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SOCIOLOGICAL DATA ON ATTITUDES TO THE EUROPEAN UNION IN BELARUS

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A stable divide

Belarus is a paradoxical country in the geographic centre of Europe. It would seem that the nation's centuries-long development as part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania should have conditioned an overall support for the pro-European vector of the country's development following the collapse of the Soviet Union; yet it has failed to follow the path of the Baltic countries.

The framework of post-Soviet transformations was fixed firmly, first of all, by Belarusian society itself, in both its qualitative and quantitative features. A close look at the past through the prism of collected knowledge leaves no doubt that the nation had almost no chance of choosing a different path. Take the numbers for instance. A poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Study Centre (VTsIOM) in March 1991 found that 69 percent of respondents in Belarus considered themselves citizens of the USSR and only 24 percent said they were citizens of the republic in which they lived. Belarus had the highest proportion of "Soviet citizens". In Ukraine, the ratio was 42 percent to 46 percent, and three percent to 97 percent in Estonia. Even ethnic Russians living in other republics were less pro-Soviet with 66 percent associating themselves with the Soviet Union and 24 percent with its republics.[1]

The idea of national revival fell on deaf ears for about 70 percent of Belarusians, at the time when a strong sense of national identity inspired the Baltic nations to move closer to Europe. Some scientists cite the Baltic na-

[1] L. Gudkov. *Negativnaja Identichnost. Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, "VTsIOM-A". 2004, p 142

tions' shorter Soviet legacy to explain this sad fact. They say that the Bolsheviks had ruled on a greater part of Belarus' current territory since 1917, while the Baltic republics were occupied 22 years later. The latter had an opportunity to gain experience in building an independent state and form a national elite, they argue.

This is a valid argument, but it cannot by itself explain the large difference in the nations' behavioural patterns. The problem has deeper roots, and one needs to go back in history to trace them. It should be recalled that the Belarusian Socialist Hramada gained less than half a percent of the Belarusian vote in the 1917 Founding Assembly elections, which are regarded by historians as relatively democratic, like Belarus' first presidential election in 1994.

Belarusian speakers began forming an elite in the late 20th century, when the nation-building processes in Europe were close to their conclusion. That was a result of diverse factors beginning with the Polonisation of the Belarusian nobility in the Rzeczpospolita and ending with the Russian Empire's Russification policies. Not insignificantly, the ethnic Belarusian territory had no university that could bring up nationalist-minded people.

According to the 1897 census, most ethnic Belarusians, 92 percent, were engaged in traditional agriculture and only 1.1 were employed in the manufacturing sector. People of free professions made up a very small percentage of the population. Three in four Belarusian speakers aged between 10 and 49 were illiterate. Valer Bulhakau, author of *The History of Belarusian Nationalism*[2], made the justified conclusion that the success of nation-building hinges on a balance between those who can propose a nation-building plan, and a critical mass of those who can embrace it. Belarusian cities definitely fell short of the required critical mass in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it would be an exaggeration to define them as Belarusian. According to the above-mentioned census, Belarusians accounted for no more than 10 percent of the population in cities of more than 10,000.

According to the VTsIOM poll of March 1991 this proportion has not changed significantly over time. The results gave a view of the structure of Belarusian society that is instrumental for understanding its nature and analysing social trends in Belarus, including changes in people's views on geopolitical priorities.

[2] V. Bulgakov, *Istorija belorusskogo natsionalizma,*Vilnius, Institut Belorusistiki, 2006, pp 277-287

Let us consider Table 1.[3]

Table 1. Who did you vote for in the recent presidential election? (%)

Answer	1994	2001	2006
Alyaksandr Lukashenka	34.7*	48.2	58.2
Pro-democracy candidates	**26.4**	**21.0**	**23.5**
Other candidates	18.9	2.9	2.0
No answer/refused to answer	1.6	8.6	5.2
Against all	4.4	7.1	3.2
Did not vote	14.0	12.1	8.0

* First round data

There are striking differences between the socio-political situations in Belarus in 1994, 2001 and 2006. The first presidential election was held amidst a major crisis, as GDP had plunged by 13.3 percent that year. The country's economic performance had improved by 2001, with Lukashenka reporting to delegates at the Second Belarusian People's Congress that "Gross Domestic Product has grown by 36 percent over the last five years. Industrial output was up 65 percent and fixed capital expenditures up 26 percent. Last year, industrial output, consumer goods production, people's real income and other indicators surpassed the 1990 pre-crisis level (the most effective year of the Soviet era in terms of economic indicators."[4]

Five years later, speaking at the Third Belarusian People's Congress, Lukashenka looked even more confident. "Today we live in a stable, trouble-free and civilised country. We have a strong economy, developed science and culture and one of the world's best education systems. National security is completely assured. We have learned to cope with difficult tasks, to implement big projects, to perform effective, fruitful and high-quality work."

Polls suggest that Lukashenka's conclusions were correct. Optimism about family living standards climbed over the five years from 9.1 percent in October 2001 to 23.6 percent in 2006. The proportion of those dissatisfied with their financial situation shrank in the same period from 32.4 percent to 16.4 percent.

[3] When not specified otherwise, all poll results were found on the website of the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), www.iiseps.org.

[4] The Belarusian People's Congress is an assembly that Lukashenka convenes before presidential elections and referenda. The Belarusian Constitution makes no mention of the assembly.

Lukashenka's arguments about successes achieved under his rule look especially credible against the backdrop of remarks he had made at the First Belarusian People's Congress. He began his speech with the following statement, "We face a choice: either Belarus remains a hostage held by politicians seeking revenge over their losses, or we establish a proper legal order and concentrate all the forces of the people on the solution of urgent problems."

The economic upturn recorded during Lukashenka's presidency did not reflect on overall support for pro-democracy candidates such as Zyanon Paznyak and Stanislau Shushkevich in 1994, Uladzimir Hancharyk in 2001, and Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin in 2006. It is possible to see that the percentage of pro-democracy supporters has been relatively the same over the years, by adding half the number of respondents who failed/found it difficult to answer (an analysis proves this formula quite reliable) to the number of votes the opposition candidates captured in elections.

Let us consider Table 2.

Table 2. What language do you use in day-to-day communication? (%)

Language	**1994**	**2001**	**2006**
Belarusian	17,3	1,7	3,5
Russian	66,6	46,4	61,0
Russian and Belarusian	7,0	20,9	12,9
Mixed	6,4	30,0	21.4
Other	1,6	0,1	0,2

Numbers of Belarusian speakers shrank from 17.3 percent in 1994 to just 1.7 percent before the next presidential election held in 2001. The sharp decrease could be blamed on Lukashenka's Russification policies. But then it would be difficult to explain a 20.2-point fall in the number of those using only Russian on a daily basis.

A possible explanation is that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people in the former Soviet republics were more ready to mobilise to support certain ideals. In Belarus, the nation's mobilisation readiness was even higher. The politically-charged environment prompted people to choose in favour of one language or the other. The proportion of bilingual speakers and those using *trasyanka* (a mixture of the two languages) was very low.

If this explanation is correct, it proves a rigid structure of the Belarusian electorate. In 1994, both Stanislau Shushkevich, former speaker of the Su-

preme Soviet, and Zyanon Paznyak, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), employed pro-democracy and pro-independence rhetoric, but it did not help them win additional votes.

Torn between East and West

The above-cited examples of voting in presidential elections illustrate a socio-cultural divide in Belarusian society. It is very important to trace the cause and effect relationship. The split manifested itself in an interesting Belarusian phenomenon -- a steep decline in Lukashenka's national poll ratings after the 2001 presidential election to a record low of 27 percent in September 2002 failed to translate into a rise in support for his political opponents. The nation is divided not along the lines of approval/disapproval of the authoritarian leader, but depending on the possession or lack of certain personal resources.

Lukashenka scored better among older rural women with a low level of education, i.e. those who would not survive without state support under free market conditions. On the contrary, opponents did better among educated young men living in big cities. The former outnumber the latter by a proportion of approximately seven to three. The ratio has not changed over the years as more people reach retirement age.

Based on this presumed structure of Belarusian society, it is easy to understand that the proportion of staunch supporters of integration into the European Union stands close to 30 percent. Numbers cited in Tables 3 and 4, in general, prove this conclusion (the reasons for an unusual rise in support for EU membership in December 2002 and a temporary drop in September 2008 will be explained below).

Table 3. If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote?

Answer	12'02	12'05	11'06	03'08	09'08	10'08
Yes	**60.9**	32.0	36.0	35.4	**26.7**	36.0
No	10.9	26.8	36.2	35.4	51.9	39.1
Would not vote	10.0	20.4	15.5	15.4	12.2	14.0
Failed/found it difficult to answer	18.2	20.8	12.3	13.8	9.2	10.9

Table 4. If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose?

Answer	09'03	03'04	06'06	03'08	09'08	10'08
Unification with Russia	47.6	41.0	52.3	45.3	54.0	48.1
EU membership	36.1	36.5	29.6	33.4	26.2	31.1
Failed/found it difficult to answer	16.3	22.5	18.1	21.3	19.8	20.8

The IISEPS surveys make it possible to identify the integration priorities of various social and demographic groups.

Table 5 shows that opinions are not significantly divided along gender lines. Support for EU membership is 5.5 percentage points higher among men, and not much fewer men are opposed to the idea. A similar pattern holds for the question about a possible referendum on Belarus' entry into the EU.

Table 5. Integration priorities of the population depending on sex*

Answer	Men	Women
Should Belarus join the EU? (09'05)		
Yes	41.0	35.5
No	42.8	44.9
If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote?(11'06)		
Yes	39.1	33.5
No	33.6	38.4
Would not vote	15.4	15.5
If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose? (01'07)		
Unification with Russia	45.1	51.4
Integration into EU	39.0	29.2
Do you think that the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus and that Belarusians should be wary of it? (09'05)		
Yes	43.0	45.6
No	46.4	39.4
Confidence in international organisations (UN, OSCE, EU, European Parliament, Council of Europe etc.) (09'05)		
I have confidence	39.0	38.4
I do not have confidence	40.6	32.4

* Here and below the month and year of the survey are indicated in brackets.

More men and women favour unification with Russia than EU membership, but 1.8 times more women support the pro-Russian choice, compared to the 1.2 times higher support among men.

More men do not consider the West to be hostile toward Belarus, while more women said the West takes a hostile attitude to the country. At the same time, the difference between the opposing points of view is not very big.

The same proportion, 40 percent, of men and women expressed confidence in various international organisations, but more men said they had no confidence in international organisations.

Differences in opinion are greater among various age groups. As Table 6 indicates, nearly half (49.3 percent) of respondents under 30 advocate EU membership, with only 33.1 percent members of the same group are opposed to it. Meanwhile, people over 50 are more likely to vote against EU membership — 52 percent were opposed to it and only 25.4 welcomed the idea. As for the middle age group (30 to 49 years), they are split down the middle. A similar pattern holds for the question of a possible referendum on Belarus' entry into the EU: younger respondents are more likely they are to say "Yes" to EU membership, while older respondents are likely to say "No."

The age factor plays an important role in people's integration preferences. The polls suggest that unification with Russia is more popular with older persons, while pro-EU sentiments are higher among younger groups of respondents.

Assessments of the West's attitude to Belarus also differ depending on age. More than half of respondents in the oldest age group said that the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus, compared to 36.7 percent in the youngest age group. On the contrary, nearly 52 percent of respondents in the youngest age group do not consider the West to be hostile toward Belarus, compared with slightly over 34 percent in the oldest age bracket. Respondents were split down the middle in the middle age group (the difference was within the margin of error).

Belarusians' attitudes to international organisations also depend on their age. The polls found that 44 percent of respondents in the youngest age group had confidence in international organisations, while about 32 percent had no confidence in international organisations. The proportion was 32.4 percent to 39.1 percent, respectively, in the oldest age group. In all, the number of those who approve of international organisations was 2.5-percent higher than the number of those who question their credentials because six-percent more people had a favourable opinion in the middle age group.

Table 6. Integration priorities of the population depending on age

Answer	Under 30	30-49 years old	Over 50
Should Belarus join the EU? (09'05)			
Yes	49.3	43.9	25.4
No	33.1	42.4	52.0
If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote? (11'06)			
Yes	52.7	38.5	23.7
No	20.5	32.3	49.6
Would not vote	12.2	16.8	16.0
If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose? (01'07)			
Unification with Russia	31.5	43.1	64.0
EU membership	55.2	38.2	16.5
Do you think that the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus and that Belarusians should be wary of it? (09'05)			
Yes	36.7	42.7	50.8
No	51.9	45.6	34.1
Confidence in international organisations (UN, OSCE, EU, European Parliament, Council of Europe etc.) (09'05)			
I have confidence	43.9	41.7	32.4
I do not have confidence	31.6	35.8	39.1

Opinions on integration priorities also considerably differ among various groups categorised on the basis of education (see Table 7). Less educated persons were more likely to be opposed to EU membership (more than 53 percent). Only 23.3 percent of respondents in this group would like the country to join the EU. Holders of higher education degrees were more likely to vote in favour of the EU, as 51.5 percent were in favour of membership and 35.2 percent opposed to it. People holding secondary education certificates support and oppose EU membership roughly in equal numbers. A similar pattern holds for the question about a possible referendum on EU membership.

Less educated people were more likely to be wary of the West. In particular, 52.4 percent of respondents who had not completed secondary school said the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus (almost double the number of those who thought the opposite), while 43.1 percent of higher education degree holders are apprehensive of the West, compared to 46.8 percent who did not consider the West to be hostile.

More educated people have more confidence in international organisations (from 31.3 percent in the least educated group to 40.9 percent among those with a higher education degree). However, the proportion of those disapproving of international organisations is roughly equal in the least and most educated groups (the difference is within the margin of error). The level of distrust of international organisations is the lowest (34.3 percent) among people with secondary education.

Table 7. The population's integration priorities depending on education,%

Answer	Below secondary education	Secondary, including technical school	Higher, incomplete higher education
Should Belarus join the EU? (09'05)			
Yes	23.3	41.1	51.5
No	53.1	42.2	35.2
If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote? (11'06)			
Yes	25.0	38.7	44.6
No	46.0	33.1	31.8
Would not vote	18.1	15.7	8.4
If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose? (01'07)			
Unification with Russia	68.2	43.6	34.5
EU membership	11.7	37.7	55.2
Do you think that the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus and that Belarusians should be wary of it? (09'05)			
Yes	52.6	41.3	43.1
No	28.2	47.8	46.8
Confidence in international organisations (UN, OSCE, EU, European Parliament, Council of Europe etc.) (09'05)			
I have confidence	31.3	41.2	40.9
I do not have confidence	39.1	34.3	38.2

As indicated in Table 8, the idea of EU membership found most support among students (55.7 percent) and private sector employees (52.3 percent). In the former category, the number of supporters was 33 percent higher than the number of opponents. Supporters outnumbered opponents by 14 percent in the latter category. The poll found more pro-EU housewives and unemployed persons, although the difference is within the margin of error. Opponents of EU membership dominate among pensioners and public sector em-

ployees. Opponents held an edge of nearly 32 percentage points in the former group (53.7 percent to 22 percent) and of 3.2 percent in the latter group (43.3 percent to 40.1 percent). A similar pattern holds for the question of a possible referendum on Belarus' entry into the EU.

Quite naturally, supporters of unification with Russia dominate among pensioners, 66.8 percent (five times the number of EU membership advocates) and public sector employees, 47.3 percent (1.5 times the number of EU membership proponents), as well as among housewives and the unemployed, 48.3 percent. The idea is not popular with students, with only 24.6 percent embracing it.

Table 8. Integration priorities of the population depending on occupation, %

Answer	Public sector employees	Private sector employees	Pensioners	Students	Housewives, the unemployed
Should Belarus join the EU? (09'05)					
Yes	40.1	52.3	22.0	55.7	42.4
No	43.3	38.3	53.7	22.8	40.0
If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote? (11'06)					
Yes	36.2	46.2	22.8	67.3	37.9
No	34.4	28.1	50.7	13.6	25.7
Would not vote	15.8	12.2	16.2	10.7	24.7
If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose? (01'07)					
Unification with Russia	47.3	32.4	66.8	24.6	48.3
EU membership	31.7	56.7	13.3	59.4	39.4
Do you think that the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus and that Belarusians should be wary of it? (09'05)					
Yes	45.9	33.3	51.1	35.4	42.4
No	41.3	58.3	32.2	46.8	50.6
Confidence in international organisations (UN, OSCE, EU, European Parliament, Council of Europe etc.) (09'05)					
Confident	41.9	41.7	31.7	45.6	30.6
Mistrustful	33.3	40.2	39.2	26.6	37.6

There is a widely held perception that the West is hostile toward Belarus among pensioners (51.1 percent) and public sector employees (45.9 percent). The opposite point of view dominates among private sector employees (58.3 percent), housewives and the unemployed (50.6 percent) and students (46.8 percent).

Opinions on international organisations are more favourable among students (45.6 percent) and public and private sector employees (about 42 percent), but the proportion of those with a positive opinion of international organisations is lower among housewives and the unemployed (30.6 percent) and pensioners (31.7 percent).

Students were least likely to be suspicious of international organisations, with only 26.6 percent registering their disapproval. More respondents are wary of international organisations among private sector employees (40.2 percent) and pensioners (39.2 percent).

Thus, one can draw the conclusion that pensioners and public sector workers give preference to unification with Russia, while private sector employees and students are mostly in favour of EU membership.

As indicated in Table 9, residents of larger cities are more likely to endorse Belarus' EU membership bid. The proportion of pro-EU residents is higher in regional cities (51.3 percent) and lower in villages (27.9 percent). However, replies to the question about a possible referendum on Belarus' entry into the EU did not show any difference in opinions among various locations — roughly the same numbers would vote for and against (the difference is within the margin of error).

There is not a big divergence in response patterns between cities and villages as regards the question of choosing between two alternatives — the EU or Russia. It should be noted that Belarusians are often hesitant when faced with a tough choice between two alternative options.

As for perceptions of the West, the proportion of people who considered it hostile toward Belarus was smaller in regional cities (36.5 percent) and small towns (43.1 percent), and larger in villages (50.2 percent) and big cities (50 percent). Those who did not consider the West hostile considerably outnumbered those who held the opposite opinion (51.3 percent to 36.5 percent) in regional cities.

Polls found more favourable opinions of international organisations in small towns (45 percent said they had confidence in international organisations) and regional cities (42.4 percent). Only 29.8 percent of big city residents registered approval of international organisations. Regional cities had fewer residents distrustful of international organisations (29.8), while in other settlements non-confidence levels stood between 37 and 40 percent. Sceptics outnumber sympathisers (39.4 percent to 29.8 percent) in big cities only.

The attitudes might be linked to the distribution of humanitarian aid, which is channelled to regional cities first and then delivered to small towns and villagers. But this theory is yet to be verified.

In general, one may draw the conclusion that residents in smaller settlements tend to approve of unification with Russia, while closer ties with the EU find more support in bigger towns and cities.

Table 9. Integration priorities of the population depending on place of residence, %

Answer	Regional cities (except Minsk)	Big cities	Small towns	Villages
Should Belarus join the EU?(09'05)				
Yes	51.3	38.6	38.9	27.9
No	32.2	40.7	41.8	55.0
If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote? (11'06)				
Yes	34.8	38.4	36.9	35.5
No	35.3	39.7	35.0	34.3
Would not vote	17.6	14.5	16.8	16.4
If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose?(01'07)				
Unification with Russia	47.1	56.0	44.9	51.5
EU membership	35.2	31.5	33.7	24.4
Do you think that the West takes a hostile attitude to Belarus and that Belarusians should be wary of it?(09'05)				
Yes	36.5	50.0	43.1	50.2
No	51.3	35.5	38.7	38.1
Confidence in international organisations (UN, OSCE, EU, European Parliament, Council of Europe etc.)(09'05)				
Confident	42.4	29.8	45.0	39.3
Mistrustful	23.6	39.4	39.7	37.2

The idea of EU membership is more popular in Minsk than in other cities in Belarus. The opposition could take advantage of pro-EU sentiments in the capital.

Non-patriotic youths

Belarus has an open economy. In addition, the country borders EU member states in the west and north. Therefore, people's sympathetic attitude to

the EU, registered in national polls, poses a serious threat to Belarusian stability and Lukashenka's autocratic regime. The Belarusian leader is aware of the threat. Let me quote one of his statements to prove it. "Neither the government nor local authorities should forget that we must considerably raise people's incomes in the next few years. If, for instance, wages in the neighbouring countries amount to $1000, we must follow suit. We must not lag behind."[5]

Respondents' answers to the question, "If you had an opportunity, would you accept temporary employment in a European Union country?" prove that he had reasons to worry. A poll conducted in December 2007 found 47.7 percent willing to accept a temporary job in the EU. Taking into consideration the fact that one in three Belarusians is a retiree, nearly all working-age Belarusians would like to work in the EU. The number is indicative of the poor competitiveness of "the Belarusian model of economic development", touted by the pro-government media.

Table 10 helps trace changes in the number of Belarusians seeking to move to other countries for permanent residence. The first thing that catches one's eye is the lack of any change in the numbers. The total number of people seeking to leave the country has not changed over the last eight years. Interestingly, the proportion did not change when Lukashenka's approval ratings hit an all-time low in 2003, when people's income stopped rising, and when it hit an all-time high before the 2006 presidential election. It did not increase considerably amid inflation fears that gripped the nation in December 2007.

Table 10. Answers to the question "Would you like to move to another country for permanent residence?" in various opinion polls, %

Answer	11'99	11'00	10'01	09'02	09'03	06'04	06'06	12'07
To Germany	15.2	14.1	18.5	13.3	13.2	13.5	11.4	9.0
To the United States	11.5	11.1	6.1	8.6	7.7	9.8	7.2	8.7
To Russia	1.3	3.2	3.6	4.3	6.5	6.3	4.3	5.6
To Poland	3.9	3.1	5.8	5.7	4.9	5.4	5.0	4.3
To Baltic countries	1.8	1.3	1.8	1.7	1.7	3.8	2.9	2.7
To another country	4.7	7.1	6.3	4.7	4.8	4.0	2.7	5.7
Total	48.8	39.9	48.0	45.4	42.9	47.9	42.4	44.7
I do not want to move anywhere	61.2	60.1	52.0	54.6	57.1	52.1	57.6	55.3

[5] Doklad "Vozrozhdenie malykh gorodov i poselkov — prioritetnaja zadacha sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitija strany" 29.12.2007

Although the total number of Belarusians willing to settle in another country has not changed considerably, certain variations can be observed in their choices. Germany and the United States were less attractive destinations in December 2007 as more people were contemplating departure for a neighbouring country, mainly for Russia. People who change their country of residence are usually quite practical. Flush with money from oil and gas sales, Russia offered bright prospects to young and educated Belarusians.

The above-mentioned change in the preferences of anti-patriots takes us back to the problem of the competitiveness of the much-advertised "Belarusian model of economic development." It is definitely losing out to its neighbours.

Not surprisingly, people critical of Lukashenka are twice as likely as his supporters to declare their readiness to leave the country (60.2 percent vs. 32.1 percent). As a rule, they are younger and more educated than their political opponents, i.e. have more of the assets (personal resources) mentioned earlier. They think they have better prospects in market economies. Table 11 shows a link between the desire to move to another country, readiness to vote for Lukashenka and the age of respondents. That a correlation exists is obvious. As people grow older, they are less disposed to changing their lifestyles (and places of residence) in a radical way, and develop a greater need of support from the state.

Table 11. Links between the desire to move to another country, readiness to vote for Lukashenka and age.

Age	**18-29**	**30-39**	**40-49**	**50-59**	**60 and over**
Do not want to move	27.8	50.0	57.4	63.7	77.8
Ready to vote for Lukashenka	19.2	25.4	34.3	45.5	70.7

Thus, Belarusians in their productive prime do not need a country called Belarus with an authoritarian regime. They prefer to realise themselves abroad. As people grow older, they tend to have a better opinion of their country - in fact it would be more correct to say "of the state," not "of their country." They hold on to the state that, as Russian political analyst T. Sergeytsev put it, "tries to justify its existence through social payoffs, on the basis of which it wants to possess socially secure citizens in a feudalist way, to exploit their dependency and their votes."[6] As long as such a state has enough money to pay out social

[6] T. Sergeytsev, *Proekt Demokratii*. http://shh.neolain.lv/seminar14/alm8.sergejsev.htm

benefits, the mutual dependence of an authoritarian state and the citizens addicted to its generous handouts guarantees political and social stability.

"Oil offshoring" and geopolitical priorities

The idea of fixed opinion patterns in Belarusian society does not seem to hold water, taking into account the fluctuations in pro-EU sentiment noted in Table 3. Support for possible EU membership plunged from 60.9 percent in December 2002 to 36 percent in October 2008. Clearly, a change in social values cannot explain such a large deviation over such a short period of time.

Values evolve so slowly that it is almost impossible to trace changes using national opinion polls. Surveys usually reflect changes in public sentiments. The steep decline in support for EU membership is a phenomenon of the same type. After generous social payouts made before the second presidential election in 2001, most Belarusians were unhappy that their incomes stopped rising in the following years.

Let us examine Table 12. The second presidential poll was held in September 2001. That explains a rise in the number of optimistic replies to the question, "How has life changed for you and your family since 1994?" After the election, optimism fell to its pre-election level. It should be noted that the Belarusian government took advantage of favourable terms of oil trading to launch, in late 2003, a scheme often referred to as "oil offshore."[7] The government used profits from petroleum sales to raise wages and pensions. The authorities hiked wages and pensions in the lead-up to the 2006 presidential election.

Table 12. How has changed for you and your family life since 1994?

Answer	04'01	10'01	09'02	06'06
For the better	**11.8**	**22.8**	**13.8**	**51.2**
Has not changed	27.7	34.2	33.1	27.1
For the worse	50.7	38.3	48.5	17.4

[7] "Oil offshore" enabled the Belarusian government to earn billions in profits by buying Russian oil at below-market prices without paying any duty, and selling petroleum products to Europe at market prices.

Rises in income levels are a very strong factor that can contribute to geopolitical change, and could be significantly influencing Belarusians' views on politics and the economy. Table 13 provides examples that prove this assumption.

Table 13. Electorate structure

Types of electorate	04'00	10'01	09'02	06'06
Stalwart supporters of Lukashenka*	15.5	20.2	10.7	21.9
Undecided	54.2	43.9	48.0	47.0
Stalwart opponents of Lukashenka**	30.3	35.9	41.3	31.1

* Stalwart supporters are ready to vote for Lukashenka in the next presidential elections and elections for the president of a Russian-Belarusian Union State. They approve of his performance in the job and consider him an ideal politician.
** Stalwart opponents would not support Lukashenka on all the above-mentioned points.

Naturally, rises and falls in income are not the only factor responsible for changes in public moods. For instance, what explanation can be given for an abrupt decline in support for EU membership in September 2008? (See Table 14). The steep fall over a short period came as a surprise to sociologists, especially in the context of the government's efforts to improve relations with the European Union and EU-friendly statements made by officials in the run-up to the parliamentary elections.

Table 14. If a referendum on Belarus' entry into the European Union were held now, how would you vote? %

Answer	12'05	11'06	12'07	03'08	09'08	10'08
For	32.0	36.0	37.1	35.4	**26.7**	36,0
Against	26.8	36.2	35.0	35.4	51.9	39.1
Would not vote	20.4	15.5	16.3	15.4	12.2	14.0
Failed/ found it difficult to answer	20.8	12.3	11.6	13.8	9.2	10.9

A recorded surge in support for unification with Russia, from 38.7 percent in 2008 to 46.3 percent in September 2008, proves that the waning of pro-EU sentiment is not a result of possible polling flaws. Just like the decrease in pro-EU support, it is difficult to link the rise in pro-Russian responses to specific developments in Belarusian-Russian relations. The considerable change seems to have been unmotivated.

The war that broke out between Russia and Georgia in August is the only possible explanation of the unexpected change in attitudes. The conflict did not go unnoticed in Belarus. Belarusians did not hesitate to answer the question, "Who do you think is to blame for the conflict between Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia?" Most respondents, 55.9 percent, blamed Georgia, 35.1 percent pointed the finger at the United States and only 8.4 percent accused Russia.

That such a large role was assigned to the United States in a local armed conflict in the Caucasus may at first seem surprising , but the answer to the puzzle is quite simple.

Russia's Levada Centre conducted a survey between August 15-18, hot on the heels of the war. The poll found 49 percent of Russians blaming the war on "the US leadership's desire to expand its influence to Russia's neighbours." Only 32 percent noted the role of the Georgian leadership with "its discriminatory policy with regard to the Ossetia and Abkhazia population." Thus, the Kremlin's large-scale brainwashing campaign worked, but only to some extent. Its reverberations were detected in Belarus by an IISEPS poll conducted in September.

The Russian media have retained much of their influence in Belarus in the years that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. They succeeded in imposing on Belarusians a pro-Russian view of the war. Clearly, public opinion went back to its normal state as soon as the war was over and the discourse of the elites was exhausted.

It should be noted that the maximum deviation of public opinion from its average level is greater in Table 4 than it is in Table 3. Not surprisingly, deviations are always smaller if respondents face a tough choice, in this particular case between Russia and the EU.

The conclusion made earlier, that Belarusian views on economic, political and social trends depend on changes in income levels, can be substantiated by examining answers to the question, "How do you think people live in neighbouring countries?" (Table 15). As people's financial situation improved, more respondents believed that living standards were declining in neighbouring countries. Such a change in comparative assessments had nothing to do with the real situation in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

To conclude the examination of Belarusians' geopolitical priorities, let us briefly dwell on the eastern vector of Belarusian integration. As indicated in

Table 16, support for a merger of Belarus and Russia into one state fell considerably after 2001. This trend is attributable to corrections made by the ruling elite to its integration plans. In the first few years after Belarus gained its independence, the pre-Lukashenka and Lukashenka ruling elites regarded Russia as the only guarantor of its political survival. But as time went by, its need for internal legitimacy grew and it came to realise the importance of creating a sense of national identity. For that purpose, it sponsored state ideology textbooks and courses in 2003 and launched the "For Belarus" pro-independence campaign in the lead-up to the 2006 presidential election.

Table 15. How do you think people live in neighbouring countries?

Answer	Better than in Belarus			Living is the same as in Belarus			Living is worse than in Belarus		
	03'05	04'06	08'06	03'05	04'06	08'06	03'05	04'06	08'06
In Poland	63.1	50.8	46.2	15.2	26.0	22.5	2.9	11.4	14.9
In Latvia	47.6	39.7	34.1	19.1	26.3	23.3	6.4	18.0	21.9
In Lithuania	45.7	36.8	33.1	20.8	27.3	25.0	6.2	20.0	21.9
In Russia	28.9	24.6	21.2	40.4	40.7	44.6	15.9	28.1	23.6
In Ukraine	11.2	10.9	8.4	30.9	26.0	29.3	41.6	56.1	50.6

Table 16. Best option for relations between Belarus and Russia

Answer	09'98	11'99	08'00	08'01	02'06
A union of independent states	28.1	33.4	37.2	41.2	41.5
Good-neighbourly relations between two independent states	50.8	42.4	37.7	35.9	41.4
Unification into one state	20.1	21.8	22.5	21.2	14.8

Naturally, a change was observed not only in support for integration with Russia but also in Belarusians' perceptions of the acceptable degree of integration (see Table 17). More Belarusians want the government to maintain the same relations with Russia as with other CIS countries.

Certainly, propaganda spread throughout the media does have an effect on Belarusians' geopolitical preferences. But its role should not be exaggerated. Given the socio-cultural divide and in spite of their complete domination, the state-controlled media can only influence supporters of the authoritarian government. In the same manner, the opposition media has an observable effect only on ideo-

logical supporters of the opposition. Moreover, the example of a change in public opinion following the Russian-Georgian war proves that large-scale brainwashing campaigns involving the media can have only a short-term effect.

Table 17. What option for integration of Belarus and Russia would you prefer personally? *(more than one answer possible)*

Answer	12'02	03'04	11'04	06'06	12'07
The countries should form a union of independent states bound by close political and economic ties	51.7	50.1	47.8	44.7	43.8
Relations should be the same as with other CIS countries	19.7	27.0	32.1	25.1	36.3
The countries should form one state with one president, government, army, flag and currency	21.2	13.8	11.6	21.8	13.1

Effects of propaganda on geopolitical choices

Table 18 makes it possible to assess the effects of the anti-Western propaganda campaign launched by the Belarusian authorities in the lead-up to the 2006 presidential election (it added 10.5 percentage points to perceptions of the "threat from the West", compared with June 2004). The table lists issues of concern to Belarusians, depending on their significance. Table 15 suggests that Belarusians do not perceive a threat posed by the West to be the most pressing worry.

Table 19 shows the top concerns of supporters and opponents of the Belarusian leader in December 2007. The issues are arranged in three groups. The first features worries shared by the supporters and opponents of Lukashenka. The second includes issues of greater concern to Lukashenka supporters than to opponents, and the third vice versa.

Table 19 suggests that all Belarusians share concerns about the economy (an industrial downturn and rising prices), the decline of national culture and a split in society (it should be noted that the latter is too abstract an issue for the public).

A threat from the West worries three times as many Lukashenka supporters as his opponents. Quite unexpectedly, more Lukashenka supporters worry about a threat to Belarus' independence. This may be a result of a government-sponsored propaganda campaign: the state-controlled media started giving prominence to the issue in 2006.

Table 18. What problems are the most pressing for our country and its citizens?" % (more than one answer is possible)

Answer	09'99	09'02	06'04	06'06	12'07	*
Rising prices	82.7	71.9	73.2	60.1	84.2	+24.2
Poverty	73.2	60.6	58.0	19.5	34.7	+15.2
Crime	44.6	49.4	37.3	23.2	26.9	+3.7
Unemployment	35.7	35.3	49.7	37.0	38.3	+1.3
Industrial downturn	31.8	38.7	22.2	18.7	20.6	+1.9
Corruption, bribery	29.7	27.8	35.6	27.6	33.4	+5.8
Chernobyl aftermath	29.5	19.7	21.1	25.5	22.3	—3.2
Lack of law and order	24.6	27.4	32.9	22.1	21.3	—0.8
Human rights violations	23.3	25.2	30.4	22.1	25.6	+3.5
Decline of national culture	13.1	10.2	13.8	10.8	12.8	+2.0
Threat from the West	**9.3**	**3.6**	**7.7**	**18.2**	**12.0**	**—6.2**
Belarus' international isolation	9.1	14.4	14.7	14.4	14.5	+0.1
Split in society	5.0	5.2	8.9	7.3	7.2	—0.1
Risk of Belarus losing its independence	—	10.2	7.2	8.3	8.4	+0.1
Population decline	—	—	19.8	21.9	20.1	—1.8

*The difference between the results of polls conducted in December 2007 and June 2006

Table 19. What issues are the most pressing for our country and its citizens? Replies have been sorted based on the respondent' attitude to Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Answer	Lukashenka supporters	Opponents of Lukashenka	Difference
Group 1			
Decline of national culture	12.5	11.5	+1.0
Industrial downturn	19.9	20.6	—0.7
Split in society	8.5	9.1	—0.6
Rising prices	84.1	83.7	—0.4
Group 2			
Crime	35.1	19.6	+15.5
Chernobyl aftermath	27.8	14.3	+13.5
Threat from the West	**17.4**	**6.1**	**+11.3**
Population decline	23.6	16.1	+7.5
Risk of Belarus losing its independence	9.8	4.4	+5.8
Group 3			
Human rights violations	11.5	43.3	—31.8
Poverty	25.7	45.5	—19.8
Corruption, bribery	26.9	40.7	—13.8
Belarus' international isolation	9.0	22.0	—13.0
Lack of law and order	18.0	27.9	—9.9
Unemployment	37.0	42.4	—5.4

Those opposed to Lukashenka increasingly worry about human rights abuses, Belarus' international isolation, the rule of law, corruption and unemployment.

So, how do supporters and opponents of the president perceive the West while watching TV? There is no definite answer to this question, because the one who "orders the picture" always acts to suit the politics of the moment.

Quotes from a news conference that Lukashenka gave on 20 March 2006 testify to the use of diverse approaches to drive home certain ideas.

"Despite the overt foreign diktat and colossal pressure from the outside, they did not manage to break us down. Quite the contrary, these efforts achieved the opposite effect. The Belarusian people are a nation that cannot be manipulated. It makes no sense to put pressure on it. The results of voting proved this with all certainty." In this remark, Lukashenka portrayed the West as an enemy, indicating that the nation should rally round him to resist its pressure. He also seizes the opportunity to create an image of a firm and invincible nation.

"Secondly, and this is probably the most important argument against those who criticise us, early voting has been practised in most countries of the world, including super-democracies, in inverted commas, like the United States, Germany and others. They do not see it as falsification. Moreover, they vote by mail. Imagine us introducing the same clause and voting by mail? We would probably be wiped off the surface of the Earth."

In this statement he takes a different approach. He seeks to discredit his opponents by using the argument, "Do not blame the mirror for the ugly face." He tries to make it clear to Belarusians that the West's claims of ideological and cultural superiority are unfounded.

"Thirdly, what kind of falsification are they talking about, if more than 1,200 international observers, more than 30,000 local observers and more than 1,000 journalists monitored the election? I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to local and international observers, most of whom contributed their constructive deeds to the conduct of a really free and fair election." In this statement, Lukashenka unexpectedly goes positive, depicting the international community as the highest criterion for appraising the achievements of the Belarusian regime.

"Belarusians take a very respectful attitude to the peoples of the United States of America and the European Union. But this does not mean that we

are ready to modify ourselves to meet some standards applied by Washington, Brussels or Warsaw. Whether others like it or not, the Belarusians will remain Belarusians in the 21st century — a European nation with its own state, culture and traditions." In this remark, Lukashenka indicates that the nation follows "a special path," employing a negative demonstration to justify its choice. If there is no West, there is no "special path."

Table 20 features results of an IISEPS poll conducted in April 2007 and a Levada Centre[8] survey performed in March 2006. The propaganda of the "special path", carried out over many years, seems to have found a receptive audience. More than half of Belarusians said that the nation follows a special path.

Table 20. What do you think Belarus' historic path is? What do you think Russia's historic path is?

Answer	Belarus (04'07)	Russia (03'06)
The common path of European civilisation	17.3	29.5
The country should return to the Soviet path	25.5	19.2
Unique, special path	56.8	51.2
Failed to answer	0.4	0.1

"The dynamics of socioeconomic development in the last few years, our people's industriousness and their sense of purpose give me confidence that the living standards of Belarusian families will climb to the average European level. On the international arena, we will continue to pursue a peaceful multidimensional foreign policy, strengthen good neighbourly relations with everybody. Belarus has never threatened anyone. But we will defend our independence and national interests by all civilised means. Me and you, we have earned it through hard work." This is yet another reference to the "special path," with Lukashenka expecting the West to attest that this is the right choice. Belarus, which has borders with EU countries, cannot fence itself off from the West. That is why he often evokes the West in his statements.

As noted earlier, the government controls all major media outlets in the country, while the opposition has access to a handful of periodicals and foreign-based broadcast media that have a small audience. Table 21 features results of a survey conducted in October 2008.

[8] The Levada Centre was established by prominent Russian sociologist Yury Levada in 2003.

Table 21. What TV channels do you watch?

Answer	Watch	Do not watch
Belarusian TV channels (BT, ONT, STV etc.)	90.1	9.1
Russian TV channels (ORT, RTR, NTV etc.)	84.0	14.4
Local TV	46.2	51.0
Cable TV	39.0	58.3
Satellite TV	18.3	78.6
Euronews Russian Service	16.2	80.5
Polish TV	8.4	88.0
RTVI weekly show for Belarus	7.6	88.9
New independent channel Belsat	4.1	92.3

The Internet remains the only source of information uncontrolled by the government. Table 22 shows an increase in the number of Internet users in the last eight years. Internet penetration has nearly quadrupled among adults from 9.7 percent to 35.9 percent. The number of users has been rising by 25 percent a year.

Table 22. Do you use the Internet?

Answer	08'01	12'02	09'03	11'04	12'05	11'06	05'07	09'08
Yes	9.7	15.9	17.3	16.4	24.7	29.2	30.0	35.9
No	90.0	80.3	81.2	72.8	72.6	70.6	68.8	63.8

Let us paint a socio-political portrait of the population according to people's attitudes to the Internet (see Table 23). Internet users are more likely to support Belarus' entry into the EU. At present, one can say with a high degree of certainty that most opponents of the government in Belarus have no problem receiving information from news outlets not controlled by the authorities. On the other hand, the Internet has failed to change opinion patterns in society, because public opinion depends more on personal assets than on access to information.

Certainly, Belarusians form their opinions on life in EU countries not only on the basis of media reports. They also get first-hand experience. An April 2006 poll found that 12.1 percent had travelled to neighbouring countries to visit friends or buy goods. Of those who had travelled, 46.4 went abroad several times a year, and 10.2 percent several times a month. It appears that most people in the latter group were so-called "shuttle traders."

Table 23. A socio-political portrait of the population according to attitudes to the Internet, %

Answer	Internet users (35.9)	Non-users (63.8)
Do you think the country is headed in the right or wrong direction?		
In the right direction (53.4)	38.8	61.8
In the wrong direction (30.0)	44.9	21.8
Would you like to see drastic changes in the Belarusian government's internal and foreign policies?		
Yes (52.2)	61.9	46.9
No (15.6)	13.9	16.6
I do not care (14.7)	10.4	17.0
Do you have confidence in the president of Belarus?		
I have confidence (51.9)	34.9	61.5
I do not have confidence (32.1)	46.0	24.3
If you were to choose between unification with Russia and membership of the European Union, what would you choose?		
Unification with Russia (54.0)	38.9	62.6
Membership of the European Union (26.2)	43.2	16.8
Do you watch Euronews Russian Service?		
I do (13.9)	26.7	6.7
I don't (83.1)	70.3	90.6

Belarusians can also learn about life in other countries from foreigners visiting Belarus. In April 2006, 49.6 percent of respondents said they had met foreigners, CIS residents not included, in the last three years. Respondents had met foreigners only once (11.4 percent), several times (20.3 percent) and many times (8.9 percent).

Still, independent news outlets play an important role in changing the perceptions of Belarusians about life in the countries that joined the EU in 2004 for the better (see Table 24). One should note both a rise in positive replies and a fall in the number of those who failed to answer.

Table 24. In May 2004 Belarus' neighbours — Poland, Lithuania and Latvia — joined the European Union. Do you think the life of people in these countries changed for the better or for the worse in the last four years?

Answer	12'05	03'08
For the better	19.4	38.3
For the worse	23.7	12.8
Has not changed	25.2	26.0
Failed/found it difficult to answer	31.7	22.9

First-hand information might have made Belarusians invulnerable to massive anti-Polish propaganda that came in response to the adoption of the Polish Charter Law, which granted extensive privileges to people of Polish descent living in the post-Soviet region.

Table 25. What is your attitude to the so-called Polish Charter — a document giving visa and other privileges to ethnic Poles living outside Poland?

Answer	%
I do not care about it	44.4
I approve of the decision	42.6
I disapprove of the decision	12.6
Failed to answer	0.4

In conclusion of this brief analysis of Belarusians' geopolitical preferences, it is interesting to consider people's attitudes to NATO. It is particularly interesting to compare the results of polls conducted in Belarus and Ukraine (December 2005)[9].

Table 26. If a referendum were conducted in Belarus (Ukraine) on the question of entry into NATO, how would you vote?

Answer	Belarus 04'06	Ukraine 12'05
Against	46.2	57
For	14.4	16
Would not vote	22.6	9
Failed to answer	16.8	18

As indicated in Table 26, the proportion of opponents to possible membership of NATO is similar in Belarus and Ukraine, despite the fact the Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko advocates his country's entry into the alliance, while his Belarusian counterpart has been consistently building a military alliance with Russia to counter "NATO's aggressive plans." The poll results are yet another piece of evidence that propaganda plays a secondary role in forming opinions about the nation's geopolitical priorities.

Based on our theoretical assumptions about the nature of the socio-cultural divide in Belarusian society, it is possible to predict a rise in pro-EU sentiment in Belarus in 2009. It will be fuelled by the deepening economic crisis, which has been primarily imported to Belarus from Russia.

[9] The Kyiv International Sociology Institute, *http://www.kiis.com.ua/index.php?id=4&sp=1&num=24).*

BELARUS-EU RELATIONS: NEW TRENDS

Valery Karbalevich

Attempts to establish a dialogue after an oil and gas row

The Belarusian government revised its approach to internal and foreign policy following a row with Russia over oil and gas prices in late 2006 and early 2007. Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka was perfectly satisfied with the pattern of Belarusian-Russian relations established over the previous 12 years. Russia supplied Belarus with cheap energy, thereby helping the government to satisfy the material needs of the electorate. In addition, it offered Minsk political support and military assistance, and gave Lukashenka a free hand in achieving his ambitions for political power. The friendship with Russia propped up Belarus' economy, helped the government fulfil its social contract with society, and was the cornerstone of the government's foreign policy and ideology. Lukashenka's image was as Russia's best friend and enemy of the West. The Belarusian leader prided himself on stability, delaying reform. Relations with Russia formed the basis of the world created in people's minds by official propaganda, and seemed to be a reliable anchor holding the country in a safe haven, away from disturbances and the crushing waves of globalisation.

But all that suddenly collapsed. Moscow's demand that Belarus pay market prices for gas and oil ruined the established world order and knocked out the foundation pillar of the Belarusian development model, resulting in the deconstruction of its support structure. It is impossible to find an adequate and sufficient replacement for it.

Immediately after the gas and oil spat with Russia, Belarus offered to begin a dialogue with the European Union. Lukashenka repeatedly made overtures to the West in interviews with journalists from major European news outlets. That was Minsk's most serious offer of normalisation to the EU since 1996. Lukashenka's interview published in Germany's *Die Welt*, for instance, was seen as a U-turn away from Russia.

The Belarusian leader expected Brussels to clash with Moscow over political control of Belarus, under new circumstances that emerged after New Year Eve's oil and gas feud. He expected both sides to restore old preferences, offer new ones, and make new attractive offers. Minsk would be able to choose and reap the benefits from both sides, making steps in one direction or the other.

The idea was quite rational in itself. Playing the East off against the West, trying to woo both major players in a bid to win economic and political concessions from both sides is a well-known geopolitical pattern of behaviour, widespread in global politics. Yugoslavia and Romania employed such tactics during the Cold War. It enabled the two governments to avoid making radical changes to their economic and political systems and get away with cosmetic modifications and small sacrifices.

But the Belarusian government ran into a number of difficulties trying to put the idea into practice in 2007. One of the major problems was a wide gap between expectations and offers in the political horse trading between Minsk and Brussels. The EU gave priority to democratic values. In late 2006, Brussels proposed a programme of assistance to Belarus but made it conditional upon democratic change.

Minsk initially refused to discuss the conditions, suggesting that the sides build relations around pragmatic interests rather than common values. This was also a brilliant idea. But, in the grand scheme of things, it turned out that Belarus had nothing to offer. Minsk did not have a commodity valuable enough to have the EU turn a blind eye to human rights abuses. Azerbaijan, for instance, can offer oil. Uzbekistan can offer natural gas, while Libya can pledge to stop supporting international terrorists.

What bargaining chip could Lukashenka use in negotiations with the EU? He could promise that his country would stop pursuing the creation of a union with Russia and drift away from Russia's orbit. In an interview with *Die Welt*, published on 25 January 2007, Lukashenka made overtures to the EU, hint-

ed at threats from Russia ("you'll be next") and suggested that Belarus could guarantee reliable protection of the European Union's eastern border.

But politicians in the EU did not take his statements seriously, because a few days later he dismissed "wild speculations that Lukashenka flirts with the West" at his meeting with Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and Aleksandr Prokhanov, editor of the Russian newspaper *Zavtra*. "I am well aware of how I am perceived in the West and what the West wants from us," he said. He enthusiastically talked about a union with Russia. "We will always be with the Russian people. If you would like to call us Russia's outpost in the west, we do not mind, we have never denied that."

Later, Lukashenka reiterated his commitment to Russia as a military ally, commenting that Belarus would stop "tanks advancing to Moscow from the West."

Thus, Lukashenka indicated, Belarus could be "an outpost" of Russia and the EU at the same time. Minsk tried to sell the same thing to two buyers. He expected the EU to offer a good price for his conflict with Russia, and hoped that Moscow would buy his flirtations with the EU. However, when he publicly made mutually exclusive offers to both sides, the price went down. Western politicians did not buy Lukashenka's rhetoric.

Apart from making military plans (building outposts), the Belarusian leader aired other proposals. He said that Belarus could offer the EU reliable transit guarantees. However, Belarus' reputation as a transit partner was badly damaged by the three-day disruption in the flow of Russian oil to the EU during a Belarusian-Russian dispute over prices in early 2007.

Conflicts with transit nations prompted Russia and the EU to consider bypass routes. In addition to the trans-Baltic North European Pipeline, Gazprom decided to build the South Stream pipeline to transport natural gas across the Black sea to Bulgaria.

Belarus also offered the EU economic cooperation. But its invitation of European investors to Belarus would make sense only if the government launched a large-scale privatisation programme. The authorities have made many declarations about economic liberalisation, but have taken few real measures in this direction so far.

In other words, Belarus and the EU had no serious agenda for a fully-fledged dialogue. The EU's decision to suspend Belarus' benefits under the Generalised

System of Preferences in 2007 was a signal that the bloc took a tough position on Belarus because it was disappointed by window-dressing. The EU signalled its willingness to change its attitude to Belarus on condition of meaningful and far-reaching changes in the country. In other words, the Belarusian government had failed in its effort to normalise relations with the EU.

The Russian-Georgian war and the beginning of a new affair

The situation changed dramatically in August 2008. An armed conflict broke out between Russia and Georgia. Earlier, during major international crises that heightened tensions between the West and Russia, Minsk had always shown off its loyalty to Moscow, and had often been even sterner in criticising the West. Take, for instance, Minsk's reaction to NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia over Kosovo in 1999, the 2003 Iraqi crisis or the alliance's eastward expansion. Belarus received generous subsidies from the Kremlin in return.

The Russian-Georgian war seemed to offer Minsk an excellent opportunity to prove its loyalty to Moscow and demand a new portion of financial subsidies. Unexpectedly, Minsk took a position close to neutral in one of the bitterest stand-offs between Russia and the West since the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Belarusian government delayed decision-making on the issue of recognising Georgia's breakaway provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

Moreover, as international tensions over the war boiled over, the Belarusian government renewed its effort to mend fences with the EU. Why? In my view, there were several reasons for this change in the country's foreign policy.

Relations between Belarus and Russia have been marred by disputes during the last few years. Lukashenka drew the paradoxical conclusion that he could blackmail Moscow into subsidising Belarus by threatening to move closer to the EU. These tactics may seem questionable, but let us consider some facts.

Days before his scheduled meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi in early 2008, Lukashenka held an ostentatious meeting with German Ambassador Herbert Weiss. The president sees the heads of foreign diplomatic missions on very rare occasions, except for the habitual meetings at

the start and the end of a tour of duty. It does not really matter what Lukashenka discussed with Ambassador Weiss, be it the weather, soccer or women. The fact of that meeting was a signal to Moscow.

Fact Two. During the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 and shortly before another trip by Lukashenka to Sochi for talks with Russia's new President Dmitry Medvedev, Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Surikov criticised Minsk for its failure to back Moscow and denounce Tbilisi over fierce fighting in South Ossetia. On the same day, Lukashenka summoned Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynaw and told him to improve ties with the EU and the United States, Moscow's opponents in a diplomatic tussle over South Ossetia. This appeared to be a deliberate move.

In addition, the conflict in the Caucasus proved that the Kremlin leadership is ready to use military force to achieve its goals, defying international law and protests from the international community. This fact alarmed Lukashenka.

The Belarusian leader found himself facing a dilemma: to take a neutral position and retain the opportunity to manoeuvre between Russia and the West, or back Moscow despite uncertainty over future bilateral relations and its vigorous effort to tighten its grip on Belarus. The Belarusian leader concluded that it would be impossible to pressure the Kremlin into concessions without a dialogue with the EU and the United States, or at least without a simulated dialogue.

If one takes a closer look at the Belarusian government's policies following Russia's invasion of Georgia, it becomes clear that Minsk made significant progress in diplomacy. Moreover, recent developments suggest that diplomatic efforts are more effective when foreign policies are not excessively directed to the East and there is more room for manoeuvre between Russia and the West.

For instance, when Russia stepped up pressure on Belarus to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, the Belarusian leader demonstrated considerable wire-dancing skills. First, he suggested discussing the issue at a summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). At the summit, Russia suffered a diplomatic setback. Although the leaders of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan took Russia's side in the conflict, they stopped short of making any commitment to the recognition of the breakaway provinces. Despite the diplomatic failure, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev put on a brave face, saying that each country will make an independent decision on the issue.

Lukashenka explained how the matter would be handled in Belarus. He said that the issue of the recognition of the two territories will be considered by the next Belarusian parliament. His position gave rise to two questions. Why can the president not do it? Does he not have enough power? The foreign ministry also could issue a recognition statement. Belarusian law does not specify who is responsible for dealing with matters like that.

The other question: if parliament was to decide on the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, why could the current parliament, which was in session at the time, not consider the issue and why was there a need to wait for a new parliament to be elected? It was absolutely clear that the Belarusian leader was playing for time, expecting the proposal to drown in a sea of red tape.

The motives for such behaviour are quite clear. The main reason is that Lukashenka did not want to be the odd-one-out. In the context of other CSTO allies' reluctance to recognise the breakaway territories, Minsk's immediate and unyielding support for Moscow would bolster the widely held perception of him as "the Kremlin's puppet." This is a humiliating status for Lukashenka, who seeks to play a significant role in international politics. So he decided to wait and see who else will be persuaded by the Kremlin to follow Russia's suit, apart from Nicaragua, and make conclusions afterwards.

Also, since Belarus' recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is of such great importance to Russia, Lukashenka wanted the Kremlin to pay a good price for it. He could play the card when Minsk and Moscow were to negotiate a gas contract for 2009. It would be clear then how much Belarus' recognition costs in US dollars.

Finally, the issue should be examined in the context of Belarus' effort to mend fences with the West. With the United States and the EU seemingly prepared to make concessions to Minsk, Lukashenka feared that Belarus' recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may dash prospects for better relations.

In truth, when compared to 2007, the West showed a much greater interest in cooperation with Minsk in 2008. There were several reasons for that.

Firstly, the Belarusian government took some real steps to open up its politics — it released political prisoners, took some measures to reform the economy, and took a more tolerant attitude to the opposition during the parliamentary election campaign.

Secondly, unlike in 2007, Minsk did not only declare but also made real attempts to distance itself from Moscow, during the Russian-Georgian war. The West was encouraged by the Belarusian leader's reluctance to recognise the Georgian breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

Thirdly, tensions heightened between Russia and the West as a result of the Caucasian conflict. Wars are usually played by different rules. Disassociation from Russia was a commodity rising in price, and the West was willing to pay a higher price for it. Belarus could seek the same treatment as Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan, which also have serious problems with democracy, but the United States and the EU are not as principled in their approach because the countries have oil and gas, and maintain friendly ties with the West.

Finally, the September 23-28 elections for the House of Representatives were seen by the West as a good opportunity for the Belarusian authorities to display willingness to liberalise the political system.

The EU was fed up with failed attempts to democratise Belarus. Voices that called for an end to the isolation of the country and a political rapprochement with Minsk took the upper hand.

House of Representatives elections: A turning point

The EU placed conditions of normalising and democratising the electoral process in Belarus. The House of Representatives election held in late September was seen as a test of the Belarusian authorities' willingness to take steps toward democracy. On the other hand, Lukashenka threatened before the election to break off all dialogue with the West if it refused to recognise the parliamentary vote as democratic.

However, the election ended in the traditional way for Belarus, with the OSCE observation mission concluding that it fell short of international democratic standards.

It seemed that Minsk would react in its usual manner to the critical report by Western observers. In particular, the Belarusian state-controlled media were expected to pounce on the OSCE monitors' verdict, shame the West, accusing it of double standards and a biased attitude toward Belarus, and use

all the other standard tools of waging ideological war. That would have put an end to Belarus' short affair with the West and Lukashenka's threats to break off all dialogue would have come true.

Paradoxically, and quite unexpectedly at first glance, the Belarusian authorities used an absolutely different script. They stopped short of declaring an ideological war on the West. Instead, they made a feint that could be described as elegant. If you cannot change the thing itself, you can still change the perception of it. The authorities changed negative for positive, black for white, by telling trusting TV viewers that the OSCE monitors made an overall positive assessment of the election despite noting some flaws. It was a brilliant move courtesy of British PR guru Lord Bell.

The farther into the forest, the deeper the trees. One day later, the Belarusian leader met with Anne-Marie Lizin, vice president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and special coordinator of the OSCE short-term observers who had a hand in writing the critical conclusions about the Belarusian election. Lukashenka admitted mistakes and offered to continue the dialogue. The move was quite unusual for Lukashenka, known for his anti-Western rhetoric. He behaved as if he wanted to apologise for his failure to keep his promise to hold a free and fair election by Western standards. In addition, Belarusian officials offered unofficial apologies to European diplomats, explaining that the Belarusian leader had ordered a free election, but authorities on the ground failed to obey. That exceptionally naive excuse was designed to mitigate confusion following the election.

So, why, despite OSCE disappointment with the election and Lukashenka's threat to end all dialogue, did Minsk do exactly the opposite, indicating its strong desire to continue the dialogue? First of all, the Belarusian leader sensed the moods prevailing in Western capitals, in particular European politicians' eagerness to normalise relations with Belarus. He based his tactics on the assumption that the West has little or no option. Confident that the EU and the United States want normalisation with Belarus so much that they would swallow the pill, Lukashenka hiked the price.

Lukashenka proved right. That time, the West also behaved itself in an unusual way, not as it would have acted before. European politicians and diplomats made the best of a bad bargain. They pretended as if nothing unexpected had happened and expressed a readiness to continue the dialogue. EU leaders and institutions were not as critical in their assessments of the election as be-

fore. They only expressed regret and hope that the dialogue would continue. Some EU ambassadors bought the theory that the top leadership is willing to change, but hard-line officials on the ground were slow to act. The OSCE observation mission's criticism of the election did not discourage the two sides from continuing the dialogue.

Since the beginning of the dialogue in mid-August, the West had made token steps to encourage Minsk to drift away from Russia. On September 4, the US Treasury Department lifted for six months a ban on dealing with two Belarusian companies, Lakafarba and Polatsk Shklovalakno. Western politicians held a series of meetings with high-ranking Belarusian officials. Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, chairman-in-office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), paid a visit to the Belarusian capital. He was the highest-ranking European politician to visit Minsk in several years. For the first time since 1997, the Belarusian foreign minister was invited to Brussels to meet with EU foreign ministers.

As the result of a new policy, the EU on October 13 suspended for six months a visa ban on Alyaksandr Lukashenka and 35 other Belarusian officials. This was a landmark decision in the EU's new policy with regard to Minsk. It was indicative of EU readiness not only to make statements, but also to act. It was a major shift in the EU's policy with regard to Belarus.

The EU used to prioritise democratisation in Belarus, but that objective had become secondary to geopolitical goals.

Nations often revise their policies with regard to each other - this is normal. However, as a rule, decision-makers responsible for drastic changes make efforts to make their decisions seem logical to the politicised public and ordinary people. But that was a big problem.

The point is that EU officials had made it clear that the bloc's policy with regard to Belarus would depend on the conduct of the parliamentary election. They had stressed the importance of a democratic, free and fair election on so many occasions that it was seen by experts and politicians alike as a condition for rapprochement. Therefore, both the authorities and opposition looked forward to the OSCE mission's recognition or non-recognition of the parliamentary race. The issue dominated analysis stories and forecasts because it was viewed as crucial for future relations between Belarus and the EU.

However, after the election the OSCE observation mission said that the poll fell short of democratic standards. Nevertheless, the EU decided that the

travel ban should be temporarily lifted. It turned out that the compliance of the election campaign with OSCE standards was not essential for the EU's relationship with Belarus. In other words, the EU's decision appeared illogical, to say the least.

Maybe, the most comprehensible explanation for this decision by the EU's foreign ministers would be the following: both sides, Belarus and the EU, had let themselves become entangled in the gambling game called dialogue. It would be more precise to say that Minsk drew the EU into a mutual political communication process. When several steps had already been made along the way, it was not easy to back out. It was more difficult to quit the game than it had been to enter it. A certain amount of political capital had been invested. Moreover, the bulky EU interest-coordinating and decision-making machine is characterised by a powerful force of inertia.

However, a more important question is whether the EU's efforts will pay off. It may or may not be a success. Brussels probably hopes to bind Minsk with certain agreements. Any game implies that its participants play according to a set of rules. Therefore, European politicians reasoned, once the authorities had entered into the dialogue, they would find it harder to crack down on the opposition, imprison opponents of the government or recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. They hoped to encourage Lukashenka to move slowly, step by step, along the path of liberalisation and rapprochement with the West.

Apart from that, the dialogue with the West would require the authorities to introduce drastic changes into the government's ideology. Earlier, government propaganda had portrayed the West as alien to the Belarusian nation. The West was depicted as an enemy that is working day and night, making plans to capture and enslave Belarus. At the same time, Russia, China, Venezuela and Iran were painted as Belarus' real friends, allies, brothers by blood and civilisation. The government would have to explain to the people why it suddenly started seeking friendship with enemies.

There is a certain logic in this kind of reasoning. But it seems logical to European politicians only. It is common knowledge that Lukashenka is not one of them. He hates to play by the rules. More accurately, the president follows only those rules that give him an advantage.

The Belarusian ruler achieved what he had sought to accomplish since early 2007 — to improve relations with the West without changing the author-

itarian governance system in the country. He expects the EU to shelve its 12 conditions calling for democratisation in Belarus, hide them in the darkest corner so that they will no longer be an eyesore and will not be reminiscent of the noble causes of the past. The president has won an almost bloodless diplomatic victory. In general, he made no any other serious concessions than the release of three opponents from prison.

Therefore, there was a great chance that Lukashenka would view the EU policy shift as his victory and a sign of weakness on the part of the EU. In that case, he would not consider it necessary to open up his politics. The flawed parliamentary election was a signal that he was reluctant to change. Moreover, many opposition politicians feared that the reconciliatory gestures by the EU would be interpreted by the regime as a blank cheque for a new crackdown on opponents. Incidentally, after casting his ballot at the polling station, Lukashenka predicted that the opposition would disappear after the election.

An urgent need for investment prompted Lukashenka to seek closer ties with the West. The need arose from dramatic social changes in Belarus. Between 2003 and 2008, Belarus was flush with money from petroleum sales as the country was an offshoring destination for Russian oil companies. Consumer spending rose steeply during those years. People's incomes increased and relatively cheap credit was made available for buying apartments, cars and consumer goods. Lukashenka's electoral base also changed. He had previously relied on working-class voters and collective farmers, but later expanded his base to include people of middle-income.

However, it turned out that the emerging middle class had much higher consumer standards than lower-income groups. In addition, its consumption needs were growing rapidly. If Lukashenka failed to satisfy those needs, he would lose support from the new electorate. Lukashenka found himself hostage to the growing consumption needs of that social group. This is why he declared economic liberalisation plans and vowed to attract investment from the West, despite the fact that the move conflicted with his ideology and he was aware of threats that market-oriented changes can create to his social and political system.

A global financial crisis added one more topic to the agenda of talks between the Belarusian government and the West. The Belarusian government urgently needed money to prop up the national currency and provide emergency loans to industrial enterprises hit by declining global demand.

In November 2008, Russia approved a $2 billion stabilisation loan to Belarus, making the first instalment of $1 billion available the same month. The government also requested the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to issue a $2 billion loan, saying the money is needed for replenishing the country's gold and foreign exchange reserves amidst the global financial crisis. An IMF mission stayed in Belarus between October 27 and November 23 to discuss the loan request with the government. The talks resumed in mid-December.

Thus, Belarus asked for loans in two places. The Belarusian authorities saw that abandoning polices tilted toward Russia and manoeuvring between centres of power could produce a quick and great effect. The temptation to receive aid from both sides was a great one. The need to play was real, and the excitement of the game prompted some risk-taking.

Needless to say, Moscow approved the loan not just for fun, but in exchange for concessions from Belarus. Minsk and Moscow had been negotiating the deal for a year. The Russian leaders no longer believed that the Belarusian leader would keep his promises. They agreed to release the second instalment only after Minsk fulfils certain conditions. Presumably, Russia expects Minsk to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or sign an accord to establish a common air defence system, or take some other steps.

But in that case, Minsk would face a new geopolitical dilemma. As soon as Belarus recognises the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and strikes an air defence deal with Russia, its negotiations with the EU may stall.

Most importantly, it will have a slim chance of obtaining a loan from the IMF. The Fund is not a charity. Political factors play an important role in its operation. The IMF is controlled by Western countries, the United States in the first place. That is why, when making decisions, it is guided not only by considerations of global economic stability, but also by geopolitical interests. The IMF's approval of a $16.5 billion to Ukraine was partly a payment for the country's geopolitical choice in favour of the EU. If Belarus scrambles firmly back into Russia's orbit, there will be no sense in helping it.

The point of Minsk's strategy of playing up to the West is to not quarrel with Russia, reconcile with Europe, and be able to receive aid from both sides. In addition, the Belarusian leader would like to have a tight grip on society and keep the opposition shut out from establishment politics. But it will take a very skilful and delicate performance, and a lot of balancing, to achieve that

goal. Will Belarus' current political system, pre-programmed to perform absolutely different functions, be able to cope with the task?

The Belarusian opposition may fall victim to the new geopolitical alignment. If the emerging trend intensifies, the leaders of opposition parties and organisations may lose a controlling stake in relations between Belarus and the West. They will be sidelined. Key decisions will be taken without any regard for their position.

A discussion is currently under way in opposition circles as to what would be better: Lukashenka's drift toward the West without any change in his autocratic style of governance, or continued isolation and heavy pressure on the Belarusian regime from the EU and the United States? The opposition is divided on the issue. For instance, former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich drew fire from the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) for advocating engagement with the Belarusian regime.

IDEOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL REASONS BEHIND ANTI-WESTERN RHETORIC IN BELARUSIAN SOCIETY (POWER HOLDERS, STATE MEDIA)

Yury Likhtarovich

Introduction

The notion of 'the West' or 'the Western world' has multiple meanings, depending on the time period and region. In today's Belarus this term primarily signifies Western Europe and the United States together with the political and military institutions built around these countries, such as the European Union and NATO. This Western world is, on the one hand, idealised as a consumerist heaven, where one could simply enjoy his/her life. The West is also represented as the bearer of political and civic freedoms, social welfare and economic abundance. On the other hand, the ruling elites, as well as a part of population, stigmatise it as the cause of many of the political and economic problems faced by Belarus, thereby following the Soviet pattern. From this perspective, the West is to blame for the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the betrayal of the post-Soviet countries which wholeheartedly opened themselves up to the Western capitalism, with its lifestyle and values, but in return received hyperinflation, mass unemployment, mafia structures, extreme inequality and the loss of major assets taken over by multinational corporations instead of welfare and rule of law.

This attitude towards the Western world can be explained as a result of historical, political and ideological factors.

Firstly, from the historical point of view, Belarus has traditionally been seen as a 'crossroads country' between West and East. This border status of Belarus, between Western and Russian influences has had an impact on the political thinking of the elites and the self-identification of Belarusians. Over the last two centuries, Belarus evolved as a constituent part of larger state entities, namely the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, consistently opposed to the West. From the imperial Russian perspective, Belarusians were part of the Russian people, but had been 'spoiled' by Western and especially Polish influences. The Belarusian national movement born in these conditions in the mid-19th century was weak and developed relatively late. Being split between Polish and Russian orientations, the ruling elites most often chose to espouse a set of pan-Slavic or Soviet ideas, where the West was represented as a hostile and rival force.

Secondly, the political regime of independent Belarus that has been formed since Alyaksandr Lukashenka's coming to power in 1994 has regularly resorted to the rhetoric of "external enemies". Since the 1996 constitutional coup, it was the Western world that was blamed for plans to "destabilise" and isolate Belarus because of its criticism of authoritarian rule in the country.

Thirdly, since 2000, the Belarusian authorities have sought new ways of exerting influence on the Belarusian people to reinforce the power system built in the country. They adopted a new "ideological" doctrine of a particular "Belarusian way of development". Though elsewhere recognised as an unacceptable instrument of mass manipulation after the collapse of the USSR, in Belarus the state ideology was reanimated — though not as a totalitarian "science of the idea" that aspires both to provide a comprehensive picture of the world and to radically change it. Its rationale in Lukashenka's Belarus is limited to justifying the existing regime and its erratic policies and to preserving it. After reviewing this particularity, this paper explores the reasons behind this unprecedented appeal to ideology by the post-communist elites. On the one hand, ideology plays a legitimising role for the current regime and Lukashenka's permanent stay in power. On the other hand, it strengthens the internal cohesion of the ruling group. The introduction of ideology can be seen a kind of veil that conceals from society the political and economic changes, with the purpose of stifling high social expectations. Its anti-Western element is simply functional here: as long as Lukashenka is criticised and unaccepted by the West, the latter is the "enemy". If Lukashen-

ka were to be accepted by the West, Belarus would develop a dialogue with Western countries.

1. Anti-Western rhetoric in Belarus: historical perspectives

For most of its history, Belarus evolved as a part of larger geopolitical/state entities: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Rzeczpospolita, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This fact deeply affected the self-identification of Belarusians and the political ideas of its elites. Among the elites there were several different conceptions of the future political development of the Belarusian lands or, later, the Belarusian nation: "unionist" (different versions of union with Russia), "federalist" (different projects for federal bonds with Poland), "regionalist" (ideas of regional cooperation with Lithuania and Ukraine), and, finally, "independence" (project of an independent Belarusian state). The entire political history of the Belarusian territories since mediaeval times can be described as an endless struggle between different groups of elites that opted for one of the above options. Moreover, the independence strand started to develop relatively late in the second half of the 19th century and is still rather weak in today's Belarus. This explains the weakness of nationalist sentiment among Belarusians and their inclination toward "unionism" - a social acceptance of the idea of integration (unification) with other states, particularly Russia. For that reason, today's Belarus is often seen as a country reluctant to develop and affirm its own national identity. For example, in March 2005 Adrian Severin, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus, published his report where he described the situation of the country as "being without its own identity". By saying it, he reproduced the formula of a Canadian scholar, David Marples, who called Belarusians a "denationalised nation". In these conditions of national identity weakness or uncertainty, the ruling elites of the newly independent Belarusian state have primarily opted, since 1991, for staying with and developing the familiar set of pan-Slavic and Soviet ideas that are essentially anti-Western. This can be seen both as their response to the identity problem and an aspiration to establish their own "only game in town".

Peculiarities of the identity situation in Belarus before 1991

Despite the fact that Belarus was a relatively ethnically homogenous USSR republic, where Belarusians composed the majority of the population (around 80%), the Belarusian language and cultural practices were marginalised until the eve of the independence, and the new Belarusian society encountered serious social integration problems. After the end of the Second World War, Belarusian society went through an intensive urbanisation process and there were resulting changes in the values system of the population1. One of the most important changes was a rise in the pain sensitivity threshold. Belarusians seem to be ready to withstand privation with endless endurance. Urbanisation provided them with a chance to achieve a happy and worthy life; all their hopes for a better life and moving up the social ladder started to be connected with moving to the city. The city dwellers were expected to use mainly Russian, which pushed Belarusians to abandon their language, traditions and identity. Thus, for example, in 1950 Belarusian speakers formed a majority in Minsk, whereas in 1970 54.5% of Minsk dwellers said Russian was their native language. At the same time, 37.3% of books and 36.5% of all the newspapers in circulation were published in Belarusian. In 1984, only 5% of Belarus' newspapers were printed in the vernacular language. As a result, at the end of the 1980s, Belarus was ranked last among all the nations of the USSR in the percentage of people living in the republic and retaining the capacity to speak their native language.

Moreover, from the 1950s the Belarusian Soviet *nomenklatura* promoted the ideological construction of "Soviet Byelorussia" as the most Soviet republic of the USSR, where there were no nationalistic movements and where the Belarusian language and culture were confined to a kind of social ghetto, or a golden cage. This implied that Belarusian culture had a recognised official status and some financial and material support from the Communist Party of Belarus but, in return, it had to glorify the republic as the conqueror of Nazism that suffered the most and remained faithful to the "Soviet motherland". This myth is one of the basic ideological conceptions of the current Belarusian authorities.

[1] In 1950, ≈79% of Belarusian population lived in rural areas; in 1989 — only 35%. *Naselenie Respubliki Belarus'*, Statistical Compendium, Minsk 2001

The victory of the *nomenklatura*'s vision for an independent Belarusian state

The last decade of the Soviet Union was a period marked by the growing disintegration of the Soviet state apparatus, and the attempt of the local Soviet elites to adjust to new circumstances. In other words, there were problems of "system integration" and of "social integration", or legitimisation. The systemic problems were characterised by the lack of effectiveness of the Soviet regime in managing and coordinating supply and demand in the civilian and military sectors. The legitimisation difficulties led to the decline of the communist ideology that nobody believed any more, including the members of the Communist Party themselves, and to a growing gap between society and Party/State institutions.

The local elites found a new possibility for legitimisation in the adoption of a national revival discourse. At first, these requirements did not contest the system itself, since local elites demanded only the abandonment of the late Soviet approach of ignoring national diversity. Thus, the Republics started to demand the recognition of national minorities by the central powers. However, this process of becoming more nationally-minded was not the same for regional communist elites in all of the republics. While in the Baltic republics the new national revival discourse provided a common platform of compromises both for communist elites and the anti-communist opposition, in Belarus it became a matter of political conflict.

In Belarus, the last years of the USSR and first years of independence were a very contradictory time. The Belarusian population was uncertain of its opinions about the breakdown of the USSR and the newfound independence. In a December 1991 survey, the question of support for the independence of Belarus and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) treaty received 69% positive answers and 10% negative ones. One year later, in December 1992, the figures were respectively 42% and 34%. At the same time, opinions in the summer of 1992 on the withdrawal of Belarus from the USSR were only 30.7% positive, with 52.6% responding in the negative. The political and intellectual elites were profoundly divided. While the democrats defended the new democratic project based on national revival for the future of Belarus, the former Soviet *nomenklatura* was calling for restoring its previous experience, in the other words the idea of "Soviet Byelorussia".

The pro-democracy camp was represented by a number of political forces. The biggest was the Belarusian Popular Front that emerged in 1988-89 as a national, cultural and ecological revival movement, among other things as a reaction to the Chernobyl disaster. It started with a moderate criticism of the Soviet model. But, rapidly, the whole Soviet system was called in question in favour of independence for Belarus.

A conflict between Belarusian democrats and communist leaders was imminent. The "Conservative" camp mainly consisted of members of the former Communist party *nomenklatura*, who were unwilling to accept the ideas of independence, democratic change and national revival. This was largely due to the lack of a national consciousness among the Soviet ruling elite in Belarus. In Belarus, local communists did not follow the pattern set by Ukraine or the Baltic States. However, until 1994 there was a coexistence of the old and new political elites, because neither of the groups had sufficient political resources to completely neutralise the other. The former communist *nomenklatura* retained its network of connections, the bureaucratic hierarchy and the backing of the Communist Party of Belarus. The national democratic movement took the initiative to change the ideological climate in Belarus and to start reforms in this field. But there was no discussion of political and economic reforms. The main debates took place at the symbolic level and concerned the perception of the past, national symbols and geopolitical orientations. Three different visions of Belarus' developmental path were discussed. The first was the "*nomenklatura*'s vision" — to embed the existing sovereign Belarusian state in the frame of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. The second was based on the national revival vision which called for achieving nation-building processes while gradually moving towards Europe. The third one, called liberal, was less articulated, emphasising economic well-being issues and taking the West as a model, but largely ignoring identity and nation-building issues. The conservative vision eventually prevailed. For the former *nomenklatura*, the Western world was the "natural" enemy.

2. Anti-Western rhetoric in Belarus: the political perspective

At the most fundamental level, social problems in the human imagination are connected with two things: the particularity of the social order and the

nature of human being. It is often stressed that man started to understand the surrounding world by regarding first the group and then himself. Hence, there are two basic concepts for apprehending the social order: integration and equilibrium. Problems appear when there are signs of disintegration or of disequilibrium, where a minority group dominates and oppresses the majority group, creating inequality and conflict. This is exactly what we find in today's Belarus, where power is under the total control of the post-communist *nomenklatura*, with Lukashenka at the top. To maintain the existing social order, the authorities have built into society an enduring distinction between 'us', meaning the group of people loyal to the president, and 'others', meaning society at large, the political opposition, and Westerners. Originally, this conflict was used by the post-Communist elite as a tool to keep hold of power and later it was constantly reemployed to further legitimise the *nomenklatura*'s stay in power. As a result, society is kept under the threat of disintegration by the ruling group. This leads to the strengthening of the unity of each of the groups that act in the framework of the conflict using, for instance, mechanisms of self-identification through the existence of an opponent.

The political regime that has been built up in Belarus over the last 14 years relies on a constant appeal to the "external and internal enemies" rhetoric that has hampered the development of essential political processes in Belarus. Since 1996, it has been the Western world which has been stigmatised as the "external enemy" by the regime, mostly for political purposes, because of its refusal to accept the political, social and economic system and the governing practices of the ruling group.

The period 1991-1994 saw the end of the coexistence of the old and new political elites and the victory of *nomenklatura*'s vision for Belarus. This was strongly connected to the figure of the first president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka. His victory in the 1994 elections was called an "electoral revolution" because it was a victory by representatives of the lower levels of the former Belarusian communist party apparatus, who replaced the high elite of the *ancien régime*. Lukashenka's victory was also a proof of the underestimated potential of the system of unofficial relations and ties which had been formed during the Soviet period, as well as a demonstration of the overestimated vigour of the newly established democratic institutions of government. The democratisation process did not become irreversible in Belarus. As it turned out, the authoritarian and non-democratic method of govern-

ment was closer and more familiar to the newly elected head-of-state and his advisers. On the one hand, it provided the opportunity to control the situation and avoid the threat of losing power. On the other hand, the authoritarian model was considered functional and appropriate for responding to pressures from the external world (i.e. EU and US policies of supporting democratisation in Belarus).

Thus, the first step of the new president was to contrast the issue of national revival with the issue of economic reforms. He politicised linguistic and national issues to reorient his main political opponents (the national revival movement) towards defending the Belarusian language and culture, which finally deprived them of a credible economic platform. The May 1995 referendum on national symbols illustrates these tendencies clearly. At the start of 1995, a significant deterioration of the economic situation was observed and the government had to adopt painful measures. This led to a rise in social dissatisfaction with the policies of Lukashenka, and it became increasingly obvious that the national democratic forces had a good chance of winning the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The call for a referendum disoriented the opposition and led them to change their emphasis in the political struggle. From then on, the issue of national symbols became part of its political programme. Returning the Soviet symbols in modified form, and ending the policy of support for the Belarusian language, was aimed at diminishing the social basis of the opposition and, at the same time, enlarging the public support base of the ruling group.

Lukashenka's second step was to concentrate all power into his hands. This was done through constitutional reforms in 1996 that gave the Belarusian president extraordinary competences and, from 2004, an unlimited number of terms in office. Now, the Belarusian president is above and beyond the reach of any other state institution. His rule is based on a highly centralised power vertical of distribution of competences, with the presidential administration playing the role of major decision-making institution, instead of the government which has been transformed into a strictly executive-administrative institution. Legislative power depends on the president because the parliament has no right to initiate legislation and *de facto* approves all bills prepared by the presidential administration. The president himself has legislative power: he issues edicts, which have the same force as laws. The parliament has no real possibility to impeach the President, while he can easily dissolve the parlia-

ment. The president also controls the judiciary branch: he appoints and dismisses judges at all levels, including the prosecutor-general. Some attributes of a democratic system, such as "elections" and "majority rule", exist in Belarus, but only as a means to ensure public support for the regime or as a self-legitimising mechanism of the regime. For example, elections serve only as a cover for the redistribution of positions among representatives of the same ruling group, not as a natural mechanism of selection and change.

Lukashenka's final step in building his regime was to reintroduce an official ideology which assures the centralisation of the regime's core values and defines the indicators of anomaly or deviation from the system. The system is built around the concept of a strong state that takes care of citizens, treats them as "children" under the protection of a "father", i.e. president Lukashenka. The citizens in return have to be loyal to the president/state. "Deviation" means to be in opposition not only to the president and his model of Belarus, but to the state and the country. Such a policy reinforces the divisions within society, adding to the identity fractures a new line of distinction — partisan/opponent to Lukashenka. Each group is closed to outsiders and there is no communication between them. All the difficulties and problems of Lukashenka are explained by activities of all his opponents, no matter who they are: democratic opposition parties or foreign countries, primarily the USA or the EU.

3. Anti-Western rhetoric in Belarus: the ideological perspective

The period of change — the breakdown of the Soviet Union —led to a strong social disintegration in Belarus. Traditional beliefs were weakened and the power-holders started to introduce ideology as a basis for the new social beliefs on which they would construct their legitimisation. It provided them with a platform from which to speak to the whole population.

In today's Belarus, ideology does not have its traditional meaning of a "science of ideas" which serves men by ridding their minds of prejudice. Belarusian officials do not hide the instrumental orientation of their reestablishment of ideology at the beginning of 2000. The main objective of this ideology is to exert influence upon the people. They believe that ideology has a stronger

influence on people, because of two basic elements: appeal and persuasion. This is in contrast to politics, where legal and administrative instruments are also in use. It turns ideology into "a specific form of sanctioning an existing system of domination and subordination in society, a defined regime of power, or, on the contrary, its radical transformation"[2].

The current Belarusian official ideology consists of what could be called a "Belarusian ideological triad": "the national idea", the traditional values of the Belarusian people, and the constitutional and legal basis of the state. In the context of the official ideology, the Belarusian national idea is based on classical concepts formulated in Belarusian literature in the late-19th and early-20th centuries: "to be named Belarusian" and "to be treated as a people". These two historic claims refer to the ideas of having an independent state and developing an equal society. At the same time, the official ideology opposes the traditional values of the Belarusian people to Western values of unlimited freedom and the power of money.

The ideology insists that among the main Belarusian values are tolerance, order, a capacity for hard work, non-recognition of violence, and others. As a result, there is no concrete information about the values of contemporary Belarusian society, but rather a set of ideological statements that nobody would argue with. In the same way, the constitutional and legal basis of the Belarusian state is treated through a division of the modern political history of Belarus into two periods. The first one lasts from the gaining of independence until the mid-1990s and is described in categories of 'identity drama' and 'demagogy'. The second one starts from the 2nd half of 1990s, when the people voted for "the presidential republic under the power of the president". The final triumph of the Belarusian state organ would be the unification of the Belarusian and Russian peoples in the Belarus-Russia Union State. This ideological construction is reminiscent of the old *nomenklatura*'s vision of Belarus, but with minor modifications due to the fact of having an independent state. An important engine for nation-building is the profit that the political elites gain as a result of sovereign independence. The Belarusian post-communist elites are no exception. In contrast to the first years of independence, they no longer question independence as such, but still do not manage to govern according to democratic principles and create a pluralistic society. This is the main reason why they are so suspicious of the West.

[2] E.M Babosov, *Osnovy ideologii sovremennogo gosudarstva,* Minsk, Amalfeya 2004

The fact that the Belarusian post-communist political elites have chosen to re-impose an official ideology can be explained with reference to their adherence to power categories. The official "ideology" serves to defend the concrete interests of the ruling groups. Immediately after the 2001 presidential election, Lukashenka faced the problem how to ensure his continued tenure of office. He required more effective mechanisms of legitimisation. The Soviet conception of state ideology was used as a model. It permitted the omission of all the problems which had appeared during the previous years of his rule. Among them, one of the most notable was legal instability (the Constitution was changed three times), inadequate balance of power, repressions against political opponents, a refusal to make reforms, etc. Instead of all this, the population is supplied with a positive vision of the Belarusian reality with Lukashenka as the central figure who is building an independent Belarusian state and assures order, stability and prosperity in the country. All criticism is rejected. The past and present of Belarus is being constantly remade by the ideologues: they change, throw away, and reformulate those moments of the country's earlier and modern history that do not serve the regime's purposes.

Another possible explanation for why the ruling group decided to re-introduce ideology can be taken from Asian political philosophy. One of the central elements of China's reforms was the idea of providing them on the local level, whilst avoiding social recognition of the fact that change is actually happening, thereby serving to extinguish high social aspirations. In Belarus during the spring of 1991, there was a huge wave of demonstrations in the country. This put the then-Communist government in a very fragile situation: they were confronted with several days of fear because of popular dissatisfaction and protest. They realised how shaky and weak their power was. The main conclusion that the post-communist elites drew from these events is to never allow such manifestations to happen again. One can therefore argue that the introduction of the ideology was meant to introduce a kind of veil that conceals change from society. It also hides divisions and fraction lines within the *nomenklatura* circles. More recent events can serve as evidence. Among the current Belarusian ruling elite, important changes are taking place: old Lukashenka advisers with links to law enforcement agencies have lost their positions to younger, more 'pro-Western' groups. It is also illustrated by the change of official rhetoric in the Western world. The Belarusian regime is no longer presented as the enemy. However, the Belarusian power elites are se-

cretive and it is difficult to say how sincere they are being in their *rapprochement*. This shift in rhetoric could be a temporary phenomenon, merely an additional element of Minsk's bargaining with Russia.

In any case, the establishment of the official ideology, together with its anti-Western rhetoric, is limited in purpose to an internal political legitimisation of the ruling group and has almost no external imperial implication, in contrast to the Soviet internationalist ideology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that anti-Western rhetoric in Belarusian society is descended from the ideological heritage of the Soviet Union, a lack of strong national feeling and the peculiarities of political development in independent Belarus.

Over the last 14 years, Belarus has been developing as an authoritarian regime where the relations between rulers and the society are based more on coercion than on persuasion. The society is still living in the so-called medley identity condition, when several national identity models coexist, collide and interpenetrate. The post-communist political elites have used these structural particularities to conserve their power via the creation of artificial political conflicts around the question of identity. Finally, after strengthening their position, they could no longer support this medley identity condition. The decision was taken to go back to using old tricks, namely to re-introduce the official ideology that defines the "Belarusian national idea" according to the 'Soviet Byelorussia' model. All other possible propositions and projects concerning the Belarusian national idea were banished. Anti-Western rhetoric was an important element of the Soviet ideology, and it is also presented in today's official ideology of the Belarusian authorities. However, in their relations with the external world, the Belarusian rulers are showing a more flexible and pragmatic approach. When the question arises of economic cooperation and business interests with the EU or USA, they easily abandon their ideological criticism of the Western world. The same tendencies can be found among the population. Western countries attract the majority of Belarusians with their high level of economic welfare, but only one third of the population positively perceives the prospects of political integration with the EU.