian Language and Global Language Experience*, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2000 [<http://dzvinkaxxv.narod.ru/bud-skopn.htm>].
- Smith, Anthony D.**, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, 12th ed. London, UK: Blackwell, 1999 (original edition 1986).
- Timmermann, Heinz**, "Belorussiya, Rossiya i ES: Problema dlya obshcheyevropeyskoy bezopasnosti (Belarus, Russia, and the EU: The Problem for All-European Security)," *Nashe Mneniye*, October 31, 2005 [[http://nmnby.org/print311005/timmermann\\_prn.html](http://nmnby.org/print311005/timmermann_prn.html)].
- Weeks, Theodore**, "'Us' or 'Them'? Belarusians and Official Russia, 1863-1914," *Nationalities Papers*, **31**, 2:210-224, 2003.
- Woolhiser, Curt**, "Constructing National Identities in the Polish-Belarusian Borderlands," *Ab Imperio (Kazan', Russia)*, 3:293-346, 2003.
- World Bank**, *Belarus: Window of Opportunity to Enhance Competitiveness and Sustain Economic Growth*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2005.
- World Bank**, "Belarus" country website [<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/BELARUSEXTN/0,contentMDK:20726033~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:328431,00.html>], accessed April 19, 2006.