

Chapter 1

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF BELARUS BETWEEN 1990 AND 1996

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INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Belarus is the acknowledged leader in preserving the elements of the Soviet style communist system. However, the dynamics of the political system illustrate that post-Soviet Belarusian society has its own specific features. The current political system in independent Belarus preserves not so much the old political institutions of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) as its principles of exerting power.

The period between 1990 and 1996 (from the declaration of independence to the crystallisation of the authoritarian model of government) should not necessarily be evaluated as a period of lost opportunities. Due to a number of historical and cultural factors, when the USSR collapsed Belarus was the most backward republic in terms of national and civic self-awareness.

In order to analyse the development of the Belarusian political system it is necessary to look at the factors that moulded it during the Soviet period. However, this study should not be limited to the Soviet period. The essential distinctions between Belarus and other post-Soviet countries require an examination of the historical and cultural factors that are largely responsible for the failure of Belarus to move forward along the road to democracy after the collapse of the USSR.

The Belarusian regime that consolidated power in 1996 with the disbandment of the 13th Supreme Soviet (the legislature) and the forged referendum results can be traced back further in time. The creation of the Belarusian political hybrid during the late Soviet period was

influenced by the specific nature of the historical and cultural development of the Belarusian nation. This chapter will analyse how those historical and cultural factors facilitated the temporary victory of anti-democratic trends in the Belarusian political system.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT AND THE POSITION OF THE SOVIET ELITE

EXTERNAL FACTORS ON THE DEMOCRATISATION OF BELARUS

The external political context, the rise of the Belarusian State, the politics of the USSR before and after its collapse and the post-Soviet political developments of Belarus' neighbours, must be considered when examining the political system in Belarus.

The declaration of independence, attempts at democratic transformations and market reforms as well as the revival of ethno-national foundations of Belarusian culture are all the result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The post-Soviet history of Belarus differs significantly from that of the other European ex-Soviet republics. As one of the republics, Belarus was economically more advanced. The majority of the intellectual elite was highly russified and mentally devoid of national consciousness. Belarus had its own mythology based on the Soviet historiography of World War II. The initial move toward anticommunist, democratic transformations in Belarus was much weaker than that in neighbouring countries, both in terms of self-identification and economic welfare. National cultural opposition to the Soviet regime in the form of resistance to Soviet russification was also extremely subtle.

Democratisation in Belarus was first stimulated by perestroika initiated by the Moscow elite. Nationalist and democratic movements began to stir in Belarus only after Moscow tried reforming the socialist system from the top. The democratic movements began to appear in Belarus in the mid-1980's, supporting perestroika conducted by Communist Party leaders. The national democratic movements first rose as national, cultural and ecological movements as a reaction to the Chernobyl disaster. This non-political character moderated the confrontation with the Communist Party, which had the constitutional status of being the «directing and guiding» party.

However, these unauthorised, independent associations of people displeased Belarusian communist leaders and therefore they did not enjoy the relatively more favourable conditions of their colleagues in the neighbouring Baltic countries, Russia or Ukraine. This was largely due to the lack of ethnic consciousness among Belarusian ruling elite during the Gorbachev reform period. Mark Nordberg and Taras Kuzio have stated that national movements during perestroika were based on communists sharing national ideas. Belarus, however, lacked a strong body of national communists¹. The democratic movement in Belarus, as in other Soviet republics, was developing along with the nationalist movement, but was initiated primarily by external factors.

In its struggle against the national democratic movement, the old elite used only limited repressive measures, primarily due to the influence of Moscow Party leaders. Meanwhile, the intense processes of democratisation and the dismantling of the Soviet system exerted substantial pressure on the Belarusian communist nomenclature.

COEXISTENCE OF THE OLD AND NEW ELITES. DISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN BELARUSIAN POLITICS

Prior to the spring of 1990 the national democratic movement developed outside the institutions of state power.

Elections to the BSSR Supreme Soviet were held in March 1990. As opposed to the Party nomenclature, advocates of national revival and democratisation had few resources to conduct their campaigns. Moreover, a large portion of the population was not swayed by the slogans of the national democratic opposition. As a result, only 37 of out the 345 members of Parliament represented the political platform of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and openly opposed the communist bureaucratic majority. BPF allies in Parliament organised the Democratic Club that included 100 MPs. Meanwhile the Belarusian Soviet nomenclature was rather weak, lazy and old. It had neither specific nationalist ambitions nor strong ideological resources in spite of its control over the media. Thus, the nomenclature was unable to neutralise the

national democratic minority in the Parliament. The latter, however, was not radical enough to consciously escalate the conflict with the old elite.

As a result, the distribution of forces in the Belarusian political system ended in a peculiar balance in 1990: neither of the groups had sufficient political resources to completely neutralise the other. The nomenclature retained the network of connections, the bureaucratic hierarchy and the backing of the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB). However, the external processes of modernisation deprived the old Belarusian elite of its economic resources. Possibilities of actively counteracting the national democratic movement were stymied by the CPB's subordination to the CPSU and the local administration's obedience to Moscow. The dominant position of the ideological centre, Union-wide television broadcasting, glasnost and the very integrity of the Soviet Union's information system encouraged the Belarusians to increase political activity. Against the background of Moscow's support of democratic developments and the activity of democratic elites in the neighbouring republics, the initiative to change the ideological climate in Belarus belonged to the national democratic movement.

The sun was setting on the Soviet empire in 1990. Centrifugal forces resulted in what came to be known as «the sovereignties parade» as union republics were adopting declarations on independence. On 30 June – 1 July 1990, BPF adopted the «Declaration concerning the Independence of Belarus.»² The declaration established the independence of Belarus as the movement's main goal. The BPF faction in Parliament insisted on the adoption of the necessary documents. The Soviet nomenclature majority charged the opposition with separatism and nationalism and blocked the initiative.

Nevertheless, following the proposal of Mikalay Dzemyantsey, chairman of the Parliament, the Supreme Soviet of Belarus adopted the Declaration of sovereignty on 27 July 1990. The document declared the total Sovereignty and independence of the Belarusian SSR in domestic and foreign affairs. The superiority of the Constitution and laws of Belarus were declared and its territory was declared the property of the Belarusian people. A National Bank, Tax police and Customs services

were established. Article 10 granted Belarus the right to maintain national armed forces and organs of security while military detachments and bases of other countries could be stationed on the republic's territory only with the consent of the Supreme Soviet. The Belarusian SSR was declared nuclear-free and neutral³. 27 July was declared a national holiday.

The Supreme Soviet's Declaration of Sovereignty was due to liberal capitalist or nationalist ideas inside the Parliament less than to external factors. The BSSR Supreme Soviet adopted the declaration only after the Russian Congress of People's Deputies and the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet had adopted similar declarations. The Belarusian nomenclature now attempted to use independence as a means to avert reform imported from Moscow. The Belarusian Parliament delayed adopting the declaration until a majority of MPs saw this as a chance to retain the privileges of the former Soviet Belarusian elite. Democratic-minded deputies, not to mention advocates of a fully-fledged market economy, constituted an overt minority.

THE AUGUST 1991 COUP. DECLINE OF THE SOVIET ELITE. DEMOCRATISATION AND REACTION

The political playing field in Belarus was being redrawn in 1990. The Association of World Belarusians «Batskawshchyna» (Fatherland) held its constituent conference in Minsk on 9–10 September. The constituent congress of the United Democratic Party of Belarus was held in Minsk on 3–4 November. The population became more active. A violent anticommunist meeting was held in Lenin Square in Minsk on 7 November* and transport workers went on a strike on 26 November.

Adversaries of reform were working clandestinely behind the scenes. The new year began with pogroms. On the night of 4 January 1991, the editorial offices of «Litaratura i mastatstva» (Literature and Art), «Polymya» (Flame), «Nyoman», and «Belarus» were attacked. Later that month, events in the Baltic countries echoed by meetings in Minsk on

* Anniversary of the 1917 revolution. – Translator.

13 and 20 January in protest against the suppression of the Vilnius uprising.

New players entered the political scene in Minsk: the Belarusian Peasant Party held its constituent congress on 23 February and the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada followed suit on 2-3 March. BPF «Adradzhennie» (Revival) held its second congress adopting new statutes on 23-24 March.

The development of the political situation in Belarus was strongly spurred by events in Russia. In August 1991, the Office of the Central Committee of the CPB issued a statement supporting the 19 August coup launched by the so-called State Commission for the Extraordinary Situation (a.k.a. Ghe-Ka-Che-Peh). The Office also issued an appeal to communists and all working people in the republic. Mikalay Dzemyantsey, the Chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet, who believed the actions of the State Commission were constitutional, also supported the coup⁴.

BPF immediately condemned the putsch and held a protest rally in Lenin Square on 20 August. After the failure of the Moscow putsch, pressured by BPF, the Supreme Soviet elected Stanislaw Shushkevich as the Chairman, declared the economic and political independence of Belarus, changed the country's name from the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Republic of Belarus and introduced the new state symbols: the white, red and white flag and the Pahonya emblem. The CPB and CPSU were suspended.

After the failure of the coup in Moscow, the Soviet Union rapidly began to collapse. In December 1991, Boris Yeltsin, Leonid Kravchuk, Stanislaw Shushkevich and Belarusian Prime Minister Vyachaslaw Kebich met in the Belavezhskaya Pushcha National Reserve and signed the agreement to disband the USSR and found the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Accustomed to following Moscow's lead, the Belarusian nomenclature lost its bearings. From that moment on, Moscow, still viewed by the old Belarusian elite as the empire's administrative and ideological centre, pursued political and economic reform. Russia began to dismantle the socialist system. With the victory of nationalist and

democratic movements in the Baltic countries and Ukraine, the old Belarusian elite was forced to pursue its own policy.

The balance of powers between the advocates of reform and the old Soviet elite basically remained unchanged from 1990. Now independent, the Belarusian elite changed the structure of leadership. The cabinet (Council of Ministers) replaced the role of the Central Committee of the CPB. Parliament (the Supreme Soviet) was virtually under the control of the «Belarus» faction, a government lobby. However, while holding on to the reigns of power, the old nomenclature did not know how to use it. Rather than taking control of the situation, the ruling faction held it hostage⁵. Unlike the old guard, the BPF-led opposition had a clear program that featured strengthening independence, distancing the country from Russia, closer ties with the West, belarusification, market reforms and democratisation. Still a minority, opposition deputies actively used the media, appealed to the public and gradually gained influence that partly compensated for their weak position in Parliament.

With no plan of its own the ruling Soviet elite gave in to pressure exerted by the opposition. While maintaining control over the national and local administrations, the economy (still fully state-owned), privatisation, and foreign policy, it turned over ideology and culture to the national democrats.

In the winter of 1991 and spring of 1992 BPF attempted to initiate a nation-wide referendum to hold early parliamentary elections in the autumn of 1992. Stanislaw Shushkevich chose not to use his authority to back the proposal and the Supreme Soviet rejected the initiative on 1 October 1992 (despite the 442,000 signatures collected supporting the referendum).

MUSHROOMING PARTIES

On 30–31 May 1993, BPF held its 3rd congress, during which resolutions were adopted declaring the movement a political party, giving equal significance to national self-determination and

democratisation as well as equal values of the rights of the nation and those of the individual⁶. The party retained the structure and leaders of the movement.

BPF's declaration to become a party was a practical move. According to its ideology, the Belarusian Popular Front is not a party but a national liberation movement, «a movement of the people as a whole, oriented not at coexistence with other parties and the rotation of power but at 'total' victory and radical changes in society⁷». BPF took a cautious and suspicious approach to the appearance of the new parties that continued to emerge.

In November 1990 Belarusian supporters of the Democratic Platform in the CPSU founded the United Democratic Party (UDP), chaired by USSR MP Alyaksandar Dabravolski after the party's 2nd congress in 1991. The UDP takes a moderate position relative to the official status of the Belarusian language and primarily unites the Russian-speaking intelligentsia.

The Belarusian Peasant Party was founded in February 1991. In March, the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada (BSDH) held a constituent congress declaring itself the successor to the Belarusian Socialist Hramada, a party from the early part of the 20th century. BSDH attracted some BPF members with moderate views and connected with the former establishment as well as some representatives of the current establishment not associated with BPF. In terms of ideology, BSDH and BPF had much in common, BSDH was more of a national democratic than social democratic party.

In June 1991 the Belarusian Christian Democratic Union (BCDU) held its constituent conference. In July, the National Democratic Party was established. NDPB supported the Belarusian language and encouraged its members to use it.

At the end of 1991, a group of Russian-speaking intelligentsia joined the Movement for Democratic Reforms founded by the Russian politician Gavriil Popov. This group founded Democratic Belarus (registered in February 1992), which was a national branch of MDR. A portion of its members subsequently joined the United Civic Party, while

others split off to found the pro-Russian democratic association «Yabloko» (Apple) in 1996–97.

In 1992, the Party of People's Accord (PPA) was established and led by Henadz Karpenka, a MP and the mayor of Maladzechna. This party drew its support from mid-level administrators. It should be mentioned that the future president of Belarus, Alyksandar Lukashenka, was one of the two founding co-chairmen of PPA. The party had no clear ideology. Henadz Karpenka was eventually expelled from the party. The party was the first to support the «young and independent» Lukashenka during the presidential election in 1994, and a number of its second-rate leaders collaborated with Lukashenka.

The United Democratic Party and the movement Democratic Belarus, both with liberal ideologies, merged into the United Civic Party (UCP).

BPF's relationships with the new democratic parties were rather complicated. These parties sought alliance with BPF due to its position as the strongest organisation opposed to the old Soviet elite. In 1992 the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada proposed the formation of a broad bloc, «New Belarus,» to unite all democratic parties and trade unions (including official, state-controlled unions). BPF rejected the proposal. A permanent consultative conference of democratic forces was founded in late 1992, but BPF only participated as an observer. As a result, the first effort to consolidate all democratic forces in order to oppose the old power system failed.

As political parties within the national democratic movement were developing, the communists were planning revenge. The Communist party was suspended in Belarus after the failed 1991 coup in Moscow. However, on 7 December 1991, 320 delegates founded the Belarus' Party of Communists (BPC) in Minsk. Among others, the founders included Viktor Chykin, Vasil Novikaw and Syarhey Kalyakin, former middle and lower-ranking communist officials. In 1992, the BPC faction had 58 MPs in the Supreme Soviet (of which only 12 were party members), mostly deputies put forward by veterans' groups and organisations of disabled people.

After numerous efforts on the part of BPC, the Supreme Soviet lifted

the temporary ban against the Communist Party of Belarus on 14 February 1993. The legalisation of BPC was facilitated by the investigation of the public prosecutors office, which could not find any involvement of the BPC in the August 1991 coup. The communists acquired particularly strong support outside the capital while the democratic opposition mainly focused its attention on Minsk.

One of the main goals of BPC, as proclaimed in its program, was the restoration of the USSR. This aspiration made bedfellows of the communists and those parties professing pan-Slavism and the unity of the Belarusian and Russian peoples. All of these groups, to one degree or another, denied any historical right of the Belarusians to independence. It was characteristic that parties similar to the Russian neo-fascists, absent in other former Soviet countries, appeared in Belarus with its russified as well as ethnically and culturally marginalised population.

Belarus experienced a phenomenon similar to Russian nationalism, but on a smaller scale. The Slavic Assembly «Belaya Rus», founded in June 1992, was the most known neo-communist party advocating Russian dominated Slavic unity. The party cooperated with the Russian National Assembly and was one of the initiators of the Popular Movement of Belarus (PMB) that united communists with pan-Slavists in 1993. In September 1993 this movement staged a so-called congress of the people of Belarus that demanded cancellation of the USSR-disbandment agreements. In 1993-94 PMB and the communists jointly supported Prime Minister Vyachaslaw Kebich's move to create a single monetary system for Belarus and Russia.

In 1992 collective farm managers united in the Agrarian Party, which was led by Syamyon Sharetski, Kebich's advisor for agriculture in 1993-94.

The political parties emerging in Belarus filled the entire political spectrum. However, according to Halina, Yury Drakakhrust and Dmitriy Furman «this seemingly all-encompassing political system was very weak and fragile⁸». All of the parties, excluding BPF, had few members and supporters and none were in power. Having lost its constitutional

privileges, the ruling elite, the old Soviet nomenclature, continued to exert power outside the system of political parties.

The authors cited above have precisely characterised the political environment and ruling elite in Belarus, comparing the country to Russia and the Ukraine ruled by Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk respectively. Former communist activists, both remained outside of party politics but associated themselves with certain ideas, such as building bourgeois democracy or an independent state. In the case of Belarus «the Belarusian 'party of power' had no clear position whatsoever. They were merely opportunists. First they blamed Moscow for all of the economic difficulties and tried to save themselves from Russian democracy by 'sovereignisation' and 'belarusianisation.' However, the declaration of independence, the official status of Belarusian, the ban on the CPB were all rather acts of cowardice. They had no national consciousness and no awareness of their historic mission that, for example, overwhelmed Kravchuk. Belarusian Prime Minister Vyachaslaw Kebich sought union with Russia and sided with communists and 'pan-Slavists'. Due to its opportunism and lack of ideas, this 'party of power' created no party structures, nor could it have done so³».

The old ruling elite had neither an ideology nor a party program, but was held together by strong corporate interests and personal connections. The Soviet regime spawned a privileged social group that existed under CPSU patronage. The Soviet nomenclature exercised its domination through the formal structures of the Soviet state. However, the power-connected relations themselves were not political in the strict meaning of the term. They were based on corporate, clan, family, pre-political, or politically authoritarian relationships and ties. The formal, external structures of the Soviet state fell apart or mutated but the very foundation of the system of power-based relations continued with the old nomenclature.

Vyachaslaw Kebich expressed the interests of the old Soviet elite and relied on its majority in the Supreme Soviet. His support originated from the largest faction «Belarus,» founded in 1993 specifically to support the Prime Minister, and included half of the Parliament.

BELARUSIFICATION AND PROBLEMS OF NATIONAL REVIVAL

Belarus conducted a campaign of belarusification initiated by BPF-led national democratic movement. New state symbols were introduced. Schools and institutions of higher learning began teaching Belarusian history stripped of Soviet ideology. The common historical destinies of the Russians and Belarusians and their fraternal brotherhood was questioned and radically revised. A large number of national and local newspapers promoted the idea of national revival. Many began printing in the Belarusian language. Compared to the previous year, 1993 saw a 43 % increase in the number of Belarusian-language media with a 53 % increase in circulation¹⁰.

The opposition considered making Belarusian the official language as a key aspect of the development of Belarusian culture, professing the idea of language as the basis for shaping a nation. The educational system was transitioning to the Belarusian language. By 1994, Belarusian was the language of instruction for more than 60 % of all elementary schools pupils. The same transformation was underway in professional high schools and institutions of higher learning, concentrating first on humanitarian subjects. However, the introduction of the Belarusian language into official government usage made little headway.

As the campaign of belarusification was conducted, discontent grew among educators, officials, and Russian-speaking intellectuals, the latter comprising a large part of the Belarusian opposition. The media inflamed the debate about the intense introduction of Belarusian. Advocates of the rapid and wide spread introduction of Belarusian had the upper hand, as they held key positions in the media. Nevertheless, the majority of the population was indifferent to the language and did not welcome its rapid introduction. According to the 1989 census, 20 % of ethnic Belarusians considered Russian their mother tongue. In 1999, only 37 % of the population preferred Belarusian in their daily life.

PRIVATISATION OF THE NOMENCALTURE AND CRISES
IN THE BELARUSIAN ECONOMY

The Soviet nomenclature maintained its positions in the economy and administration and was responsible for the deterioration of the economic situation. The old elite excused itself by exploiting the mythical views of Soviet Belarusians on how the economy functions. The very principle of centralised control over production and distribution was never questioned in Belarus before the collapse of the USSR. The majority of the population, whose knowledge of economics was limited to the social science curriculum in school (a vulgarised interpretation of fundamental Marxist political economy), simply did not have the skills necessary to realise what was happening. (Later, Alyaksandar Lukashenka very effectively used the anti-capitalist mentality of the Belarusians in his populist rhetoric.)

For the bureaucracy, transitioning to a market economy spelled the end of its power and its demotion to the humble executors of people's interests. In 1990–91 the Belarusian nomenclature tried to preserve the socialist system, an effort that required enterprises remain dependent on the state and state property not be privatised.

Meanwhile, Belarusian leaders blamed Moscow for the growing economic crisis in Belarus. Cabinet chairman Vyachaslaw Kebich stressed that it was Moscow's ('the central apparatus') fault that the living standards of the population were declining. It is noteworthy that BPF leader Zyanon Paznyak also put the blame for the crisis on both the Belarusian party nomenclature still in power and on Moscow allegedly striving to strangle the independence of Belarus. Therefore, both the old elite and, unintentionally, BPF publicly raised the issue of the deadly consequences of the Soviet Union's break-up. The nomenclature consciously shifted the blame to Russia, whereas BPF did not foresee the possible effects of its anti-Soviet and anti-Russian speeches in conditions of declining living standards in a country still trapped in the Soviet system (to a greater degree than Ukraine, for example) and with a national movement much weaker than elsewhere in the USSR.

Moscow was blamed for the budget deficit, the destruction of the consumer market as well as for the collapse of the financial, credit, and monetary systems. Belarusian leaders sought to protect themselves against the actions of Moscow administration. The Belarusian Cabinet banned exports of consumer products without a special permit. However, all attempts to preserve the socialist economy and stop the economic slide failed.

Isolation was also unsuccessful. Moreover, the BSSR economy depended on imports of raw materials, oil, gas as well as components from Russia and other Soviet republics, imports that were not purchased but supplied by Union ministries. At the end of 1991 Russia announced radical economic reform and price liberalisation. The Belarusian government was forced to do likewise and liberalised prices on 1 January 1992. However, the prices of bread, meat and dairy products, goods for children, as well as rates for public utilities and transport remained fixed.

Belarus suffered an energy crisis in the summer of 1993. This crisis resulted in the policy of the Council of Ministers extending beyond mere economic union with Russia to political and state confederation of CIS members.

In September 1993 Belarus and Russia signed an agreement to introduce a common rouble zone. The treaty, to be signed in January 1994, called for the circulation of a single currency, the Russian rouble, in both Belarus and Russia. The Belarusian National Bank was to retain all its functions including that of printing the currency. Belarusian government propaganda promised the population's income would double or triple. The plan was hampered by the armed conflict between Russia's executive and legislative branches in October 1993. Boris Yeltsin's victory left Kebich's government in a complicated situation. Soviet conservatives in the Belarusian Cabinet and Parliament had to cooperate with Russian reformers. To maintain its stature, the old Belarusian elite needed to exert strong governmental influence on economic processes. However, Yeltsin's victory resulted in Russia choosing a more liberal model of economic development.

Due to the collapse of the old economic ties and the transition of the former Soviet republics to a market economy, the old Belarusian elite had to adjust to the new situation. Still trying to exploit the remnants of the Soviet administrative economy and Russian resources, the Belarusian nomenclature commenced privatisation. With independence attained and the Communist Party dismissed, the state bureaucracy was the de facto owner of Belarus. The old Soviet elite resigned from communist ideology but retained its stature and access to the resources of power and property. The period of nomenclature rule, which characterised Kebich's government, was 1991–1994.

Primary accumulation of capital by the state bureaucracy was facilitated by the policy of tethering prices, unleashed in other post-Soviet countries, and manipulating currency exchange rates. Privatisation of finances made it possible to privatise state property, but the Supreme Soviet did not provide related legislation. As a result, privatisation began under provisional rules imposed by the Cabinet. The Belarusian leadership's attempts to continue the country's development under a socialist model created excellent opportunities for abuse of office and the misappropriation of state property.

The bureaucracy launched privatisation under the 1991 provisional rules, two years before the Parliament passed the relevant legislation. The property in question was assessed not according to its market value but according to book value; it went for a song. During 1992–94, the old Belarusian elite was transforming the system from the completely bankrupt socialist model to that of oligarchic capitalism.

While the nomenclature was privatising, public discontent with the deteriorating economic situation grew. The government's populist policy resulted in a high rate of inflation. Between 1992 and 1994, prices soared 432 times with a 20% drop in GDP. Living standards continued to fall (by almost half in 1994 compared to 1990). Social stratification increased abruptly: the difference between the incomes of the richest 10% and poorest 10% of families grew 13 fold (in Russia it grew from 4.5 in 1991 to 15 in 1995)¹¹. The Soviet establishment did not have the necessary apparatus of repression at its disposal to

suppress discontent and usurp power. Nor was there a political mechanism to legitimise the old elite as a new ruling class. Meanwhile, the authority of the Supreme Soviet with its nomenclature majority was drawing to an end. The population held no serious anti-governmental rallies; however, had a political force appeared in Belarus able to unite the people and channel their discontent against the old elite, the government would have fallen. The position of the old elite was secured by the weakness of the opposition and the people being confused and disassociated.

**THE 1994 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.
REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER; TRANSFORMATION OF THE
BELARUSIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

A PRESIDENTIAL REPUBLIC AS A MEANS OF REGENERATING
THE OLD ELITE

The old Belarusian elite would never share its economic and political power with enterprises themselves. It resisted the development of democratic trends and the national revival movement in Belarusian society. By retaining administrative power as well as political and economic influence, it lost legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the population.

While the old Supreme Soviet maintained authority, the Soviet elite took no noticeable steps to change the status quo. However, the approaching parliamentary elections threatened to weaken its position as the people (even those still sharing communist views) *en masse* hated the nomenclature establishment.

The approaching end of the Parliament's term forced the Soviet elite to look for new ways of staying in power. Without much popular support it needed a legitimate mechanism of concentrating and redistributing resources to its benefit. The presidency was selected to be this mechanism; its introduction required a new constitution and election.

The nomenclature reinforced its position before the election. In September 1993 the presidium of the Supreme Soviet rejected Stanislaw Shushkevich's initiative to hold an extraordinary session to consider the economic situation, adopt a constitution and hold a pre-term election. Shushkevich was dismissed from the post of Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, and in January 1994 Mechyslaw Hryb, a representative of the parliamentary majority, was elected Chairman. The reason for Shushkevich's dismissal was an allegation of corruption lodged by Alyaksandar Lukashenka. The communists in Parliament as well as the pro-imperial National Movement of Belarus supported the dismissal.

A new constitution was adopted in March 1994. It defined Belarus

as a democratic state, independent in its domestic and foreign affairs. The constitution asserted political pluralism, the separation of powers, generally accepted principles of international law, equality of property types, and the principle of non-aggression against other countries. The supreme goal of the state was to guarantee the rights and freedoms of its citizens. Moreover, the status of the individual was radically changed. The constitution declared civil and political rights and freedoms based on international obligations adopted by Belarus. However, in regard to socio-economic affairs, the constitution was largely based on the 1978 constitution.

For the old elite, the adoption of a new constitution merely meant a change in the form of rule. Belarus was transitioning from a parliamentary republic to a presidential republic. With sufficient administrative and financial resources at its disposal the old elite expected to install its man, Vyachaslaw Kebich or Alyaksandar Lukashenka, in the presidency and retain its influence in one form or another.

The old elite had much greater administrative and economic resources to promote its candidate and finance the election campaign. In addition, it counted on an extra ideological factor – Belarus' entry into Russia's monetary system. The popularity of Vyachaslaw Kebich was expected to increase as a result of the merger and the exploitation of Russian resources. This was why the new constitution, which included the office of president, was swiftly adopted. The nationalist and democratic opposition did not support the government's plans. In order to prevent the signing of the rouble zone treaty, in January 1994 BPF leader Zyanon Paznyak published an article in «Narodnaya Gazeta» entitled '*About Russian Imperialism and Its Danger.*' The article contained an unprecedented attack against Russia for its imperialist policy in respect to Belarus.

THE DEFEAT OF THE NOMENCLATURE AND THE OPPOSITION

There were six candidates for president: Vyachaslaw Kebich, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Zyanon Paznyak, Chairman of the *Soym* of

the Belarusian Popular Front, MP Alyaksandar Lukashenka, Director of the «Haradzets» State Farm in the Shklow District, former Chairman of the Parliament and then MP Stanislaw Shushkevich, Alyaksandar Dubko, Director of the «Progress» Collective Farm in the Horadnya District and Chairman of the Council of Collective Farms of Belarus, and Vasil Novikaw, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Party of Communists of Belarus.

Vyachaslaw Kebich, Alyaksandar Lukashenka, Vasil Novikaw, and Alyaksandar Dubko supported the old Soviet order, union with Russia and slowing market reforms whereas Zyanon Paznyak and Stanislaw Shushkevich advocated market reforms, independence from Russia and rejected the common rouble zone.

The election was held in two rounds, the first of which eliminated all of the candidates excluding Alyaksandar Lukashenka and Vyachaslaw Kebich. The former clearly led in this round (see table below) :

Nom inee	Votes in favour (%)
Alyaksandar Lukashenka	44.8
Vyachaslaw Kebich	17.3
Zyanon Paznyak	12.8
Stanislaw Shushkevich	9.9
Alyaksandar Dubko	5.9
Vasil Novikaw	4.3

Source: Central Committee for Elections

The second round resulted in the overwhelming victory of Alyaksandar Lukashenka with 80% of the votes, with a frequency of 70 % of eligible voters.

ALYAKSANDAR LUKASHENKA AND THE ELECTORAL REVOLUTION

In his election campaign, Alyaksandar Lukashenka applied the same strategy that proved successful during the election campaign for

Parliament: projecting the image of the common man, promising to unmask the authorities, offering simple solutions to complicated problems and finger pointing.

Prior to the presidential election MP Lukashenka was chairman of an Anti-corruption Commission in the Supreme Soviet. The commission was established in connection with the nomenclature's privatisation that irritated the people and gave the opposition an advantage in its competition with Kebich's camp and the Soviet majority in Parliament. As a result of pressure from the opposition and the public, on 4 July 1993 the Parliament established the «The Temporary Commission of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Belarus for the Investigation into the Activity of Commercial Entities operating within the Republic and Local Organs of Power and Government.» The commission was granted wide-ranging powers including access to all governmental and non-governmental institutions and organisations. Stanislaw Shushkevich supported Lukashenka hoping to find an ally to disclose the illegal activity of the people around Vyachaslaw Kebich.

However, both the parliamentary majority and the opposition underrated Alyaksandar Lukashenka's ambitions. All of the activities undertaken by Lukashenka as chairman of the anti-corruption commission were essentially a vehicle to strengthen the ideological and administrative resources already under his control. Lukashenka continued to employ this strategy during his presidential election campaign.

In early 1994, Lukashenka began consolidating his position in speeches before the Supreme Soviet, insinuating that he possessed compromising information against high officials including members of Parliament. Naturally, a conflict arose between Lukashenka and a portion of the old nomenclature. Lukashenka accused Defence Minister Pavel Kazlowski and Foreign Minister Piotr Krawchanka of scheming, and Vyachaslaw Kebich of soft on crime. Despite the efforts of the media, then under Kebich's control, Lukashenka's ratings continued to grow as the election approached.

Delayed social transformations played an important role in shaping

public opinion. The first democratic presidential election was held in Belarus during a period of deep systemic crisis, worse than in neighbouring countries. Moreover, the very mentality of the Belarusians, including the political elite, was a factor in preserving the existing system of politically authoritarian relations and the authority of state bureaucracy was a factor that worked against market reforms.

The status of Alyaksandar Lukashenka and Vyachaslaw Kebich differed greatly. Kebich was a part of the upper echelon of the administration whereas Lukashenka came from the bottom of the Soviet pyramid – a minor party functionary who began his career as director of the «Haradzets» State Farm in the Mahilyow Region. Apart from personal qualities, this was the only important difference between them. Neither depended on parties nor had a clear programme or ideology; both were guided by the situation and close to the communists. The Lukashenka-Kebich contrast was an opposition of images: the man of the people versus the representative of the nomenclature elite. Although both employed democratic rhetoric to win voters, their background was the Soviet system based on the unity of power and property. In the second round of the presidential election, Belarusians has a choice between two Soviet functionaries. However, Alyaksandar Lukashenka, being closer to the people by his background and manners, was not perceived as a full-fledged member of the nomenclature.

The election was held outside the political environment as such and was rather a referendum on the people's trust to the outdated state machine. Alyaksandar Lukashenka consciously set the people against politicians, discredited state institutions, political institutes, and authority in general. His populist propaganda channelled public discontent against market reforms and democracy. The people who had never known what a market economy is were increasingly against it.

The victory of the populist Lukashenka in the first democratic election became a sort of electoral revolution. The old nomenclature had maintained power for too long. Having shed its communist ideology, it used mechanisms of market and political democracy for its own ends. It went through the motions of conducting market reforms, but never

actually implementing them. The period of nomenclature privatisation, the plundering of state property by the bureaucracy, and inconsistent reforms implemented within the new system of oligarchic capitalism, discredited the idea of a market economy even before it was introduced. Against a background of aggravating economic problems and the pauperisation of the population, functionaries allied with entrepreneurs. This was why the pent up potential of protest by the population, not taken advantage of by the opposition, was targeted at the nomenclature and emerging business alike. The electoral revolution in Belarus was anti-nomenclature and anti-bourgeois and brought to power a populist who persistently criticised both the nomenclature and private business.

**MOULDING A HYBRID REGIME: ADAPTING DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTIONS TO THE SYSTEM OF POLITICALLY
AUTHORITARIAN RELATIONS**

RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM;

ABOLISHMENT OF THE SEPARATION OF POWERS

The presidential regime originally comprised representatives of various political parties. Together with Alyaksandar Lukashenka, there were reform-oriented specialists (e.g., Mikhail Chyhir, Stanislaw Bahdankevich, Anatol Lyabedzka, Dzmitry Bulakhaw, Uladzimir Nistsyuk). They mobilised Russian funds and the majority of influential Belarusian periodicals to support Lukashenka. However, it was not long before the reformists began resigning. The first to leave was Viktor Tsyareshchanka, Director of the Territorial Department. Before leaving, he accused the presidential entourage of incompetence. On 8 December 1994 Viktor Hanchar resigned over a disagreement with the president's policy. Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir resigned as late as 1996, during the conflict between the president and the Supreme Soviet. Officials from collective farms and state-run enterprises eventually replaced the others.

Once in power, Alyaksandar Lukashenka declared a crusade against all elements allegedly impeding the direct will of the people, be it the bureaucracy, independent courts, the press, entrepreneurs, Parliament, political parties or non-governmental organisations. This proved to be an all out attack against anyone and anything that limited the power of the executive.

The president and his entourage were able to usurp power due to the weakness of the democratic forces in the Supreme Soviet. In October 1994 the 12th Supreme Soviet passed a law, in which the chairmen of local administrations were appointed directly by the president (eliminating elections by local councils). The old guard, still a majority in Parliament, expected to be appointed to the local executive

committees after the term of the 12th Supreme Soviet expired. This law abolished local self-government in Belarus.

In December 1994 Alyaksandar Lukashenka banned the publication of parliamentary deputy Syarhey Antonchyk's statement concerning corruption in the presidential administration. National newspapers were printed with blank columns in the place where the statement was to be printed before the ban was imposed. Early the following year most editors-in-chief were replaced and the regime took over television.

In the spring of 1995 the presidential regime began the repartition of property. The presidential affairs department, headed by Ivan Tsitsyankow, appropriated the most prestigious buildings in Minsk that were formerly national property. Income generated from renting the properties went to the presidential treasury.

Elections to the 13th Supreme Soviet were held in May 1995. The executive branch made every effort to subvert them: candidates were given limited access to the media, campaigning was banned outside a candidate's respective constituency, and campaign budgets were limited to USD 50. All workers were granted holidays between 1 and 15 May, which minimised voter turnout but which benefited candidates associated with the old elite – the directors of factories, collective farms, and state institutions.

Elections to the Supreme Soviet were based on the majority system that allowed the old nomenclature to control the electoral process and moderate the influence of political parties. The strategy of the executive branch succeeded due to low voter turnout. A by-election was held on 28 May that left the new Parliament with 119 members – 55 short of the 174 (two thirds of the 260 deputies) needed for the Supreme Soviet to be sworn in under the Constitution. The newly elected MPs were mainly from the left of the political spectrum and (or) employees of the executive branch. The old 12th Supreme Soviet continued working so that Belarus would have a functioning legislature.

While formally retaining its status as the country's supreme legislative authority, the Supreme Soviet de facto lost its power in the spring of 1995. On 11 April president Lukashenka addressed the Parliament

announcing his initiative to call a referendum on four issues, granting the Russian language the status of an official state language, changing the state symbols, economic integration with Russia and giving the president the authority to dismiss the Parliament. The deputies rejected all of the issues except economic integration with Russia. Lukashenka threatened to hold the referendum without the approval of Parliament. In response, 18 democratic MPs accused the president of violating the constitution and began a hunger strike in the parliamentary session hall. In the early morning hours of 12 April the hunger strikers were forcibly removed from the building by military units acting on a presidential order. Involved in this operation were internal forces, the special branch police (OMON), main security department of the Ministry of Interior, as well as other brigades whose identity was not uncovered by the prosecutor general's senior investigator for extraordinary cases. The incident received almost no coverage in the state-owned media. Parliament did not react to the removal of the deputies nor did it appeal to the international community. The following day the Supreme Soviet approved the presidential proposal.

In the autumn of 1995 Alyaksandar Lukashenka made public his plan to transfer all power to the office of the president, in the form of direct presidential rule. In September the 12th Supreme Soviet ceased working under pressure from the president. Soon after Lukashenka refused to accept rulings of the Constitutional Court. The latter lost its constitutional functions and became a consultative organ.

In October 1995 the presidential administration ordered all Belarusian state-owned printing houses to cancel their contracts with influential opposition newspapers including «Nasha Niva», «Svaboda», «Imya» and «Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta.» All such publications were removed from subscription catalogues. The only state-owned distribution agency «Belsoyuzpechat» refused to distribute the publications.

At the end of 1995 the president lifted on some of his edicts imposed earlier by the constitutional court.

A subsequent parliamentary by-election was held on 29 November and 10 December 1995 to fill the empty seats in the 13th Supreme

Soviet and establish a quorum. Meanwhile the media under presidential control had been engaged in a campaign to discredit MPs and the Supreme Soviet in general as an institute of state power.

At the beginning of 1996 the inter-bank currency exchange was nationalised and a 6-month recess imposed on the registration of new businesses. Later that year, a Belarusian-Russian customs union treaty was signed. The treaty abolished customs between the two countries, which allowed the Belarusian side to benefit from privileged imports of goods to the common duty-free zone.

THE 1995 REFERENDUM.

CRISIS FOR THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

One year after Alyaksandar Lukashenka became the first president of Belarus, there was no visible improvement in the living standards of the population and the conflict between the president and the Supreme Soviet was escalating. Lukashenka needed a means to strengthen his position and consolidate his ideological resources to be used in increasing his administrative and economic powers. He was about to employ a well-tried populist scheme. Having thrown the striking MPs out of the Parliament in April 1995, president was free to conduct the referendum his way.

The referendum was held on 14 May to coincide with the election to the 13th Supreme Soviet. The referendum issues involved the status of the Russian language, state symbols, and presidential competence. For the initiator, the main objective of the referendum was to strengthen the ideological resources for the president personally and for his clique. Lukashenka sought the approval of the people to destroy the principle of the separation of powers.

The voting was held on four questions. The first question was a guaranteed success due to the high level of russification among the population, but did not specify what was meant by equal status of the Belarusian and Russian languages. The third and forth questions were vaguely formulated in order to provide significant leeway for

interpretation. However, most of the population swallowed the sophistic formulations. All Lukashenka's proposals were approved by at least 75% of the voters (see table below).

Question	Voted «yes» (percent of voters)
1. Do you agree the Russian language be granted a status equal to the Belarusian language?	83.1
2. Do you support the proposal to establish a new State flag and State emblem of the Republic of Belarus?	75.0
3. Do you support the actions of the President towards economic integration with the Russian Federation?	82.4
4. Do you agree to the necessity of changing the constitution of the Republic of Belarus which would provide the possibility for the President of the Republic of Belarus to prematurely terminate the authority of the Supreme Soviet in cases of systematic or severe violations of the constitution?	77.6

Source: Central Committee for Elections

The referendum put an end to attempts to consolidate the status of the Belarusian language that had been being undertaken between 1990 and 1995. It also gave a green light for Lukashenka to consolidate authoritarian presidential power.

The question concerning the state symbols of Belarus was a very important question in the referendum. Adoption of the red and green flag of the BSSR, deprived of the communist hammer-and-sickle, replacing the white, red, and white flag as well as the similarly edited Soviet Belarusian emblem, replacing the Pahonya, had a specific function in the president's fight for the electorate. It was a very populist move, and to fully grasp this it must be understood why it was populist.

The second of the four questions was formulated most specifically. Free of logical flaws present in the other questions, it hid the scheme on which the president was to build relationships with the voters. For several years to come, this would guarantee the president support from the most conservative and passive portion of the Belarusian population.

President Lukashenka played on the Soviet mythological complex and specific stereotypes. By 1995, most of the population still had not figured out their own political priorities. Lukashenka supporters, those who voted for him in the presidential election, felt a strong nostalgia for the times of the BSSR when a consumption minimum was guaranteed and the situation was stable. In the twilight years of the USSR, the multi-million-strong Soviet Belarusian electorate was not as interested in abolishing the tainted Soviet system (they did not realise it was tainted) as it was in improving their material well being.

Neither Vyachaslaw Kebich nor Alyksandar Lukashenka were capable of resurrecting the USSR with its socialist system and guaranteed miserable living standards. The conflict between the irreversibility of history and voter's hopes for returning to the USSR was resolved (as it is today) based on the 1995 referendum. Replacing the Belarusian emblem and flag with quasi-Soviet symbols on behalf of the people, Lukashenka offered his electorate a symbolic return to the USSR. As it was not possible to return to the socialist system, he gave his voters a symbolic substitute. It was «back-to-the-USSR» on the figurative, symbolic level – a return not to the old world but to symbols merely denoting its presence.

Instead of satisfying the population's material needs, the Soviet Belarusians were offered a sublimated, symbolic satisfaction. The people associated virtually guaranteed material welfare with socialism and the USSR. Alyksandar Lukashenka and his propagandists restored a chain of stereotype associations, Soviet mythologies in the reverse order, by restoring as many of the socialist symbols and customs as possible. The regime restored the state symbols associated with the Soviet period (although slightly adapted due to the collapse of the CPSU). Those symbols induced image-conscious Soviet Belarusians to have emotionally positive associations with the new Belarusian order.

Instead of actually solving problems, the people were shown TV images of problem solving, just as was done in the Soviet Union. Instead of improving the well-being of the masses, the TV demonstrated great achievements. Images were delivered instead of things. Presidential

propagandists returned the symbols of socialism, re-marking the calendar with public holidays celebrating milestones in the history of Soviet Belarus; the subject was taught accordingly.

THE 1996 REFERENDUM. THE PRESIDENT OPPOSED
TO THE SUPREME SOVIET, AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

The 13th Supreme Soviet held its opening session in January 1996; but failed to be a counterbalance to executive power. The Parliament had neither access to the state-owned media, nor other informational means. Moreover, the new members of parliament did not have the political will to stand up to the president's dictatorship. However, even this Parliament and Constitutional Court could at least pose a potential threat to Lukashenka's policy of one-man rule. He aspired to legally consolidate his authoritarian position and make every effort that most of the population perceives this usurpation as legitimate and appropriate.

Alyaksandar Lukashenka and his regime initiated another referendum; this time concerning a new constitution under which power would be further concentrated in the hands of president while the Supreme Soviet, Constitutional Court, and local administrations would become purely formal institutions with no real authority. These institutions were not to be eliminated: their purpose was to provide the facade for the separation of powers. Meanwhile, Lukashenka and his administration gave lip service to democracy. At this point, the regime had acquired sufficient administrative, financial, and ideological resources.

The media, controlled by the president, supported his campaign. The models suggested were the Arab Emirates and the Saudi Kingdom, where «against a backdrop of absolute personal power... representative organs exist only as props, in order not to unnerve the international progressive public»¹².

The media published letters from the masses supporting the call for the introduction of direct presidential rule.

The new nation-wide referendum initiated by Lukashenka was held

between 9–24 November 1996. The legal basis for this referendum was the resolution «On Conducting and Enforcing a National Referendum in the Republic of Belarus» issued by the Supreme Soviet on 6 September 1996. Under Paragraph 2 of the resolution, the referendum offered two sets of questions: one initiated by the president and another by a group of MPs.

The president raised four issues:

«1. To move Independence Day of the Republic of Belarus (Republic Day) to 3 July – the day Belarus was liberated from the Nazi invaders during the Great Patriotic War.

2. To adopt the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with the amendments and additions proposed by the president of the Republic of Belarus A. H. Lukashenka.

3. Do you favour free and unrestricted buying and selling of land?

4. Do you support the abolishment of the death penalty in the Republic of Belarus?»

A group of Supreme Soviet members raised three issues:

«1. To adopt the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with the amendments and additions proposed by members of the factions of communists and agrarians.

2. Do you favour the practice of electing leaders of local bodies of executive power directly by the inhabitants of the respective administrative territory?

3. Do you agree that financing all branches of power should be carried out openly and exclusively from the state budget?»

Under Paragraph 3 of the resolution, the referendum concerning the issue of adopting the 1994 constitution with amendments and additions would be mandatory in nature.

Following a request from the speaker of the Parliament Syamyon Sharetski as well as on its own initiative, the Constitutional Court reviewed the Supreme Soviet's resolution for compliance with the constitution and other laws of the Republic of Belarus. On 4 November, the court struck down Paragraph 3, ruling that the referendum concerning the constitution was not mandatory.

The Supreme Soviet obeyed the ruling and changed its resolution. The new version, issued on 6 November, accepted the mandatory nature of the referendum only in regard to moving Independence Day and electing local administrations heads.

President Lukashenka did not agree with the ruling of the Constitutional Court or with the subsequent resolution of the Parliament. He issued two edicts in regard to the forthcoming referendum. The first, Edict No. 455, dated 5 November 1996, established a new procedure for implementing the results of referenda in amending and adding to the constitution. The edict was unconstitutional and violated the law «On Popular Voting (Referendum) in the Republic of Belarus.» The second edict, Edict No. 459, dated 7 November 1996, cancelled the Constitutional Court ruling of 4 November «as one in essential discord with the Constitution and limiting the constitutional right of the people to participate in a referendum (popular voting).» The edict also contained an overt threat to state institutions that obstructed the holding of the referendum. Under paragraph 5 of the edict, those state bodies were to be abolished and those guilty were to be held accountable.

The plebiscite began on 9 November 1996, two weeks prior to referendum day, and even before the two draft constitutions were published. Four million copies of the presidential version were published on 12 November. The version advocated by the Supreme Soviet deputies was published on 21 November. The voters had virtually no opportunity to become familiar with the two documents. Therefore, although both drafts were made available to the public, the people were de facto forced to opt for the president's version.

On 19 November the Constitutional Court initiated proceedings in a case filed by 73 MPs concerning president Lukashenka's violation of the constitution. The hearing was scheduled for 22 November. The president pressured the deputies who had signed the court application demanding presidential edicts be reviewed for compliance with the constitution. The deputies were blackmailed with compromising information and threatening with job expulsion or physical violence.

During the night of 21–22 November, president Lukashenka and

Supreme Soviet speaker Sharetski signed an agreement concerning the socio-political situation and constitutional reform in the Republic of Belarus. It is noteworthy that the signing took place in the presence of high Russian officials who arrived in Minsk specifically to arbitrate the conflict among the branches of power in Belarus.

The Russian delegation comprised Vice Prime Minister Valeriy Serov and Duma Chairman Gennadiy Seleznyov, later joined by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. Talks among Alyaksandar Lukashenka, Syamyon Sharetski, and Valery Tsikhinya, Chairman of the Constitutional Court, were held on the night of 21-22 November, mediated by the Russian delegation.

Under the agreement reached president Lukashenka agreed to revoke edicts No. 455 of 5 November and No. 459 of 7 November. In doing so he accepted the advisory nature of the referendum in respect to amending the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. On behalf of the Supreme Soviet, Syamyon Sharetski was to see to it that the deputies' impeachment action against the president be withdrawn from the Constitutional Court.

On 22 November authorised representatives of the Supreme Soviet petitioned the Constitutional Court to suspend the case, while representatives of the president requested the case be terminated. Both sides based their requests on the agreement signed the previous night by the speaker and president. The Court considered the arguments and suspended the case.

The agreement, however, was not fulfilled. In order to become valid, the Supreme Soviet had to ratify the agreement. Prior to the negotiations, the pro-presidential faction «Zhoda» (Accord) appealed in Parliament for co-operation with the executive branch¹³. Nevertheless, when it came to ratification «Zhoda» members voted against the agreement. This allowed Lukashenka to blame the Supreme Soviet of an inability to compromise and to withdraw from his obligations in connection with the agreement. The president restored his edicts before the referendum was held making the voting on the amendments to the constitution binding.

These events were accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign in support of the president's initiatives. The electronic media, almost totally controlled by the president, repeatedly extolled the virtues of voting in favour of president Lukashenka's proposals in the referendum.

The executive branch was also very busy preparing for the referendum. Directors of enterprises, state institutions, organisations and military commanders were given specific instructions to deliver a victory for the presidential version of the constitution. Referendum preparation offices were operating in every area of the country, extending their influence virtually over the entire population. On various pretexts people were persuaded to vote in advance despite the fact that this violated the law on referenda. The propaganda campaign was unprecedented; Lukashenka personally visited a number of towns and major enterprises and spoke at mass rallies. The executive branch used all its resources to bring about a victory for the president in the oncoming referendum.

The official results, as made public, gave Lukashenka an overwhelming victory. Within the first few days after the referendum loyal MPs moved to the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of a puppet parliament established by the president to imitate legislative power. Approximately 70 % of the «Zhoda» faction (the group that sabotaged the 21 November agreement between the president and the Parliament), half of the agrarians and half of the communists of the 13th Supreme Soviet became members of the House of Representatives.

On 28 November, the House of Representatives voted to withdraw the suit of the Supreme Soviet from the Constitutional Court.

THE BACKBONE OF ALYAKSANDAR LUKASHENKA'S IDEOLOGICAL RESOURCE

Alyaksandar Lukashenka's success was largely the result of support from that portion of the population whose economic and political culture could be described as low. By the time the presidential elections were held a specific socio-cultural situation had developed in the

country connected with forced industrialisation in the second half of the 20th century. The remnants of patriarchal relations in Belarus were substantially diluted by newer mythological beliefs of Soviet mass society and relationships that formed specifically under Soviet conditions.

Alyaksandar Lukashenka's rhetoric was based on Soviet mythology implanted by the Soviet ideological machine and functioning in the consciousness of the president's electorate at the common sense level. The idea of direct democracy, the simplification of democracy as a political system without hierarchy and mistrust of representative institutions supported the anti-democratic actions of Alyaksandar Lukashenka. The attitude of Lukashenka's supporters manifested a characteristic feature of Ortega y Gasset's mass person (i.e., self-identification with the state, perceiving «society» and «state» as synonyms).

The ideological base for Lukashenka's victory in the Belarusian battlefield of power relations had developed over the entire Soviet period of Belarus' history. In terms of ideology, the Soviet state was a state of the people, of workers and peasants. In the communist myth, the people and the state became one. While the adherents of Belarus' democratic development viewed the Soviet political and state system as tainted and vicious, most of the population was simply not aware of the possible alternatives.

During the Soviet regime, the Communist Party asserted its power was popular one through the institute of Soviets of People's Deputies, where a single-party system selected the administrative and party cadre, which was essentially the same. The Soviets, in turn, provided the veneer of the expression of the people's will.

The discontent felt by Belarusians concerning the communist regime was primarily due to the social inequality inherently present in the Soviet system albeit always denied by its ideological institutes. Opaque for ordinary citizens, the Soviet system produced quasi-estates and a party-bureaucratic elite that managed the resources of power and property according to its own interests. However, the very existence of such

groups contradicted the basic Soviet mythology of equality, people's power, and social justice.

The Communist Party and its leadership were discredited in the eyes of Belarusians. However, a large part of the population had no other concept of democracy other than that based on communist mythology. It protested against the Soviet elite and not against the principles declared but never implemented by the Soviet state. This protest was not aimed so much at the socialist regime as it was at the ruling elite of state bureaucracy.

In the period between the declaration of independence and the presidential election, Belarus did not have (and did not later obtain) a system of representing interests – a component specific for a democracy. Instead, the country developed a system of people appealing directly to the president on issues that would normally fall within the sphere of a ministry or local administration. The presidential administration receives tens of thousands of appeals from the population and thousands seek an audience. Rather than identifiable opponents or supporters, the Belarusian regime is facing a chaotic mass of disoriented people who have lost faith in everything.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE BELARUSIAN POLITICAL ARENA FOLLOWING THE INTRODUCTION OF THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT

By the time the first presidential election was held, two opposing political camps had developed. The first was the old Soviet elite that had no strict political organisation but was in control of key state offices and had its own sort of lobby in Parliament. The second was the national democratic movement comprised of various political parties. Both of these two major groups vying for power in Belarus campaigned for the presidency in order to increase the legitimacy of their own authority by expropriating the legitimacy of the opponent.

However, following the 1994 conservative electoral revolution, as presidential power consolidated, the bipolar political opposition between the old elite and national democrats was transformed. Neither

pole gained strategic advantage in the form of control over the institutes of executive power. Instead, a third force, with ties to the first two and relatively independent, emerged to consolidate power – president Lukashenka and his inner circle.

The strategy of Vyachaslaw Kebich's election campaign consisted in the old Belarusian elite preserving the binary character of its opposition to the national democrats. The nomenclature aimed to stabilise their position by using the elections as an instrument of legitimising supreme executive power in order to redistribute ideological and extra administrative resources for their own benefit. All they needed was the public to legitimise their political domination of the Soviet bureaucracy. The challenge for the national democratic opposition was to use the elections to de-legitimise the political domination of the old elite and redistribute administrative authority for its own benefit. In a state-run economy, this also implied economic resources.

The election gave rise to a third, initially not particularly strong, power group, the president and his entourage. Democratically elected president Lukashenka, a low-ranking Soviet manager, was neither a part of the old nomenclature establishment nor a player in the national democratic movement. He was an independent actor on the Belarusian political scene, joining forces or competing against the representatives of the two opposing camps. The election of Alyaksandar Lukashenka transformed the political landscape in Belarus.

As the president accumulated power, three power groups formed in the political arena: the old nomenclature with its Soviet traditions, the national democratic groups and president Lukashenka and his entourage, which comprised mid-level members of the nomenclature who were personally elevated to top level positions by their patron. According to the situation each group was in opposition to the other two or two acted in concert in order to undercut the third player.

Having established a strong ideological base and acquired an administrative base through the constitution, the president redistributed the resources of power and property for his own benefit. The national democratic forces remained in opposition whereas the communists

and part of the nomenclature stripped of access to power and property, consciously or implicitly found themselves in opposition to the presidential administration.

With the effective abolishment of the nascent separation of powers, Belarus reverted to the old system of exercising power. Continuity with the previous Soviet system is maintained through the imitation of democratic power in the form of elections to local Soviets of People's Deputies that have all the trappings of political authority but essentially no influence as a result of the president gaining virtually absolute power. The National Assembly (new Parliament) was created as the formal successor of the Supreme Soviet, but was in fact merely a rubber stamp to turn presidential initiatives into laws. As in the Soviet system, power remains opaque for the people. Corporate and family bonds and not political institutions remain the basis for exercising state power.

However, the new power system that emerged in Belarus at the end of 1996 differed from its Soviet predecessor. The system has no distinct ideology that could replace the communist ideology of the BSSR. Unlike the Soviet totalitarian system where the state and Communist Party used their ideological and punitive resources to mobilise the population in order to achieve a goal imposed by the party, the present Belarusian regime tends to demobilise the population and neutralise its political activity. As opposed to Soviet era propaganda, current propaganda does not appeal to the idea of building a better future, but primarily appeals to the mythological Soviet past and claims that the present regime is the successor to the Soviet empire. The public holidays reinserted in the calendar after 1996 are meant to extol the Belarusian-Soviet myth of a state of people's prosperity. Compared to the Soviet system, the apparatus of political repression is much weaker – Belarus has preserved freedom of speech.

Rather than the well known structure of all power resting in the Politburo of a monopolist party, the president who represents no political party holds supreme power in Belarus. Having expelled democratic reformers, the regime had to rely on the old bureaucracy, but limited the power resources of the old elite. However, the

nomenclature retained access to the resources of power and property as Lukashenka continued to develop an administration-driven economy. The containment of market reforms was a necessary condition to block the development of democracy and establish Lukashenka in power. Therefore the cadre of the old command-driven system was still necessary. The old elite did not gain the desired advantage by neutralising the opposition's effort to redistribute the resources of power and property. However, the opposition also failed to expropriate the power of the old nomenclature. The president became a buffer between the old and new elite as well as between the voters and state bureaucracy. The presidential administration comprised the old nomenclature, both that portion hostile to the president as the usurper of their freedom to abuse its position and that considering him a guarantee for preserving the nomenclature's traditions, unlawful privileges, and freedom to distribute resources.

President Lukashenka and his regime halted the privatisation process, as had been conducted by the nomenclature between 1990 and 1994. Unlike during Kebich's government when the nomenclature independently distributed power and property, Lukashenka limited and regulated this process, distributing resources according to his own interests. As for retaining a closed system of managing power and property, the interests of the presidential group and old elite largely coincided. Moreover, the worldview of the new president and the old nomenclature was very similar.

Some representatives of the national democratic opposition, discontent with the violation of the separation of powers in 1996, were now opposed less to the old nomenclature and more to presidential power. The former elite co-operated with the president despite its displeasure with the shift in power to the presidential group. However, for the old elite, the tendency toward confrontation was counterbalanced by the need to co-operate for the sake of survival.

Alyaksandar Lukashenka acquired the means to intimidate uncooperative functionaries, but did not eliminate the privileged status of the old elite – the office-guaranteed right to distribute state property

(but not ownership rights) and administrative power. The state sector's dominance in the economy, unreliable legislation and the absence of legal guarantees for businesses contributed to the bureaucracy retaining its privileged position, even if limited by the possibility of direct presidential interference. However, the scope of presidential intimidation can only be selective (even when shortcutting the law), and therefore does not threaten the vital interests of the old, post-Soviet bureaucracy.

PRECONDITIONS FOR THE DEFEAT OF DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

A CRISIS OF VALUES

The establishment of Lukashenka's regime is often interpreted as a victory for the stiff, inert Soviet majority and the revenge of the lower classes. However, the interpretation of the socio-cultural foundations of Lukashenka's regime as traditionalist is debatable. The traditionalism of Alyaksandar Lukashenka does not extend back further than the rule of the Communist Party and therefore is a kind of quasi-traditionalism, a specific Soviet conservatism of the president's electorate that has little in common with Western conservatism. Post-Soviet Belarus is heir to the mass Soviet society of the BSSR with its state atheism and consistent policy of destroying traditional institutes of civil society. The legitimacy of Lukashenka's power has no religious cornerstones; his propaganda appeals to Orthodox Christianity exclusively within the context of vague pan-Slavic ideas and of the anti-Western orientation justified by the present Belarusian leadership.

The Belarusian regime is not based on a certain system of values but on the lack of a single value standard in Belarusian society. This regime was established through a wave of spontaneous protests against pauperisation and social inequity by a poorly educated population and is maintained due to a lack of positive alternatives understandable to Belarusian voters. Out of the three basic values, specifically the basic human rights to life, freedom, and property, post-Soviet Belarus has realised – if relatively – only the right to life.

Following revenge on the rich and prosperous, the main ideological pillars of presidential propaganda are «food and peace.» Of course, food and stability at any price cannot become the basic values of society. Some analysts evaluate the election of Lukashenka to president as an electoral revolution whereby values of traditional society prevailed over those of liberal civilisation. However, given the devastation of traditional, patriarchal structures of Belarusian society (mostly agrarian before World

War II) in the second half of the 20th century, it would be correct to state that an anti-capitalist mentality has triumphed over traditional values. During the entire period Belarus was ruled by the Communist Party, Soviet propaganda and socialisation cultivated specific anti-capitalist stereotypes, which together with related prejudice have been analysed in detail by Ludwig von Mises¹⁴. These stereotypes, however, are a product of the post-traditional (Soviet period) history of Belarusian society.

It is also wrong to interpret the situation in Belarus after Alyksandar Lukashenka's election as polarisation, a political split between adherents of independence and democracy and poorly educated, unenlightened supporters of the president. The insufficient polarisation of both the population and elites with respect to liberal values would be more accurate. Belarusian society is not integrated, not structured and has no single value standard. This is true for the supporters of the present regime and its opponents alike, not to mention the mass of indifferent people. It is the lack of consolidation and clear polarisation within the Belarusian elite combined with the low level of political and legal culture in the population that facilitated Alyksandar Lukashenka's triumph and the establishment of his regime.

Spiritual repercussions resulting from the years under the Soviet regime are an essential problem for the development of the democratic movement in Belarus. The traditional value system of a patriarchal society was destroyed by the propagation of the atheist communist ideology. The latter, however, offered no alternative value system and no consistent standard of values. The very internal discord of Soviet ideology resulted in a conflict of value systems at the level of individual consciousness. Atheism enforced by the totalitarian communist regime destroyed the value standards of traditional Belarusian society without offering a viable alternative. The destruction of the system of religious values was facilitated a complicated religious situation that had developed before the arrival of the communist regime. Although the area of Belarus was Christian, it fell under the influence of both Western and Eastern churches. Each of the churches had dominated in different

historical periods. Moreover, Protestantism was later introduced. The Belarusian population was multi-denominational.

The Belarusian language is not currently the dominant language in any church in Belarus. The Orthodox Church primarily uses Russian whereas the Roman Catholic employs Polish. Metropolitan Filaret, head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, remains under the jurisdiction of the Moscow patriarchy. The idea of pan-Slavism exploited by Alyksandar Lukashenka is supported by the Moscow patriarchy in light of the myth it holds about uniting eastern Slavs through the Orthodox Church. However, this church, once imposed by the Russian empire, then having rapidly lost followers after religious liberalisation in early 20th century, and later undermined by the communist dictatorship, does not have such a strong historical and cultural foundation in Belarus as it does in Russia.

As a result of complex historical and cultural processes, clash between the Catholic and Orthodox cultures, and their alternating domination in the Belarusian ethnocultural environment, religion was not a basis for consolidating Belarusian society in the 20th century. Although, religious consciousness is currently underdeveloped in Belarus, signs of a religious revival are beginning to appear.

Most of the population understood the ideas of democratisation as interpreted by the media, which remained under the control of the communist party. Although shared by a substantial part of BSSR citizens, those ideas (adapted for Soviet stereotypes) did not closely correlate with those of an independent national state, which BPF advocated. The population of BSSR, and later the independent Republic of Belarus, had inconsistent and fragmented concepts of an acceptable alternative political system to the existing communistic-bureaucratic model. Anti-communism, demand of social justice (later to become equal justice for all and equal distribution of material goods according to Soviet tradition), primitive ideas of people's power, and the desire to control authorities became intertwined with paternalist customs and «patriarchal-subject» behaviour patterns, encouraged by and deeply rooted in the Soviet system.

Conceptual analysis of developments in Belarusian society was difficult for most of the members of the Belarusian elite due to the fact that they lacked the necessary liberal education, corresponding arsenal of categories, and the set of ideas developed by the Western education system. Despite all the differences between their ideological platforms and political watchwords, both Alyaksandar Lukashenka and his opponents are bound by a common Soviet past. The worldview and behaviour stereotypes that had been developed by the Soviet socio-cultural system have been and to a large extent still are a burden on both the supporters and opponents of the present Belarusian regime. The split on the ideological level and on the level of political organisations does not reflect a conceptual conflict at the level of distinct value systems. Belarusian political experience simply did not yet have clear standards of values that would inspire a distinct polarisation in society, which would have radically opposed changing these values. Belarusian society, on the whole neither expecting nor aspiring for radical political and economic reforms, found itself a society without socio-cultural goals.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL ELITE

Compared to the Baltic republics and Ukraine, the ethnocultural tradition in Belarus proved to be the least resilient to russification. Unlike the neighbours, the people of Belarus happened to be insufficiently united (by either liberal or national values) to effectively resist elements of the Soviet system.

It was not only due to the patriarchal history of Belarus that the country found it difficult to unite on the basis of liberal values. The industrial economy developed extremely rapidly and intensely after the World War II under the rule of the Communist party. As industrial technologies were introduced, elements of traditional agrarian culture were destroyed and a specific communist system of political institutes and politically authoritarian relations that mirrored official institutions was implemented. However, the weakness of national identity is

primarily due to the specific history of the Belarusian nation and its elites.

By the time the USSR began to disintegrate, the predominant majority of the post-war Belarusian elite had adopted the specific Soviet identity or had an extremely subtle sense of national self-awareness. The Belarusian population en masse did not consider the break-up of the USSR and the collapse of its economic system to be the result of a deep intrinsic crisis. Unlike the Baltic countries and other regions of the USSR, a Popular Front did not enjoy mass support in Belarus with its ethnoculturally marginalised population.

Belarus differed from the other ex-Soviet republics that gained independence as a result of Moscow-initiated democratisation and desovietisation by most firmly adhering to Moscow-centrism. The attitudes of the masses and elites to the «centre,» with all their polarity, remained within the «centre of empire – subordinated periphery» model of relationships formed under the Russian empire and further developed during the Soviet period.

The ruling, party-nomenclature elite of Belarus, whose economic and administrative resources of power continued after the break-up of the USSR, strove to restore connections with the former centre of the empire. In speeches and publications, the nomenclature associated the deterioration of the economic situation and living standards with the disruption of economic ties with Russia. Initially, the Belarusian nomenclature did not want to break ties with its Russian counterpart represented by the old communist bureaucratic elite. All initiatives of the Belarusian party in power were aimed at restoring the situation in Belarus as it was before the break-up of the Soviet Union, a situation that implied Russian subsidies and privileges for Belarus at Russia's expense. This parasitic economic strategy provided a way to maintain the system of distributing power and resources beneficial for the ruling elite. Therefore the Belarusian nomenclature sought support from anti-reformers in Moscow. The restoration of previous relationships was only possible with the restoration of the former Soviet political and economic system.

The Belarusian ruling elite, the highest ranks of Soviet bureaucracy were propagating the old stereotypes of relations typical for the Soviet empire. Major decisions concerning the development of the Soviet republics were made in Moscow, at the top levels of the government and party. Despite formal attributes of independence, the ruling elite of the BSSR and later the Republic of Belarus did not act independently but preferred to mirror Moscow's moves. It retained control over all major resources as well as the network of personal connections and the system of power and property relations that developed during the Soviet period. The problem was that the system lacked ideological or theoretical backing. It was not sanctioned by the population through a delegation of power to the elite. The domination of the same elite of once communist bureaucrats in Belarus was the result of the weakness of the opposition and the fact that the people were indifferent and insufficiently mobilised. Moreover, a system of common values and concepts capable of uniting and mobilising the people was lacking.

As the ruling elite was not strong enough to influence the internal political situation, the main factor of change in the Belarusian system of power and property was located outside the country. Unlike the other former Soviet republics, Russia had a dual position having initiated the break-up of the Soviet Union and being the successor to the Soviet empire. The ruling Belarusian elite tried to play on contradictions of Russia's transformation and more precisely, on the imperialist ambitions of the Russian elites.

The nationalist opposition, which gained some influence in the domestic political field largely due to changes in Russia, originally took a negative stand against the former centre. It viewed Moscow as a serious, if not equal to Minsk, source of political influence on internal Belarusian affairs. The old nomenclature considered Moscow's imperialist forces to be the guarantors of restoring a Soviet system, whereas the nationalist opposition painted an image of a powerful enemy that always threatened Belarus' independence, was the cause of its economic problems and tainted its political system.

The mythology of an all-powerful Moscow has become an important

part of the post-Soviet Belarusian ideological environment. It was the successor to the Soviet myth about Moscow as the sacred centre of the world communist movement. Deeply rooted in the mass consciousness of Soviet Belarusians, it was used by the Belarusian elites to justify their own political and economic failures.

Stating the need to restore the Soviet Union, the old nomenclature elite drew on the views shared by the Soviet population. Its thinking and ideological manipulations occurred within Soviet mythological views on social reality foisted by communist propaganda and the entire state system of socialisation.

The new nationalist (and partly democratic) elite used an anti-Moscow myth to disguise its own weakness in the political arena and to justify its pretensions to expressing the will of the people in the struggle against the old elite. However, the majority of the population, discontent with the old nomenclature elite, did not support the positions of BPF.

A BACKWARD CIVILISATION, INTENSE INDUSTRIALISATION AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ETHNOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Such factors as the physical destruction of the national elite, suppression of national ideology for the sake of communist ideology, and persistent russification after the World War II were accompanied by new powerful factors that checked the development of a Belarusian national identity. The post-war recovery of Belarus involved building its industry from the ground up. Industrially underdeveloped at the beginning of the 20th century, despite its proximity to industrial centres, Belarus experienced an industrial boom only after 1945.

Before World War II heavy industry in Belarus was almost non-existent; the economy was overwhelmingly agrarian, and the rural population vastly outnumbered the urban population. However, after the war Belarus became «the assembly line» of the Soviet Union. The republic produced 30% of the electronics and 23% of the radio equipment in the USSR. Moreover, Belarus was designated as the major producer of agricultural machinery and motor vehicles.

In the late 1980s Belarus was considered an economically developed region of the USSR. It had the highest rate of per capita GDP, the highest rate of production growth as well as the highest increase in labour efficiency. The republic's economic development was largely due to appropriated subsidies from Russia perfected through the socialist pricing system.

The post-war industrialisation of Belarus occurred within the span of a single generation. In 1940, 21.3% of the population of Belarus lived in urban areas compared to 34.5% in Russia. Industry developed rapidly in Belarus after the war; industrial production grew 9 fold between 1960 and 1985 (an average growth of 4.9 times in the USSR). Belarus began urbanising rapidly in the late 1950s. The urban population increased 2.62 fold between 1959 and 1987 (1.73 fold in Russia). The urban population in Belarus primarily grew at the expense of the rural population.

Industrialisation and urbanisation in Belarus occurred against the background of total domination by communist ideology, after the destruction of the specific cultural environment of Belarusian towns and the virtual obliteration of towns themselves during World War II. As new settlements rose on the ruins of old cultural centres, the Belarusian population was brainwashed with the basic clichés of Soviet ideology, including the single destiny of the Russians and Belarusians, proletarian internationalism, and the priority of Union interests over those of its member republics.

In the Soviet Union, goods, raw materials, energy, and money were not exchanged according to market principles but were distributed in a centralised manner without consideration for the contribution of each region to the manufacture of goods. Prices for oil and gas delivered from Russia were about 2.7 times cheaper than world market prices, while light industrial goods exported from Belarus to Russia were 3 times more expensive than their would-be international equivalents (indexed with respect to quality), and food 2.6 times more expensive¹⁵. As one of the areas most affected by World War II, the economy of Belarus, with its strong partisan lobby, was fuelled by Russia's resources. As the

crisis of the Soviet system escalated, Belarus retained its privileged position in the distribution of goods and resources and appeared to be the better off for it. In the post-war Soviet period Belarusians enjoyed a higher standard of living than the populations of other Soviet republics, also with respect to the situation Belarus found itself in after the war. Belarusian party leaders lobbied on behalf of the Belarusian economy as well as on behalf of their own regions for the distribution of resources. The people in Belarus were much less discontent with the Soviet regime than the people in other Soviet republics.

A socio-cultural situation developed in post-war Belarus, affected by industrialisation accompanied by urbanisation, that Jose Ortega y Gasset had characterised as the «uprising of the masses» long before World War II. Soviet mass society developed in conjunction with the general improvement in living standards as well as with the further deterioration of social and cultural ties, already weakened by earlier events in Belarusian history. The traditional social system was being totally eradicated; systems of mass education and social care that promoted Soviet ideology were developing; the masses were moving to the cities creating a new cultural environment. The old traditions were largely lost before the war through repression and industrial development and later by the war itself. The specific Soviet identity was rapidly developing, accompanied by the quick deterioration of the ethnocultural identity of the Belarusians.

The rapid process of modernisation spearheaded by Moscow, crowned by the historical legacy of russification first imposed by the Russian empire and then the Soviet Union, left post-Soviet Belarus in a specific socio-cultural situation that hinders the development of democracy in the country.

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