

## 6. Does the notion 'Slavic community'/'community of former Soviet peoples' exist?

**Volha Abramava**

When talking about Slav unity, people refer to cultural matters to be polite. But actually they imply bonds of blood. However, it is wrong to define a unity as nations tied by the concept of blood because not only Russians, Belarusians and Serbs but also Czechs and Poles are Slavs. Meanwhile, we all are moving in absolutely different directions in many spheres today. That is why I do not believe in the concept of Slav unity. To me, it is a political or even an ideological thing. Unity can be defined in terms of shared values that are a result of shared faith. A faith that dominated a country for many centuries cannot but affect people's values. A political regime that a country has is also a result of a predominant faith in the culture.

But surely there is unity among post-Soviet states, excluding the Baltic states that have always been something alien due to cultural and historic differences. We have similar mentality in general. We understand each other at least. Why would it be easy for Belarusian businesspeople to do business with Israeli partners? Because there are many people from the former Soviet Union in Israel. We speak one language and also think alike. They understand exactly what we mean and vice versa.

### Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

Soviet peoples are an imagined community. I traveled to various former Soviet countries – Georgia, and Turkmenistan etc. – I saw separate Soviet individuals, but the nations return to their roots.

However, the Slavic unity is a thing of the future. I do not like pan-Slavism, but I do not doubt that the Slavic community has a great future. The whole world is united according to some principles. Sweden, Finland and Norway are different countries, but they have something in common. I can say the same about Japan and China.

Belarusian intellectuals are trying to fight with the past, recalling some old insults. I think that time is gone. The modern Belarusian intellectual should not talk about hatred for Russia.

### Yauhen Babosau

There is no such historical community like the ‘Soviet people’. The Slavic community does exist. Slavyanski Bazar in Vitebsk, a recent congress of Slavic peoples in our country – this is what we have. The Slavic community exists but we must ensure that Eastern Slavs do not drift far away from Western Slavs, namely the Poles, Czechs, Slovenians.

I believe, we must have a broader view: there are Slavs in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. We must look at a broader picture! By the way, there was such unity during the war. It lost its polish after the war and it would be good to revive it. This community exists.

### Anzhalika Borys

I like the European community better.

## Henadz Buraukin

There is a notion and a sense of Slavic unity. Like in a village: you can have very good relationship with your neighbors, but if the family is normal, it remains the most close to you. Another matter is that politicians should not use links among Slavic peoples for their ends.

It is much easier for us to understand a Slovak or a Slovenian than a Finn or a German. There is something in common despite the fact that we were closer or more distanced one from another during various periods in history. The Slavs are the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, but also the Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, Slovenians, Serbs and Croatians. I do not like when politicians single out some Slavic nations and entitle them to speak on behalf of the Slavic community. It is unfair to ignore the interests of other nations, or to treat some Slavic nations as brothers and other as enemies. There is a Slavic community and it should continue to exist. I am an advocate of diversity. There must be a Slavic community of nations, a community of French-speaking nations, of English-speaking nations and African nations. The communities should not be hostile toward each other. Let us compete peacefully and give as much good as possible to the world. If the Slavs give more good than others, we should praise them, if the Africans give more, we should praise them and if the Chinese give more, we should praise them.

I am not sure about the existence of the community of the Soviet people. The Soviet Union consisted of diverse nations – some have recently abandoned feudalism while others were quite advanced, like the Baltic states. It was an artificial or forced union. That is why it disintegrated like a troubled family. Many nations were part of the Soviet Union for 70 years, and all nations for 50 years. That was a long period during which they established close economic, political and cultural ties. I, for instance, regret very much that I cannot follow literature in Georgia, Armenia or Central Asia as closely as I did during the existence of the Soviet Union. I know less about literature in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine than before. Therefore,

I wish that ties and that cultural community remained. When I meet people from Moldova, the Baltic states, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Russia, I feel that we need each other. In literature and culture, it is essential to know each other better in order to learn from each other. I want these nations to maintain ties (especially cultural ones. I am not sure about the economies, as I am not an economist, but it must be the same.) If ties are effective and work for progress and democracy, they must be kept.

### Ales Byalyatski

Certainly, the Slavic community exists in a mental sense. The Slavs have similar identity with around 80 percent of patterns of behavior in various situations – in the Army, at parties, work and holidays – being absolutely the same. They differ from the Germans, French and other non-Slavic groups. When I go, for instance, to Croatia, some 1,500–2,000 kilometers from Minsk, and find myself in a company of boys who are drinking wine, working or doing something else, I always wonder how they act in a way similar to people in Belarus.

The Slavic people are not yet so far apart as to say that they are absolutely different. One can only note differences in customs, behavior, thinking, the manner of working etc. at close examination. It is exciting to feel yourself like home wherever you are between the Adriatic and East Sea.

The Russians are not an exception. The Belarusians should distance themselves from the Russians in politics and strategy, but they should maintain close cultural, economic and human and other ties. It may be unusual for me, who has worked in Belarusian culture for so many years, to admit that we do not realize how much we have in common with the Russians or Ukrainians. Although scientists say that the man also bears resemblance to the chimpanzee – 95 percent of the genes are the same and only five percent differ (*laughs*). I think the difference between Slavic peoples is less than 0.01 percent.

There is a greater difference between Slavs and German peoples. The Swedes, Norwegians and Germans are pedantic and accurate. Slavs do not like it. Interestingly, the German traits are more strongly felt in the Belarusians and Poles than in other Slavic nations. The Belarusians and Poles are more prudent than other Slavic peoples. I think these traits were inherited from German tribes. The Croatians and Russians are like the two hands of one body. They are much alike in their lackluster attitude. Our jaws dropped when we mixed with them. A lackluster attitude is in our nature too. It is possible to identify traits common for all Slavs, but this is subject for a serious research.

On the community of former Soviet nations, I was quite comfortable in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan – the countries I visited quite often in the last few years, exactly every year. We have much in common, something that allows us to maintain a close psychological contact. Belarusians make jokes about them – this is OK, they got used to it. I feel much better in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, than in any Western country. They were educated by the same standards as our generation of Soviet people. The same template was applied to all nations across the Soviet Union. Our children probably will not understand each other. Or most likely, Belarusian and Azeri children will understand each other like the Swedes and Germans. As for our generation, I feel very comfortable there [in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan] in terms of understanding.

### Pavel Daneika

There are facts behind this. It is clear that we can sit and drink vodka with Poles and that we can sit and drink vodka with Russians as well, but we can hardly do this in a similar way with French people. There will not be anything Slavic in the latter party. But Slavs also differ, because countries and even regions opted once to adopt different values.

As for unity among post-Soviet states, it is difficult for me to speak about this. When we want to speak about unity between two nations we should refer to a traditional indicator – history. However, history is the

Battle of Orsha and the Battle of Grunwald<sup>27</sup>, events that either united the nations or separated them! If the Radziwiłłs<sup>28</sup> had learned about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster they would have said, 'The Sapiehas<sup>29</sup> have always been a mess'.

Common history and similar aesthetics indicate that Slavs have much in common. But post-Soviet states are a totally different thing. The Turkmen have nothing to do with us, although they do speak Russian. They are different. They have different mentality, rules and attitudes. In my opinion, being close means having common values, not speaking one language. Slavs have common values, starting from the language and linguistic archetypes.

### Andrey Dynko

I do not see any traces of Slavic unity. The Balkan peoples obviously do have neighbor solidarity. The Vyšehrad Group countries – the new members of the European Union – also have a sense of solidarity caused by common history and shared current economic interests. Neighboring countries here share a certain sense of solidarity as well. But we often see that Belarusians have expressed solidarity with Lithuanians, Czechs with Hungarians and Poles with the Baltic peoples.

As for Pan-Slavism that certain circles in the Russian empire attempted to promote, it had a very specific purpose. A Czech thinker said in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century that Russians like to call everything Russian Slavic so as to be able later to call everything Slavic Russian.

---

<sup>27</sup> The 1514 Battle of Orsha saw armies from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland fighting against Muscovites. The July 15, 1410 Battle of Grunwald took place between the Kingdom of Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and their allies on one side, and the Knights of the Teutonic Order on the other.

<sup>28</sup> The Radziwiłłs are a noble family from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

<sup>29</sup> The Sapiehas are a Polish-Lithuanian princely family descending from medieval boyars of Smolensk.

To a certain extent, this is what is going on inside the former Soviet Union. On the one hand, Estonia and Turkmenistan have absolutely nothing in common today. It's hard to imagine more different countries than these two. However, it is also hard to find similarity between Belarus and Moldova, the countries situated not far away from each other but that have completely different vectors of development. Of course, attempts to use the Soviet identity, the Soviet culture or economic contacts between these countries for political ends do exist and meet with support from the current Russian political elite. Gazmanov, a singer close to Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, once had his song 'I was made in the Soviet Union, I come from the USSR' get much promotion. However, one cannot describe this unity as something homogenous and coherent. And, I believe the revival of this unity would not serve Belarus' national interests.

### Valery Fralou

I think there is some awareness of Slavic unity, they are now promoting it.

There is a community of the former Soviet peoples. Even if we take our Belarus, there are so many national minorities living here!

This is a different matter when politicians start using it for achieving their ends. This is horrible!

There is unity, it is difficult to destroy it over 15 years. But turning it into a tool for pursuing a political career, for earning money from this (I know that many do earn money from this), for promoting oneself is heinous.

I often visit Ukraine, Russia and the Baltic states and I feel that there's something left of it. I don't want to magnify the positive trends that existed in the Soviet Union, but there were many good things during this era. And we, as always, join either the whites or the reds. We used to worship Lenin, calling him a 'curly-haired boy', and now we call him a 'tyrant'. Life is not that simple, it is not black-and-white, it has many colors.

Of course, we must say 'thank you' to Lukashenka for the fact that we are starting to have an awareness of our own country, our own republic. Yes, indeed, this is not related to national qualities, this is formal. But nevertheless... I belong to the people who lived long in the Soviet Union. I see a new generation growing up. I like the way Chernomyrdin said about this when he was the ambassador in Kyiv, not the prime minister. 'Some in Russia think that we are the elder brother. We are neither elder nor the brother, we are already different. We need to realize that a new generation has grown up that views these things completely differently'. I guess some time will pass and we will increasingly regard our country as independent and sovereign with its peculiar mode of thinking and its own traditions. But it will be great if we are guided by the same principles that could make peaceful coexistence possible across the continent and the globe! When a nation preserves its peculiarity and adds something new to a multi-color mosaic! And this mosaic should look beautiful and not take the shape of a Nazi swastika...

### Svyatlana Kalinkina

It is hard to say. I do not have a definite answer to this question. While pursuing certain ends, politicians always refer to some common roots. We could see this when a so-called Assembly of the Slavic Peoples of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine was held in Minsk not long ago. Of course, we are Slavs. If propaganda constantly highlights Slavic unity, this may become a popular idea among the public.

From a historic viewpoint, we also can talk about a Soviet community, as we all originate from the Soviet Union. That is why however different cultural roots Belarus and Turkmenistan, for instance, may have, there is something that unites us thanks to the Soviet Union.

I think both a Slavic and post-Soviet communities may exist. But another question is how important this will be for nations and for people. This will depend of political developments and on those who will rule the country.



All post-Soviet countries, except the Baltic states, have found themselves between two civilizations, the western and oriental ones. That is why it is very important who will be in power, as they will determine which community should be prioritized.

I would not make little of such 'patriotic' sentiments if I can put it so. They are very strong. Much depends on who would fuel them and for what purposes. Many generations should change until this smoothes over.

### Syarhey Kalyakin

There were such communities, but they broke up. As long as communities exist their members have more and more things in common. But when they break up, these common features slowly disappear.

European researchers have recently concluded that there is no European community despite the fact that the nations appear to be on track to form a single state. There is a big difference between the Dutch, French, Germans etc. It was the same in the Soviet Union. One could call the Soviet Union a community of Soviet people, but there was a big difference between the Georgians, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Chukchi. After Belarus gained independence, its people gained new national features and developed its identity.

As for the Slavic community, I must admit that the Slavic nations have common roots. But it depends how far one looks back in history. If we take a span of 100 to 200 years, one can say we have much in common with the Poles. If we look back 300 years, we would recall the Great Duchy of Lithuania in which old Belarusian language was the official language of the state. However, politicians should not use common roots to set off the Slavs against the Europeans for instance.

No one knows what the Belarusians or Germans will be like in 500 years. Some big and prosperous nations that once dominated the world have disappeared. Therefore, attempts to use common roots in politics may lead to the emergence of hostile blocs. We need to consolidate the nation on the basis of common traits. In the last few years, the political leadership has done

a lot to split up the nation into Belarusian speakers and Russian speakers, the old and young, rich and poor, city and village residents, supporters and opponents of the president. This is not good for society. Split nations never prosper. Prosperous nations have political competition, not a big divide. If they ever have disputes, the disputes are of scientific nature.

### Kasya Kamotskaya

Surprisingly, the Slavic community does exist. I feel it when I visit other countries. The Slavs differ from other nations by their carelessness. When you come to the Czech Republic, it feels like a very cultured country. Then you go to Germany and think, the Czechs are slackers.

The former Soviet peoples have some historical memory. Older people in the Baltic countries may have this kind of memory also. I do not mean Muslim countries because I do not know what is going on there. I was making a concert at Cambridge. There were a lot of Belarusians there, but many Kazakhs, Ukrainians and other former Soviet nationals turned up. There were no Britons, or just two or three did show up.

### Syarhey Kastsyen

The former Soviet nations are grateful to the Slavs for preserving their values such as language, faith and traditions. Not a single Muslim country was converted to Christianity in the Soviet Union. The Baltic republics were not forced to adopt the Orthodox religion instead of Catholicism. Any nation that respects the Slavic civilization, culture, traditions and history can develop under its umbrella.

Slavic brotherhood does exist. It is another matter that Slavs have been obsessed with internationalism in the last few years. They have not noticed having lost the possibility to elect their leaders independently. Today, Brussels and Washington decide who governs one Slavic country or another. However, the fact that the leaders of some Slavic nations do not promote

Slavic unity and brotherhood does not mean that the brotherhood does not exist. Slavic peoples are close to each other regardless of whether their leaders like it or not. However the current leaders of Poland may criticize Belarus, the ordinary Poles support Belarus and do not support their government's actions hostile towards this country. It is the same in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and any other Slavic country. Do not they only support Belarus with words, but they also maintain close economic ties.

### Vyachaslau Kebich

I would not distinguish the Slavic community. It was interesting to watch films about Soviet troops fighting the Germans. The Soviet soldiers usually included two Russian faces and the rest were slant-eyed guys. However, the commander calls all of them the Slavs. Russia has no right to describe itself a Slavic nation because they are not Slavs any longer. One can historically distinguish between the Slavs and non-Slavs, but I would not say a definite Slavic community exists at present.

A community of former Soviet nations remains quite prominent. Whenever President Saakashvili leads Georgia, most Georgians dream of friendship with other former Soviet republics. People will be nostalgic for the former community until politicians, especially nationalistic ones, persuade them that they are the greatest and most unique nations.

### Anatol Lyabedzka

There is a unity of former Soviet peoples at the political level. It is a political tool. And there is also the word '*sovok*' to describe Soviet mentality that has been conserved in Belarus. Lukashenka's governance model boils down to the conservation of *sovok*. It is a very simple model – there is his residence and about 10 million people waiting in the line. All these people are waiting for the tsar to give them something. The *sovok* mentality is about someone doing everything for you and you do not need to use your internal

potential and develop it beyond the limit allowed by the authorities. This is part of the current Belarusian authorities' policies aimed to return the country to the Soviet Union format. Authorities exploited that mentality actively before, and continue to exploit it less actively now. But there are still a considerable percentage of people with the *sovok* ideology.

However, time is not on their side. Older generations are nostalgic for the Soviet Union, but this is natural for the transition period. Nostalgia prevents people from exploring and using their internal potential. When you were 30 or 40 years old, you were taught to behave in a certain way, adopted certain stereotypes. It is difficult to expect people to adapt themselves quickly to new conditions, even in an environment where they have more opportunities. A recent poll in Lithuania showed that about 50 percent of the respondents are nostalgic for the past directly or indirectly. Nostalgia remains despite the fact that Lithuania is a member of the EU and has achieved a significant success. As time goes by and a new generation grows up, the issue will become less topical.

As for the Slavic community, I think it is not a matter of any importance to Belarus. There is a small group of people. Organizations like the Slavic Assembly are all dead, because the idea has no solid foundation.

It was not based on a consolidated position like, for instance, the position of Islamic countries. There are Slavic nations in the EU and in the former Soviet Union. But they do not have a common ground, like the Islamic world.

**Vasil Lyavonau**

Was or is there a Slavic community? It may have existed but does not exist now. Because when we talk about Slavic nations, we do not mention the Poles, the Czechs and others. The Slavic community has split by religious differences. Even if we talk about the East Slavic community, which includes the Russians, the Belarusians and the Ukrainians, there are also problems and they are very complicated. We are not just close nations. We are very

close nations. But this closeness and kindredness caused and continue causing a lot of problems. This is a big and separate subject.

As for a community of post-Soviet countries, I cannot put it better than Vladimir Putin: 'The Commonwealth of Independence States is an organization for a civilized divorce'.

### Aleh Manayeu

Prominent Russian political figures and their followers in Belarus and Ukraine, where there are many of them, like to highlight Slavic unity in an ethnic and geopolitical sense, saying that we had common history and a common state, that we fought together against the Tartars and the Teutonic Knights, and so on. Just in the same way, some politicians in Belarus try today to strengthen Belarusian identity on the basis of the golden era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In my opinion, this view of the Slavic community as well as Belarusian identity does not meet the present realities times. These no longer exist.

But in other aspects, in cultural, psychological and, in some degree, religious aspects, I think that a Slavic community as a feeling of commonality, not Slavic unity, does exist. It is the same like, for instance, a Chinese tourist who meets a Korean or a Vietnamese national somewhere in the African jungle or in Manhattan probably feels his cultural and psychological commonality with them. In this sense, I think that it is possible to talk about the cultural and psychological commonality of Slavic nations and closer ties between them than between the Slavs and, for example, the French, the Brazilians or the Japanese.

As for the community of post-Soviet nations, this is simply a bluff. The famous formula, offered as far back as the Stalin era, that a new historic community, the Soviet people, had formed was a bluff. There were special cultural and psychological ties between certain close nations and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. (There were more than one hundred nations and ethnic groups within the USSR.) For instance, such ties were between

the Slavic, Baltic and Caucasian nations. But the so-called unity of the Soviet people was maintained on violence and false propaganda. If we take an average Estonian and an average Turkmen, their social and cultural commonality was on a minimal level. Of course, the 300 million people who lived in the Soviet Union and were called the Soviet people had some common features. But those features were common not because of national similarities but because of the peculiarities of the Soviet social and political system. In particular, those common features included poor initiative and responsibility if compared with the Western Europeans or the Japanese, but a increased feeling of fear and an intention to get something for nothing. As soon as the system collapsed, those common features started to vanish. That is why present attempts to restore the unity of the Turkmens, Estonians, Georgians, Yakutians and other nations and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union are doomed to failure.

### **Alyaksandr Milinkevich**

Various hard-line politicians have been manipulating notions like these for a long time. They say, for instance, that the Slavs are all Orthodox believers, or the Slavs are those who recognize Moscow as the center of Slavic lands. These are the people who consider that Belarus is not a nation.

### **Anatol Mikhailau**

One cannot deny the existence of distinctive features that can be expressed by the notion 'the Slavic community'. Shared history and cultural traditions, language similarity to name but few. The nations that were part of the Soviet Union have even much more in common because they were not divided by state borders.

## Ales Mikhalevich

As for Slav unity, I always cite a Russian whom I met in Czech Republic, in Prague. He said that the Czechs only speak a Slavic language but in fact, they are Germans! To me, Slav unity means common values. If you look at those who represents Russia at international forums and people in power you will have doubts that a half of them is of Slav descent. That is why it is hard to see Russia as part of a Slav community.

My mother has very strong Lithuanian roots. And I could never understand why some Slavs from remote Russian regions are somehow closer to us than Lithuanians who live 100 kilometers off Belarus.

People from former Soviet states have common experience. They have an advantage over countries that have not been in the socialist camp or in the Soviet Union because they know how dictatorship works. They have a common language for communication and I personally am not ashamed of using Russian as a working language at joint conferences between Belarusians and Azeris. We know this language well, so why should we feel ashamed of using it when talking to each other? It is a means of communication. It is one of the few things that we have inherited from the Soviet era. However, things that unite us, including the knowledge of Russian, will vanish with the passage of time.

## Tatsyana Protska

There is a notion of Slavic community. It appeared long ago, before the Soviet Union. It implies religiousness, devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church, collectivism and the way of life and attitudes of Russian villagers before the Bolshevik revolution.

Western Slavs, who belong to European civilization, differ from the Russian ones. Urbanization has considerably changed the Russian Slavism. Now it seems that the concept of 'Slavism' is an ideology with a system of values, which differ from that of Western Europe. Freedom, democracy and

human rights are the support pillars of European civilization. Slavic civilization takes a different approach – the state, economy and submission to the authorities are the top values.

The West European approach is quite liberal – the human being takes precedence over everything, including the state. Humans are responsible for themselves and decide for themselves. In Slavic civilization, the state is in the center and humans exist for the state. Collectivism plays a big role, whereas freedom and democracy are not important.

The community of Soviet peoples will exist as long as people who lived in the Soviet Union are alive. Around 100 years ago, generations were raised with a particular outlook on life. There are fewer and fewer people who have the same outlook.

I would not say that the Soviet community is dead. The ingrained feeling that the state decides for you is very popular and more characteristic of the Belarusians than of other former Soviet republics. They want a new Stalin to think for them and they do not want to take responsibility for their fate. The European system of values implies that people seek happiness themselves rather than wait for the state or the public to bring you happiness.

### Andrey Sannikau

Slavic unity is a political term, a political phenomenon. For some unclear reasons Slavic unity as former Soviet countries understand it does not include Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic or Slovakia. Slavic unity means 'we are building the Soviet Union'. The Serbs were recognized until Milosevic's departure from office. Neither Poland, nor the Czech Republic, nor Slovakia are recognized as Slavic countries by the politicians who advocate the Slavic unity idea. However, when the Republican Party in the Czech Republic was organizing a Slavic congress, a reactionary event aimed against democratic principles, they were recognized as Slavs at once, with delegations from Minsk and Moscow coming to attend.



Slavic unity does exist, it means certain cultural traditions. But what politicians today call Slavic unity is a political phantom, something used by politicians in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

And ties between ex-Soviet countries will remain, I think. Unfortunately, there are some artificial obstacles to the contacts and the constructive environment which came into existence in the perestroika period has been destroyed. I lack serious intellectual support from Russia. Support from the people who exemplified dignity and freedom for us once. We were together while destroying the empire and supporting each other.

I've recently attended the celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Riga events, their barricades. They also regretted having lost these ties. Because if it were not for these people, intellectual leaders, dissidents, human rights defenders from Russia who came from St. Petersburg, like members of the Leningrad City Soviet, to support the Latvians, no one knows what might have happened. I guess things will never be like this again and I regret this. We don't see this anymore. Only few people can have a correct idea of what is happening here at present.

### Stanislau Shushkevich

As for the Slavic community, I have an impression that there's nothing but the mere ability of poorly educated people (who don't speak foreign languages) to understand each other. I don't see any unity here, there's rather some contradiction. One group of Slavs includes Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, while Poles, Czechs and Slovaks are different Slavs. Serbs are a bit like Russians.

Apparently, this all is the result of common origin, but I'm not a historian and cannot say for sure.

I feel at ease in a place where I can share thoughts with another person, understand his language. In this context, the Slavic community does exist for me. While visiting a professor in Ljubljana in the Soviet era, I suddenly realized that I had no problem talking to him although I had not learned

the Slovenian language. The same was in Bratislava, Slovakia. It was more difficult in the Czech Republic. As for Poland, I had no problems whatsoever there: I speak Polish as I lived in places where Polish is spoken. In this context, this community exists for me.

But these unions often were not very decent, I would say. For instance, the Serbian-Russian union contributed to the slaughter of Muslims. I don't feel that much close to the Muslim culture but I do find it very easy to contact with people who practice a different religion. The people has hidden those guilty of the genocide like national heroes. Probably this has been caused by flaws in upbringing, this is far short of European standards.

I'd put it that way: the Slavic community exists but it has partially evolved, and sometimes contacts with other communities, say, with the French or Finns, seem to me more efficient and more useful for both sides.

As for the Soviet community... I'm a Soviet person, you know I traveled through the Soviet Union much and once said that one cannot manage Uzbek cotton farming and Chukchi deer farming in the same manner. But I felt well both in Dushanbe and Tbilisi, and later in Bishkek thanks to our common history. We appear to have common history because of the same social problems.

I've recently come back from France. The French have long staged revolutions. This spirit of protest is the spirit of the people, it cannot be banned. They are taught how to protest in a civilized manner. Of course, they can overdo sometimes, even during student protests. But this is the spirit of the people. By the way, they all once united into the single French people. I believe that if the principles of the Soviet Union had been based on truth, the country could have had chances to be more solid. And the principles were based on lies, and the leadership's actions differed from its words much. Only those people who were misled (and I was too, because I liked the Soviet principles for quite a long time) are nostalgic for this community. For me, a Belarusian, it was a humiliation that my father, a Belarusian language teacher, earned 12 percent less than Russian language teachers did. This difference did exist. These are humiliating principles imposed by

the colonialism, and people do understand their essence only thanks to free media outlets.

The only thing that still unites us is the knowledge of Russian. I can't name any other shared features. European peoples like Poles and Czechs have already abandoned this. Just like the Baltic peoples... And we still remain *homo soveticus*.

### Uladzimir Ulakhovich

Certainly, some community mechanically continues its existence after the Soviet Union's collapse and the fact explains a lot in our modern life.

### Alyaksandr Vaitovich

The existence of Slavic nations, peoples with the same roots that speak Slavic languages, is a historical fact. These nations share many cultural elements and traditions.

As for the community of former Soviet peoples, these were part of one big state not so long ago, therefore such a community still exists and manifests itself.

### Andrey Vardamatski

There are two levels of Slavic unity. There is no longer unity of national mentalities. Unity implies a large degree of connection, big similarities and interaction. There is not much connection, similarity and interaction at present. Although Slavic nations have similar national characters, cultures and mentality. This is as far as the first level, the level of national psychology, is concerned.

In politics, however, a gap between some Slavic nations is widening for functional and pragmatic reasons. On the other hand, some nations empha-

size and advertise their similarities, which are attributable, in fact, to other, pragmatic reasons.

The same applies to the post-Soviet space. Residents of the former Soviet republics aged of 30 and over have much in common. They were born in the Soviet Union. But on the other hand, the nations have been torn apart by centrifugal forces.

### Vintsuk Vyachorka

These are different things.

To a humanities scholar like me, language similarities of the Slavs are natural and useful in a way, because they give food for comparative studies of cultures and mutual enrichment. I mean all Slavic nations, not only the nations viewed as 'the Russians' by imperial doctrines. There is no mental or political Slavic community.

From the nation building viewpoint, more typological proximity is found among the Central and East European peoples that experienced national rebirth in the 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries (independence of Montenegro was the most recent example) regardless of language, ethnic and religious divisions. (By the way, most Slavic nations, except Russia, may be included in this group). Most of these nations were under control of the Soviet Union in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is why these peoples sympathize with each other and express solidarity with those still fighting for independence and freedom. This is where the term 'new Europe' comes from, although these nations are not a new Europe, just Europe.

As for the former Soviet republics, they form a group called Central and Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. They are part of the community mentioned above. The old civilization divides were restored immediately after the collapse of the Soviet empire. The next generation will not associate themselves with *mundus sovieticus*.

## Usevalad Yancheuski

Someone made a smart remark that the four economic formations identified by Karl Marx existed simultaneously on the territory of the Soviet Union. There was a feudal formation in Russia, capitalists in the Baltic states, a slave formation in Central Asia and savage conditions in Chukotka.

Those who live in Central Asia and the Caucasus differ from us. When were the Central Asian countries actually incorporated into the Russian Empire? When did Skobelev<sup>30</sup> defeat the Khivan Khan? Historically, it did not happen long ago.

There was, and there is, the concept of Soviet people. Just like in physics, you join mechanically some things together and they adjust to each other despite being very different. The molecules of one element start penetrating into the other one. That was the case in the Soviet Union. Sometimes, things were harsh. Sometimes, the process was natural, but sometimes it was forcible. There is nothing strange about that. Russia was a classic empire during both the Romanov dynasty's rule and the Soviet era. Empire is just a type of a society's self-organization. Russia absorbed different cultures. It had a superior idea, super values, super task.

The empire fell apart. It happened partly accidentally. Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan could have remained parts of one state by some quirk of history, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote. It could well have happened so.

The Baltic states were something alien despite being part of the Russian Empire for 200 years. Galicia (Halychyna) was never part of the Russian Empire in fact. It was annexed to Russia by Stalin.

Then the Soviet Union collapsed. Its parts started moving apart from each other. Many of them do not feel any need to unite and they will continue moving further apart from each other. What can Tajikistan have in common with Estonia?

---

<sup>30</sup> Mikhail Skobelev – General, one of the military commanders responsible for the Russian conquests in Turkistan, took a prominent part in the capture of the Khivan capital in 1873.

I have a strange attitude to the concept of Slav unity. Let's look at Russia and Serbia, which are traditionally cited as an example of brotherhood. But the countries do not have any historical links. Their histories have never come in contact with each other.

Brothers Bulgarians. We liberated them once but they were fighting against us in two wars.

The Slav people of Poles. If you look back you will see that Russians were fighting with Poles too often. I do not know whom they were fighting more with. The Poles and the Ukrainians have never been great friends.

The Czechs. Their language is very much similar to Russian, but what does their history has to do with Russia's? Nothing.

To put it short, there are few barefaced facts speaking for some Slav unity. The language is certainly among them, but what can I cite more?