

Discussion

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The panelists:

Anatol Labeledka – politician, chairman of the United Civic Party, the most important Belarusian liberal party

Zhanna Litvina – chairwoman of the Belarusian Journalists Association, activist for independent media and freedom of speech in Belarus

Alyaksandr Milinkievich – active third sector activist in Belarus, chairman a Grodno-based NGO 'Ratusha' dissolved by the authorities, head of election committee of Siameon Domash, opposition candidate in the recent presidential election

Vital Silitski – economist, political scientist, former lecturer of the private European Humanist University in Minsk, dismissed on political grounds

Aleksander Smolar – columnist, political scientist, since 1990 chairman of the Board of Stefan Batory Foundation

Vincuk Viachorka – politician, chairman of Belarusian People's Front, the main opposition party in Belarus

Tomasz Żukowski – Ph.D. in human studies, sociologist, political scientist lecturer at Warsaw University

Can Belarus be reformed?*

Aleksander Smolar

The project entitled the 'European Choice for Belarus' was initiated by the Stefan Batory Foundation and was in part the result of Polish transformations which, despite their radical character, were often rather impromptu and intellectually unprepared. So, we thought that – together with our Belarusian friends and other people from our region – it would be a good idea to consider the future of a European country, our neighbor with which we have numerous historical bonds, a country which is 'reinforced concrete' politically speaking; and, it is hard to believe that this could go on for a longer stretch of time in 21st century Europe. So, it is worthwhile analyzing the situation of Belarus, the changes that are taking place there, and think about its future shape as a democratic free market economy connected with Europe. I believe that this book, a result of a series of meetings and discussions is pioneering work. Our discussion should focus on what can and should be done, and reflect on the material included in this book.

Tomasz Żukowski

I'd like to present impressions of a Pole visiting Belarus. First of all, let me stress that the media picture of our neighbors is heavily one-sided.

* Transcript of a discussion 'Can Belarus be Reformed? – Reform Scenarios' which took place on 27 October 2003 in Warsaw.

Belarus is closer to Poland and more central European than it might appear on the basis of what we hear about it. The Polish stereotype has it as a negative example: if we fail to do this or that, we will be another Belarus. But, the picture is far more complex. I was surprised to find out that Belarus has the best educated population of all the former Soviet republics. This is important information as in the future knowledge and the skill capital will be of primary importance, and this is something Belarus already has. Another surprise: several years ago, the Belarusian economy was the most technologically advanced in the entire post-Soviet Union area. We usually associate it with frontier trade and the Polesie marshes, while it has the best educated society of the former USSR and used to be the most advanced economy. This is the other side of the coin that is worth bearing in mind. It is a serious mistake that opinion-makers have such a scant and one-sided idea of Belarus. The longer Poland is part of integrating Europe, the better it should know this country. Belarus is our strategic neighbor and from this we have to draw conclusions, and cooperate with it.

This book proves that our Belarusian friends are better prepared for reforms than we were in Poland in the mid 1980's. Belarusians are more knowledgeable, more pragmatic and enjoy the privilege of 'late entry into reforms'. This gives them a chance to learn from others, from their success and mistakes. It is definitely a good thing that Belarusian experts and politicians are aware of the great cost of social reforms. One matter ought to be more thoroughly analyzed, which is a source of heated controversies in Poland i.e. the choice of the model of capitalism, particularly when it comes to the relations between domestic and foreign capital. And, another dilemma: to what extent is this model South Korean or European? Given the current economic situation and structure of Belarus, this is how one could determine the future place of the big non-market firms which up till now have driven the economic momentum, exports in particular. As a political scientist, I am aware that those who identify themselves with these huge lobbies can either block reforms or render them impossible.

Dariusz Filar

Belarusian problems, as a matter of fact, resemble those of Poland of over a dozen years ago, but appear more difficult when seen from our perspective. This country has appealing industries like, for example, machine engineering and electronics which ceased to develop and are highly decapitalized. There are educated people who cannot find appropriate jobs. There is a great difference between the potential of the industry and of farming. The currency is another problem as more important deals are dollar-based which in turn means that the economy is actually operating in two currencies. Additionally, there is the question of privatization, already initiated, but later halted for want of political determination. When speaking with Belarusian colleagues, a feeling of *dejà vu* appears: of Poland having the same sort of problems, with some past us and some yet to be solved.

One more serious problem remains: out of ten new members of the European Union, most were once Comecon members including – indirectly – Belarus. Their reciprocal trade relations in 1989 accounted for 15% of the trade volume. In the early 1990's, the figure fell to 4%. At present, on the eve of European integration, gradually we are back to the late 1980's level of trade between Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. This proves that, in a market economy environment, these countries turned out to be equally important for one another as they used to be in the former imposed Comecon structures. How does that trade relate to Belarus? Formally speaking, the country has a high foreign trade index, but this is largely due to its traditional contacts with Russia in the first place. Thus, Belarus did not free itself from the old bonds and did not return to cooperation on new terms. Belarus is still bound by the same trade ties, and still has the same problems with its eastern partner.

All these problems are familiar to Poland, and they can be overcome. It seems only a matter of time before Belarus is drawn towards Western Europe on the one hand and, on the other, keeps rebuilding its relations based on different principles. In order for such a process to take place, an opportune political climate is needed. I hope that it will come about.

Zhanna Litvina

As regards freedom of speech in Belarus, let me repeat that the situation is getting worse. Access to information and the media seems to be of paramount importance; one can hardly count on any changes in the society or electoral victories when people have no access to information they could themselves judge and thus be able to make a conscious choice. The authorities, in their turn, attempt to control all the spheres of life and, at the same time, refuse to relinquish control where it would be otherwise advisable. For example, a presidential decree of last July allows government offices to classify various documents as secret. As a result, all the agencies and offices, even the smallest ones, have their top secret information. It is hard to understand why this is being done.

The main reason, I think, is to concentrate power. This is a method for ensuring political survival for the current head of state. This situation changed and relations between Russia and Belarus deteriorated, so what remains is to control the minds of ten million Belarusians. This is simply a totalitarian system. In April, conferences of heads of the presidential sector of administration were held at all levels. Those in charge were given the task of setting up a new ideological system. The head of state made a public statement: 'One would wish to achieve what the Soviet Union had achieved in the sphere of propaganda but, unfortunately, we cannot do this. Yet, we need to set up a new ideological system'. What does it mean in practice? Firstly, it entails the launch of 'Aspects of State Ideology', a new subject in the syllabuses of higher education institutions. Moreover, it [would result in] managers of all enterprises making ideological speeches and taking part in continual propaganda campaigns. To put it in grand terms, the nation's media will be the main instrument of this policy. The very existence of this propaganda machinery is pernicious, whereby stereotypes are being imposed on the minds of the people to the tune of: 'Who else if not him?', 'the West is the enemy', or 'the West does not want us'. These stereotypes take root in people's minds, and it is hard to build anything in such a situation.

This year, we have seen a head-on confrontation as the authorities are trying to disempower the independent/non-government-controlled media, not to mention those in outright opposition, as the authorities are trying to control the entire information space. In the spring, we have lost eight out of thirty periodicals published in Belarus. Some are closed by court injunction; others go bankrupt for want of any outside support. We do not have the funds, we have no oligarchs to finance the press as is the case in Russia or Ukraine. The president is right when he says that in Belarus the press is free. Indeed, it is free from anyone, and its 'freedom' means that it is simply disappearing crushed by the policy of eliminating independent media and by economic discrimination. We are dying for help. Recently, for example, a five-thousand dollar fine was administered to the 'Narodna Wola' newspaper because the head of the government-controlled TV and radio company recalled a publication of several years before which he found offensive, so the newspaper was sued for libel. We face, then, the prospect of losing the last independent Belarusian daily as it cannot afford to pay such a high fine.

New processes are also taking place in the Belarusian information space. Until quite recently, I'd thought that Belarus allowed for excessive expansion of the Russian media, and that it is unacceptable to let them shape the views and mentality of our people and that it is some kind of meddling in our internal affairs. Yet, as it turned out, when compared with the new Belarusian media, the Russian [ones] provided quite reasonable information. Our authorities decided that the Russian media are dangerous and initiated a policy of expelling them from our information space. Instead, as of the beginning of this year, three new channels opened in Belarus and they are completely controlled by the authorities. They don't have financial problems because the authorities spare no money on this purpose. It is important to arouse interest in the Belarusian situation. I know that my Polish colleagues are interested in our country. So, I can't understand why a few months ago 'Gazeta Wyborcza' and PAP (Polish Press Agency) closed their Minsk offices. Their correspondents' reports were an independent

source of information about what was going on Belarus. Unfortunately, we have lost this source.

Anatol Labedka

I am a political optimist, as a matter of principle. But I am pessimistic about the chances of successful reforms if pursued in cooperation with Alexander Lukashenka. This view is justifiable given the character of the Belarusian regime and Lukashenka's traits of character. If I may venture a political diagnosis: Alexander Lukashenka is incurably obsessed with power. He wants it all, come hell or high water. Not long ago, he dissolved the Supreme Council (of the 12th term), our parliament, with most of its members being his supporters. He aggravated relations with the international community as there was a group of people in this parliament that he did not tolerate because they might not be willing to agree with him. The Belarusian regime is oligarchic in character. Yet, unlike in Russia or Ukraine, there is only one oligarch who, unfortunately, has another full-time job: that of the head of state.

In Belarus, there is oligarchy and monopoly of power. What can we propose in this situation? Reforms. Why? Because reforms mean death to the monopoly. These two do not go together. Lukashenka cannot agree to reform, because that would impair the system which is the foundation of his power. Let us consider the following: when was he politically prepared to negotiate? Answer: only in moments of crisis of his rule. But, when the West showed sign of weakness and was less tough in negotiations, Lukashenka ran out of good will immediately. 'Five Plus', our joint civic party, the coalition of five opposition groups tries to do away with the myth that the opposition is capable only of waving banners at demonstrations in the streets of Minsk and cannot offer anything more constructive. We are keen on offering constructive proposals for economic reforms. In the last three years, we have submitted a number of methodically drafted documents to the government and Lukashenka's administration. We have proposed two alternative budgets and plans for tax and social security system reforms.

We have had no official reply. What we did find out is that the economic reform draft went missing about three times in the government offices. Is any communication with the nomenklatura possible? The question is: what is Belarusian nomenklatura, anyway? This is the president's people, mostly [veterans] of his Mogilev days, or members of the Supreme Council of the thirteenth term. I think that one may effectively communicate with them, but one ought to understand that Lukashenka plays by the rules of the Russian roulette. Those in highest ministerial positions and their deputies live in constant fear. One of the deputy ministers confessed: 'I go to work as if to war. I kiss my wife and children for the last time and go off'. It so happens because the wheel of fortune is spinning and there is no way of knowing where it will stop. Lukashenka also thrives on the popular need of finding the scapegoat. Every now and then, someone is singled out, shown to the public on television, his/her voice is heard on the radio and the crowd cheers that even those 'up there' get a beating. In this situation, a large part of the nomenklatura wishes that power be taken over by democrats who would introduce the rule of law. I think that the Belarusian nomenklatura will behave like the Georgian one in the recent 'Revolution of the Roses' in Tbilisi. One should mention one factor absent two or three years ago: popular discontent. Within two years of the presidential campaign, Lukashenka lost one half of his electorate. Fifty per cent of Belarusians admit that although they voted for him in the [last] election, they wouldn't today. In June 2003, one fourth of the population declared readiness to vote for a coalition of five opposition parties even though it hasn't achieved anything yet. All told, its members have 28% of [popular] support. Only 25% can vote for Lukashenka. About half of the people are undecided. All this depends on who would claim the remaining half. Most importantly, Belarus has seen disappointment with the authorities and genuine opposition emerge. In the 'Five Plus' coalition, we have managed to combine various entities of socio-political life: non-governmental organizations, trade unions, associations of deputies of various levels. For the first time, long before the actual election campaign of autumn 2004, we have political determination to fight effectively. On

top of that, we have the conflict between the official Red House in Belarus and the Kremlin where there is still room for maneuver. Of course, I rule out in advance the possibility of importing democracy from Russia, but the conflict between Lukashenka and Putin is a fact which should be used to serve our aims.

Vincuk Viachorka

The main question of this discussion is: 'can Belarus be reformed'? Of course it can and should be. The sooner the better. This process has already begun; one by one, stereotypes fall apart, and the first one to change is the people's mentality. The latest surveys by Belarusian and foreign sociologists (to quote Prof. Oleg Manaev and the Lithuanian 'Baltic Service') demonstrate that about 66% of Belarusians would vote against Lukashenka and against extending his presidency onto his third term. This index has remained stable for the last twelve months, so we are in a position to say that this majority is unaware of its own existence. There is no mirror in which the changed society could look at itself such as the independent media, but their situation has already been discussed. All other possibilities are also subject to government control. It is no accident that a new law on assemblies and demonstrations has been passed this year which renders them virtually impossible.

The propositions to this discussion fail to mention one question: 'is it necessary to preserve independence in order to carry out reforms in Belarus'? As I understand, this question has not been taken into consideration because independence was considered a *conditio sine qua non* for reforms. But, this issue keeps coming up in all discussions about Belarus. At the end of 1991, in the opposition milieu, the Belarusian National Front discussed whether to initiate a referendum on independence modeled after a similar one already carried out in Ukraine. Some claimed that it would have been risky given the people's mindset; there was no way of knowing what results such a referendum would bring. What about the latest survey? Between 84% and 89% of Belarusians are unconditionally in favor of independence,

with only 7% against¹. We can therefore speak of an overwhelming majority supporting an independent Belarus, which in part explains why, in his propaganda language, Lukashenka changed the paradigm and began using the word ‘independence’. So, is it necessary to depose Lukashenka in order to carry out reforms in Belarus? Hasn’t Lukashenka now turned into a defender of Belarusian independence? The answer to this question is obvious: no, because it is not enough to talk of independence and, at the same time, run a campaign of repressions against the Belarusian culture, language and schools. One example is the closure of the Belarusian Jakub Kolas high school of humanities in Minsk, which did not result in its final liquidation. Students still attend classes, more or less like in the Nazi-occupied Warsaw, in private homes, in the face of the militia who are after them.

The ideological evolution – not revolution – that the regime is undergoing stems from economic disaster. There is a clear and marked shortage of funds to pay pensions and wages. We are witnessing a gradual and inevitable increase of public service provision, practically on the same level as in Lithuania, but the earnings are of the communist times. This means that utilities rates are already at market level, with household income still in the past era. Such a situation must lead to popular unrest. Everyday problems must be compensated for by means of, say, ideological demagoguery. In this ideology, the word ‘independence’ means Lukashenka’s attempts to break free from Putin’s pressure who tries to subjugate him. Let us recall what Lukashenka said about Belarusians: to him they are Russians with a quality mark. A note to the outsider: in Soviet times, this ‘quality mark’ was a stamp that certified the high quality of a given commodity.

What is most important then, when it comes to our nation’s prospects? In various opinion polls, about 65% Belarusians say that if a European referendum was held today, they would vote for joining the EU. We are not so naive as to believe that this is a conscious choice based on the understanding of how much sacrifice EU membership involves. We are

¹ International Republican Institute and Gallup Baltic Survey (Lithuania), 2003.

aware that it is an instinctive choice of a geopolitical orientation made in spite of the many years, a century almost, of anti-Western propaganda. And, if as many as 65% Belarusians would vote for the western option, this shows how deeply it is rooted in their collective mind. An obvious objection would be that more or less the same number of Belarusians supports alliance with Russia. There is nothing unusual about it; this is also a result of many years of propaganda, this time pro-Eastern. This also shows certain naïveté to the tune of ‘what if we got hold of some subsidies from Brussels and have Russian gas at reduced rates at the same time’? This is also a message for our friends and supporters in neighboring countries: Belarus belongs to Europe and formally it will become its member, but only after the necessary democratic changes have taken place.

Alyaksandr Milinkievich

When we speak about what is referred to as the third sector in Belarus, we must admit that, despite the hard working conditions, non-governmental organizations in our country are growing, especially until 2001. We have around three thousand registered organizations and over three thousand non-registered. The number of the non-registered ones will be growing as these organizations themselves do not want to obtain legal status in order to avoid control and aggression of the authorities. This does not mean that they will stop operating. I’ll demonstrate it with the example of the Grodno-based ‘Ratusha’ organization I have run since its foundation. It has recently been officially dissolved, but you can visit our office in Grodno and find that nothing has really changed: same people, same programs. As of now, we are working, but a bit differently. Frankly speaking, even before only about 20% of our operations were legal; now we are facing 100% of illegal activity. Such are the circumstances and the peculiar character of Belarus. One should bear that in mind when speaking about cooperating with our country.

The Belarusian third sector is very dynamic, capable of responding quickly to new requirements. The authorities, for example, introduce Soviet history

textbooks and, in response, hundreds of organizations devoted to tourism, local history, etc. emerge. There are human rights problems, but we have a big network of non-governmental organizations dealing with these issues. We have an information problem – three hundred local papers and bulletins appear. This means that one part of the society is very dynamic. Importantly, in the last five years the third sector has filtered into the regions and is now present all over the country, with non-governmental initiatives in ninety seven out of one hundred seventeen administrative areas. Those who are aware of the Ukrainian and Russian settings know that these countries don't have such widespread regional presence of NGOs.

The third sector faces some serious problems as well. Primarily, it comprises only a tiny fraction of the society. Sometimes, the active groups work as if for their own sake and cannot reach out to the masses. I have just been to Brussels, where the European Commission debated on how to deal with Belarus. When Belarusian NGOs were being assessed, we heard that the only successful ones are those capable of cooperating with the authorities in the current situation. We do understand that such cooperation is important, and sometimes we do so at the local level, but it won't succeed on a bigger scale because the authorities do not want an active society; they are interested in its passivity. Belarusian organizations shouldn't be assessed for their ability to cooperate with the authorities. Let us take human rights organizations, for example; for obvious reasons they, will never initiate contact with the authorities. For me, the criterion for assessing the third sector in Belarus is the fact that even in such hard conditions it pursues the process of de-communization, de-sovietization, Europeanization and democratization. It is in these NGOs that we find people who are the future democratic European elite of Belarus.

For us, cooperation with Europe, and now also with Poland as a new member of a united Europe, is of particular importance not only due to possible financial aid. It is also about big moral support. Despite overwhelming pro-Russian propaganda, there are strong pro-European sentiments in Belarus thanks to the work of the third sector and independent

media. It is in these two areas that Poland and probably Lithuania – these two countries primarily – would be particularly useful in the process of ‘europeanizing’ Belarus. At the abovementioned meeting in Brussels, there was also talk of isolating Minsk. We argued that it wouldn’t mean isolation, but only supporting self-isolation of Belarus, which makes all the difference. If Minsk is unwilling to cooperate with Europe, it should not be aided in its policy. Help should be offered to those willing to cooperate, namely the democratic third-sector forces.

Vital Silitski

As I ponder the historical point Belarus has found itself in, I recall an old view that our country is completing a full circle, going through a mild version of Soviet communism: when Lukashenka came, the kulaks were being removed, then came the New Economic Policy, the partial reforms, then repressions, talk of liberalization, and now we are back again in the stagnation stage redolent of the Brezhnev era. The society is fairly stable, the standard of living is down, but people make ends meet so the slump doesn’t lead to political crises. The society’s mood has changed and it is different from what it was ten years ago. Soviet cynicism is back and people sympathize with the opposition only in the privacy of their own homes. An atmosphere of indifference and fear prevails.

In this debate, we heard the question whether reforms are possible with Lukashenka [still in power]. Lukashenka, as Mr. Viachorka put it, is like concrete slowly penetrated by roots of grass, as reforms in Belarus are carried out by the people not by the authorities. I do agree that it is rather transformation than reform. We are not witnessing a change of system, but a change in people’s behavior because the human being will always be a homo economicus: where there are people there is market, also in Belarus. The current economic crisis should not be seen as a disaster because it stimulates market-style behavior. People are looking for various opportunities in order to survive, to pay the tuition for private schools that are beginning to appear; there are fewer free-of-charge medical services,

utilities must be paid for, etc. This means that capitalism is beginning to set in, albeit in an environment characterized by decline and lethargy. Perhaps this is no longer the lethargy of the Soviet society, but that of Czechoslovakia or Hungary of the Brezhnev era. Perhaps to some extent, the Belarusians have been influenced by what happened in the neighboring countries. This gives reasons for moderate optimism about the future.

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