

AFTERWORD

By Valer Bulhakaw

Belarusian-Russian integration is one of the most painful problems for Belarusian society. Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his Russian allies have taken such steps that the pro-independence element of Belarusian society strongly opposes this process and views it as only a serious threat to the very existence of the Belarusian state. That is the issue of integration was sometimes held hostage to self-sufficient political strategies that ignore the interests of the Belarusian nation. This book was written for the purpose of responding to the questions of the Belarusian independent society about Belarusian-Russian integration, its economic, political, cultural and strategic security aspects, with respect to the two nations.

In the official interpretation, “integration” appears to be a complicated and contradictory process that is, however, conducive to the development of the Belarusian economy and to strengthening its security. The economic analyses in this book show that it is not quite true. Lukashenka’s integration proposals have in fact prolonged the existence of the Soviet-era industrial complex in Belarus and economic relations characteristic of it. However, the nation has paid a high price for this. As Vital Silitski clearly shows in his article “The Politics of Economic Policymaking in Belarus under Lukashenka,” in the last eight years, Belarus has in fact regained the status of an economic colony of Russia. The country’s total dependence on Russian energy resources, subordination to Russia’s customs, investment, lending and

tariff policies has made Belarus extremely sensitive to the slightest changes in the Kremlin’s political and economic policies.

By rejecting integration into the international economic community, Lukashenka and his close entourage have chosen to force the country to embark on the Latin American path of development, which means tying the national economy to the parent state’s markets and leaving Belarusian manufacturers no choice but to serve Russian consumers. The “integrated economic zone of the Union State”, which the Belarusian leadership has exerted significant effort to establish, is merely an economic subsystem with elements of authoritarian management, isolated from the rest of the world. It is no surprise that this “integrated economic zone” frequently does not follow the upward and downward trends in the world economy.

The economic policy of the Belarusian regime is riddled with inconsistency, as periods of economic liberalization alternate with administrative methods of management. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the regime’s policy in the cultural sphere. During his entire period in office, Lukashenka has never let the Belarusians be what they are — a European nation with European cultural identity. There is nothing he would not have done to get what he wanted. Lukashenka staged a national referendum in 1995 in order to replace the country’s historical emblem and flag with Soviet-style state attributes. It was a symbolic act for the Belarusian public, it symbolized the beginning of a full-scale crackdown on the main achievements of Belarusian culture. Lukashenka destroyed the national system of education too, ousting the Belarusian language from the educational process and reducing the number of Belarusian-language publications.

As a matter of fact, Belarusian culture has fallen victim to the economy. The situation with the Belarusian media was quite different, as the Lukashenka regime was constantly concerned about the situation on the information front, as the government-controlled electronic media cannot compete with Russian television and radio stations, which reduces the regime’s ability to manipulate public opinion.

President Lukashenka’s eight-year rule has been a period of trial for Belarusian culture and a test for the civic courage of those working

in the cultural sphere. These eight years have discredited Russian cultural circles in Belarus, the russified colonial cultural elite, which by their silent support of the Lukashenka regime reduced their role to guarding the achievements of Russian cultural imperialism in Belarus, contributing to the discrimination of Belarusian culture. It is becoming increasingly clear that even the most successful information, educational and political projects undertaken by representatives of these cultural traditions do not consolidate society but lead to the recolonization of Belarus, creating a transit territory devoid of national distinctness, a sort of buffer zone between authoritarian Russia and democratic Europe. Indirect evidence of this includes the Belarusian regime's tolerance of Russian-language private media outlets with a "pro-democracy orientation" or non-governmental political organizations that use the Russian language in their promotional campaigns while Belarusian-language projects are fiercely attacked. After the fall of Lukashenka, the entire range of projects aimed at the development of national culture should be given full-scale government support as this is the sector that has suffered most from the authoritarian regime.

The persistence that Lukashenka and his cohorts display while implementing their integration initiatives demonstrates the provinciality of their cultural knowledge and interests. The outlook on the world and life that is deeply rooted in the minds of these people, who may be called cultural cripples without exaggeration, was formed during the times of the Soviet empire, which is why it is stuffed with stereotypes of Communist propaganda, it is xenophobic in the extreme and worships brutal force, the search for enemies, has a friend-or-foe mode of thinking, and recognizes Moscow as the mecca of culture.

The lexicon of these promoters of "Belarusian-Russian integration" illustrates their educational level. For instance, for several years they have been using the bubble-word group "Union State," which is logically senseless. Their choice of words is convincing evidence of the functional emptiness of "Union State agencies" and their humiliating dependence on changes in the political situation. In this regard, indicative is the integration eloquence of Lukashenka, who, without negatively impacting his political career in Russia, pretends

to be an ardent pan-Slavic doctrinaire, an advocate of All-Slavic unity, while playing the role of a moderate nationalist and the guarantor of Belarusian statehood on the national political stage.

The "Union State," being the turning point in political rapprochement between Belarus and Russia, is in fact an institutional phantom. This is beneficial for advancing the true interests of the Belarusian and Russian political elites, which, as it turns out, push certain integration initiatives while simultaneously opposing others. These interests can vary dramatically. For instance, Minsk is primarily interested in protecting, through political means, the positions of national manufacturers in Russia's markets, while Moscow, apart from introducing Russian companies into Belarus, aims to influence the decisions of the Belarusian leadership on important political matters as well as its cultural and information policies. The analysis by Yuras Likhtarovich suggests that following a brief remission, caused by the breakup of the USSR, Russian political circles are experiencing a relapse of their old political disease — imperial mentality. Russian politicians, who have failed to learn their lesson from historical experience, are again harboring plans to achieve strategic control over Central and Eastern Europe and other regions of significant geopolitical importance.

The phantom nature of "Union State governing bodies" reflects the Belarusian leadership's notion of democracy and shows that they were established on the initiative of Minsk. As a matter of fact, they are copies of Belarus' state entities, which, under the rule of Lukashenka, have been degraded to the level of merely formal elements in the government system and have no levers to influence the country's political course. The fictitious "Union State," which, as Vital Silitski suggests, was designed by Lukashenka as a political agency to push Belarusian products into Russian markets, is antagonistic to the new proposals of the Kremlin, which currently aims to optimize the Union State's institutional system. The Belarusian government is not enthusiastic over the possibility of elections for the Union State's legislature on the basis of population, as the Belarusian delegation would not be able to block resolutions that would not be in the regime's interests.

The first results of political rapprochement between Belarus and Russia leave no room for doubt that the governments of both countries will use every means possible to prevent any moves that would disturb the current status quo in the Union State. Contradictions that have accumulated in recent years are another impediment to the further integration of Belarus and Russia. The institutional conflict inherent in the foundation of the “Union State” is likely to become second in acuity to the main problem concerning economic relations between the two countries — the incompatibility of the Russian economic system with the Belarusian one, which is dominated by state ownership and experiencing a severe financial crisis. Therefore, the first Belarusian president will likely spend more time playing “independence games” than integration games.

The troubles faced by the Belarusian state in the first decade of its independence, when its very survival seemed to be in question, was caused among others by Belarusians’ outlook on the world, which could be characterized as narrow and underdeveloped. However, there is hope that the nation will be able to take advantage of the political independence, the unique opportunity to champion its cultural rights.