

***Two Decades of Post-Communist Change in Europe and the CIS:
What Has Been Achieved? What Is Still To Be Done?***

CRCE Colloquium- September 2011

Between Russia and Europe

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Discussion Leader: Oleg Manaev

“The Last Dictatorship in Europe – Belarus, a very particular case”

The paper can be accessed at:

<http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/more-state-nation-lukashenkos-belarus>

Below are excerpts from the discussion:

Oleg Manaev: Let me remind you that despite most of post-Soviet countries being authoritarian, Belarus is the most authoritarian; because you never call Ukraine or Kazakhstan or Russia ‘A Russian dictatorship,’ or ‘A Kazakh dictatorship.’ But we used to say about Belarus that it was the last dictatorship in Europe. So let me start by briefly summarising the major features of Belarus before and during this year.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and two years after relative democratic and free behaviour; Lukashenko was elected as the first President in the summer of 1994. Since then, some elements of the market economy, political democracy, civil society and rule of law, were – not introduced, but – *allowed*. And really we have some elements of this, so we cannot say that we are a total dictatorship. We have fifteen political parties registered and we have between one quarter to thirty percent of the private sector in the economy. A second very important element of the previous development was that the majority *did* support Lukashenko. In 1994, the first free and fair one, about eighty per cent of the electorate voted for him. In 2001, 2006, and December 2010; he received around sixty per cent of the vote. I do not refer to official data from the central electoral committee, because they would say much more; the majority *did* support him. Then, the economy: During these seventeen years of his rule, the GDP growth rate was, at least since 2002, more than ten percent. It was one of the most impressive economic growth rates in the East Soviet zone, and that is to say, ten per cent per annum. For example, wages in the mid-nineties were around \$50 per month. December 2010, it was over five hundred – around 550 Euros. Of this, one estimate was that inflation was around two or three per cent for most of this period. And the last feature of the previous development is that Belarus became one of Russia's closest allies but in a different form. I could refer to Commonwealth and Independent states – and let me remind you that the headquarters of the Commonwealth was Minsk, from the beginning, then the so-called ‘Union state,’ between Russia and the union; and the relatively recent treaty for collective security defence. Finally, the most recent development, which is the customs union.

But this was before the end of 2010. Since then, most of the features mentioned have changed. For example, inflation: since January 2001 until today, inflation is almost fifty-five per cent. To answer your question, the consumer price index is sixty-five percent, this year.

External debts reach almost seventy percent of GDP. Lukashenko's rating dropped from fifty-three percent at the end of December, after the last elections; to twenty per cent now (September 2011). For the first time in the seventeen years of his rule, he and the whole ruling elite face pressures from all sides: from the EU, the West, the United States; in various forms, regarding credit, money, whatever and from the Kremlin. So we can see that the situation is changing to some extent; but the question is whether these current changes – economic, political, psychological, informational and so on – *will* bring the country to some new situation. This is my major point on this issue.

I shall cite some basic factors, or reasons, to explain why Belarus is in this format, why this situation is still sustained; why Lukashenko still gets support, and why he has continued to balance between those two super powers. The question is whether in five, ten, twenty years from now, we could expect Belarus' situation to be radically changed internally or in a geopolitical sense. So let me describe very briefly at least four basic factors that determined this very particular development of the country – even compared to Ukraine, Russia, or the Russian republics. The first factor is, I call it, the 'value split' of the society. Let me remind you that one of the most important foundations for any form of territory is a very significant split of society; winners get everything and losers nothing. This old saying fits Belarus very well. In this country's case, it means not just the substitution of one ruling elite by another; but the substitution of one value system with another value system. Now, these days, the values of national independence, political democracy, rule of law, market economy, and a return to the European family, inspired Belarussian democrats of the perestroika wave, and led to them imagining independence and democracy in the early nineties. Now these been substituted by patriarchic values, of rule over the people, fair distribution of prosperity, and restoration of the historic and cultural union – or friendship – with Russia. Moreover, the latter waves of majority were consolidated, whilst the first ones (of minority) were marginalised; the various political, legal, economic, informational, educational... instead of a system of checks and balances.

In a sense, anything could happen – because according to practice and theory, humans are the most unpredictable creatures on earth. So I cannot even disagree with you about this point. But about a contradiction between crisis and concentration of constraints and problems and obstacles now, and the status quo in the scenario that I mentioned is one of the most probable. But, let me remind you, that we have already met Lukashenko. Within his fifteen or seventeen year rule, it happened at least two or three times. For example it was after the second election in 2002, when his rating was 26% – so it dropped by half from fifty-something. And what happened then? Just one year later he did a deal with Putin on what we used to call 'off-shore' – Russian oil and gas off-shore. Since 2003 until now, as I told you, there was a rise in prosperity, because of Russian money. So we can't avoid the fact, that someone might help him. If for example I was in Putin or in Medvedev's shoes, I would use this moment. Why should I speak about democracy or whatever: this is in my national interest. Do we speak about Germans, or Hungarians, or Belarusians, and their national interest? If Russia could use this moment to strengthen their influence in a different form – in military form, or to buy some properties as they want to do here – why not? And I think sooner or later, Lukashenko will have to make some deal with them, and also with the West. And not only Russia and the West. Just last week we had a huge delegation from China, headed by a ninth or tenth ranking official. They signed a lot of contracts and one of these contracts – they had already offered one billion dollars for some Sino-Russian bill – and the

Russians were very angry about it, because during the last decade they tried to get some property in Belorussia and Lukashenko resisted and now he is allowing Chinese in.

But why exactly now? Because – you know, I’m not an economist but I do believe them – as soon as Lukashenko signed their Customs Union last year, the Russian market, through Belarus is open to Chinese investment. The Chinese are trying to infiltrate Russia from the Far East but experience many different problems. So they decided to do it, this way.

As to the point about incomplete national character, and your reference to the GDR experience: you know on the one hand it is true, but on the other hand when we speak about what was the major motivation for most nations and states at the end of the eighties, beginning of the nineties –the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist system as such – it was of course to flee from communism. But for most of them, including Hungary, it was to get away from Russia. For them it was more or less the same: *communism in Russia* and communism. That was most important. And that is why concrete forms – concrete political leaders, concrete political parties, concrete political platforms and promises of that time: they used that – to build parties, national fronts, whatever. And they used this mechanism to destroy the liberals; not physically, but in a symbolic sense.

You are right, that in this case we should speak not about the ethnic foundations of nation building, but about civil and so on. But let me stress again- this concept of civic nation-building means exactly that those elements that Lukashenko has in his hands are most important. The state, the state institutions, that symbolise nationhood for many Belarusians, and finally it means that Lukashenko is in control. And that is why for those, who feel more and more like Belarusians now, it means they feel that Lukashenko is closer to them; not for everyone, but for the majority. That is why I think that the parallel between the GDR experience and that of Belarus is not very relevant.

As for Duncan’s excellent question about the splintering of the elite, not the society: now that part of the elite who run the minority – to some extent they were represented in the legislature, in government, in local government, at the beginning of the nineties – all are oppressed. Now you cannot find *any* representative of the national democratic elite – with the emphasis on national or democratic or Christian – who is represented. If you speak about painters, you can’t find their paintings in the exhibitions; if you speak about writers, you can’t find their books in 99% of the state-run shops; not even mentioning the position of politicians. All of them are marginalised. So your question is more appropriate in the Belarusian case, about the split within the *ruling* elite. The ruling elite is more complicated. There were many cases when some former minister or governor was arrested and expelled from the country, or emigrated and so on. So it means that for the moment, to speak about a real split in the ruling elite, in the Belarusian case does not carry much weight. If by some chance Lukashenko were dismissed, most of the ruling elite would join the new leader, no doubt about it. But can we talk about the real split? I don’t think so. So in this sense, compared to the Ukrainian or Georgian or Turkish case, so why much more of a monolithic elite?