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WAS BELARUSIAN INDEPENDENCE IN 1991 AN ACCIDENT?

As for the foundations and origins of Belarusian independence, **Aliaksandr Smalianchuk**, professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, points out that although Soviet historiography ignored the experience of establishing the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918, the modern Baltic approach should not be copied here either. Unlike in the Baltic states, the idea of the BPR was not implemented in political practice, did not stick powerfully in people's minds, and most importantly, Belarus did not have an interwar period of an independent nation state. Thence, the current Belarusian statehood grows out of the BSSR.

As a result, the problems of the BSSR, i.e. absence of democratic traditions, low level of political culture and russification - became part of the modern history of Belarus. The politicians of the 1990s failed to jump over this abyss, and already in the presidential election of 1994, those who dreamed of revanchism came to power.

Andrei Kazakevich, director of the Institute of Political Research „Political Sphere“, believes that during perestroika Belarus did not want independence so much as it did not understand what it was and was not ready for it. The elections of 1990, which were held all over the USSR, make it possible to compare the situation in different regions. While in the Baltic states the people's fronts and those who supported them won a constitutional majority, and in Ukraine there was an unstable pro-Soviet majority, in Belarus the pro-Soviet forces won about 2/3.

Among the reasons for it, Andrei names weakness of national identity, russification, ignorance of Belarusian history, and crisis of Belarusian nomenclature of the second half of 1980s, which coincided with perestroika. A succession of strong post-war figures (Mazurau, Masherau, Kisyalou) was replaced by a new weak elite (Kebich, Myasnikovich) who could not imagine themselves as the leaders of the republic. As a result, even victory in the elections of 1990 did not strengthen this nomenclature, and in 1994 it was defeated by a non-systemic man, after which it left the political scene and never returned (unlike nomenclatures of other post-Soviet countries, which often came back to power on new principles later).

Aliaksandr Dabravolski, advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, head of the internal politics department and a member of the USSR Supreme Soviet in the year when Belarus got independence, recalls that the Belarusian agenda was heard very little in Moscow. Even the democratic Interregional Deputy Group (of which Dabravolski himself was a member, besides Sakharov and Yeltsin) was more concerned with democratic issues than nationality-oriented ones.

Dabravolski agrees that the BSSR nomenclature was weak, and „if we had had our own Brazauskas“ (a Communist Party leader who understood that he was also the country's leader, a Lithuanian) - „there would have been a different situation“. At the same time, he notes that there were ideas of independence in Belarus, they were promoted by the Belarusian Popular Front established in 1988, and on the political scene there were prominent intellectuals, writers and artists (Bykau, Marachkin), who prepared the vision of independent Belarus. Therefore, Dabravolski believes that although Belarus received its independence due to the collapse of the USSR, it was not by accident, and the current public consensus about the importance of independence is the merit of those who raised the issue even earlier, including Vaclau Lastouski and Janka Kupala.

Hanna Liubakova, a non-resident member of the Atlantic Council, points out failures in the implementation of the foreign policy of independent Belarus: „No matter how hard we tried to show a breakthrough in the Western vector, it did not happen“, and even in the Eastern Partnership Belarus participated the least of all countries. The Russian vector of foreign policy has led to the current epic of union programmes, which are ultimately designed to tie Minsk to Moscow more strongly so that Belarus does not run away too quickly when change occurs.

Finally, Andrei Kazakevich notes the failure of even the post-Soviet ideological foundation (let alone the deeper ones) in modern independent Belarus. Although the authorities consider themselves the heirs of the BSSR, this is not actually present in their discourse, only the all-Soviet. Even the monuments to Masherau and Mazurau have not been erected, though they should have been heroes for the authorities. On the contrary, as **Aliaxei Lastouski**, associate professor at the Polatsk State University, who moderated the discussion, notes, the memory of Masherau is being erased by renaming the avenue, the symbolic line of power - so that even Masherau would not be a symbolic competition for the present authorities.

BELARUSIAN STATE SYSTEM: 30 YEARS OF SPECIAL WAY OF EVOLUTION

Uladzimir Astapenka, responsible for multilateral diplomacy in the National Anti-Crisis Management and former ambassador, recalls that in the first years of independence the system was intent on change: embassies and consulates were opened, negotiations with the Council of Europe were actively conducted, an agreement on cooperation with the EU was signed, and the first foreign policy concept was to strengthen links with the Baltic States, Ukraine and Poland. But the referendum of 1995 was a fateful milestone and put an end to this way of developing the system.

Pavel Slunkin, associate analyst at the European Council on Foreign Relations, a former diplomat, notes that the factors that allowed Lukashenka to build an authoritarian system were the control of the power system, popular support, and the weakness of the checks and balances in the 1994 Constitution. As a result, we have a system that can exist without popular support, based only on downward impulses. This is both the secret of the system's stability and its weakness: at critical moments it "freezes" because it cannot work autonomously or in reverse mode (by impulses from the bottom up).

The system changes the perception of the people who enter it: the talented and professional are persuaded that they are uncompetitive, and this keeps them silent and makes them stay in the system, even if they do not support it. Even the positive features of the system, such as diligence and discipline, have shown their perverse forms in 2020, existing apart from laws, morality and common sense.

Valery Kavaleuski, the head of the Cabinet of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the foreign affairs representative, draws attention to the evolution of the system. In 1998, he encountered a system that was open, where expressing an opinion and even a political position was encouraged, but in 2006, when he was leaving government service, „people started to bite their tongues“. According to Kavaleuski, now „the state apparatus is a religion named after Lukashenka“, civil servants should be loyalists squared, and many of them are guided by the principle „we feel bad here, but it will be much worse elsewhere“. By 2020, „the state has completely detached itself from society“ (there is not even an attempt to show that it serves it) and „it has abandoned the law as a means of regulating social relations“.

This contradiction is also emphasized by **Natallia Rabava**, director of the SYMPA / BIPART School of Public Administration Managers: the conflict between the utilitarian vision of life from the state system (consumption, survival, career growth) and the vision of a society that wants not only to consume goods and entertainment, but also to participate in public life. The contradictions of 2020, on the other hand, led to the best leaving the state system, and as a result we have a system of the day before yesterday that is trying to run a modern society.

Tatsiana Chulitskaya, PhD in Social Sciences from Vytautas Magnus University, agrees that the requirement of the loyalty of civil servants has increased tenfold, it is now the basic criterion of being in the system and it is prescribed in the legislation as well. As a result, the civil service is not organised on the basis of merit and qualifications, and the criterion of professionalism is getting lower and lower. Sooner or later, the system will not be able to function properly with this approach. In the meantime, the current government apparatus is designed to preserve and reproduce itself and the system that exists. As long as the demand for loyal cadres persists, the system will continue to exist and will only begin to fall apart with a change in the political framework.

BEYOND 30 YEARS: TOWARDS A COMMON NARRATIVE OF BELARUSIAN IDENTITY?

Henadz Korshunau, PhD in sociology, former director of the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, research analyst at the European Humanities University and senior analyst at the Centre for New Ideas, notes that by the time the USSR collapsed, Belarus had reached the peak of industrial development, a consequence of accelerated post-war urbanisation. However, another consequence was the Russian language elite and the suppression of the Belarusian national narrative. Instead of the national idea, the ideology of the Soviet man was cultivated in the society, and at the end we got the BSSR as the most Soviet republic.

The initial public demand for the idea of the Soviet reverse proposed by Lukashenka ended by the middle of the 1990s, just as the industrial inertia on the Soviet reserves ended, the relationship with Russia began to experience difficulties and cuts in subsidies. In addition, generations were changing, and the popularity of a return to the USSR inexorably declined, as did the idea of a union with Russia.

The processes of digitalization and internetization, as a result of which the internet became a commonplace for almost all young and middle-aged people, also played an important role in the Belarusian identity. The Internet environment has become an experience of independent construction of relations between subjects and construction of horizontal ties, as opposed to the metanarrative, which was maintained by the state, as in industrial society.

Belarusian society is forming a new type of polysubjective identity in the post-industrial era. The use of different languages and faiths is a postmodern situation, which has developed in Belarus even before industrial society (and the first coat of arms of the BSSR with inscriptions in four languages reflects this).

What is happening in Belarus in 2020, **Aliaksei Kazharski**, PhD, a researcher at Charles University in Prague, calls a laboratory of nation-building, involving the reappropriation of Soviet symbols and their recombination with new progressive ideas, such as feminization. According to Aliaksei, the key to this process is its spontaneity, growing from the bottom up, so the identity project is not reducible to any one thing.

Franak Viachorka, senior advisor to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and head of the foreign policy department, sees in the events of 2020 such features of Belarusian identity as responsibility and discipline, peacefulness and peace as a principle and value. Diaspora activity and forced relocation demonstrated the demand for a national identity outside the country's borders. And Franak sees the Belarusian dream as building their home, with all the comfort and privacy, but at the same time with their neighbourhood – which is why new local communities have become so popular. And the demand for geopolitical neutrality, which sociologists record, is a peculiar view of the farm dweller on a national scale.

Aliaksandra Zverava, co-founder of the initiative „Voices from Belarus“, who used to work at the crowdfunding platform “Ulei” („Hive“), points out that while all over the world crowdfunding was used to raise funds for technologies and gadgets, in Belarus cultural and social initiatives were more popular. This demonstrates that Belarusians are very responsive and emotional; they have a need to be part of society and work within it. And when an opportunity to unite in 2020 appeared, the Belarusians did it, even despite the risks and threats.

However, the philosopher Maksim Harunou, co-host of the program about the national idea „Idea X“ on the Euroradio, believes that a peculiar love for gadgets is not alien to Belarusians. In his opinion, the Belarusians would like to have a society of continuous development - with constant updates, like smartphones, and a president like Steve Jobs, who would hold a presentation every four years and demonstrate updates.

Lukashenka previously managed to deceive the Belarusians by selling himself as the continuer of continuous progress, and now Tsapkala and Babaryka in their rhetoric promised progress after stagnation and releasing new gadgets on time. As for positive memories of the Soviet image, Mazurau and Masherau appear in it as the Belarusian Lee Kuan Yew.

As for the future, Harunou predicts that people in the new Belarus will be very receptive to the leftist feminist agenda as a new progressive substitute for Sovietism.