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BELARUS 1991-2011: TRIUMPH OR TRAGEDY? AN ASSESSMENT[1]

Artur Roland Kozłowski*

ABSTRACT
The overall balance of the two decades of the independent Republic of Belarus is far from impressive. The fact that the country retains its own statehood is a success in itself. Perhaps owing to personal ambitions of the Russian and Belarusian leaders or maybe as a result of their inadequacy in implementing integration projects involving the two countries, Belarus remains a separate political entity. At the same time, a long lasting period of Lukashenko's rule has manifested the weakness of the opposition. It lacks solidarity, has no common strategy to follow at the decisive moments and is thus easily defeated by the President. The analysis is carried out on the basis of political science and is aimed at a diagnosis of Belarus's degree of identification with its subjectivity and independence in the spirit of critical geopolitics.

Key words: Belarus, Lukashenko, post-Soviet states, sovietisation, Central-Eastern Europe

Introduction: the emergence of Belarus

Two decades of the existence of independent Belarus seem to be a perfect occasion to make an assessment of its performance as an independent state. It is twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union gave Belarus the opportunity to become independent after two hundred years of Russian rule, first Tsarist, and then Soviet. The present study aims to outline the performance of the Republic of Belarus in a number of aspects relating both to domestic and international contexts. It is particularly important to assess the extent of freedom of its political system and to discuss the degree of its sovereignty in its relations with Russia. The method applied is based on an analysis of qualitative and quantitative factors that determine the conditions of Belarusian state. The qualitative analysis concentrates on how the authorities and the majority of the

* Artur Roland Kozlowski, Ph.D. is Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Gdansk School of Banking, ul. Dolna Brama 8, 80-821 Gdansk, Poland, akozlowski@wsb.gda.pl.

[1] Translated from Polish by Piotr Styk

population treat the national heritage and examines the political system that derives from such an approach. Further on, the economic situation in Belarus and its foreign relations are discussed. The quantitative analysis considers sociological data from surveys conducted by leading research centres to present social attitudes to the former Soviet Union and to estimate the degree of support for the reintegration with Russia.

Belarusian independence did not really come about as a result of an ambition to achieve national self-determination. Rather, it was brought about by the rising tide of pro-democratic developments that had been taking place in the Central European part of the decaying Soviet bloc for over two years. It is worth mentioning that the decision concerning the independence of Soviet republics was made by only three of their leaders. In a referendum over the future of the USSR, which was held on 17 October 1991, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic had the turnout of 83.3% with 82.7% of the votes in support of continuing the USSR. Only in the Azerbaijani SSR was the result higher (94.1% support), but the turnout there was lower (75.1%). Even the Russian Federal SSR showed a lower support for the USSR (just over 71%), with a considerable proportion of the votes against (28.7%) and the turnout of 75.4%. The Ukrainian SSR's result was: 83.5% turnout with 70.2% support. As Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia and Moldova had already declared their independence, they refused to go to the ballot. In this way, the march of history overwhelmed the *homo sovieticus* loyalty. In the Belavezha Accords (8 December, 1991), the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus dissolved the USSR and signed an agreement that established the Community of Independent States (CIS), a political entity meant as an alternative to the compromised Soviet Union. Not all the leaders of newly independent states, however, found this new formula attractive: Ukraine, for example, has not ratified the CIS statute to this very day. Independent Belarus, on the other hand, has always been 'top of the class' when it came to integration projects. Indeed, on some occasions it even outbid Yeltsin's Russia.

Following the era of Russian and Soviet domination, which had subjected Belarusians to intense indoctrination from the Kremlin, the level of development of national identity in Belarus was distinctly different from European historical patterns. Five years after the independence, **Aleś Kraucewicz**, a historian and a Belarusian Democratic Party activist, concluded that "*In a ten-million population of Belarus there are about five thousand people who are conscious of their Belarusian identity*." (Białoruś…, 1996, p. 89) Such severe criticism

came out more as a result of frustration on the part of pro-national activists who found themselves in a marginalised opposition, than reflected the actual figures. However, there was some point in this remark, as could be seen in a growing popularity of slogans glorifying the Soviet times at the expense of the newly granted independence. Instead of swimming with the rising tide of pro-democratic change that, not without problems, had swept across Central-Eastern Europe, Belarusians elected **Alexander Lukashenko** as President (1994), which constituted a more or less conscious attempt to maintain the post-Soviet system.

Jerzy Kłoczowski has coined the term *"Younger Europe"* to describe the Central-Eastern part of the continent which, as he rightly points out, followed the Western European patterns (Kłoczowski, 2003). In contrast to the first years of Belarusian independence, when the prospects of adopting a pro-democratic course looked promising, ever since Lukashenko came to power the state has fallen short of the *"Younger Europe"* or *"two-speed"* Europe formula. The line implemented instead is not even an original variation on the Third Way theme, but rather a pointless exercise in copying a bankrupt system which had already proved to be an utter failure. Taking such a direction was possible due to an ideological vacuum that could not be successfully filled with pro-national awareness. The low level of national self-identification can partly be explained by two hundred years of Russian domination in Belarus and reflects a complex background against which Belarusian national identity has formed.

In his discussion of theoretical aspects of the birth of a nation, **Hieronim Kubiak** points out the sources that determine its vitality: "*National identity is not an outgrowth of a simple, primary extrapolation, a spontaneously born ethnic identity. On the contrary, it has to be forged by intellectuals and institutions. (...) For such a shared identity to integrate a group of people, it needs to be stimulated first by creating conditions in which individuals begin to perceive themselves in national categories. Under pressure from the state, intellectuals and journalists, we either 'become conscious' of, we discover (as the Romantics had it), our national identity; or, according to the ideas of the Enlightenment, we become hostage to stereotypes, standardised opinions, views and beliefs imposed by school, symbolic culture and religion*." (Kubiak, 2007, pp. 213-214) Such an approach has determined the evolution of national identity in Europe since at least the 19th Century. Although present among Belarusians, this trend has failed to become a model for building their state on the basis of the national factor. A comparative analysis of European models of state and their historical

evolution indicates that Belarus was unlikely to follow the nation state formula (Kozłowski, 2008). Paradoxically, during his twenty-year-long presidency, *Lukashenko*, fighting against pro-national opposition remaining outside the parliament, has consolidated the awareness of a distinct national character also among the sovietised Belarusians. A besieged President of an allegedly besieged country has been using allegedly free media in his attempts to integrate Belarusian society around his vision of the state. Although this is not enough to form a fully developed national identity, it could be sufficient to create a sense of commonly shared experience, especially if this experience is different from that of the neighbouring countries.

The model of nation state has long since proved inadequate for the needs of Western European countries and those Central-Eastern European countries that follow the path of European integration. In an age of globalisation, its attraction fades when confronted with the benefits of an open economy. Modern Belarus seems to follow neither of these patterns: the nation state is not in line with the policy of the current regime; the open model is limited to cooperation with Russia in the framework of neocolonial organisations, and to contacts with countries whose openness leaves a lot to be desired, to mention Venezuela and Iran.

1 Independent Belarus

It was almost on the eve of the fall of the Soviet Union that **Jerzy Giedroyć**, a Polish advocate of Eastern European cooperation and revival, when interviewed on his vision of Poland and its role in Europe and in the world, said: "*Our role could be enormous. We have not been in such a favourable situation for a few centuries. We have the potential to contribute to the stability of this part of Europe and to function as a link between the East and the West. We can also have a considerable influence on the democratic processes in Russia and Ukraine*." He pointed out the importance of cooperation with Lithuania and stressed that "*Belarus is important for Polish interests.*" (Giedroyć, 1992, pp. 88-90) *Kultura*, a Polish monthly edited by **Giedroyć** in Paris, had for decades intellectually supported the great change that, initiated in Poland, eventually started a domino effect which swept away the regimes of the Soviet bloc. In fact, two days after this interview, the Soviet Union was dissolved. In his letter to **Andrzej Piskozub, Sokrat Janowicz** was enthusiastic about his hopes for a new Belarus. For **Janowicz**, Belarusian freedom would mean going back to its

historical traditions, with *Pahonia* (the Chaser) as the national emblem going back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the thaler as the national currency. Also, a one-hundred-thousand strong Belarusian army would protect the sovereignty of the state.

In his speech at the December 1991 convention of *Adradżennie* (Revival) Popular Front, Zianon **Paźniak** said (as reported by *Kultura*): "*Belarus should join Europe. It was necessary to ratify the agreement that established the Community of Independent States as it was the only way to declare the 1922 treaty null and void and thus dissolve the Soviet Union and its institutions.*" This, however, was to be only the first step since, in Paźniak's words: "*We should always remember what Russia is (...) [and] (...) never, under any circumstances should we enter into any political treaties or any political alliances with Russia*" (Kronika, 1992, p. 115). When he had an influence on the political developments in the country he was convinced that "*it would be dangerous for Belarus to encourage the political involvement of the general public"* as he did not believe *"that the politicised masses would give strong support to independent Belarus*." In fact, he expected quite the opposite. In 1991, his plan was to "*Quickly create structures of independent Belarusian state relying on nationally aware elites and then use the state institutions to issue orders, impose restrictions and, possibly, use repressions to form a Belarusian nation in every sense of the word. In international relations, a Baltic-Black Sea Federation with Belarus as its leader would be an ideal solution. The role of the state as a nation-maker meant supporting Belarusian language and culture as the foundation of an independent state. Consequently, Belarusian was to become the official language of education, administration, the mass media and the army*" (Pawluczuk, 1996). This challenging project put forward by **Paźniak** was a reflection of the idea of shaping the state and its institutions according to the national principle. The sovietised society had little understanding of such a wide-ranging initiative and was unwilling to accept it. Also, the whole idea referred to an abstract cultural concept and, as such, could not compete with everyday reality of a deep economic crisis that severely affected former Soviet republics. What brought **Lukashenko** to power was a combination of criticism of the nation state and market economy, which had come to be associated with corruption, and his tribute to the Soviet era.

1.1 Belarusians and their national symbols

The new head of state, a former manager of a *kolkhoz* (a collective farm), went beyond lip-service and took action to remove symbols of Belarusian national identity from public life. He used a referendum as a vehicle for this change: the sovietised masses were to decide on the vital issues of national identity. In December 1995, 83.1% of voters supported the equal official status of the Russian and Belarusian language; 75% rejected the official national symbols introduced after independence and supported the new ones going back to the Soviet times; finally, as many as 82.4% were in favour of a closer integration with Russia. The results of the ballot proved that a two-hundred-year process of Russification in Belarus, dating from the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was successful.

In favour of re-sovietisation of Belarus, **Lukashenko** regarded the symbols of national tradition as redundant. The first issue on this agenda was the equal official status of the Russian and Belarusian language and the change of official national symbols. Belarusian historical heritage going back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Duchy of Polotsk was more than redundant, it was a political disadvantage. Only a handful of intellectuals searching for historical roots appreciated the value of this tradition in fostering elements of national identity. This challenging task was not only rejected by the state, but was also met with indifference by the apathetic masses. To these, **Lukashenko** restored an illusion of security guaranteed by his state.

It was only a few years after independence that **Lukashenko** rejected *Pahonia* as the national emblem and the white, red and white national flag. In their place, he (re)introduced symbols that for many Belarusians had positive associations with the Soviet era. The old-new emblem and the old-new flag had only some minor elements that distinguished them from those of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. The old *kolkhoz*-style wreath made of ears of corn remained intact except for its red decorative ribbon which was given an additional green stripe corresponding to that of the new national flag. Pro-national Belarusians cannot identify with the new colours as they feel attached to the traditional, historical symbols, and not to those that go back to the times of the Soviet Union. Although both the emblem and the flag were stripped of the hammer and sickle, the advocates of the old times can feel safe under the good old Soviet star that has remained on top of the wreath and can be seen displayed all over the country.

The question of national holidays also became subject to President **Lukashenko**'s pro-Soviet regulations. The anniversaries of the 1918 declarations of independence (made possible by the German military presence along the Brest Treaty borderline) (Kozłowski, 2000) are national holidays in all the Baltic States: Lithuania (16 February), Estonia (24 February) and Latvia (23 March). In Belarus, the corresponding date is 25 March, but here the head of state does not organise any official celebrations. Instead, his security forces make sure that opposition activists who rally to commemorate the anniversary have ample opportunity to celebrate the occasion in prison cells and casualty wards. By contrast, the authorities highly respect a different occasion. The Belarusian Independence Day goes back to the times of the Soviet Union and commemorates the liberation of Minsk by the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War (World War II). For the Soviet-oriented part of the population, who see **Lukashenko** as their leader, this day is far more important than the anniversary of the proclamation of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918. To stress its high rank, the national holiday is celebrated with a special military parade with tanks and aircraft.

Despite his disregard for national history, **Lukashenko** integrates the people of Belarus around a political agenda. A prominent example was his failed attempt to replace **Boris Yeltsin** at the Kremlin as the head of the Union of Belarus and Russia (established in 1997). To Belarusian people, during his long presidency **Lukashenko** has become a symbol of their country, thus in fact consolidating the awareness of an independent state. Having gone through periods of isolation from and flirtation with the European Union as well as Russia, the President concentrates on the pro-state propaganda designed for the home market and stresses the distinct position of Belarus. It is only a new rejection by the West, but also, in a sense, by Russia, that has undermined the position of **Lukashenko**, who, until recently, could repeat after Louis XIV "*I am the state*".

When it comes to national identity, although the first decade of independence was marked by a continuity of the Soviet era, there were also signs of a coming change. As revealed by the *National Human Development Report* (2000) (Belarus: Choices…, 2000), 42.6% of the respondents saw Belarusians as a part of the threefold Russian nation (in Minsk the proportion was 39.6%, Vitebsk: 54.3%, Brest: 28.9%). Almost half of those questioned (49.8%) considered Belarusians to be a distinct nation (Minsk: 50.2%, Vitebsk: 39.2%, Brest: 67.7%). Also, while three quarters (75.9%) saw themselves as

Studies (IISEPS), an organisation based in Lithuania, which has been conducting systematic sociological research for several years now. The activities of numerous supporters spread the idea of free Belarus and have a formative influence on those who are ready to follow it. They appear in Belarusian streets with white, red and white flags not just on every 25 March. They demonstrate their disapproval after each rigged election and rally outside courts where their colleagues are on trial for alleged offences, whereas in fact all they did was to stand up for their civil rights and liberties. When the authorities tightened the screws after a wave of protests that followed the latest Presidential election (2010), the opposition decided to hold silent rallies. In June 2011 at 7 p.m. people gathered in the squares of Belarusian cities to stand there in silence for a few minutes. Their silence is becoming louder than words, which infuriates the crumbling regime.

Apart from the obvious restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, the opposition also faces a problem of target-oriented organisational unity. What is needed is a move away from the stage of romantic appeals to people's hearts towards the practical stage of planning power transfer scenarios. What chances did the Presidential candidates of the opposition really have against such a highly experienced political player as Lukashenko? Although they made history, they could not have won the rigged ballot. It takes a strong determination to put personal ambitions behind in order to achieve the desired freedom in a democratic way, as the Solidarity movement in Poland demonstrated in the 1980s.

The activity of the opposition is not made any easier by the fact that **Lukashenko** still commands widespread support in the society. In an IISEPS opinion poll (Results…, 2011) conducted in March 2011 the respondents were asked: *"Did the majority of those who came to the elections in December 2010 actually vote for A. Lukashenko, in your opinion?"* The answers were as follows: 39.8% of those questioned trusted the results published by the Central Election Committee, 35.4% did not trust them, but were still convinced that he had got more than half of the votes; only 24.1% did not believe that the President had won at all.

Furthermore, according to 40.9% of the respondents, the Presidential election had a unifying effect on the nation, while for 38.7% it contributed to divisions in Belarusian society. When asked about the influence of **Lukashenko**'s victory on this issue, over 20% failed to give any answer at all. The official propaganda convinced 48% of those questioned that the rally of 19

December 2010 was an attempted coup d'état; 36.1% thought otherwise and saw it as a peaceful protest action. The fact that seven hundred people, including seven Presidential candidates, were arrested on the occasion revealed a similar pattern of answers: 47.7% thought the authorities had had the right to take such measures and 42.4% condemned them. As regards the fact that Lukashenko had been re-elected President, 46.2% expressed their satisfaction, 43.2% were of the contrary view and only 10% had no opinion on the matter. The data above indicate that there is a deep split in the society over the judgment of President **Lukashenko**'s actions, but they could also be treated as a manifestation of a weakening position of the regime. Add the severe economic problems that Belarusians have experienced since early 2011, and it may soon turn out that *"the King is naked".*

3 Developments in Belarusian economy

In his discussion of the USSR and China, analysed as modern incarnations of ancient satrapies reborn in the form of totalitarian communist regimes, Wittfoegel refers to their socio-economic model using a Marxist term *"the Asiatic mode of production"*. **Leonid Zlotnikov**, an economist, a former principal advisor of the Belarusian parliament (1991-1994), has reached a similar conclusion with regard to Belarus, adding: "*Owing to the fact that it is now a widespread system around the globe, it is referred to as 'the state mode of production'. Characterised by the ultimate unity of power and ownership, it divides the society into the rulers and the ruled.*" (Złotnikow, 2006, p. 53) This model does not know private ownership in the European sense of the concept, nor does it protect private property but rather leaves it at the mercy of the ruler. At the same time, the officials who blindly follow orders and the privileged members of the business community can count on enormous profits, but their economic prosperity is bound up with the regime in power.

The situation in which Belarus is heavily dependent on Russian supplies of energy sources poses a serious threat to the sovereignty of the country in both an economic and political sense. Russian monopoly in this sector cannot really be undermined by contracts for deliveries from Venezuela, Azerbaijan or Iran. What is more, the position of Belarus as the second most important transit country for Russian natural gas supplies to the European Union after Ukraine has diminished since the North Stream gas pipeline (a direct connection between Russia and Germany, bypassing Central-Eastern and Eastern

European transit countries) moved ahead from the planning stage to the actual construction work. Consequently, Belarus has lost its trump card in its gas negotiations with Russia as the scope for possible blackmail is now limited. To make matters worse, the country also relies on Russian oil, which is of great importance to Belarusian economy. Although the technology used in its oil refineries is far from cost-effective, thanks to Russian deliveries Minsk is able to make a profit on re-export of petroleum products and thus generate a considerable proportion of the state budget. However, this source of income depends on Russian policy on customs duties, which evolves in a direction that is unfavourable to Belarus. With no investments in modern technologies for alternative energy sources, the country's energy policy undermines its economic stability and can rather be called a policy of energy insecurity. In this context, it is interesting to point out new prospects for Poland and Ukraine which opened when American companies discovered shale gas deposits there. Although it will take years before they can be exploited, the two countries might be able to become independent from Russia in terms of energy security. It cannot remain unnoticed that, probably for political reasons, Belarus was entirely omitted from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) report *World Shale Gas Resources: An Initial Assessment of 14 Regions Outside the United States* (US Energy…, 2011).

A severe blow to Belarusian economy came with a currency crisis which hit the country in spring 2011. In May and June, the Belarusian rouble exchange rate kept falling to become devalued by 60% after the central bank had lifted its control of exchange rates offered by commercial banks and exchange offices. Between January and May, the inflation rate was as high as 20%, with the prices of petrol soaring by 50%. Under the circumstances, the government decided to introduce petrol rationing and unlimited purchase was restricted only to those who paid in hard currency, including the Russian rouble. As viewed by some analysts, this could pave the way for replacing the Belarusian rouble with the Russian rouble. According to an opinion poll, before the crisis, the ranking of currencies that Belarusians put their trust in was as follows: US dollar (56.4%), Belarusian rouble (22.7%), Euro (17.5%); the Russian rouble was regarded as the weakest currency (Results…, 2011).

Belarusian financial crisis has made it evident that the country cannot cope with its economic problems. This opens new opportunities for Russian business, which may take advantage of the situation in return for anti-crisis support offered by the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC: Belarus, Russia,

Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan), an organisation dominated by Russia. Indeed, as reported by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, it is Russia that dictates its conditions to Belarus. It is mostly interested in taking over strategic companies in the energy and chemical sectors, as well as car manufacturers. Belarus has already promised to privatise its state assets amounting to the total value of US$ 7.5 billion, US$ 2.5 billion a year within the next three years (Białoruś i Rosja jednoczą siły…, 2012). Thus, the economic underachievement of **Lukashenko**'s rule has already resulted in a disaster. What is more, all evidence points to the fact that its future consequences could be summed up paraphrasing Winston Churchill: *'Never was so much sold for so little.'*

4 Belarus in international relations

Under **Lukashenko**, Belarus has earned a reputation as a country that forms various alliances with other non-democratic states. Hence, contacts with Iran, Venezuela under **Hugo Chavez**, or rumours of offering shelter to deposed **Muammar Kaddafi** are hardly surprising. Having tolerated the Belarusian despot long enough, the international democratic community has finally abandoned hope of democratisation under the current regime. This became evident after the 2010 rigged Presidential election and ruthless suppression of the unrest that followed in December 2010 and spring 2011. As a result, Belarus is increasingly being isolated from the Western world.

Lukashenko pays visits to those neighbouring countries that are not members of the European Union. When in Ukraine, he tries to motivate it to intensify its relations with Russia, or, on the contrary, to form an alliance with Belarus that would enable him to gain some particular concessions from Russia. Whatever the short-term perspective, the question of Belarus' reintegration with Russia has constantly been on the agenda in the political debate for the entire period of independence. In the Presidential campaign in 1994, **Lukashenko** outbid **Kiebicz** in pro-integration sympathies. Given a disappointing development of the Community of Independent States, an organisation that has proved to be a poor substitute for the Soviet Union in a new formula, Belarus has both initiated and participated in a number of projects aiming at the restoration of the old order. **Lukashenko** even had a vision that he would replace **Boris Yeltsin** in the Kremlin, which was to be achieved through the Union of Belarus and Russia, a poorly managed reintegration project (April 1997-December 1999), renamed the Union State of Russia and Belarus (8

December 1999). (Those involved might have become aware of the Polish acronym for the former name and its meaning in Polish: ZBiR meaning 'a thug'). Whatever the name, in view of the nightmares of the past, both the Belarusian opposition and the neighbouring countries that were prospective European Union members regarded the whole idea with distrust and suspicion.

The transfer of power in Russia from **Boris Yeltsin** to **Vladimir Putin**, who, like **Lukashenko**, also encourages his personality cult, was bound to end up in a conflict of interests. Indeed, **Putin** did consider a union with Belarus, but only one that would mean the incorporation of this former Soviet republic and certainly not an equal partnership. **Lukashenko** rejected all the proposals of this kind, such as the one of 2002, which planned to transform Belarus into three western provinces of Russia.

Most of the reservations about integration projects involving the two countries that were expressed by **Stanislav Shushkevich** still remain valid. In 2006, he wrote: "*Real integration is going to open the Belarusian market to Russian capital. It also means privatisation according to Russian standards... I have often visited Russia [and] I have been to many different regions of that country. With all due respect, my impression was that Mamai's, Napoleon's and Hitler's occupying armies had just left the country and the local administration officials were engaged exclusively in taking away from the society what the invaders had not managed to plunder*" (Szuszkiewicz, 2006, pp. 20). Although this opinion reflected the views of the opposition, **Lukashenko** himself also realised that he could not be sure of his own position in a unified state dominated by **Putin**.

Regarding another integration project, Russia's independent radio station Echo Moskvy announced on 6 December 2007 that "*the two Presidents would meet in Minsk to sign a constitutional act formalizing the union between their countries. The Union would reportedly involve a common legislature, currency, and military. (…)* ***Putin*** *planned to become President of the new formation and Lukashenko its parliamentary speaker. However, Presidential spokesmen in Moscow and Minsk have denied these rumors, saying that the constitutional act has not been finalized yet and that the two parties still need to review its draft. (…) Negotiations about the Russia-Belarus union have stalled repeatedly in the past, allegedly due to Putin's and Lukashenko's disagreements over the division of powers*" (Gurtovnik, 2007).

Apart from direct integration projects involving only Minsk and Moscow, both of them are also partners in a number of organisations designed to forge closer

links between the countries that Russia treats as its sphere of influence and calls Russia's *'Near Abroad'*. Schemes of this kind give Russian enterprises an advantage in penetrating their markets and facilitate taking over the most attractive businesses. In return, Russia's partners can get access to its large, high-demand market and to subsidised natural resources. One of such organisations is the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). Belarus and Kazakhstan as its first members (1996) were joined by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2000. However, so far it has failed to meet the expectations. A project called the Customs Union is the latest initiative to rebuild the political and economic ties between Russia and its neighbours. Established in July 2010, the union includes Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, opening a single common market of about 170 million people, and is planned to become fully operational by January 2012. As **Andrea Bozanni** observes, "*The economic benefits of unions of this kind are questionable, however. Trade blocs among middle-income countries with similar economic structures and natural resource endowments are costly to implement and hardly generate new trade beyond the distortive flows triggered by an inevitable trade-diversion effect (…) unlike countries that have entered similar trade agreements with the EU, Belarus and Kazakhstan were reluctant to join their markets with Russia's larger one. Some Western analysts believe that Gazprom's 50 percent hike in gas prices charged to Belarus, along with the interruption of supplies in late June, played a significant role in pressuring President Alexander Lukashenko to ultimately commit to the union. In other words, instead of strengthening Russia's ties with the two countries, the customs union has come at a considerable cost in political capital for the Kremlin, and could gradually lead Minsk and Astana away from Moscow. The EU, which is already the largest buyer of Belarusian and Kazakh goods, has long sought to provide an alternative to Russian hegemony in the region. (…) The customs union highlighted the main limitation of Moscow's regional hegemonic role: In both its near abroad and the EU, Russian diplomacy has been successful when it has used coercive means, or when it has sought to build ties with narrowly limited political or economic elites. However, Moscow is unable to provide sustained economic benefits for its neighbors, especially during periods of low oil and gas prices. With the impact of the global recession hitting Russia and some of its cash-starved neighbors hard, significant geopolitical shifts could be ahead*" (Bonzanni, 2010). It also should be noticed that Belarus is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Belarus, Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan,

Kyrgyzstan).

In the context of a debate on the integration of Belarus and Russia, it is interesting to mention the results of a survey published in the *National Human Development Report* (Belarus, 2000), in which respondents were asked about their opinion on this issue: *"If a referendum on the unification of Russia and Belarus were held today, would you vote..."* The proportions of the answers varied in different age groups: 'Yes' had 31.2% score among those questioned who were less than thirty years old, and 51.3% in the over-fifty age group (the overall support was 41.8%). Votes against unification amounted to 40.4% in total, which, broken down into age groups, meant that 47.5% of those below thirty and 33.3% of the higher age group would vote 'No'.

Research conducted by **Oleg Manaev** (Manaev, 2004) and the IISEPS (The European Breakthrough, 2011) indicates the evolution of Belarusian public opinion on the subject of integration with Russia. **Manaev** observed falling support for such initiatives based on the model of the USSR: from 55.1% in 1993 to 38.8% in 2002; in the same period the proportion of opponents increased from 22.3% to 42.6%. Regular surveys carried out by the IISEPS revealed a further decline in support, which fell below 30% (first recorded in June 2010) and remained below this level after the rigged Presidential election in December 2010. The number of those against integration with Russia is on the increase and the relevant figure for March 2011 was as high as 53.1%. Considering the trend observed by **Manaev**, it could be argued that the younger generation does not share or does not understand the pro-Soviet nostalgia as they quite simply have no memory of that epoch. At the same time, it is interesting to observe a growing support for a hypothetical option of integration with the European Union. Answers to the following question: *"If a referendum on the question whether Belarus should join the European Union were being held now, what choice would you make?"* indicated that the proportion of those in favour of such an idea increased from 31.5% in June 2006 to 48.6% in March 2011, and the number of the opponents fell from 49.2% to 30.5%, respectively. The success of the Baltic States and Poland as the European Union member states will provide a further stimulus that will make such an option more popular among Belarusians.

Conclusions

Free Belarus could find its hope in the development of the civil society, which

is already active in the cyberspace, and in the real world its members rally in silent protest against the policy of the leader. In his rise to power, **Lukashenko** was led by his ability to understand social emotions and to use slogans that were close to the heart of an average Belarusian. However, the President and the society have already gone their separate ways and so he has to maintain his regime with batons and tear gas. The opposition, on the other hand, is growing in power. As more and more people gather in public places to clap their hands in unison in a mockery of applause to ridicule the regime whose time to go off stage has come, one can only hope that this is a beginning of an increased cooperation between the different opposition groups which will result in more intensified efforts not only to overthrow the regime, but also to introduce a reasonable government in the future. This is, however, only one of many possible scenarios. It is difficult to agree that the outstanding status of the Belarusian state in the European context can be recognised as a triumph. Those who would like to see Belarus as a democratic country with economy open to global cooperation are therefore definitely disappointed with so little progress made over such a long period of time. Still, Belarus remains an independent state and has not absorbed by the Russian Federation, which is slowly but surely trying to rebuild imperial supremacy over its neighbours. Triumph, then, cannot be announced by those forces which counted on a quick integration of Belarus with Russia in the form of one or more of its provinces. Belarus has not used well the first two decades of independence from the perspective of sustainable empowerment, but at the same time it seems to be looking for a soft path on the road to achieve this aim.

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