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INTRODUCTION

There can be no common measurement
If man cannot measure
his role in the world.
Czesław Miłosz, *Native Realm*

The materials from "The Geopolitical Place of Belarus in Europe and the World" conference are a collection of interpretations of socio-political activists and representatives of contemporary Belarusian culture, who took part in two days of roundtable debate and follow-up discussions. These materials will give readers, students, academics and ministry officials responsible for contacts with Belarus a chance to acquaint themselves with a wide range of interpretations concerning the current political, economic, social and cultural situation in the country currently dominated by Alaksandr Łukašenka. Even though no agreement exists among political scientists as to whether Łukašenka is Vladimir Putin's obedient puppet or an independent player, Łukašenka's control over the country is unquestionable.

Readers will notice that the varying interpretations concerning the situation in Belarus were not determined by the writers' allegiance to a particular state, but rather resulted from differing evaluations of the level of national consciousness (identities) in Belarusian society and different opinions on the effectiveness of the coercive system and the secret police (Belarusian KGB). I would like to emphasize that issue because it indicates the lack of a successful Iron Curtain dividing the Belarusian intellectuals from the rest of the world.

The fact that all the Belarusian participants at the conference, who expressed criticism of Łukašenka's regime to varying degrees, were all able to come to Warsaw forms an interesting aspect of the meandering

politics of Belarus, the explanation for which was the subject of the November conference. The image which emerged from the participants' statements was one of a country in which executive power has been completely consolidated in the hands of an autocratic president, while the all-powerful secret police quell, oppress and marginalize not simply democratic and national opposition, but all signs of disagreement with the prevailing regime. Contrary to its Polish and Slovak predecessors, opposition to Łukašenka had thus far been unable to find the universal slogans and symbols which could allow it to assume the role of the nation's spiritual leader. Not surprisingly, the discussions on this topic were often accompanied by bitter irony and sarcasm, concealing a deep feeling of helplessness.

The materials from this conference are an excellent source for readers seeking to learn about the current state of intellectual perspicacity, analytical proficiency, the sense of moral responsibility, and the political vision of opposition-oriented, Belarusian intellectuals. I do not expect that judgments expressed ten years from now will be as severe as contemporary internet discussions on conditions in Belarus, but such judgments will undoubtedly focus on what was missing from the opinions of the participants. This is not a question of topics omitted in the discussions, but one of forgotten or marginalized frames of reference that would cast a different light on the state of Belarusian identity.

In writing this introduction I would like to share two thoughts: one of them concerns the Belarusian past and, the other, the Belarusian future; however both of them are closely connected with Belarus' sense of national identity, which is currently undergoing an acute crisis. There are many causes for this situation, but, in my view, the most serious stems from the loss of Belarus' own history. The dying out of knowledge of Belarusian history is so advanced that according to research data from 1993 and 1994, Belarusian students from the seventh grade consider, along with Janka Kupała and Francišak Skaryna, Catherine The Great (sic!), Suvorov, and the murderer of the Polock Bascilians – Peter I – to be their national heroes. On the other hand, the same children mention Hitler and Gorbachev among the greatest criminals of the twentieth century. Gorbachev's crime was bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Stalin, whose victims exceed in number those of Hitler's by several fold, is mentioned only sporadically. In such a situation, the lack of references to Belarusian

history throughout the conference was painfully significant. Of course, this problem might have been altered by including two or three sessions on topics which, though of a strictly historical nature, might have contributed to understanding contemporary Belarus. The problem, however, was not in the number of historians represented at the conference, but in the insufficient historical awareness of the political scientists, economists and sociologists who were present.

Perhaps I am being unfair to the guests of the Institute of Civic Space and Public Policy at the Lazarski School of Commerce and Law, but let me note that, during the discussions, when Barbara Skinner, a professor from Indiana University, drew the participants' attention to the absence of the above mentioned references to the past while analyzing the present and making prognoses, her remark evoked no response from the participants. Therefore, one has the impression that despite the efforts of such historians as Hienadź Sahanovič, Andrej Katlarčuk, and Aleś Kraucevič, no one regards the war they have waged to recover Belarusian national history as a sine qua non in the battle against the entrenched Soviet-style regime in Minsk.

For most of Belarus' neighbors (as for the majority of Europeans) national history provides a treasure chest of arguments that can be used to support present-day political debate (ideas). By correlating political arguments with *national* patterns of behaviors, informed by centuries of experience, one can give them greater seriousness, as well as justify enormous risks and allow oneself to curse or grant absolution in the name of one's forbearers. Of course, politicians prefer to listen to political scientists, economists, sociologists, and public opinion researchers rather than to historians, because by doing so they can reduce the amount of data upon which they make decisions. No great political debate, however, has ever avoided invoking the voice of one's predecessors. That voice, and moreover, the understanding of its importance, has always accompanied every major political party and every influential intellectual circle.

In Russia, the debate over the reforms introduced by Peter I divided the intellectuals into two opposing groups, which propagated completely different social and political programs in the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. Joseph Stalin, by referencing the figures of Ivan the Terrible and Peter I in his directives sought to justify his own role in the history of the country. Putin, who is constantly strengthening his autocratic government, wants to erect monuments commemorating Dzerzhinskii

rather than Emelian Pugachev. Moreover Putin's pride in his own national history does not significantly differ in power or ideological expression from that of Karamzin.

In Poland, during the preparations for the 1000th anniversary of the baptism of Poland, Gomułka lost the battle over the understanding of national history to Cardinal Wyszyński. In its own historical mythology, Solidarity associated itself with the heroic Confederacy of Bar, singing the Confederacy's religious songs and printing its patriotic poems. To this day, proponents of the supremacy of executive power caution their audiences against the dangers of widespread political anarchy associated with the *szlachta*, while their opponents continually note that certain, basic, modern principles of democracy and religious tolerance were created in the 16th century in the territories of present-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. For Hungarians, on the other hand, an almost pious respect for the crown of St Stephen has been used to justify their policies towards Slavs and Romanians. One could continue to cite such examples, such as the importance of the 1848 heroes for those participating in the heated days preceding the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. Further, we might mention the weighty significance that the battle of Kosovo Field continues to hold of Serbs, or that Jan Hus and the Prague defenestration in 1618 evoke in Czechs. There is no need to provide further examples to convince my readers that our contemporaries employ history to justify their political choices. In such a situation, attempts to win control or interpretative dominance (esp. in school textbooks, radio speeches, and television content) are an inseparable element in the fight to gain political power. One may despair over this vested interest in violating historical truth, one could extol historical truth and objectivism, but one cannot deny the importance of historical awareness in the life of any nation.

It is well known that the winners (e.g. empires) take upon themselves the burden of writing the history of conquered nations. This imperial vision often acquires widely accepted academic recognition, a kind of academic patina. Until this day, it has been extremely difficult for historians from the conquered countries of the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union to introduce their own anti-imperial vision of their national history to the world. This incessant fight about history and its interpretation is both an internal fight and a fight about sovereignty, or even about survival. In that fight a nation may forfeit its language and still survive, as did the

Irish, but we must remember that that nation never introduced English heroes to their national pantheon. Naturally, the moment we start to think independently and begin to sort out our accumulated stereotypes, we have to critically revise many national myths. Those myths that still survive, link us – by their universalism – to the world, and – by their national tinge – to the shadow of our ancestors. Taking up the fight to preserve national history and culture appears to be one of the most vital tasks facing not only Belarusian, but all proponents of individual and national autonomy must face.

Nowadays a large number of Belarusians, despite their aversion to NATO, are willing to join the European Union. I do not know how many of the proponents of joining the EU are aware that, for their country, such an endeavor would not be an expedition into the unknown, but a return to the civilization in which their ancestors participated for over 300 years.

It is worth mentioning here that Belarusian Europeans of those days were not necessarily the Chreptowiczes, Sapiehas, Ogińskis, Pociejowes, Pacows, Bilewiczes or Tyszkiewiczes who participated in public life and took posts in the Senate, but there were also numerous Orthodox and Uniate priests such as Meleti Smotrytskii, Semeon Polocki, Hipacy Pociej, Jozef Welamin Rucki, Antoni Sielawa, Jakub Susza, Rafael Korsak and many more, including no less than Piotr Mohila, who belonged to two, if not three, European cultural circles. All of these men were fluent, both in speaking and in writing, not only in their own, rich language, but in the universal language of the time – Latin, as well as Polish and, not uncommonly, Greek. Their works and abundant collections of letters display such high intellectual standards, original thoughts, biting wit and excellent understanding of the world and human nature, that these authors continue to surprise scholars to this day. Most of them felt equally at home in Rome, on Mount Athos, in the capital city of Vilnius, or in the proverbial Smorgonie of the Sapiehas. It is not their fault that most of their descendants are less familiar with their work than with those authors officially recognized by the East and West.

Many educators from Belarusian Jesuit schools, or like Bazyli Rudomycz, scholars from Zamoyski Academy were unquestionably Europeans. The works of the latter, as far as I know, have never been translated into the Belarusian language, despite the fact that his enormous, extremely

interesting diary, resembling in parts that of Samuel Pepys, was written in three languages: Latin, old Belarusian and Polish, depending on the mood of the Rector Magnus. Investigating the choice of topics, emotions or passions which determined his choice of language might reveal many unknown aspects about seventeenth century Belarusian identity.

The burghers of the great and small towns of Belarus were also Europeans who knew how to defend their personal and self-governing rights. Even more interesting, a consciousness of human rights and dignity existed not only among the Cossacks of Ukraine, but also among Belarusian, Uniate peasants, a fact which becomes obvious when reading the paper included in this volume by Barbara Skinner. One could debate the extent to which the material quoted by Barbara Skinner reflects only the consciousness of the clergy and to what extent such consciousness penetrated into the minds of average citizens; however it cannot be denied that, Belarus made itself, by its own efforts, a country of civic space. What is immensely impressive is the civic consciousness of Belarusian townspeople, their respect and belief in the effectiveness of the law, their attachment to their municipal government, which they fiercely defended, and their great religious tolerance. I cannot refrain from supporting my opinions with the voices of the seventeenth century townspeople of Mohilev, Orsha, Vitebsk, and Krichev which were published over 100 years ago in Saint Petersburg as Akty Otnosiashchijesia k Istorii Juzhnoj i Zapadnoj Rosii sobrannyje i izdannyje Archieograficheskieju Komissieju (Acts relating to the History of the Southern and Eastern Russian Empire), v.14 (supplement to v.3) St Petersburg 1889. The material that I will emply comes from the fourth volume, entitled: The Unification of Belarus, 1654–1655:

Let me begin by providing some background and context. In 1654, after accepting Bohdan Khmel'nets'kyi's Ukraine as a province subject to his rule, the father of Peter I, tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich, marched off to subjugate the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its Baltic ports. To justify his military conquest, he described it as a religious crusade, which was meant to bring liberation to Orthodox believers suffering Egyptian slavery, to destroy the union, to annul the public cult of the Catholics and Evangelicals, and to bring death, slavery or exile to the Jews. Readers interested in more information on this subject should refer to a well-known book by Hienadź Sahanovič (Nieviadomaya Wojna – The Unknown War), for I will concentrate only on certain basic facts. The Tsar issued decrees

and wrote personal letters in which he summoned Orthodox bishops, Orthodox noblemen and townspeople to support his army in the war against the enemies of Orthodoxy, i.e. Polish pagan heretics of the Latin rite. He called upon the representatives of all the bishoprics, towns and provinces to come to his military headquarters to take an oath of loyalty. While the tsar's army was besieging Smolensk, large Muscovite forces, backed up by Khmel'nets'kyi's Cossacks, set forth to capture Belarusian towns. Messengers from Smolensk were sent to all the towns and villages to convince the Orthodox citizens to open their gates. This, however, was not an easy task. In all the towns where the citizens were forced, following a defense of any length, to open their gates, even in Mohilev, the most submissive town, the burghers stoutly demanded that their hitherto existing legal situation be maintained. They opened the gates only when their conditions were accepted. Obviously, these burghers were afraid to share the fate of the "tiaglei" people inhabiting the tsar's towns; they feared the arbitrariness of the officials and representatives of the tsar's government. The Orthodox townspeople wanted to maintain the very way of life from which the Orthodox tsar planned to liberate them. For this reason, they demanded the preservation of their elected municipal government and their municipal courts of justice; moreover, they insisted on maintaining the rights of people of different religions, or at minimum, a guarantee that such people could safely leave for Lithuania or Poland. Townspeople further requested consent to dress in their own manner, rather than that of Muscovy. The conditions for surrender of every town sounded very similar. Before deciding to surrender, townspeople sometimes requested permission to send messengers to Smolensk and other cities under siege in order to make a collective decision; sometimes they promised to surrender only if other towns surrendered as well.

Thus we see that this uninvited "liberator" was not greeted with an enthusiastic response. For further confirmation of this fact, let us turn to the voices of the townspeople themselves: "We bow down to Your Tsarish Majesty and request that, in accordance with the public pledges of the tsar, all the rights and privileges of the city of Mohilev be preserved in their entirety, and that all the burghers living in Mohilev be judged without alteration according to their rights and privileges under the Magdeburg code of law, with one court as well as an annually elected mayor, town councilors, jurors, and a reeve. If someone should not be satisfied with

a ruling, then he must not appeal to any other court than to His Tsarish Majesty's, and only in cases of great significance." (p. 260). "In order that the major, town councilors and juries as well as burgemeister have to be elected by the burghers as a whole from the city's population which is to be judged only by their own in the high court which has to rule in accordance with Magdeburg law. If someone is displeased with the court's decision, their only recourse for appeal is to the throne of Your Tsarish Majesty." (p. 413). Notably, the Krichevian townspeople, wrote to the Tsar, bowing down before "Your Tsarish Majesty, requesting that we retain all the privileges and liberties bestowed upon the people of Krichev by Polish kings of glorious memory". (p. 413) The people of Krichev, as with other cities, did not fail to intercede on behalf of their Jewish co-citizens in their hour of greatest danger. "We bow to Your Tsarish Majesty to request that the vice captains safely, and with all their possessions, as well as the Jews who inhabit Krichev, be allowed to leave Lithuania, or, if Your Tsarish Majesty allows, to remain in Krichev". (p. 416) A similar request concerning the vice captains and the Jews was issued by the citizens of Mohilev, the outcome of which was the subject of a later investigation. (p. 370–380) For the representatives of Vitebsk province, a condition of their ceasing battle and submitting to the tsar was the right to escort the Jews and noblemen out of the city protected by armed guard. (p. 292) Finally, it should be observed that the citizens of Mohilev, like citizens of other cities, bowed to the Tsarish Majesty in order to be granted the right to dress according to their ancient traditions. (p. 261)

These demands were so common and so similar that one cannot fail to perceive that, during the battles of Smolensk, Krichev, Vitebsk, Orsha, Mscislav and Old Bykhov, there was also a clash between the ideas, customs, and social and political structures represented by the East and the civilization that today we call Western, a civilization which, from the sixteenth century, was deeply rooted in the Dnieper area. The Russian tsar, Russian laws, and Russian customs were, in spite of their common Orthodox faith, foreign and unwanted in these lands. Those who defended Belarus against Aleksei Mikhailovich's army were mainly identified by Russians of the time, as evidenced by our source, as neither Lachy (a pejorative term for Pole) nor Lithuanians, but as Belarusians.

Delivering the annual Dinur lecture at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1976, I referred to the behavior of the townspeople and the Belarusian

population in general towards the Jews during the period of Moscow's invasion. My lecture evoked surprise (such surprise always results when stereotypes are questioned, especially with the help of experts such as Simon Dubnow), which underscores the fact that this moment in Belarusian history does not deserve to fall into oblivion and, moreover, should be included in all books on to the history of European civic societies. Europe needs that kind of civic tradition to enrich its seventeenth century history, which otherwise is represented rather poorly by the history of France and Spain.

Towards the end of eighteenth century, the borders of European civilization, which up to that time had been secured by Magdeburg law, statutes and constitutions, as well as self-government, in cities, provinces, and parliaments, were pushed further west as imperial powers succeeded in destroying civic societies. In the nineteenth century, Western Europeans and even Belarusians began to forget that, in the past, because of Magdeburg law, local self-government, the Lithuanian Statute, and the Lithuanian Tribunal the borders of Europe extended to the Dnieper. A Russian who crossed that border in 1696 was utterly bewildered, as one can easily discover by reading The Travel Diary of Peter Tolstoi (specifically, his arrival and description of Mohilev). Two hundred years of tsarist rule, followed by the reign of Soviet Russia, destroyed and warped the memory of Belarus' European heritage. Currently the line between Europe and Dugin's Eurasia does not run along country borders, but along a line marked by the symbols of different values. Hussers eschatology of the European spirit does not tolerate any symbols of totalitarianism, and it ceases to apply in places where Lenin's monuments still stand today, places that have forgotten the gulags and the famine holocaust, places where the symbols of the red star, the hammer and the sickle are still ubiquitous. Fighting against those symbols is just as crucial as fighting against symbols of fascism: both Soviet and fascist symbols served, and continue to serve those who want to destroy the world of human rights, tolerance, self government and democracy. The line marked by Lenin's monuments divides not only the Belarusians, but Ukrainians and Russians as well. The fact that the line has existed for a long time does not help the efforts of those who, if for purely pragmatic reasons, would like to enjoy the advantages of the European Union.

The euphoria of the Orange Revolution has died out recently, and the paeans to Viktar Yushchenko have ceased. The dramatic and important

victory of the Ukrainian opposition has been undermined not only by the continued power of the oligarchs, the petty infighting of the leaders, and the influence of a powerful secret police, but also by the confusion caused by conflicting systems of values and the distance between the individual and his/her ability to influence the government, even at the local level of neighborhood, town, or municipality. The Ukrainians, consciously trying to restore the tradition of civic society, which has yet to be realized, are turning to the history of the Cossacks and parliamentary participation under Austrian rule. Similarly, Belarusians could turn to the civic traditions of Polock, Vitebsk, Krichev or Sluck. Acquainting themselves more closely with this tradition would help all participants in self-government who are struggling to build a democratic system from scratch. Moreover, focusing on the spiritual values and conscious moral choices (of their predecessors), mentioned several times during the conference, appears to be a good direction towards finding Europe. Without any significant change in Belarusian national consciousness, any centrally-made political changes will bring results important only to a victorious elite and powerful interest groups.

Freedom imported from abroad is always dangerous. The so-called liberation of Central and Eastern Europe by the Red Army brought only a new occupation and the loss of sovereignty under a government of communist collaborators (who, unfortunately, are never in deficit in any political system). Rules and regulations meant to create a civic society equally pose a danger, if introduced from the outside. The twentieth century history of postcolonial countries and the current experience in Iraq appear to be exceptionally clear examples of this theory. Nevertheless, many nations have in their own culture, traditions and history a period or a brief moment of democratic practice, ideas and experience, which could serve as foundations for attempts to build a system of self-government appropriate to their conditions and customs. The establishment of this self-government could, in turn, contribute to creating a sense of citizenship and a real democracy that controls both executive power and the parliament.

Belarusians, unlike many other nations, have a very rich tradition of civic rights and self-government. They have many reasons to be proud when looking at their distant ancestors. Belarusians currently know very little about their predecessors, but that is a different issue and one that can be overcome without much difficulty. We should, however, no longer passively

tolerate imposed, pedagogical ignorance and degrading lies. Belarusians could still choose the road to Eurasia, out of indifference, intellectual laziness, decades of acquired habits and the fear of the unknown. All the residents of Belarus, who still grieve at the collapse of the Soviet Union, have already gone a long way down that path. Even those Belarusians who are not offended by that thoughtlessly tolerated idiocy, the loss of their national language, will also find that path, even if they hope to become Russian-speaking Europeans. The remainder will hopefully try to resume a spiritual connection with their forefathers who were able to draw up the Lithuanian Statutes and defend themselves against the father of Peter I. They must do it by themselves. Without such an effort, any attempts at modernity and transformation à la Balcerowicz or Majdan will rest on a very brittle foundation.

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