

RELATIONS OF BELARUS WITH RUSSIA SINCE 1991

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled "Relations of Belarus with Russia Since 1991" submitted by Premendra Kumar in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Degree of Master of Philosophy, is his own work under my supervision and has not been previously submitted for any degree of this university or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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To

My Dad and My Mom

With love and Gratitude

*Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be
Long upon the land which the lord thy God giventh thee.*

- Old Testament, Exodus (5th Commandment)

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A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.

- *Henry Adams*

Few human efforts succeed without the cooperation of fellow human beings. And so in this exercise, I am indebted to many. I feel, it is high time to appreciate and acknowledge them.

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Inspite of the fact that I have taken advantage from different streams of intellectual ideas, the views presented in the present work are entirely my own and I am solely responsible for errors, if any.


PREMENDRA KUMAR

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PREFACE

The present study is intended to analyse the relations of Belarus with Russia since 1991. This period was marked by many unprecedented developments throughout the world. This study aims at the repercussions of the disintegration of USSR in general and Belarus role in particular. The stress is more on political and economic study of Belarus and its ordeal in dealing with chaotic economic situation and erosion of political institutions. These two factors have proved to a large extent to be very decisive in formulation of its independent foreign policy vis-à-vis the West as well as Russia.

Belarus post-Soviet existence has put it as an independent actor on the world stage, though it is still grappling with several vital issues related to it. The nation-building processes and national interests are yet to be defined. Belarus inherited a ruined economy along with unstable political institutions. In Belarus itself, the pro-West and pro-Russia lobbies have delayed certain important decisions making issues, which have catastrophic implications for Belarus liberalisation programme. The dire need for aid has divided Belarus neutral stand. The economic reforms and political instability have been a catalyst in Belarus foreign policy-making, but the situation has changed in recent years for positive economic growth of Belarus.

However, after its independence, Belarus has been slow to extricate itself from old Soviet framework. The problem of national identity is complicated by extensive Russification that took place during the Soviet regime and that subsequently diluted all aspects of Belarussian separateness affecting all the usual indicators nationalism - ethnicity, language, consciousness and historical memories. Belarus had been a relatively prosperous and economically developed republic during the Soviet period despite its lack of natural resources and raw materials but the economic turmoil of independent Belarus indicates that the Belarussian economy will find it hard to survive without closer cooperation with former Soviet republics and domestic pressures motivated the signing of currency union with Russia, and an economic union with nine CIS republics in September 1993.

The Russian-Belarus relationship also has another aspect that of military and security concern. Belarus was one of the four Soviet Republics where substantial nuclear weapons were stationed during the Soviet period. From the very outset Belarus opted for a no-nuclear status as an independent country and unlike Ukraine, it carried out its commitment in all sincerity. Its relations with Moscow never saw the kinds of uncertainties and mutual suspicion, as was the case with Russian-Ukrainian relationship. It carried out constructive dismantling of Soviet nuclear presence; the tactical weapons were removed to Russia for destruction by July 1992; it was a party to the Lisbon agreement and ratified START-I and NPT.

Hence, the nuclear issue which preoccupied Russian policy makers during the immediate post-Soviet period, was never troublesome for the Russian-Belarusian relations.

Due to close ethnic, economic and historical reasons, there is an urgent need for close cooperation with Moscow. This is a popular view not among the political elite but also the common masses. The foreign policy adopted by Belarus so far has been pro-Russia though not one of desiring to be re-incorporated in the Russian Federation. Russia on its part has responded positively to the Belarusian overtures. The recent Russian plan for speeding up the "integration" of the CIS has given a special place to Belarus. Yeltsin two-tier CIS calls for closer cooperation among Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan than with other former republics. President Lukashenko of Belarus, while reacting to Russian Duma's denouncement of Belovezhske agreements on March 17, 1996 called for the unification of the two people on an "equitable and civilized" basis. He called the resolution a "personal tragedy" because it obstructed his own plans for reintegration with Moscow via the "Russia-Belarusian union treaty". The latest consolidation trend in the CIS has much to do with the joint effort of Russia and Belarus.

Therefore, keeping in mind the above-mentioned facts, the dissertation consists of five chapters.

The **first chapter** deals with historical background of Belarus and Soviet policy towards it. This chapter also deals with the formation of

Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) and its participation in the founding of USSR in 1922. It will also give emphasis on inter-republican economic linkages and political-cultural ties of Byelorussia particularly with RSFSR.

The **second chapter** deals with Belarus's role in the dissolution of USSR and its march towards independence. How various issues, factors and circumstances catalysed the process of getting independence and ultimately the formation of commonwealth of independent states (CIS), on the initiative of Yeltsin but with the active participation of Shushkevich and Ukrainian President Kravchuk.

The **third chapter** deals with the transition Belarus to market economy and its implications for the relations with Russia. It further analyses how this got reverse with the coming of Lukashenko who gave his assent on union with Russia with an orthodox pro-Russian policies.

The **fourth chapter** deals with Belarus' de-nuclearization programme programme and problems of cooperation with Russia in strategic sphere. It also deals with the latest and contemporary problem to analyse the whole issue.

The **fifth chapter** (i.e. Conclusion) is an overall assessment of relations between the two countries with the clear indication of Belarus's tilt towards Moscow.

However, the researcher has tried his level best to compartmentalize the dissertation into respective chapters. But it is very difficult to keep

them watertight as the work progressed. So, the chapters are under broad headings and to maintain logical consistency he has taken an integrated approach.

This study is based on published, primary and secondary sources, particularly Summary of World Broadcast (BBC) and Current Digest of Post Soviet Press, which proved invaluable on account of detailed recording of information. These are supplemented with relevant books, academic articles and press coverage.

CHAPTER-I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Republic of Belarus, formerly the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) is a land locked state in the northeastern Europe. Historically, the country is also known as White Russia or White Ruthenia.¹ The origin of the term Belaia Rus or Belarus has not yet been clarified, but in recent years several linguists support the theory that the area is so called because in the period of Kievan Russia, the territory which later became known as Belaia Rus was not occupied by the Mongols. Thus it is possible that the term came into use at that time as a means of differentiating the unoccupied lands from the areas under Mongol domination.² Later invasion by the Mongols in the thirteenth century caused the division of Kievan Russia into three separate areas, which later became known as Belorussia, Ukraine and Russia. This division, which was followed by a long separation of the people of these areas ultimately, laid the foundation for the division of the Eastern Slavs into Belarussians, Ukrainians and Russians.³

Belarus, because of its geographical position, has for many centuries been an arena of political, national, religious and cultural struggle between Russians and Poles. Partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795 decided

¹ All these terms are synonymous. The term "White Russia" is often confused with anti-Bolshevik political factions and exile groups that emerged at the Revolution of 1917.

² Nicholas P. Vaker, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p.2.

³ Francis Dornik, *The Slavs in European History and Civilization*, (New Brunswick, N.J., 1962), p. 248.

the outcome of this contest in favour of Russia.⁴ Following periods of Lithuanian and Polish rule, Belarus became a part of Russian Empire in late 18th Century. The Belorussians and Ukrainians, tied by bonds of religion and memories of common origin with the Russians, but separated by cultural, social and economic differences were now subjected by the Russians to treatment almost identical with that which they had received from the Polish government. Belorussia was denied separate nationhood and renamed the northwestern territory.⁵ During the 19th Century, there was a growth of national consciousness in Belarus,⁶ and, as a result of industrialization, a significant movement of people from rural areas to the towns. After the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia, Belarussian nationalists and socialists formed a Rada (Council), which sought a degree of autonomy from the Provisional Government in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). In November, after the Bolsheviks had seized power in Petrograd, Red army troops were dispatched to Minsk and Rada was dissolved. However, the Bolsheviks were forced to withdraw by the approaching German troops. The treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, assigned most of Belarus to the Germans, and they duly occupied the country. On 25 March Belarussian nationalists convened, to proclaim a Belarussian National Republic, but it achieved only limited autonomy. After the Germans had withdrawn, the Bolsheviks easily reoccupied Minsk,

⁴ James T. Shotwell and Max M. Laserson, *The Curzon Line: The Polish-Soviet Dispute*, (New York, 1940s), p. 2.

⁵ George Vernadsky, *A History of Russia*, (New York, 1944), p. 159.

and the Belarussian (or Byelorussian) Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was formed on 1 January 1919.⁷

Following the formation of the BSSR on 1 January 1919, the BSSR resolved to unite with other Soviet Republics to constitute the USSR in December 1922. Illiteracy was eradicated after several years of Soviet rule. The Soviet era is divided into three stages. In the first period from October Revolution to the 1930s.⁸ The main task of the authorities was to introduce a 'socialist attitude' among the population and to develop the ideological base of the working class. The peasants were to be provided with a 'Soviet' outlook on life and were to develop a collectivist spirit. The new culture was to be 'national in form and socialist in spirit and content'.⁹

Stage 2, according to official history, encompassed the period from 1930s to 1950s, during which the building of socialism was completed and the new national leaders fully versed in the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism. The victory over Fascism occurred during 1941-5 and the war left 2.23 million residents of Belarus dead, ruined over 10,000 factories, and destroyed 80 per cent of urban dwellings and 9,200 villages.

Stage 3 covered the final stage of the Cultural Revolution in Belarus and prepared the way for the transition from socialism to full communism. The industrial production was raised dramatically in the years of 9th Five-Year Plan (1971-5) with significant rises in the national income and real per

⁶ The term Belarus is used throughout to denote the Belarussian Province of the Russian Empire and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic and its successor.

⁷ *Europa Yearbook*, 1997, p. 539.

⁸ Pipes, *Formation of Soviet Union*, p. 280.

capita income. Through its industrial development Belarus took its place as a valuable and prosperous Soviet republic.¹⁰ This portrayal of the development of Belarus during Brezhnev era (1964-82) by the Soviet scholars is unremarkable when compared to that of any other Soviet republic. There is no explanation why Belarus was developed as an industrial base and selected to be one of the manufacturing centres of the Soviet Union.¹¹

The Soviet leadership's New Economic Policy of 1921-28 which provided some liberalization of the economy brought a measure of prosperity, and there was a significant cultural and linguistic development, with the use of the Belarussian language officially encouraged. This period ended in 1929 with the emergence of Iosif Stalin as the dominant figure in the USSR. In that year Stalin began a campaign to collectivize agriculture, which was strongly resisted by the peasantry. In Belarus, as in other parts of USSR, there were frequent riots and rebellions in rural areas, and many peasants were deported or imprisoned. The purges of early 1930s were initially targeted against Belarussian nationalists and intellectuals, but by 1936-38 they had widened to include all sectors of the population.

After the invasion of Poland by Germany and Soviet forces in September 1939, the BSSR was enlarged by the inclusion of the lands that it had lost to Poland and Lithuania in 1921. Between 1941 and 1944, the

⁹ Institute of Art, Ethnography and Folklore, Academy of Sciences of BSSR, 1979, pp. 13-14, 18. Quoted in David R. Marples.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

BSSR was occupied by Nazi German forces; and estimated 2.2 m. people died during this period, including most of the republic's large Jewish population. At the Yalta Conference, in February 1945, the Allies agreed to recognize the 'Curzon line' as the western border of the BSSR, thus endorsing the unification of western and eastern Belarus. As a result of the Soviet demand for more voting strength in the UN, the Western powers permitted the BSSR to become a member of UN in its own right.¹²

The immediate post-war period was dominated by the need to rehabilitate the republic's infrastructure. The reconstruction programme's requirements and the local labour shortage led to an increase in Russian immigration into the republic and during the 1960s and 1970s the process of russification continued which naturally affected the course and features of state development.

Features of State Development

Belarus did have a tradition of statehood prior to the twentieth century, but not a durable one or one that could be used as a precedent for modern nation. Nor did it possess an indigenous and growing work force in urban centres prior to Soviet rule. In this respect it differed from European regions of Russia, which saw a remarkable growth of industry in the period from the 1880s to the turn of the twentieth century. Belarussians remained

¹¹ Zaprudnik, Jan, *Belarus: At a Crossroads of History*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993, p. 16.

¹² Lubachko, *Belorussia, Under Soviet Rule 1917-1957*, Lexington, Kr: University Press of Kentucky, 1972, p. 150.

redominantly rural, living in peasant communities where illiteracy rates were high.¹³

In the late nineteenth century, there were, nevertheless, some significant economic developments, particularly in industry and rail-road construction. According to Soviet source, per capita industrial output in the Belarussian regions was less than 50 per cent of the average for the Russian Empire by the outbreak of the First World War; and in the sphere of machine building, ten times lower than the national average.¹⁴ Zaprudnik observe that unemployment and poverty in this period led to large-scale emigration of Belarussians to the United States. According to another source, Belarussians also migrated eastward into Siberia and Central Russia. For the most part, the Belarussian sector of the population remained occupied in agricultural pursuits. Based on figures from the 1897 Census, Steven L. Guthier notes that 98 per cent of native Belarussians lived in countryside or in settlements with population numbering less than 2,000. In communities with more than 2,000 people, only 16.1 per cent of residents were ethnic Belarussians. In the late eighteenth century, the Government of Imperial Russia established a 'Pale of Settlement' in which Jews were obliged to reside, and limited to 15 western gubernais of the Russian Empire. The Jews of Belarussian territories, like their counterpart elsewhere, were not permitted to acquire land outside cities or to live

¹³ Guthier, Steven L., "The Belorussians: National Identification and Assimilation, 1897-1970", Part I: *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, January 1977, p. 45.

¹⁴ Borodina, V.P., et. al., *Soviet Byelorussia*, Moscow, 1972, p. 62.

beyond city borders. Consequently, they constituted most of the traders and artisans of Belarussian towns.¹⁵

After the Jews, the largest ethnic segment in the cities was comprised of the Russians, particularly in the eastern region bordering Russia proper. There had been several waves of Russian migration into the Belarussian gubernias and concomitant Russification of these areas. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Tsarist government sent Russian landowners and officials to settle lands in the western province. In addition, some Russian peasants arrived independently, buying up lands from the landowner, or from those who had left to work in the cities.

The foundation of first independent Belarussian State emerged as a result of the Russian Revolution of 1917, yet initially at least appeared to contravene the goals of Lenin and the Bolsheviks by the establishment of a so-called 'bourgeois regime'. Though this period saw a revival of national state traditions, the number of nationally conscious Belarussians remained small. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, regarded Belarus as a buffer region between the Soviet Russia and a hostile Poland (with which Russia was at war until 1920). An autonomous Belarussian State within the Soviet Russia - and particularly one that was ruled by non-Bolsheviks - was unacceptable to the Bolshevik leaders and perhaps also to some of the large number of Non- Belarussian urban residents in the ethnically Belarussian territories. When Belarus did declare itself a national republic on 9 March

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

1918, and subsequently an independent state on 25 March the Germans already occupied it.

With the departure of the Germans following their defeat on the western front in the World War I, the territories were subject to a change of policy in Petrograd, resulting eventually in the formation, announced in Smolensk, of a Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) on 1 January 1919.¹⁶ Four days later this government was moved to Minsk, which became the capital of the BSSR. The new regime was ratified on 1st February within a month, this regime was forcibly superseded by a new Lithuanian-Belarussian Republic (Litbel) announced in Vilna.¹⁷ The establishment of a Soviet regime in Belarus was not finalized, however until the Polish-Soviet war ended in July 1920. As a result of this war, the Russians were able to retain the eastern part of the ethnic Belarussian territories, in addition to the city of Minsk. In August 1920, the BSSR was once again proclaimed, though drastically reduced in size to six raions in Minsk oblast. A formal treaty was signed with Soviet Russia on 16 January 1921, and on 30th December 1922, the BSSR - in its truncated form - formally joined the USSR. In doing so, it had conceivably gained more than the republics of the Transcaucasus, which were not permitted to form individual Soviet republics.

¹⁶ Zaprudnik, 1993, pp. 70-71.

¹⁷ Mienski, J., "The Establishment of Belorussian SSR", in Kipel and Kipel, 1988, pp. 137-140.

Ironically, however, it was the Bolsheviks in the 1920s who solidified and expanded the Belarussian SSR to encompass Belarussian ethnic territories that had been initially included into the Soviet Russia, established its capital in Minsk, and deliberately nurtured and encouraged the development of national culture in the period of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

The early Soviet period (the 1920s and 1930s) saw two concomitant and significant developments in the formation of a national republic. First, Belarus was developed both industrially and culturally, and a more substantial beginning was made in the process of creating a national culture and national elite. Second, and seemingly the antithesis of the first development, was a movement toward strict centralization of command at the center (Moscow), with severe repression conducted in Belarus as elsewhere commencing in 1930 among all sectors of society. One can take this a step further by suggesting that the non-Russian Slavic Republics were regarded as essential to the maintenance of Soviet power and nurturing of communist ideology in the urban regions.

There is no question that 1920s were years of cultural revival for Belarus. In July 1924, an official program was drawn up to develop the republic culturally and to make the Belarussian language of daily usage in every facet of life. Lubachko points out that by 1st February 1927, the 'Belarussification' of the government, with the tolerance of the central authorities in Moscow, had made significant progress and encompassed

cent per cent of Central Executive Committee, the Council of People's Commissars, the Commissariat of Education, 50 per cent of Commissariat of Agriculture, 30 per cent of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, and 30-50 per cent of all other Commissariats. Hence Belarussians were being permitted to play a dominant role in the leadership organs of their republic. Lubachko labels this development - with the concomitant growth of Belarussian schools - as a 'Golden Age' of Belarussian culture.¹⁸

The 1920s also saw significant demographic change in the BSSR. In brief, there was a large migration of Belarussians from the villages into the cities. In addition, there was a policy of moving residents of other republics, especially the Russian Federation, into the cities of BSSR, ostensibly because of shortage of labour. By the time of 1926 Census, the Jewish numericals domination of cities had virtually ended. Though Jews still constituted a plurality in urban centers, the proportion of other nationalities had increased so markedly as to indicate a definite trend rather than a statistical aberration. Thus the cities of early BSSR were cosmopolitan in composition with a variety of languages spoken, though even in 1920s, a relatively tolerant period of Soviet rule, Russian tended to predominate.

The Impact of Stalinism

Industrialization was stepped up rapidly in the first two Stalinist Five Year Plans (1928-32 and 1933-37) when over 1700 industrial plants were

¹⁸ Lubachko, 1972, p. 85.

constructed in the BSSR. By 1940, it is estimated that output of heavy industry exceeded that of the year 1913 by 14 times. The pre-war industrial development in the republic was not as advanced as that in Russia or Ukraine, which were made the focus of industrialization in the European part of the USSR. The most dramatic social transformation awaited the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. The question of the impact of Stalinism on Belarus is still very much under review and little consensus has been reached within the republic. Stalinism took the form of mass executions of the population, particularly in the period 1937-41; and a more systematic eradication of Belarussian intellectuals and cultural figures. The executions were so extensive that one writer, because of the way in which they served to eliminate the intelligentsia of a nation, has labeled them as genocide.¹⁹ Kurapaty is perhaps the supreme example of the continuing 'black spots' in Belarussian history. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the authorities thus far have managed to distort the truth about this massacre. In doing so, the image of the Soviet State is less tarnished than in other republics (Ukraine, for example). The story of Kurapaty is an important event because it demonstrates how firmly the Belarussian republic had been placed under the State control. Though similar massacres have been uncovered in most other Soviet republics, only in Belarus have the authorities managed to rewrite history once again in their favour.

¹⁹ Symon Kabysh, "Genocide of the Belorussians", in Kipel and Kipel, 1988, pp. 229-41.

On 3rd June 1988, the discovery of a burial site at Kurapaty was reported in the organ of the Belarussian writers' union, *Litaratura i mastatstva*, by Zyanon Paz'nyak and Yaugen Shmyhalev. The article opened with an emotional account of some of the more horrific events of Stalin purges. Later the government was obliged to respond to these revelations and a government commission was formed.

In November 1994 also, for example, a new 100-bed oncological dispensary was under construction in Vileyka (Minsk Oblast) and when a ditch was dug for the foundation of a new building, a mass burial site was found. In March 1995, when the information about the site was revealed publicly, it was announced that the Vileyka site had revealed the remains of a mass execution site of Soviet citizens by the Germans in 1941-4 and all other possible variations of the events were denied.²⁰ In short, therefore, the Kurapaty massacre has been supplemented by the Vileyka executions despite the obvious reluctance of the authorities to make the logical deduction of Soviet responsibility.

The Incorporation of Western Belarus

The 1930s reversed any political gains the Belarussians might have achieved in the tolerant 1920s and ensured that compliant leaders would rule the BSSR, who would vigorously follow Moscow's link. Not until the advent of Masherau as the leader of the Communist Party of Belarus in 1965 did the authorities demonstrate any semblance of cultural awareness.

²⁰ Marples, David R., "Kuropaty: The Investigation of a Stalinist Historical Controversy", *Slavic Review*, Vol.53, No.2 (Summer 1994), pp. 513-23.

By the mid-1930s, western Belarussians had no representation in the Polish Parliament; and most Belarussian cultural organizations were disbanded in 1936-37.²¹ These actions combined with the authoritarian nature of Polish rule and its deliberate polarization of the Belarussians. By the late 1930s, Poland's hold over this region was becoming increasingly weak. As a result of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, the western regions of Belarus were assigned to the Soviet sphere of interest in preparation for the German-Soviet dismemberment of Poland. In Soviet parlance, the invasion was officially an act of 'liberation'. Thus the Red Army had intervened to protect its 'blood brothers', the west Belarussians, who had for years languished beneath the 'yoke of landlord Poland'. On 12th November 1939 western Belarus was formally incorporated as part of the Belarussian SSR. The incorporation of western Belarus in 1939 and the invasion of Belarus by Nazi Germany heightened the national problems. The Soviet authorities regarded Western Belarus as an area of potentially dangerous 'bourgeois nationalism and the period 1939-41 was notable for its harshness and mass deportations, and for executions of western Belarussians at sites such as Kurapaty.²² The annexation of western Belarus raised the possibility that the city of Vilna - which can accurately be described as the cultural repository of Belarussian nation (though Belarussians resident there constituted only a small minority of the population) might once again be included within the borders of Belarussian state, albeit under the Soviet

²¹ Zaprudnik, 1993, p. 85.

²² Symon Kabysch, in Kipel and Kipel, 1988, p. 237.

auspices. Therefore, on 10th October 1939, the city, along with the Vilna region as a whole, was transferred on the orders of Stalin (in agreement with the Germans) to Lithuania.²³ Molotov noted that the majority population of the city was not Lithuanian but maintained that the handing over of the city was more of a moral question and satisfied Lithuanian aspirations.

World War II

During the World War II, Belarus was occupied in a remarkably rapid time by the German army. Within six days of German invasion, the capital city of Minsk had been occupied. The official Soviet portrayal of valiant resistance at all stages of the campaign is belied by the total collapse of the defensive system. That there was some support for the invader among the population is evident. On 27 June 1943, by which time the nature of Nazi rule was evident to the populace, the invaders belatedly attempted to establish a puppet regime with the organization of a 'Council of Men of Confidence' under the leadership of a former Slutsk landowner, Radaslau Astrouski. Astrouski later demanded that a Belarussian National Army be formed and be used extensively against the Bolsheviks.²⁴

The extent of the anti-Soviet movement in Belarus is one of the more difficult factors to assess. Clearly Stalin regime had alienated a segment of population. According to one source, in 1943, some 96,000 people joined the partisan ranks so that by November, there were a total of 122,600

²³ Vardys, V. Stanley, "The Baltic States Under Stalin: The First Experiences, 1940-41", London: Macmillan, 1991, p. 269.

partisans.²⁵ During the three-year occupation, Belarus was the site of several concentration camps, including at Trostyanets, near Minsk, the third largest in the German-occupied territories in Eastern Europe. According to Soviet sources, the occupation forces were responsible for the deaths of 2.2 million residents of Belarus. Industrial losses included the destruction of 10,388 factories and enterprises, 96 per cent of the republic's energy capacity, and almost 80 per cent of equipment of building materials industry. Such an orgy of destruction is hard to imagine. Yet the savagery of the German occupation regime was responsible for what might be termed 'new patriotism' among the Belarussian population. Belarussians associated themselves with the patriotism invoked by Stalin two years earlier at the November 1941 commemoration of the October Revolution.

For Belarus, the wartime era was a significant one. Though doubtless with the other motives in mind, Stalin was justified in emphasizing the sacrifice made by the republic in the war years at the Yalta Conference. The outcome was Belarus's advancement to the membership of the United Nations on 30th April 1945 and participation in the San Francisco Conference in the same period. While this acknowledgement might be dismissed as ceremonial, given that neither Belarus nor Ukraine ever showed any inclination to differ from Soviet directives in the United Nations. The great patriotic war became the touchstone of the BSSR's existence. Its wartime heroes became its post-war leaders. The war

²⁴ Lubachko, 1972, p. 162.

²⁵ Borodina et al., 1972, p. 66.

dominated the psyche of the population and the subsequent communist leadership. In the World War II, the losses in the republic were proportionally higher than for any other single state in the world, with approximately one in every four citizens falling casualty to the occupation regime, or as a result of battles between the German and Soviet crimes. The wartime destruction of Belarussian villages and the goals of the all-Union Fourth Five Year Plan (1946-50) to concentrate primarily on industrial expansion rather than rural recovery signalled the route taken in the Belarussian SSR to develop and invest in industry to the detriment of the countryside. The events of the war catalyzed the demographic processes of the post-war era. The village lacked amenities, roads, educational and cultural establishments and was regarded by the authorities as little more than a supplier of goods to the town.²⁶ Belarussian agriculture, in truth, never recovered from the effects of the war, and state policy, which regarded its welfare to an extraordinary degree. For the authorities, post-war recovery lay in the development of the city and in city industries. Belarus's future had been clearly mapped out as an industrial repository of the Soviet borderlands.²⁷

Post-War Urbanization

This growth of large urban centers became more accentuated after World War II. Indeed, by the 1960s, even the Soviet authorities felt obliged to address the question of whether the cities in the republic were being

²⁶ McCauley, Martin, *The Soviet Union 1917-1991*, New York, 1993, p. 187.

²⁷ Wiktor Ostrowski, *Spotlight on Byelorussia and Her Neighbours* (London, 1959), p. 57.

developed too rapidly. Thus in 1990 article, Vasiliy Kharevskiy pointed out that because of the 'extraordinary increase' in the rise of large cities, and the concomitant slow development of small cities, the republic was facing a mass extinction of villages and hamlets. In the period of 1959-86, while the total population of the Belarusian SSR rose by 24 per cent; that of urban centres rose by 250 per cent and by 1990, 66 per cent of the population was located in cities as compared to 31 per cent in 1959. Of the total urban population in late 1980s, 60 per cent lived in cities of more than 100,000 population. The industrialization and urbanization of Belarusian SSR resulted in several distinctive features in the composition of the republic. First, as noted, Minsk inherited from Vilna the position of leading city, though they had been rivals in the past.²⁸ After the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Vilna and other territories of Western Belarus were included in the re-established Polish State. The loss of Vilna in fact also left Minsk as the only major urban centre in the new Soviet Republic. By 1939, the population of Minsk was 237,000 compared to 167,000 in Vitebsk and 139,000 in Homel. By the end of Soviet period Minsk was three times larger than Homel. By the 1960s roughly one-sixth of total residents of Belarus lived in the capital city. Minsk was also the center of educational life and culture, in addition to being the administrative capital and headquarters of the Communist Party leadership. As in Stalin period, the

²⁸ Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, (Cambridge, Mass, 1956), p.207.

city was also largely Russophone and a policy of expansion of Russian culture and language publications was soon to be inaugurated.²⁹ This situation perhaps embodies the essence of the Belarussian identity crisis that persists today: how to equate pride in national achievements - such as industrial progress or culture - with the Russification of the dominant urban centre of the Republic. The Republic was, however, one of the most prosperous in the USSR, with a variety of consumer goods available than in other Republics.

This relative prosperity was one reason why the ruling Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) was initially able to resist implementing the economic and political reforms that were proposed by Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, from 1985 onwards. By 1987, however, the CPB was being criticized in the press for its stance on cultural and ecological issues. Intellectuals and writers campaigned for greater use of Belarussian language in Education indicating that there were no Belarussian language schools operating in any urban areas in the Republic. Campaigners also demanded more information about the consequences of the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station in Ukraine in April 1986, which had affected large areas of southern Belarus. Not surprisingly, the two most important unofficial groups that emerged in late 1980s were Belarussian Language Association and Belarussian Ecological Union.

²⁹ Vakar, Nicholas, P., "The Belarussian people between Nationhood and Extinction", New York, 1968, p.106.

There was, however, little opportunity for overt political opposition. A Belarussian Popular Front (BPF) was established in October 1988, but the CPB did not permit the Republican media to report its activities and refused to allow rallies or public meetings to take place.³⁰ At the end of the month, riot police were used to disperse a pro-BPF demonstration in Minsk, commemorating the victims of mass executions under Stalin. The BPF did have some success in the elections to the all-Union Congress of People's Deputies, which took place in March 1989, persuading voters to reject several leading officials of the CPB. However, the inaugural Congress of BPF took place in Vilnius (Lithuania) in June, the Front having been refused permission to meet in Minsk.

³⁰ Marples, David R., "The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster", London: Macmillan, 1988, p.112.

CHAPTER-II

DISSOLUTION OF USSR AND THE MARCH OF BELARUS TO INDEPENDENCE

CHAPTER II

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If Chernobyl was the catalyst for the development of Glasnost, there were other factors that enhanced its progress: the development of public opinion manifested itself in an outpouring of literature; the ability to study the past led to the posthumous rehabilitation of most of the victims of Stalin purges; the ending of the war in Afghanistan; the 19th party conference in the summer of 1988, and Gorbachev's decision to call elections for a Congress of Deputies later that year. These events combined to create movements oriented away from the Moscow Center that had initiated them. The Communist Party of Soviet Union no longer led them. Though the party and KGB remained powerful institutions, it was possible for a grassroot movement to survive even with their opposition. Finally, perhaps the USSR's decision not to oppose the removal of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe was the critical factor: it paved the way for popular movements to act in a similar fashion within Soviet borders, albeit on a much more limited extent.

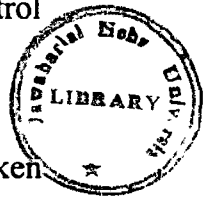
In retrospect, it is perhaps surprising that after the Baltic States, the Slavic Republics should take lead in this process. In the Brezhnev years, the Republic of Belarus had been increasingly compliant, stifling any local initiatives and awaiting directions from Moscow. Chernobyl and its ramifications came as a profound psychological shock to the Republic. Its

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leaders were incapable of formulating an appropriate response. After 2 May 1986, six days after the accident, matters were transferred to a Government Commission run by a deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers and two Politburo officials. By 1989 in Minsk, there was widespread and openly expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of initiative at the republican level; the centralization of control over republican industries; and also toward organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was permitted an important advisory role after Chernobyl but appeared too many observers to adhere too strongly to a pro-nuclear power stance.¹ Following the example of Baltic States, a Popular Front was formed in both Belarus and Ukraine that served as an alternative voice to that of the Communist Party hierarchy. In Belarus, by contrast, the Communists and Popular Front could find no common ground. Though sovereignty was formally proclaimed there and in summer of 1990, the populists were unable to gain a significant foothold in political life and the Communist bureaucracy withstood the early shock and recovered its control over society.²

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In Belarus, it is posited, the twentieth century has served to weaken severely the last vestiges of a national form of state development. As illustrated by the short-lived cultural development of the 1920s, the Belarussians could make rapid strides when given official encouragement and investment in native language usage in schools and official meetings.

¹ Kovalevskaya, Lyubov, *Reflections on the Catastrophe*, Sydney, 1993, pp. 123-24.
² Roman Yakovlevsky, in *Minsk Economic News*, May 1994, p. 5.

The Stalin period in particular - though both the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods played an important role - saw the destruction of potential national state, partly by design and partly by accident. There was no predetermined genocide of the Belarussians as a nation, though some writers have argued that the destruction of the Belarussian intellectual elite in 1930s was tantamount to such a policy.³ Here, during this period Soviet nationalism superseded and served to eliminate Belarussian nationalism. Surely even in Russia, the heartland of Soviet system, it is possible to elaborate a view point that over the course of 70 years the USSR not only failed to eradicate Russian nationalism but even began to redevelop it as a response to Hitler's invasion of the USSR and beyond. The concept of the New Soviet Man could be perceived as a mythical creation and has been the subject of ridicule. Yet, in Belarus there is evidence to suggest that the concept of New Soviet Man took on real meaning for several reasons. First, the national intelligentsia was small enough to have been almost totally eradicated in 1937-41. Second, the worst excesses of the Stalin era, including the purges and the mass executions as at Kurapaty, were kept secret from the bulk of population, and even today are either not well known or officially denied. Third, the occupation of Belarus by the Germans occurred at the very beginning of the Great Patriotic War and was the longest such occupation and perhaps the most brutal era in twentieth

³ See George O. Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth and Identity Change in Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1934*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 49-66.

century Belarussian history.⁴ It left its mark on all the population. The arrival of Soviet army, combined with local efforts of partisans who took their directions from the NKVD in Moscow, was perceived by many sectors of society as genuine liberation and the Soviet Union had 'saved' Belarus, which had lost 25 per cent of its population in the war and pride in the Soviet motherland and a feeling of close affinity with Russia persisted both during and after the 'Great Patriotic War'.⁵

The Belarussian Popular Front

It is clear that both Soviet economic and demographic policies served to impede state development in Belarus. Though there were some brief moments of optimum, the republic in 1985 had lost virtually all semblance of an emergent national state. Neither in its institutions nor in its expressed political sentiment could a declaration of independence be justified. The Belarussian Popular Front (BPF) remained a small and isolated force that was attacked, at times with viciousness by the regime. It was obliged to hold its founding Congress in Vilnius, Lithuania on 24-25 June 1989, while its members were designated at every opportunity and equated with German National Socialist in some of the most farcical yet hostile propaganda devised by the authorities, despite the fact that the notion to form a Front had originated from cultural groups. There was, however, little opportunity for overt political opposition, so that Belarussian

⁴ Henze, Paul B., "The Spectre and Implications of Internal Nationalist and Dissent", in S. Enders Wimbush, (ed.), *Soviet Nationalities in Strategic Perspective*, London, 1985, p. 27.

Popular Front (BPF) was established in October 1988, but the CPB did not permit the republican media to report its activities and refused to allow rallies or public meetings to take place. At the end of month riot police were used to disperse a pro-BPF demonstration in Minsk, commemorating the victims of mass executions under Stalin. The BPF did have some success in the elections to the all-Union Congress of People's Deputies, which took place in March 1989, persuading voters to reject several leading officials of the CPB. In early 1990, in anticipation of the elections to the republican Supreme Soviet or Supreme Council, the CPB did adopt some of BPF's policies regarding the Belarussian language. On 26th January the authorities approved a law declaring Belarussian to be the state language, effective from 1st September. However, the period of the transfer from Russian was to as long as ten years in some institutions.⁶

Although the BPF was not officially permitted to participate in the elections to the Belarussian Supreme Council, which took place on 4th March 1990. Instead, its members joined other pro-reform groups in a coalition known as the Belarussian Democratic Bloc (BDB). The BDP won about one-quarter of the 310 seats that were decided by popular election; CPB members loyal to the republican leadership won most of the remainder. The opposition won most seats in the large cities, notably

⁵ Urban Michael and Jan Zaprudnik, "Belarus: A Long Road to Nationhood", in *Nations and Politics in Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge, UK, 1993, pp. 106-7.

⁶ *Europa Yearbook*, 1997, p. 539.

Homiel and Minsk, where Zynon Paznyak, the leader of BPF, was elected.⁷

When the new Supreme Council first convened, on 15 May 1990, the deputies belonging to the BDB immediately demanded the adoption of a declaration of sovereignty. The CPB initially opposed such a move, but on 27th July, apparently after consultations with the leadership of Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow, a Declaration of State Sovereignty of the BSSR was adopted unanimously by the Supreme Council. The declaration asserted the republic's right to maintain armed forces, to establish a national currency and to exercise full control over its domestic and foreign policies. On the insistence of the Opposition, the declaration included a clause claiming the right of the republic to the compensation for the damage caused by the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power station.

The issue of the Chernobyl accident was one that united both the Communist and the opposition deputies. The Belarussian Government appealed to the all-Union Government for a minimum 17,000-m. roubles to overcome the consequences of the disaster, but was offered only 3,000 m. roubles in compensation. Moreover, in June 1990, Gorbachev, then the Soviet President, declined an invitation to visit Minsk to discuss the problem, an action that was unfavourably received in the republic. He eventually visited the BSSR in February 1991, but promised little further

⁷ Ibid.

assistance. The 31st Congress of CPB, which took place in November 1990, was notable for delegates' criticisms of Gorbachev's reforms, notably his foreign policy towards Eastern Europe. Yefrem Sakalov, who had led the CPB since 1987, did not seek re-election as First Secretary. Anatol Malafeyev, who only narrowly defeated an outspoken critic of Gorbachev, Uladzimir Brovnikov, replaced him.⁸

The Belarussian Government took part in the negotiation of a new Treaty of Union and signed the Protocol to the draft of such treaty on 3rd March 1991. The all-Union referendum on the preservation of USSR took place in the BSSR on 17th March; of the 83 per cent of the electorate, who took part, 83 per cent voted in favour of Gorbachev's proposals for a 'renewed Federation of equal sovereign republics'. Members of the BPF conducted a campaign advocating rejection of Gorbachev's proposals, but complained that they were denied the opportunity to present their views to the general public. The BSSR's reputation as the most stable of European Soviet Republic was challenged in April 1991 by a series of strikes that threatened the continued power of the CPB. Demonstrators demanded higher wages and the cancellation of the 5 per cent sales tax (introduced in January 1991), but also announced political demands, including resignation of the Belarussian Government and the depoliticization of republican institutions. On April 10, a general strike took place and an estimated 100,000 people attended a demonstration in Minsk. The Government

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 540.

finally agreed to certain economic concessions, including high wage rises, but the strikers' political demands were rejected. Some 200,000 workers were estimated to have taken part in a second general strike on 23rd April, in protest at the legislature's refusal to reconvene.⁹

The Supreme Council, which was still dominated by members of CPB, was eventually convened in May 1991. Although it rejected the workers' political demands, the power of the conservative CPB was threatened by increased dissent within the Party. In June, thirty-three deputies joined the opposition as a 'Communists for Democracy' faction, led by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The Belarussian leadership did not strongly oppose the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991. The Presidium of the Supreme Council released a neutral statement on the last day of the coup in Moscow in August 1991, but the Central Committee of the CPB issued a declaration unequivocally supporting the coup. Following the failure of the coup attempt, an extraordinary session of the Supreme Council was convened. Mikalay Dzemyantsei, the Chairman of the Supreme Council (republican head of the state), was forced to resign. Stanislav Shushkevich, a respected centrist politician, pending an election to the office, replaced him. In addition, the Supreme Council agreed to nationalize all CPB property, to prohibit the Party's activities in law-enforcement agencies, and to suspend the CPB, pending an investigation into its role in the coup. On 25 August the legislature voted to grant

⁹ Zvyazda, 14 July 1991. Cited in *Belarussian Review*, Fall 192, p. 4.

constitutional status to the July 1990 Declaration of State sovereignty and declared the Political and Economic independence of Belarus.

On 19 September 1991, the Supreme Council voted to rename the BSSR as the Republic of Belarus. The Council also elected Shushkevich as its Chairman, after several rounds of voting. Shushkevich demonstrated his strong support for the continuation of some type of union by signing, in October, a treaty to establish an economic community and by agreeing, in November to the first draft of the Treaty on the Union of Sovereign States. On 8th December Shushkevich, with the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents, signed the Minsk Agreement establishing a new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). On 21 December the leaders of 11 former Soviet republics, including the original signatories of Slavic republics, confirmed this decision by the Alma-Ata Declaration. The proposal that the headquarters of CIS should be in Minsk was widely welcomed in Belarus as a means of attracting foreign political and economic interest in the republic.¹⁰

In comparison with other former Soviet republics, Belarus experienced relative stability in domestic affairs during 1992, which was attributed to the country's more favourable social and economic policies as well as to the comparatively homogenous nature of the population. In governmental affairs, the opposition BPF censured the continued dominance of the Communists in both the Supreme Council and the Cabinet

¹⁰ Zvyazda, 12 December 1992. Cited in *Belarussian Review*, Fall 1993, p.2.

of Ministers, notwithstanding the temporary suspension of CPB itself. (In February 1993, however, the suspension was removed and the CPB was permitted to re-establish itself.) In addition, the BPF campaigned insistently for the holding of a referendum to assess the electorate's confidence in the Supreme Council and the Government. In June 1992, having collected the required number of signatures, the BPF accused the Supreme Council of seeking to obstruct such a referendum. In October, the Council voted against the holding of a referendum, owing to alleged irregularities in the BPF's collecting of signatures.

In another account of the founding Congress of the BPF, it was noted that on 24th May 1989, one month before the scheduled convocation, 16 BPF members, including four Parliamentary deputies, asked the Presidium of the Supreme Council for permission 'to cooperate in holding of the Congress'. Nevertheless, BPF was publicly admonished for its alleged secrecy by the Deputy Minister of Justice of the of the BSSR, V. Lovchy, and the fledgling organization was accused of replacing democratic ideals with extremism. The authorities then tried to postpone the Congress. Stanislav Shushkevich, at that time the Pro-Rector of the Belarussian State University in Minsk, declared that the plan was not to ban the Congress formally, but to completely disrupt it with the use of red tape.¹¹

Even before the founding Congress took place, the BPF came under attack from government organs. The movement was associated with both

¹¹ *Moscow News*, No. 27, 2 July 1989, p. 2.

the founding of the Belarussian People's Republic of 15 March 1918 and a reported Second All-Belarussian Congress of June 1944 under German occupation, which was directed against Bolshevism. Both events were equated by critics with the growth of Fascism, a subject guaranteed to inflame passions in the republic. The Party branch of the central region of Minsk saw fit to issue a special edition of its newspaper devoted entirely to critique of the BPF and its platform. An incendiary headline declared 'No! No to the enemies of the people! No to Provocations! No to nationalists! Yes - to the Soviet Socialist Motherland!'¹² Within the Belarussian capital, the Communist authorities missed no opportunity to assail the populist movement at every opportunity.

There were also attempts to prevent the organization of Minsk protest by the BPF against secrecy over Chernobyl that would include among the demonstrators residents from the contaminated areas - specifically Naroulya and Khoyniki districts of Homel'oblast, and irradiated areas Mahileu oblast. These residents intended to travel to Minsk to complain that they had not been included among the areas of concern, despite the fact that some of the areas had registered levels of Cesium in the soil of upto 60 Curies/km². The authorities tried to prevent its gathering physically until the crowd swelled over 30,000 people. Once assembled, only Evgeniy Velikhov, the Vice-President of USSR Academy of Sciences and no one addressed them from the Belarussian government. In the words

¹² Shag, 23 March 1990.

of Ales Adamovich, the 'ecological Kurapaty' awaited serious investigation.¹³ The incident reflects the irrevocably hostile attitude of the authorities to any action that was planned or supported by the BPF. A year earlier, on 30 October 1988, another demonstration in Minsk devoted to the memory of those who died during the Stalinist repression had been brutally dispersed by the Militia.¹⁴ In Minsk, no quarter was to be given to any non-Communist group.

Moreover, the activities of the BPF were largely confined to Minsk and to parts of Hrodna and Brest regions. In none of these areas could it be said to be clearly the dominant force. Ultimately the majority would prevail over the vocal minority. Minsk was the official capital and cultural center, but it was in essence a Russian-speaking city and the center of Belarussian Communist Party organization. Like other popular Fronts, the Belarussian version was supported by the Belarussian Diaspora in the West, which gave added impetus to its statements and Congresses, but that Diaspora was not numerous enough to have a significant impact on world opinion or on local circumstances in Belarus itself. The authorities in fact had a virtually free hand to impede the BPF at every opportunity. In the Parliamentary elections of 1989, it was not permitted to register officially,¹⁵ but it managed to elect some 22 deputies who sat in the Supreme Soviet as an

¹³ Adamovich, Ales, "Byelorussia's calamity: Chernobyl victims in Minsk", *Moscow News*, No. 41, 8 October 1989, p. 12.

¹⁴ Zhuravlyov, Alexander, "Not to Miss a chance. Byelorussia: Prospects of Development", *Moscow News*, No.48, 26 November 1989, p. 11.

¹⁵ Urban, Michael and Jan Zaprudnik, "Belarus: A Long Road to Nationhood" in Bremmer, Ian and Ray Taras, (eds.), *Nations and Politics in Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge, UK., 1993, pp. 112-13.

independents. Thus, it composed less than 10 per cent of total deputies. The BPF took an ambiguous stand toward Parliamentary Speaker Stanislav Shushkevich, a man who supported democratic processes in Belarus, but lacked a power base to see such processes to fruition. As a result, he was (perhaps erroneously) perceived by BPF supporters as a weak leader and one unable to assist significantly in the promotion of democracy in the republic.

The BPF itself offered an historical analysis of the movement in the republic at its third convention in 1993, which provides an instructive perspective. It described the political scene in Belarus as a 'snake-ridden field', that could only be crossed without faltering or looking back. On 19 October 1988, an organizational committee had been formed. Eleven days later a bloody confrontation had been prepared in Minsk by the Communist authorities, but the BPF had survived. In February 1989, the first victory had been achieved over the 'Communist Partocracy' with an overcrowded meeting of BPF at the Dynamo Stadium in Minsk. Further progress had been made with the founding Congress in Vilnius in July and two international gatherings in September 1989 with focus on Chernobyl. Finally, in February 1990, the early stage of the movement had culminated, when over 100,000 gathered in Minsk for the pre-election assembly of the BPF. Subsequently, during the elections, the nomenklatura had staged a recovery by exploiting its control over the media and the juridical establishment. An outpouring of anti-BPF propaganda and falsification of

truth had ensued, and had served to weaken significantly the number of electoral votes obtained by BPF.

Between late 1990 and November 1992, the opposition nonetheless made significant progress, commencing with a large-scale anti-Communist rally in Minsk on November 1990. On 24-25 March 1991, the BPF held its second Congress on the theme of the revival of national freedom and independence. On 19th July, it was officially registered by the Ministry of Justice as a Public Political Movement.¹⁶ On 19th August, the BPF issued an appeal to resist the Emergency Committee that had been established in Moscow and arranged a picket protest in the center of Minsk. The opposition deputies also initiated the critical emergency session of Parliament that led to the declaration of Independence, and the cessation of all activity of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB). The analysis then centred on the campaign to force a new parliamentary election through the collection of signatures for a referendum. By March 1992, over 442,000 signatures had been gathered, but the government refused to acknowledge the validity of some of the signatures, and by November 1992, had resolved not to hold a referendum under any circumstances. According to BPF leadership, this decision was a signal that the Communists had returned to power and ended hopes that the country might embark upon a path of progressive economic reforms. The government, in the view of the BPF, had suppressed

¹⁶ ISEPS, 1995, p.2, p. 2.

discussion on the question of neutrality, sovereignty, and the native language, and had moved toward the restoration of the Soviet system in the republic.¹⁷

How had the nomenklatura managed to reassert its authority? According to the BPF, there were two reasons. First, the public was fearful of the disintegration of the State infrastructure, of economic bankruptcy, and clung to the belief that a collective security treaty represented the best hope to prevent civil strife or political crisis. Second, psychologically, the populace had been firmly subjected to the State and Soviet rule. A large proportion of the workforce continued to work for the State more than three years after independence. Moreover, the apathy of the population towards its own nation, property rights, and personal liberty served to restore the confidence of the nomenklatura. Thus a change had occurred, but it was not a transition from a Communist state to democracy. Rather Belarus had undergone a metamorphosis only from a partocracy to an administrative economy dominated by bureaucrats and controlled by black marketeers. Insofar as privatization had taken place, it benefitted only those already in power. In some respects, according to this viewpoint, the establishment structure had become more sinister, since it now encompassed elements that could be described as mafiosi or organized criminals.¹⁸

By 1994, the rift between the BPF and the Parliamentary Speaker was complete and in the presidential elections, Shushkevich, who had been

¹⁷ *Naviny BNF*, May 1993.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

ousted on the evidently unjustified accusation of corruption in January 1994, stood as an independent candidate against, *inter alia*, Paz'nyak of the BPF. Both were defeated in the first round of voting, and together they received only some 23 per cent of the total vote. If one assumes that some of those voters who supported Shushkevich might have supported a united BPF campaign, then perhaps 15-20 per cent of the electorate backed the opposition generally in support of a programme geared to the development of a fundamentally Belarussian national state. The remainder of the population supported either a hard-line 'old school' Communist or a young populist proto-Communist, which demanded close ties with Russia and expressed his regret for the dissolution of the USSR three years earlier. As Gennadiy Grushevoy commented, the electorate was faced with a question of electing the lesser of two evils.¹⁹

Here it is to be noted that the current regime has interest in specifically Belarussian concerns or in maintaining some form of theoretical independence. To become completely subservient to Russia would reduce significantly this power base and render their roles somewhat meaningless. Rather one can say that a majority does not operate exclusively in the service of Belarussian state interests, but rather toward a policy-oriented predominantly toward Russia and some form of union with the huge neighbour state. It is fair to say that a majority of Belarussian residents' support at least an economic union; and even the policy advocated

_____ Gennadiy, "Chernobyl is still bitter reality", *Minsk Economic News*, May

by former Prime Minister Vyachaslov Kebich of a military-security union with Russia would possibly have been acceptable given a national referendum. In this sense, Belarus might be described once again as a state that has a death wish. Many of its residents would be prepared to sacrifice independence if they could be assured of an improvement in their economic well being.

A disaster of the magnitude of Chernobyl called for not merely national unity, but a national will to overcome its consequences. Ukrainian activists saw the accident as one reason why the control of Moscow over economic life should be ended. For the Belarussian State leaders (the powerless Shushkevich being an exception), the attitude was different: without the aid of Moscow, how could an event of such enormity be overcome.²⁰ The result was that Chernobyl had a far more adverse effect upon Belarus than elsewhere. For over three years the population remained largely ignorant of the significance of the disaster outside the Chernobyl region itself. When Chernobyl was compared in importance to the Great Patriotic War, the comparison served to promote the view that the Soviet Union would be responsible for overcoming the fallout, rather than the individual republics. In the period of 1986-89, only the BPF attempted to alert the population to the dangers posed by the accident. Consequently, the Soviet leadership of Belarus, oriented primarily if not exclusively to all-Union policies, was unable or unwilling to offer a national response to a

²⁰ Kanoplya, E.F., "Global Ecological Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Explosion", *SPCI*, April 1992, pp. 6-12.

national emergency. There could be no national response without a concomitant commitment to a national statehood or, at the least, to full economic sovereignty.²¹

Nonetheless, in August 1991, when the military junta temporarily took over the leadership of the Soviet Union in an attempted putsch, did the Belarussians finally take action to divorce them from the discredited Soviet State? The republic was by this time fully aware of the import of Chernobyl and the impact of official secrecy. It had been made cognizant also of some of the worst excesses of the Stalinist era. The answer was those 22 members of the Opposition issued a declaration condemning the coup of 19 August and demanded an emergency session of the Parliament, while such action was significant and exceptionally brave, it indicates the minute size of democratic movement within the highest state body. These same 22 members also put on the agenda of emergency session the questions of abrogation of 1922 union treaty and the declaration of independence in Belarus. It was the Communists however, who recommended that the independence declaration be accepted; this step was considered as a matter of personal survival, given the collapse of the Putsch and subsequent banning of the Communist Party.²²

Four months later there occurred one of the more bizarre events of tumultuous 1991 year, namely the formation of Commonwealth of

²¹ Rosenberg, William G. and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, (eds.), *Social Dimensions of Soviet Industrialization*,

²² Price, Joe, "Byelorussia Independence: Thoughts and Observations", in *Byelorussian Review*, Summer 1991, pp. 3-7.

Independent States (CIS) in Brest Oblast, on the initiative of Boris Yeltsin but with the active participation of Shushkevich, and the newly elected Ukrainian President, Leonid Kravchuk. The three Slavic republics made common cause, ostensibly against the concept of a revived union in which Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev could still conceivably play a role of symbolic significance. Why would Belarus and Ukraine make such a commitment? In Ukraine case, the answer may be simple one: there was no authentic commitment by Kravchuk to anything other than the loosest federative ties. Ukraine was never fully committed to the CIS. For Belarus, and for Minsk as the 'capital' of the CIS, the accord was perhaps more significant. For Shushkevich, it may have been an attempt to bolster his support at home for an independent state that was no longer linked to the Soviet Union. For the majority of Communists in the Supreme Soviet, on the other hand, it may have signified that links to Russia were far from broken. It could be argued that the independence of the State was at once compromised by the formation of CIS.

Moreover, the independence of Belarus can be considered as outcome that was largely determined by external circumstances. It originated directly with the events in Moscow and would not have occurred without them. Though economic sovereignty had occurred in the previous summer, this decree was largely a paper one. The vast majority of decisions on the Belarussian economy were made in Moscow. More important, Belarus was the most significant and secretive Soviet military

base and the most militarized of Soviet republics. Indeed the declaration of independence stranded thousands of Soviet troops on Belarussian territory. Belarus found itself with quasi-Soviet leadership in the post-Soviet period. The mentality of the leaders did not change simply with a change of political status. Kebich, Myachaslav Hryb and others could have taken steps to develop local initiatives. They could have supported actively republican charitable funds to alleviate social problems. In fact, they chose to do the opposite: to attempt to stifle regional initiatives on the pretext that they were politically motivated, and only in the most dire circumstances did they establish the controversial state Chernobyl committee that soon became a target of Lukashenka's anti-corruption committee. The question of the relative lack of national consciousness generally in Belarus must also be taken into consideration.²³ Belarussians, as a whole, neither acted nor responded as a nation. Those that were capable of such response were not in a position of authority. An emergent nation might have responded to a disaster of such magnitude by throwing off the former authorities and developing a new regime oriented away from Moscow. The Republic of Belarus was not in this situation. As a nation thoroughly integrated into the Soviet order, as a compliant republic of the Soviet Union, its leaders awaited orders, as in the past. The measures adopted hastily and belatedly since 1991 were far from comprehensive. In many respects they echoed measures taken in Ukraine.

²³ Drakohurst, Yury, "Opposition left out in the cold: Totalitarianism Strikes Hunger Strikers", *Minsk Economic News*, No. 8, April 1995, pp. 1,3.

CHAPTER-III

ECONOMIC REFORMS IN BELARUS: THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

CHAPTER-III

ECONOMIC REFORMS IN BELARUS: THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

On July 27, 1990, Belarus emulated a number of its sister republics by issuing a declaration of sovereignty. On August 25, 1991, following the abortive coup in Moscow, the Byelorussian Communist Party was suspended and the Supreme Soviet proclaimed the Republic's "Political and Economic Independence". On September 18, its name was changed to Belarus and Stanislav Shushkevich was designated Chairman of Supreme Soviet, succeeding Nicholai Dementai, who had been obliged to resign after displaying support for Moscow hard-liners. Belarus together with Russia and Ukraine hosted tripartite meeting that proclaimed the demise of Soviet Union and its capital. Minsk was named as the normal venue for the meetings of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that was formally launched on December 21.¹

Belarus became fully independent with virtually all its Soviet era power structure and personnel still in place. In 1992, disputes between the government and the non-Communist opposition became more heated, although the ruling establishment successfully resisted a campaign for the

¹ George Stanford, "Belarus on the road of Nationhood", *Survival*, vol.38 (1), Spring 1996, pp.136-37.

calling of new elections. In February 1993, the Supreme Soviet property remained under the State ownership. Strains then intensified between Shushkevich, a free market nationalist, and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Vyacheslav Kebich, a veteran Communist who favoured State control of the economy and close ties with Moscow. In January Shuskevich opponents succeeded in their second attempt, in securing legislative passage of a censure motion that accrued him of "personal immodesty" (i.e. corruption). Shuskevich resigned and was succeeded on January 28 by Mechislav Grib, former Communist apparatchik who shared Kebich enthusiasm for closer economic and military ties with Russia. However, divisions between the various branches of government in Belarus became more pronounced during 1993.² A major source of controversy was the drafting of Belarus's new Constitution, three separate versions of which were submitted to the Supreme Council in 1991-93. Shuskevich and the BPF strongly opposed the establishment of Belarus as a Presidential republic; nevertheless, the new Constitution, which provided for a presidential system, was adopted in March, 1994. A further point of dispute was the question of whether Belarus should adopt closer economic, military and other relations with the Russian Federation and the CIS (as advocated by Supreme Council). Shuskevich and the BPF were opposed to Belarus's signing the Treaty on collective security (which had been concluded by six other CIS states in May, 1992), on the grounds that this would lead to the

² Lych G., "Belarus on the path of Market Economy", *Problems of Economic Transition*, 38(3), July, 1996, pp.32-41.

Declaration of State Sovereignty which defines Belarus as a neutral state, and would also lead to renewed Russian domination. Nonetheless, in April, the Supreme Council voted to sign the Treaty. Three months later the legislature passed a vote of "no confidence" in Shuskevich, in response to his continued opposition to the Treaty; he remained in office, however, as the Council had been inquorate at the time of vote. A second vote of confidence in Shuskevich was held in January 1994; this time the Council voted overwhelmingly to dismiss him, on charges of corruption. Here, one point to be noted that support for the CPB increased substantially during 1993; the party's popularity was attributed in large part to nostalgia for the relative prosperity enjoyed under Communist rule as well as regret for the demise of the USSR. In March, the CPB formed, with 17 other parties and groups opposed to Belarussian independence, a loose coalition, i.e. the popular Movement of Belarus. In 1994, the Movement's position appeared less secure, as several members threatened to withdraw.³

Renewed allegations of corruption against Kebich and leading members of the Cabinet of Ministers, coupled with worsening economic situation, culminated in a BPF-led general strike in Minsk in February 1994. Protesters returned to work only when Gryb announced that the presidential election would be brought forward to mid-1994. Six candidates collected the requisite number of signatures and were nominated. These included Kebich, Shuskevich, Paz'nyak and Lukashenka, who as head of

³ *Europa Year Book*, 1997, p.541.

the Supreme Council's anti-corruption committee, had been responsible for bringing the corruption charges against Shuskevich. In the first ballot, held in late June, no candidate gained an overall majority, although Lukashenka, with 47 per cent held in late June, no candidate gained an overall majority, although Lukashenka, with 47 per cent of the valid votes, led by a considerable margin. In the second ballot, between Lukashenka and Kebich (held in early July) Lukashenka received 85% of the votes, and he was inaugurated as the first President of Belarus on 20th July, Mikhail Chigir, an economic reformist, replaced Kebich as chairman of a new Cabinet of Ministers. In his campaign Lukashenka had pledged closer ties with Russia, declaration of the privatization programme and the introduction of measures to eradicate corruption. His first priority, however, was to restructure government administration at the local level, establishing closer control over the implementation of government policy.⁴

However, despite opposition pressure for an early legislative election, the pre-independence Supreme Council elected in April 1990 ran its five year term and consequently the government secured large "yes" votes in the referendum held on May 14 on its proposal for -

- i) The Russian language to have an equal status with Belarussian;
- ii) A new state flag and emblem based on those of Soviet era (although without hammer and sickle);
- iii) Economic integration with Russian Federation; and

⁴ *Minsk Economic Review*, 12 October 1994, pp.1-2.

- iv) Constitutional changes to give the President the right of parliamentary dissolution.⁵

BELARUS-RUSSIA RELATIONS - A SHORT PROFILE

After its independence from the Soviet Union, Belarus has been slow to extricate itself from the old Soviet framework. Extensive Russification that took place during the Soviet regime complicated the problem of national identity. It was further compounded by huge and extensive Russification that took place during the Soviet regime. Vast Russian immigration and intermarriages subsequently diluted all aspects of Belarussian separateness, affecting all usual indicators of nationalism - ethnicity, language, consciousness and historical memories. According to 1989 census, out of population of 10.13 million, 77.8 per cent were ethnic Belarussians, 13.2 per cent were Russians, 4.1 per cent were Poles, 1.1 per cent Jews and 2.8 per cent were others mainly Ukrainians. About 1.2 million Belarussians lived in Russia, compared to 1.3 million living in Belarus.⁶

In demographic development and the use of native language, Belarussians have appeared at a disadvantage compared to the Baltic States or Ukraine. The republic of Belarus is limited by its lack of natural resources, particularly in the sphere of energy from playing a dominant role in East European politics. Its Parliament has appeared resistant to radical economic change and the introduction of market reforms. And, as we have seen, national consciousness and the progress of native

⁵ *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 5 May 1995, p.1.

Table-1
Population by Nationality (1989 Census)

(% age)

Belarussian	77.9
Russian	13.2
Polish	4.1
Ukrainian	2.9
Others	1.9
Total	100.0

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Analysis, Minsk.

language has been limited by the way in which the republic was developed in the Soviet period. In all these respects, Belarus is at a disadvantage vis-à-vis its neighbours. Yet it would be misleading to portray the situation in too gloomy a light and despite a bleak economic and social picture, there are some substantial gains from the Soviet period.

First, Belarussian cities were notably lacking in ethnic tension in the first two years of independence. In that period, there was virtually no reason other than national census to differentiate between one Slavic nationality or another living on the territory of the republic. A sociological

⁶ Solchany K, Roman, "A Belarussian Scholar on the role of native language", *Radio*

survey conducted by a group public opinion and published in 1992 provided evidence that Russians living in Belarus felt little or no commitment to Russia as a motherland. In responding to a question what they felt was their fundamental nationality, 47.5 per cent of Russian surveyed declared that it was based on the territory of constant and permanent habitation. On the other hand, over 64 per cent of Russians denied that nationalism, i.e. of Belarussian, had the potential to play a major role in society. Thus, though there appeared to be little likelihood of some sort of Crimean phenomenon appearing in Belarus, Russians were unlikely to lend their support to any forms of national development of the Belarussian culture. If there were to be military or economic links with Russia - and the latter seemed inevitable - then the links would be with a perceived friendly neighbour as opposed to a potential motherland.⁷

In addition, there were serious impediments even to the integration of the Russian and Belarussian economies, particularly on the question of a common currency. Russia was also facing uncertain political times. The Russian President had powerful enemies within the Parliament and had begun to behave somewhat erratically as an international statesperson. Though some western analysts saw fit to compare Lukashenka with the extreme Russian nationalist and leader of misnamed Liberal Democratic Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and maintained that their views were similar, this appears to have been a misapprehension. However, Belarus remained

⁷ *Liberty Research Bulletin*, RL/222/79, 24 July 1979, pp.48-49.
Belarussian Sociological Service, "Public Opinion, 1992, pp.54, 56.

the least national of the former Soviet States in 1992. The public opinion survey also revealed in its sampling of the Belarussian respondents that relatively few Belarussians are nationally conscious, and only a small minority supported the notion that Belarussian should be the only state language.⁸

By the spring of 1995, the question of state languages had grown more acute, promoted by the actions of President himself. Not only was Lukashenka inept in Belarussian language, he was ridiculed in the nationalist newspapers "Svaboda" for such feelings. His response, clearly backed by prominent figures of the former party hierarchy, was to demand a referendum on the status of Russian language in Belarus and the question of its elevation to the state language. Letters to the press generally supported the adoption of Russian as a language of equal status. One survey with 1,100 respondents conducted in March 1995 indicated that 54 per cent of those polled supported the referendum on the Russian language, 29 per cent opposed, and 18 per cent did not respond.⁹ Such support should not be attributed to Russian chauvinism. There were often more practical bases to the responses. One academician noted that although he generally supported the advancement of the Belarussian language, the process had to take place gradually, along side the preparation of adequate textbooks and scientific journals. At that juncture (i.e. April 1995), the Belarussian language was not yet in a position to replace Russian in all facets of life. The danger,

⁸ Ibid, pp.60-61.

⁹ *Minsk Economic News*, No. 6, March 1995, p. 4.

however, was that if Belarussian were to lose its position of eminence, both the language and its mother state might eventually disappear altogether.¹⁰

Belarus-Russia's Economic Linkages and Belarus Transition to Market Economy

In contrast to Russia and many of the other republics of the former Soviet Union, Belarus has been surprisingly calm and peaceful. It had been also a relatively prosperous and economically developed republic during the Soviet period despite its lack of natural resources and raw materials. Inter-republican links during the Soviet period accounted for 90 per cent of exports and 80 per cent of imports, including 90 per cent of all energy requirements and 70 per cent of all raw materials. Little wonder that GNP, which declined by 5.1 per cent in 1990-91, 10.6 per cent in 1992, estimated 11 per cent in 1993 and 24 per cent during the first nine months of 1993.¹¹ Inflation rocketed with retail prices increasing by 1500 per cent during 1995 and the monthly inflation rate continuing about 20 per cent during 1994-95.

Belarus produced no oil of its own but had a refining capacity of 40 million tons of crude, of which half was exported, to other parts of USSR. Only about nine million tons of crude has been received from Russia in eighth months in the year 1993, threatening the closure of many of the refineries. The leaders of the then government were naturally very keen on

¹⁰ Kozlovskaya, L.A., "On Branch and Territorial Structural Transformation Problems in Belarussian Economy in Connection with Chernobyl Accident Consequences", in *Nepvetailov*, 1996.

¹¹ Steven Erlanger, "Belarus Reassures West on Reforms", *New York Times*, 28 January 1994.

resumption of ties with other CIS countries including Russia through some form of economic union or Common Market.

The other option of closer integration with western market is, of course, being pursued, but the problems in the way are enormous. Trucks,

Table-2

External Trade
(Million roubles at domestic prices)

Imports/Exports	1993	1994*	1995*
Imports			
USSR (former)	4,589,528	9,730,311 ⁺	42,105,783 ⁺
Other Countries	2,348,156	3,762,136	21,646,852
Exports			
USSR (former)	3,866,482	6,878,015 ⁺	33,558,880 ⁺
Other Countries	1,025,255	3,341,148	20,476,931

*Figures are in terms of new rouble, equivalent to 10 former roubles.

+Excluding trade with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Source: UN Statistical Yearbook.

tractors, motorcycles, machine tools, electronics, refrigerators, textiles and synthetic fibres are among the main manufactures. On most of these commodities Belarus does not have a competitive advantage in respect of price. Moreover, it is hit by a shortage of raw materials. For this, Belarus is trying to overcome the crisis by opening up its economy to foreign investors. A law "on foreign investments on the territory of Belarus" has

been enacted, which permits foreign investment of upto 100 per cent as well as joint ventures. So far there have been few takers, for reasons that are not difficult to understand. The infrastructure of the market economy is still lacking. There is no capital market, no stock exchange and, though a few private banks have been set up, their capital base is small and they have limited investible funds. However, no wonder transition to market economy has been very slow. Only 200 very small enterprises had been privatized till December 1993. Farmers have been permitted to opt out of collective farms and own land on long term lease.¹² It appears that the leaders of the Government of Belarus and the majority of the people recognize the need for reforms, that would lead them towards a market economy, but their eyes are towards the East rather than the West. Nostalgia for the past rather than confidence in a future within the global market appears to be the dominant sentiment. A peace and fun-loving people have been caught in the pincers of cruel history, which is pushing them in a direction for which they are not mentally or emotionally prepared.¹³ However, this process of transition received a jolt by the removal of Shushkevich in January 1994. Shushkevich, who was an outspoken advocate of Belarussian independence and separation from Moscow, was removed by Parliament was charges of corruption after two years of battling for early elections and economic reforms. Washington reacted immediately after the Parliamentary vote of no-confidence in

¹² J.M. Kaul, "Slow Train to Market Economy", *The Statesman*, 16 December 1993.

Shushkevich and expressed concern before the Clinton visit that a reunion of Belarus with Russia could start an "imperial reconstruction" that Washington and the West did not want to see. Shushkevich's opponents, including the long-time Prime Minister, Kebich, favoured a tie with Russia that are almost akin to a reunion of two states. Kebich was a primary proponent of Belarussian-Russian economic union that would subordinate Minsk's financial policies to Moscow in return for cheap energy and the use of rouble. This monetary union costed Russians many million dollars when rouble was exchanged for the weaker Belarussian currency and inter-enterprise debts. So, the events in Moscow and return to dominance of Soviet-era managers had an obvious impact in Belarus.¹⁴ However, due to close ethnic, economic and historical reasons there is an urgent need for close cooperation with Moscow. This is a popular view not among the political elite but also among the common masses. The foreign policy adopted by Belarus so far has been pro-Russia though not one of desiring to be reincorporated in Russian Federation.

State of Economy

Belarus has relatively few mineral resources, although there are small deposits of petroleum and natural gas and important peat-reserves. Peat extraction, however, was severely affected by the disaster at Chernobyl, since contaminated peat could not be burned. In 1990

¹³ Leslie Dienes, "Economic Geographic Relations", *Post-Soviet Republics*, 1993, Vol. 34, No. 8, pp. 497-529.

¹⁴ David Hearst, "Belarus leader gains free hand", *The Guardian* (Rangoon), 01 December 1996.

petroleum and petroleum products (60%), natural gas (29%) provided Belarus's supply of primary energy, coal and lignite (3%) and other sources (8%). A nuclear power station, near Minsk, was under construction with the help of Russia and proposals to build two more power stations were announced by the government in 1996.

Table-3

Principal Trading Partners

Trade with former USSR (million roubles at domestic prices)

Imports F.O.B.	1993	1994*	1995*
Kazakstan	262,559	159,115	645,565
Latvia	28,325	n.a.	n.a.
Lithuania	66,560	n.a.	n.a.
Moldova	34,509	42,180	403,397
Russia	3,595,460	8,716,730	33,908,300
Ukraine	511,680	702,483	6,552,982
Uzbekistan	40,490	51,371	422,231
Total	4,589,528	9,730,311⁺	42,105,783⁺

*Figures are in terms of new rouble, equivalent to 10 former roubles.

+Excluding trade with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, totalling (in million roubles, 1993): Imports 99,405; Exports 134,998.

Source: UN Statistical Yearbook.

In 1995, Belarus recorded a visible trade deficit of US \$529 m. and there was a deficit of \$254 m. on current account of balance of payment.¹⁵ Since the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, Belarus has endeavoured to promote economic links with non-traditional trading partners. In 1994, these partners accounted for some 36% of Belarus's total

trade, the remaining 64% being conducted with former Soviet republics. Belarus's principal trading partners are Russia, which accounted for 53.2% of total imports and 44.1% of exports in 1995, Ukraine and Kazakhstan; outside the former USSR the most important trading partners are Germany, Poland and the United States of America. In 1995, the principal exports were machinery, chemicals and petrochemicals, processed food and light industrial goods. The principal imports were petroleum and natural gas, machinery, chemicals and processed food.

Table-4

Principal Trading Partners

Trade with former USSR (million roubles at domestic prices)

Exports F.O.B.	1993	1994*	1995*
Kazakstan	149,290	116,491	880,941
Latvia	56,065	n.a.	n.a.
Lithuania	68,308	n.a.	n.a.
Moldova	160,930	130,407	816,762
Russia	2,497,740	5,385,069	23,854,800
Ukraine	808,190	1,142,342	7,010,394
Uzbekistan	52,988	49,250	691,244
Total	3,886,482	6,878,015⁺	33,558,880⁺

*Figures are in terms of new rouble, equivalent to 10 former roubles.

+Excluding trade with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, totalling (in million roubles, 1993): Imports 99,405; Exports 134,998.

Source: UN Statistical Yearbook.

Belarus joined the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1992. It also became a member of the European Bank for

Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Supporting what was widely considered to be the most stable republican economy of the former USSR (Based largely on a relatively advanced engineering sector), Belarus prospects for successful economic development were initially regarded as favourable. However, the country's serious economic problems comparable to those prevalent in other former Soviet republics. In 1991-94 almost all sectors of the economy registered an annual decline in output, and the average annual rates of inflation were high. A major problem was the severe reduction in supplies of fuel and raw materials from other republics, which also adversely affected many enterprises. The economy was also affected by considerable decrease in demand for military equipment (traditionally an important sector). In October 1994, a programme of strict economic measures was adopted; the priorities were to reduce the rate of inflation and to stabilize industrial production and balance of payments.¹⁶ The reform programme achieved moderate success in the first six months of 1995, most notably, with a significant reduction in the monthly rate of inflation. However, in the inconclusive elections to the Supreme Council in late 1995 meant that the introduction of economic legislation and structural reform was severely disrupted. Payments from IMF were suspended when Belarus departed from a stabilization programme drawn up by the Fund.

Legislation covering private ownership, foreign investment and banking operations was adopted in the early 1990s. The programme to

¹⁶ *Europa Year Book*, 1997, p. 543.

transfer ownership of state companies to the private sector, however, has been slow and foreign investment in Belarus has been minimal. By mid-1996 only 11% of state enterprises had been privatized. In August, President Lukashanka decreed that all private enterprises had to register by the end of the year, claiming that many were failing to pay their taxes. Plans were also announced to re-nationalize the six largest commercial banks. A coupon currency, the Belarussian rouble, was introduced in May 1992, operating in parallel with Russian rouble. The Belarussian rouble became the country's sole legal tender from 1 January 1995. In September 1993 Belarus signed, with five other CIS members, an agreement to create a joint monetary system preserving the rouble. In April 1994, Belarus and Russia signed a treaty on an eventual of their monetary systems; the first stage - the removal of trade and customs restrictions - came into effect in May 1995. Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan subsequently joined the custom union. In February 1996, Russia agreed to the cancellation of Belarus's debt for gas supplies, in exchange for the costs of maintaining Russian military units in Belarus.¹⁷ Belarus and Russia signed a further agreement in April, forming a Community of Sovereign Republics. This envisaged a programme of common economic and social policies, leading to the unification of the two countries' monetary, taxation and budgetary systems.

The Belarussian rouble which was introduced in May 1992, initially as a coupon currency, to circulate along side (and at par with) the Russian

¹⁷ *The Statesman's Year Book*, edited by Brian Hunter, 134th edition, 1997-98, pp. 197-201.

(formerly Soviet) rouble. Based on the official rate of exchange, the average value of Soviet currency (rouble per US dollar) was 0.6274 in 1989; 0.5856 in 1990; 0.5819 in 1991. However, a multiple exchange rate system was introduced on 1 November 1990, replacing the official rate for most transactions. Following the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, Russia and several other former Soviet republics retained the rouble as their monetary unit. The parity between Belarussian and Russian currencies was subsequently ended, and the Belarussian rouble was devalued. In November 1993, the exchange rate was 1 Russian rouble = 4 Belarussian roubles. In April 1994, Belarus and Russia signed a treaty providing for the eventual union of their monetary systems.¹⁸ However, it was subsequently recognized that under the prevailing economic conditions, such a union was not practicable. In August a new Belarussian rouble, equivalent to 10 roubles, was introduced. On 1 January 1995, the Belarussian rouble became the sole national currency, while the circulation of Russian roubles ceased.¹⁹

Belarus - Signing of Union Treaty with Russia

Belarus and Russia concluded "a union treaty" on 2 April 1997, calling for the gradual creation of a confederation between the two Slavic nations, but analysts said it amounted to little more than a declaration of intent design to wrest new concessions from NATO. The presidents of the two countries, Boris Yeltsin and Alexander Lukashenko signed the treaty.

¹⁸ Oxford Analytical Daily Brief, "Belarus: Economic Gloom", 1 February 1995.
¹⁹ Sovetskaya Belorussiya, 13 January 1995.

President Yeltsin said the new treaty did not create a unified state and the two nations would keep their sovereignty. According to an expert, the document signed was an "abridged" version of an accord, proposed by Belarus and heavily criticised in the Russian press for placing a heavy burden on Russia's struggling economy. Unification with Belarus has been promoted by Moscow in response to the planned NATO expansion towards Russian borders in Eastern Europe. "NATO enlargement makes it imperative for Russia to demonstrate its ability to uphold its geopolitical interests", Alexander Shokhin, Deputy Speaker of the State Duma, said about the new treaty with Belarus. Russian media has alleged that the treaty with Belarus has split the Russian leadership right down the middle, with the Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and other "conservatives" in the Cabinet, supporting a speedy integration with Russia's most loyal ally, while his new reformist deputies, Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov, favouring a go-slow approach.²⁰ However, their differences, if any, seem to have been deliberately exaggerated to create the impression of an inner Kremlin struggle in order to get President Lukashenko agree to a watered down version of the accord.

In June 1997, the union treaty and charter of the union between Belarus and Russia, which had been negotiated in April-May were ratified by the countries' respective legislature. The treaty came into force after a ceremony to exchange ratification documents held on 11 June in Minsk.

²⁰ Vladimir Radyuhin, "Russia, Belarus Sign Pact", *The Hindu*, 03 April 1997.

Following the unanimous ratification of the documents by the Belarussian House of Representatives on 30 May, the Russian State Duma also ratified the treaty and charter on 6 June, by a vote of 363 in favour, two against and 19 abstentions. The upper houses of the Belarussian and Russian legislatures voted on the two documents on 10 June, with Russia's Federation Council approving them by 144 votes with three abstentions, and the Belarussian Council of Republic voting unanimously in favour. The first session of Russian-Belarussian Parliamentary Assembly (the joint body created under the terms of Treaty and charter), took place on 12-13 June in the Belarussian City of Brest. In a highly symbolic act, the Chairman of the Assembly, Gennedy Seleznyov (who was also, the speaker of the Russian State Duma), on 14 June signed a resolution which adopted the music of former Soviet national anthem as the anthem of the new union. The ceremony took place in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, near Minsk, in the same hall in which the agreement to dissolve the Soviet Union had been signed in December 1991, an agreement which Seleznyov termed "the betrayal of the century".²¹

Earlier, President Lukashenko of Belarus and President Boris Yeltsin of Russia signed a "Charter of Union" on May 23 in Moscow. The document amplified the Union treaty signed on April 2. This Charter stipulated that all citizens of Russia and Belarus were to be regarded as citizens of the Union, and confirmed that the aim of the Union framework

²¹ Belarus, "Signing of Union Treaty with Russia", *New Digest for April 1997 in Keesing's Record of World Events*, p. 41610.

was the "Voluntary unification of member States", to be achieved at an unspecified future date. It also permitted accession to the Union by "any member State of the UN which shared its aims", a statement seen by observers as a clear invitation to other former Soviet republics to join. The other aims of the Union stated in the document included the development of a common infrastructure, a single currency, and a joint defence policy.

The Charter stipulated that the Union would be governed by a Supreme Council, to be chaired on a rotational basis by the Presidents of the member States. The Council would consist of the heads of State and government, leaders of the Chambers of the national legislatures, and the (non voting) chair of the executive committee of the Union. The Executive Committee - the Union's permanent executive body - was to be appointed by the Supreme Council, giving equal representation to member States. These bodies were to meet in Moscow. A Parliamentary Assembly, comprising 36 members from the legislatures of each member country, was to meet bi-annually. Provision for the Executive Committee and the Parliamentary Assembly had already been made in the April 1996 Union treaty between Russia and Belarus.

The Union Charter was subject to ratification by the Russian and Belarussian legislatures. On May 30, the Belarussian Lower House, the House of Representatives, unanimously ratified the treaty. Some 15600 people participated in a rally in Minsk on May 23, to celebrate the signing of the Union Charter. The Belarussian Popular Front (BPF), however,

condemned the document as a threat to country's independence.²² However, the first joint budget of the Union of Russia and Belarus, an alignment formed in April, was drafted by the Union's Executive Committee on December 2, and approved by its Parliamentary Assembly on December 15. The 1998 budget, totalling some 600 billion re-dominated Russian roubles (US \$1.00=5,9995 Russian roubles as on January 9, 1998) was 65 per cent funded by Russia and 35 per cent by Belarus. Amongst the projects to be financed from the budget were crime-fighting measures, a customs infrastructure, and military co-operation.

Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev signed a bilateral treaty on military and technical cooperation with his Belarussian counterpart Alyaksandr Chumakow during a visit to Belarus on 19th December.

Therefore, we see that Belarus's populist and highly authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko after succeeding in discrediting the New Parliament in May 1996, threatened to introduce a direct presidential system. In the meanwhile, the President has refused to recognize the authority of the former Supreme Soviet, despite a ruling by the Constitutional Court. Belarus then seemed set for a bumpy ride, particularly as experts were predicting a grim future for the Belarussian rouble, which had remained stable for the past year despite persistent inflation. "The Central Bank which is spending almost £ 100 m. a month

²² "Belarus - Signing of Union Charter with Russia", in *New Digest for May 1997 - Keesing Record of World Events*, p. 41659.

on its interventions, will run out of reserves, and the rouble will go through the floor", warned Stanislav Bogdankevich, a widely respected Economics expert, who resigned in June 1996 as head of National Bank. The President as using the institution as though it were his private bank, and none of the reform programmes had been applied", he said.²³

Belarus, a small country located between the Russian Federation and Poland (or "in the heart of Europe", as they like to say here), has become the odd men out in the region. Whereas most nations in the former Soviet bloc have been fighting hard to hang on to their independence, this country of 10.5 million inhabitants did everything in its power to abandon its sovereignty and place its destiny in Moscow's hand.

The government and most of the population fear reform and see Russia as their economic sheet anchor. They dream of "the good old days" when Belarussian Republic was better off than the rest of Soviet Union because it was able to process cheap raw materials with cut-price Russian energy. It was also commented that although it has the custom union with Moscow, which was approved by referendum, there was a little chance of monetary union, let alone political union, between the two countries. Russia then cancelled an already signed draft plan for monetary union. As once, a Minsk-based diplomat said: "Why buy a cow when you get the milk free? Russia already enjoys all the

²³ Angel Chariton, "Belarus President wins referendum" in *New York Times*, May 17, 1996.

advantages it wants: it has a military presence, a corridor to Europe, diplomatic support and none of the usual drawbacks.²⁴

The Minsk government has been bending over backwards to please Moscow. Belarus has been more zealous than Russia in its efforts to get the countries of the former Soviet Union to reconstitute a military bloc in order to counter NATO's "expansionism". In a re-run, on a much smaller scale, of the Soviet Union's shooting down of a KAL airliner in 1983, Belarus's air defences brought down a hot air balloon which was taking part in an international competition on September 12. Two Americans were killed. The Belarussian authorities expressed "regret" but made no official apology and fined the two survivors \$ 60 each on the grounds that they had entered the country without a visa.

The balloon incident was only the tip of an iceberg. There has been a government crackdown in many areas of life. At the end of August, the President signed an edict to "ensure political stability, strengthen discipline and respect for the law, and prevent illegal strikes". The decree suspended the activities of the independent trade union and lifted the immunity of Parliamentary deputies and members of local assemblies. Gennady Alexandrovich Bikov, President of the suspended union remembers wryly how he was arrested in his office by the men wearing hoods and bulletproof jackets, then given a 10-day prison sentence for having organized an "illegal strike".

²⁴ Jean - Baptiste Navdet, "Belarus turns back to face Russia again" in *New York Times*, 6th November 1996.

In 1995, the country's four independent papers were told that they could no longer go on being printed in Belarussian capital, Minsk. In July, 1995, they were forced to find rotary presses abroad. On top of that, the state organization in-charge of distribution, which has a monopoly, refused to handle opposition papers. The state media have long since been brought to heel and the only independent TV channel has been closed down. Officials at the Presidency prefer not to comment on such incidents. One of President Lukashenko aides, Ural Latipov, attributed such "domestic problems" to the then existing "separation of powers" as advocated by Montesquieu. "That separation had never been simple in any country - in Britain, Parliament had the king executed", he said. However, he aspired that in future things will be carried out "in a more civilized fashion".²⁵

Opponents of the regime are under no illusion. One of them said, "The people really think that the opposition, Parliament and the Constitutional Court are all preventing the President from handing them happiness on a plate".²⁶ That means that President Lukashenko cannot do without his opposition, which is some consolation.

²⁵ Belarus News (Minsk) quoted in *Belarussian Review* (originally *Byelorussian Review*, Los Angeles, USA), August 6, 1995.

²⁶ Quoted in *Zvyazda (Minsk)*, 11 November, 1996,

CHAPTER-IV

DENUCLEARIZATION AND THE MILITARY-STRATEGIC POLICY OF BELARUS

CHAPTER IV

DENUCLEARIZATION AND THE MILITARY - STRATEGIC POLICY OF BELARUS

In August 1996, the total strength of Belarus's armed forces was 85,500, comprising an army of 50,500, an air force of 25,700 (including air defence of 12,000), as well as an estimated 4,700 in centrally controlled units, 3,400 women and 1200 Ministry of Defence staff. There is also a border guard numbering 8,000 which is controlled by Ministry of Internal Affairs. Military service is compulsory and lasts for 18 months. In May 1996, it was announced that term of military service would be reduced to 12 months from the year 2000. In 1992, there were an estimated 30,000 Russian troops stationed in Belarus, mostly engaged in work related to the strategic nuclear forces based in the republic. In October 1994, it was announced that two Russian non-nuclear military installations were to remain in Belarus. All nuclear weapons had been transferred to Russia by late November 1996. The defence budget for 1996 was projected at 6,100,000 m. new roubles. In January 1995, Belarus joined NATO's 'Partnership for Peace' programme of military co-operation.¹

In the early 1990s, Belarus sought to expand its international affiliations; by late 1992, the republic had been recognized by more than 100 countries and it had become a member of various leading international

¹ *Europa Year Book*, 1997, pp.542, 543.

organizations. Belarus's closest relations, however, continued to be with member States of the CIS, in particular, the neighbouring Russian Federation. In April 1993, Belarus signed the CIS Treaty on Collective Security and accords on closer economic cooperation with CIS member States followed. In April 1994, Belarus and Russia concluded an agreement on an eventual monetary union. In March 1996, President Lukashenko of Belarus and Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Quadripartite Treaty with the Presidents of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This envisaged a common market and a custom union between the four countries as well as joint transport, energy and communications systems. In the following month, Belarus and Russia concluded the far-reaching and controversial treaty on the formation of a community of sovereign republics, providing for closer economic, political military integration between the two countries.²

With the dissolution of USSR, Belarus effectively became a nuclear power, with approximately 80 SS - 25 inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles stationed on its territory. However, the Government of Independent Belarus has consistently stressed that under the Declaration of State Sovereignty of July 1990, Belarus is a neutral and non-nuclear state. Accordingly, Belarus signed in May 1992, the Lisbon Protocol to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, under which it pledged to transfer all nuclear missiles to the Russian Federation by 1999. In February 1993, the

² *The Statesman's Year Book*, edited by Brian Hunter, 134th edition, 1997-98, pp.197-201.

Supreme Council ratified the Treaty; on the same occasion it ratified the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START - 1). Substantial amounts of financial and technical aid were pledged by the USA to help Belarus to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. The last remaining nuclear warhead was removed from Belarus and transported to Russia in late November 1996.³

Although not then an independent country, Belarus was accorded founding membership in the United Nations in 1945 in a move by Western Allies to reconcile Stalin to the creation of a world organization with what appeared at the time to be a built-in anti-Soviet majority. By contrast, it did not join the IMF and World Bank until July 1992.

By early 1992, Belarus had been recognized by a wide variety of foreign governments and in late January, Council of Ministers Chairman Kebich, in a prelude to full diplomatic relations, became the first leader of a former Soviet Republic to visit China. In February, the Belarussian Foreign Minister, Petr Kravchenko, was reported to have surprised a visiting European Community delegation by stating that his government claimed portions of Lithuanian territory extending as far as its capital Vilnius, some 30 miles from the border, which had been under Polish rule from 1920 to 1939.

After protracted diplomatic exchanges, independent Belarus ratified a series of agreements by which it renounced its inherited nuclear weapons. Under one of the accords signed at Washington on July 22, 1992, the US

³ *SIPRI Year Book*, 1993, pp.133, 356 and 597.

government pledged \$59 million to assist in the dismantling of about 80 Belarus based SS-25 missiles. Under a further agreement in December 1993, Russia obtained the right to guide seven CIS members, including Belarus, in defence policy. Belarus delayed joining NATO's partnership for peace until January 1995.⁴ The following month, it signed a friendship and cooperation treaty with Russia, together with treaties on joint border protection and the creation of a single administration to run the two states' economic and monetary union.

With the coming of Lukashenko, the pro-Russian lobby became more strong and the 119 deputies elected in May included Contingents of Communists, Agrarians, and Conservative independents, almost all supportive of government's pro-Russian line and unenthusiastic about market reform. Accordingly, the preferred option of President Lukashenko was that the outgoing Soviet era legislature should reduce the quorum requirement in the new body to two fifths, so that the 119 elected deputies could conduct legislative business. However, two attempts to transfer authority to the new deputies failed in June, the majority preference of the old legislatures being to maintain the status quo pending new elections for the unfilled seats in November 1995. Opposition parties (barely represented among the candidates elected in May) complained that this course effectively left the country without a legislature, the mandate of previous body having expired in March.

⁴ *Post-Soviet Geography*, 1993, 34, no.8, pp.497-498.

The President's position was greatly strengthened by the May referenda results endorsing his pro-Russian policies and enhancing his own powers vis-à-vis the legislature. He thereafter became more assertive on the international stage, announcing in early July the suspension of further transfers to Russia of nuclear missiles deployed in Belarus, arguing that such action was unnecessary because Belarus and Russia might unite soon. Under the 1991 US-Soviet START-I treaty as adapted to allow for the demise of USSR, Belarus had undertaken that all nuclear missiles deployed on its territory would be commissioned in Russia; at the time of the suspension of transfers, 18 of the 81 missiles in question remained in Belarus. There was no official reaction in Moscow to the unilateral extension of the concept of economic and monetary union with Russia to the defence arena, but there was some alarm in the West, heightened by the Minsk government's collateral suspension of further force reductions under the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) accord, in this case in tandem with a similar Russian line.⁵

At the prompting of the IMF, President Lukashenko on March 15, 1995 re-launched the government's privatization programme, which he had suspended on taking office in July, 1994 because of the graft and corruption attendant upon the first phase. With only some 10 per cent of State enterprises having been diverted to date, Belarus lagged far behind most other Ex-Communist States in economic reforms. Minister asserted that

⁵ *SIPRI*, 1995, pp.640, 649, 259-260.

transition to a market economy remained the government's goal; but progress in that direction was expected to continue to be slow, and certainly no faster than the rate of change in Russia, given the increasing alignment of the two countries' economies.⁶

Initially after independence, Belarus declared its aspiration to create a neutral and nuclear weapon free state, with its own independent military policy. Belarus eventually opted for the creation of national military forces but holds the door open for participation in a joint CIS force at a later stage. The most immediate problem after independence concerns the over-deployment of former Soviet forces in the country, which by October 1991 amounted to a total of 160,000 men in 14 tank and artillery divisions. According to then President Stanislav Shushkevich, 'troop density in our republic is three times greater than the average for the former union'.^{*} In November, the Parliament agreed in principle to create national armed forces. Later in the month, the Commander of the then Soviet Byelorussian Military District, Colonel-General A. Kostenko, announced a planned cut of the military forces by one-third.⁷

On 11 January 1992, after a two day debate described as 'furious', the Belarus Parliament resolved to place all armed forces on Belarussian territory (except the strategic CIS troops and weapons) under the jurisdiction of its government, ratified the text of new military oath and

⁶ *Europa Year Book*, 1997, pp.542-543.

^{*} Interview with S. Shushkevich by S. Vaganov, in *Trud*, 14 January 1992, p.3; in FBIS-SOV-92-009.

⁷ SIPRI-1993, pp. 4, 148, 228.

transformed the Ministry for Defence Affairs into a Defence Ministry. After the decision on the armed forces was taken, President Shushkevich in an interview issued a firm protest against the ongoing campaign in the Russian Press and elsewhere not to split up the former Soviet forces, denouncing this as 'illegal gambling' and 'pseudo patriotism'. He went on to say that Belarus is looking for a way to make the armed forces serve the country, and not the other way around. However, the then President Shushkevich later outlined a possibility of participating in a CIS joint force in the future, illustrating the eventual third option for a unitary force.⁸ However, the economic basis for supporting a large conscript army is clearly not at hand, and a probable option would be smaller professional force in the future. Plans for future call for considerable troop reductions and the allocation of 30 per cent of the budget for weapons procurement to be switched to welfare programmes for the military, in particular for the construction of housing.

However, Belarus took further steps to tighten its political, economic and military ties with Russia in February 1995. The agreements of 21 February established even closer military cooperation, and included the location of two early-warning systems on Belarussian territory under Russian jurisdiction. The main role of the 25-30,000 Russian troops in Belarus is to guard and maintain the remnants of the former Soviet arsenal and the long-range aviation assets in Baranovichi. Belarussian-Russian

⁸ William Walker, "Nuclear Weapons and Former Soviet Republics", *International Affairs* (London), Vol. 68, No.2, p. 269.

agreements said that withdrawal of the Russian nuclear regiments should be complete by late 1995. Seven out of nine regiments of the strategic rocket forces (with 81 mobile SS-25 Topol missiles) had been returned to Russia by early 1995, but the President Alexander Lukashenko unexpectedly ordered a halt to the pull-out of the last two regiments (with 18 SS-25s) in July, claiming it was a gross political error in the light of coming unification with Russia. Like the February 1995 decision to halt reductions under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) this was prompted by economic considerations. In August 1995 Lukashenko urged Russia to 'make better use' of its defence cooperation with Belarus.⁹ In December Belarus signed an agreement with Russia to conclude the missile withdrawal by September 1996. Withdrawal of equipment and troops took several months. In the meanwhile Ukraine continues to be a serious concern for Russia, the latter's attention is increasingly focussed on Belarus. Geopolitically oriented Russian politicians, analysts and government executives seem to consider Belarus as a safe buffer zone against the eastward expansion of NATO and as only reliable supporter of Russia's opposition to this process. Furthermore, a number of obvious strategic stakes lie behind Russia's interest in Belarus - most importantly, those related to the westward lines of communication (and pipelines) and to the air defence system. Not surprisingly, at the final stage of the 1996 political crisis in Belarus, a key role was played by the active 'mediation' efforts of

⁹ SIPRI - 1996, p. 749.

Russia, which was apparently more interested in preserving the pro-Russian orientation of Belarussian President Lukashenko than in his democratic credentials.

Russia's relationship with Belarus has become one of the most controversial subjects of political debate in Russia. On the one hand, Belarus' integration with (or even incorporation into) Russia is regarded as responding to basic interests in preserving and consolidating the historical ties between the two Slavic peoples; the treaty on establishing a Community (Commonwealth) of two states of 2 April 1996 is widely claimed to represent the highest level of integration within the CIS.¹⁰

On the other hand, political elites in Russia seem basically to distrust Lukashenko, who effectively used the popular idea of rapprochement with Russia to outmaneuver his domestic opponents as well as Russia. Supporting the Belarussian leader may also have negative international implications for Russia because of Lukashenko's record on human rights and the democratic process as well as his controversial anti-Western stance (although it would be easier to present Russia as a loyal partner and democratically oriented state by comparison with Belarus). The economic burden of 'reintegration' is also considered by many in Russia as prohibitively high, especially in view of Lukashenko's extremely poor performance in developing market reforms. Last but not least, the primitive

¹⁰ SIPRI - 1997, p. 122.

and assertive populism of Lukashenko makes him an unpredictable partner even for Russia.¹¹

So, the developments in Belarus in 1996 represented a clear departure from this trend. The authoritarian policy of President Lukashenko provoked a fierce confrontation with Parliament, demonstrations of protest in the capital and an attempt made by Parliament to start the process of impeachment of the President. Having openly threatened to use force, the President organized a controversial referendum on 24 November, 1996 (carried out in flagrant violation of the fundamental criteria for a democratic system), proclaimed the Parliament dissolved and introduced a new constitution legitimizing the *de facto coup d'etat* and establishing one man rule in practically all spheres of public life.

Although Lukashenko based his strategy on those of Yeltsin in his confrontation with the Russian Supreme Soviet, Belarus avoided the armed clashes (in contrast to autumn 1993 events in Moscow, when tanks fired on the Parliament building). Another difference the Belarussian and 'earlier' Yeltsin case is the strong negative reaction of the international community, which put Belarus at the risk of becoming a Pariah in Europe. The OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Union and a number of leading States have openly condemned the legitimacy of "new order" established in the country.¹²

Transfer of Power and Military Strategy in the CIS

¹¹ *Pravda*, March 21, 1996, p.1 in Current Digest of Post-Soviet Press.

¹² SIPRI, 1997, pp.122-123.

Though it is yet unclear how the 'Military share' of each CIS member is to be determined, each state has since disintegration sought to corner all the assets of the Soviet Union on its territory. Ukraine controls 30 per cent of the tanks; Belarus 18 per cent and Russia 28 per cent (the Soviet Union had 13,150 tanks). Belarus, Ukraine and others privatized all military equipment on their territories. Ukraine declared all six regiments of the IL-76 military-transport planes its own and kept for itself the only regiment of aerial refueling tankers of the entire Commonwealth, among other things, thus encouraging a free for all.

Russia has advocated a proportional approach, with Russia getting 4,000 tanks and Belarus 2400 tanks. A similar approach has been proposed for aircraft, launchers, etc. The proposed armed units give 54 per cent to Russia, 21.8 per cent to Ukraine, and 6.6 per cent to Belarus. This is based on the Warsaw Pact and North Atlantic Treaty Organization criteria whereby 'generalized indicators' for each country are set. The aim is to maintain a regional balance. It is advocated that the creation of a correlation of forces would provide a sound basis for security in European part of the region and ensure the implementation of international treaties. Of course, these proposals have no meaning until all political disputes are resolved.¹³

Tactical Weapons

¹³ Captain Zolotov, "New Russian Military Doctrine", *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 2 June 1992.

The precise number is unknown, but the estimate is that they number 14,000.¹⁴

The Alma Ata Declaration states that all these be withdrawn to Russian territory. Ukraine and other States have stated that the withdrawal has been completed.

Table-5

Strategic Nuclear Weapons in the Former Soviet Republics

	Sites/Bases	Launchers	Warheads
Republic			
Russia			
ICBM	0,024	1,064	4,278
HB	0,004	0,122	0,367
SLBM	0,002	0,940	2,804
Total Warheads			7,449 (72%)
Ukraine			
ICBM	0,002	0,176	1,240
HB	0,002	0,040	0,168
Total Warheads			1,408 (14%)
Kazakhstan			
ICBM	0,002	0,104	1,040
HB	0,001	0,040	0,320
Total Warheads			1,360 (13%)
Belarus			
ICBM	0,002	0,054	0,015 (1%)

ICBM - Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles

SLBM - Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles

HB - Heavy Bombers

Source: START Treaty Materials, START Documents.

Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, November 1991.

¹⁴ "Byelorussia Seeks Neutrality" in *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, 23 December 1991

On 22 December 1991, the leader of Belarus said that his republic, one of four in the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons on its soil, would become a nuclear-free zone. The then President Stanislav Shushkevich while discussing with the then US Secretary of State James A. Baker said that the republic on December 8 joined Russia Ukraine in forming Commonwealth of Independent States, a political entity poised to fill the void left by the collapse of Soviet Union. Baker, before flying to Ukraine, met Shushkevich for talks with the last of the four nuclear powers in the former Soviet Union. His five-day trip also took him to Moscow to meet President Boris N. Yeltsin of Russia and to Kazakhstan the Asian republic that also has a nuclear arsenal.¹⁵ The United States then already had approved \$400 m. to help these republics account for, protect and begin dismantling their nuclear arsenals.

The Nuclear Power Question

A macabre postscript to the questions arising from Chernobyl has been the debate within the leadership of Belarus on the question of constructing nuclear power stations in the republic. The debate has reflected both the influence of Russia, which announced its own new programme for long term nuclear power station construction in December 1992, and the extraordinary insensitivity of the state leaders to the problems brought out by the nuclear accident. That Belarus, a republic without any nuclear power stations, could embark upon a programme to build such

¹⁵ Edchik, I., "Nuzhny li Belarusi AES?", *Femida*, No. 17, April 1-2 May 1993, p. 2.

plants so soon after the misfortunes caused by a previous nuclear accident, albeit from a station just over the border in Ukraine, astonished many observers. As the most significant figure in Belarussian political life in 1992, Parliamentary Speaker Stanislav Shushkevich, a physicist by training, gave his assent to the plans. In his view, Belarussian station could be constructed using foreign technology. Already by April 1992, he had held talks on the subject with nuclear experts from France, Canada and Russia.

The prime reason for this move was that the basic source of energy in the republic consists of organic types of fuel. These account for only 12 per cent of the needs of fuel energy.¹⁶ The remaining 88 per cent must be imported. Thus, Belarus suffers from an acute fuel deficit and is almost totally reliant on imports. In addition, the organic fuel production has contributed to the deteriorating environmental situation in the republic as a result of waste products. The need for alternative energy sources, in their view, is clear. In the nuclear energy production, however one did not produce the release of harmful substances into the atmosphere such as carbondioxide, sulphur-dioxide or nitrogen oxide, and there is no burning of oxygen as in organic-fuelled stations. Under normal circumstances the release of radioactive substances was substantially lower than in the case of thermal power stations, especially those based on coal. Thus, it would be incorrect to reject the nuclear power alternative as Koren and Yarosherich assert. Therefore, the answer lay in the selection of the type of reactor for

¹⁶ Marples, David R., "Post-Soviet Belarus and the Impact of Chernobyl", *Post-Soviet Geography*, Vol. XXXIII, September 1992, pp. 419-31.

the station. The station should not have Chernobyl-type reactor (Soviet RBMKs) or VVER (water pressurized) reactors used elsewhere in former Soviet Union.¹⁷ In Russia and elsewhere a new generation of reactors was under construction. After the year 2000 another type of reactor with its own 'internal safety system' would be ready for use. In Belarus, the selection of plants should take the form of a competition, based on the views of local as well as international and Russian experts. All Belarussian reactors must have two protective covers to alleviate the potential damage of a release of radioactive products. Though nuclear fuel still has to be purchased from Russia, the experts maintain that the costs would be still much lower than for organic fuel imports. In fact, the cost of such fuel has declined as a result of reduction of military development and the conversion of weapons enterprises into civilian factories.

In conclusion experts opined that there is no alternative to the development of nuclear power for Belarus, whatever the emotional implications of such a move. Non-nuclear Belarus, however, could at present provide only about 70 per cent of its electricity needs. Despite such seemingly rational arguments for the future of nuclear power in the republic, the proponents of this form of energy can only justify their statements if they omit the damage caused to the republic by Chernobyl.¹⁸

CURRENT ISSUES

¹⁷ Kanoplya, E.F., "Global Ecological Consequences of the Chernobyl Nuclear Explosion", *SPCI*, April 1992, pp. 6-8.

Belarus Tension with Russia over Television Journalists

Relations between Belarus and Russia strained in August 1997 over the arrest of seven television journalists from Russia's state owned ORT station for allegedly crossing the Belarussian border illegally. At the end of

August, two of the seven, both Belarussian citizens, remained in custody. The arrest precipitated an exchange of strongly worded statements between Russia and Belarussian authorities and threatened to cause a serious breach in relations between the two countries, which had ratified a union treaty in June.

The incident took place when a three-member crew from ORT had been arrested on 26 July, whilst apparently investigating the question of Belarussian border controls and smuggling. The crews' driver, Yaroslav Orchinnikov, was released from detention on 6 August, but was charged with illegally entering Belarus, a crime that carried a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment. The other two members of the crew, who remained in custody, faced identical charges. One of them, Pavel Sheremet, went on hunger strike on 13 August but later called off the protest after the conditions under which he was being were improved.

A visit by Belarussian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to Russian region of Kaliningrad on 1 August was cancelled at the last minute on the recommendations of Kaliningrad Regional Governor Leonid Gorbenko. The Governor based his recommendation on the recent 'complications'

¹⁸ Keesing's Record of World Events, New Digest, June 1997, p. 41785.

which had affected Russia-Belarusian relations. However, Gorbenko's recommendation had not been sanctioned by the Russian Foreign Ministry and he was sharply criticised by Russian Presidential spokesman Sargei Yastrzhembsky for having made a unilateral decision over this issue.

The situation was complicated further when a second film crew from ORT, consisting of three Russian nationals and one Belarusian, was arrested on 15 August on the border between Belarus and Lithuania whilst filming a story about their imprisoned colleagues. Criminal charges were filed against them on 18 August. One of the journalists, Anatoly Adamchuk, made a televised statement in which he apologised for his action and admitted that the assignment had been organised by ORT. The station, however, denied having 'planned' the incident, and voiced fears that Adamchuk's statement or rather 'confession' had been extracted under duress. Police questioned Vladimir Fashenko, another ORT journalist from the Minsk bureau, on 18 August. He was deported on 22 August for refusing to give evidence in the case against Sheremet.

There were fierce verbal exchanges between the Russian and Belarusian authorities on 21 August. Responding to a warning from Russian Presidential spokesman Yastrzhembsky that relations between the two countries could suffer if the journalists were not released by the end of the day, Belarusian President, Alyaksandr Lukashenko, refused to accede to what he termed as Russian 'blackmail'. However, the three Russian journalists from the second ORT crew were released on 22 August and the

fourth member of the crew, a Belarussian citizen Vladzimir Kostin, was freed on 25 August.

Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov arrived in the Belarussian capital Minsk on 27 August to negotiate the release of the remaining detainees, Sheremat and cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky. There were mixed signals about their fate following a telephone conversation on 28 August between Lukashenko and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin announced that the journalists would be released shortly, although Lukashenko continued to demand an apology from ORT. At a Press Conference on 29 August, Belarussian Foreign Minister Ivan Anatanovich said that the criminal cases against Sheremat, Zavadsky and second ORT crew remained open.

However, later a visit by President Lukashenko to the Russian regional capital of Lipetsk and Yaroslavl, which was scheduled to begin on 2 October, was cancelled that day when Russian officials denied permission for his aircraft to enter Russian airspace. Russian President Boris Yeltsin had apparently sanctioned the official actions. On 2 October, Yeltsin said that Lukashenko's visit was dependent upon the release of Parel Sheremat, the Belarussian journalist employed by the Russian Public Television Station ORT who had been held in detention in Belarus since his arrest in July.

Speaking in Nizhny Novgorod, Yeltsin also warned Russian regional governors not to invite foreign heads of state without presidential sanction.

In August, the governor of Kaliningrad region had unilaterally cancelled a visit by Lukashenko, thereby prompting a rebuke from the Russian President. However, Sheremat was released from detention on 7 October on condition that he did not leave Belarus. Then he had to face trial on charges of having illegally crossed the Belarussian border. On 4 October, a prominent Russian defence lawyer Henry Reznik, had announced that he would represent the accused after both of Sheremat's defence lawyers had been dismissed by the Belarussian authorities on 3 October.

Following his release, Sheremat spoke at a rally held in Minsk on 19 October to protest against proposals to curtail media freedom in Belarus. The proposals, which included powers to close any media outlet deemed to be disseminating materials which was considered defamatory to the Belarussian President, were passed on 15 October by the House of Representatives (the Lower Chamber of the bicameral Belarussian legislature) as amendments to the law governing the conduct of the press. On 29 October, however, the Upper Chamber, the Council of Republic, rejected the amendments.¹⁹ At last on 17 December in the trial, which opened in Oshmyany (Belarus), Pave Sheremat who had earlier pleaded not guilty to the charges, refused to give evidence on the grounds that the trial would not be conducted fairly.²⁰

However, apart from the recent strain in Belarus relationship with Russia over television journalists, on 9, February 1998, Belarus and Russia

¹⁹ Ibid., October 1997, p. 41879.

²⁰ Ibid., December 1997, p. 41976.

agreed on repayment terms for 100 m. gas debt. Belarussian enterprises owed Russian gas giant Gazprom 102 m. dollars at the beginning of the year compared with 210 m. dollars a year earlier, i.e. in 1997. Prakaporich, Belarussian First Deputy Prime Minister told a news conference that Belarus and Russia had reached a preliminary debt restructuring agreement under which the Belarussian Government would issue deferred bonds to finance the debt. Prakaporich said that at the last meeting of the two countries' Prime Ministers had agreed that Belarus would barter 70 per cent of the gas supplies from Russia and pay off 30 per cent of the debt in money. Gazprom has already placed orders worth about 80 m. dollars with Belarussian companies for the construction of facilities in both Belarus and Russia. Gazprom has also ordered 120 m dollars worth of goods for its own customers. Belarus will additionally supply goods to Russian regions towards payment of Gazprom's debt to federal and local budgets.²¹ There was another cooperation agreement signed with Russia's Orenburg region on cooperation in trade, economic relations, production and technology on 19 February 1998. The agreement envisages collaboration in the production of vehicles and agricultural equipment, in metallurgy, power engineering, radioelectronics and the manufacture of precision instruments.²²

Another agreement on press cooperation was signed on 20 February 1998. Under this agreement, both the sides intend to create favourable

²¹ SWB, SU/3146/D/7, 9 February 1998.

²² SWB, SU/3155/D/4., 19 February 1998.

legal, organizational and economic conditions in the field of publishing the press and the distribution of printed matter with the purpose of forming a single information space. The sides have also agreed to bring the two countries' legislation on press in compliance with international standards.²³ This process of integration was further accelerated by the declaration of the Chairman of the National Bank of Belarus, Pytor Prakapovich who said on 16 May 1998 that greater convergence between Russia and Belarus and the creation of a common economic space would make it necessary in future to introduce a common currency. He said that this would take at least four to five years after the leaders of both the countries take the relevant decision.²⁴ As for cooperation between the National Bank of Belarus and the Central Bank of Russia (CBR), they are actively working on some aspects of their monetary policy and its coordination. Earlier, Russia and Belarus have agreed to set up a joint intergovernmental working group to ensure interaction between the two countries on the financial markets and coordinate their measures to stabilize the Belarussian rouble on 13 March 1998.²⁵ According to Rybkin, Russian Acting Deputy Prime Minister, "Belarus itself is capable of doing much to stabilize the rouble, but the CBR will certainly offer help." Rybkin emphasized the need to take experts' opinion into consideration. According to him, the Central Bank of Russia had warned Belarus about the possibility of a sharp decline in rouble, but he added the warning had not been given proper attention.

²³ Ibid..

²⁴ SWB, SU/3231/D/2, 20 May 1998.

Therefore, after analysing the entire events in sequence we find that the process of coming closer is the hallmark of the recent year. The union between Belarus and Russia is the most effective entity in the post-Soviet space as Gennadiy Seleznev believes. The more efficient the union's activities will be, the more attractive this alliance will be for other member states of the Commonwealth. The union of two countries is a highly effective medicine which will help to get over an "illness" in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Custom Union of the "group of four" (i.e. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). There is also a real possibility that other countries will join the union, in particular, Ukraine.

CHAPTER-V

CONCLUSION

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On 9 May 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was celebrated in Minsk, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. In the Belarussian capital, however, the occasion was more than ceremonial; it signified a possible path for the future. At the demonstration in Independence Square, those carrying old Soviet flags greatly outnumbered those bearing the national flag of Belarus. President Lukashenko's speech recalled the "glorious days" of the Soviet past, when the borders of the country stretched to the Pacific. The underlying message of these words could hardly be mistaken. The leader of Belarus and his desire and ostensibly prove that of his people, to "return" to the Russian fold, what, then, does the future hold for Belarus and its people. The present century, which has brought independence to numerous States as a result of dissolution of great empires (the British, French, German, Austrian, Russian and the Soviet, for example), has been less kind to Belarus. That country is unique in several respects. It is a republic with a majority of citizens who appear to believe that life under the Soviet Union was preferable to present day existence and who maintain a deep distrust for democratic principles and market economy. Its President is a provincial

politician whose outlook reflects closely that of his compatriots, with the exception of the nationally conscious elements.

Moreover, Lukashenko's intention appears to be to eliminate the Belarussian Popular Front (BPF) as a political force. The BPF, conversely, might be perceived as the conscience of Belarus as a nation. By 1995, the official proclamations and public statements of its leaders manifested a deeply held Russophobia. Its newspaper, *Svoboda*, which was being circulated semi-clandestinely in the Spring of 1995 following the removal of its editor and pending a court case for libel, ridiculed the President and depicted him in cartoons and poems as modern day Stalin. The BPF has also identified itself more closely than ever with its leader, Paz'nyak, who was able to command a solid band of supporters, representing over 10 per cent of the voting electorate, but who was also the most intensely disliked of any individual politician in Belarus.

The BPF owed its origin to three central issues: the question of Belarussian language and cultural development; the uncovering of Stalinist atrocities in Belarus; and disaster At Chernobyl. The present leadership of the country has addressed all the three issues. It was the general apprehension that the elevation of Russian to state language will reduce dramatically the present emphasis on the use of the native language, whether in schools, higher educational institutions, publishing or mere street signs. Lukashenko aided this process by weak geographical and

political basis of the Belarussian culture, by the general lack of national consciousness in the republic.

Second, the authorities in general have effectively silenced the process of exposing crimes conducted in Stalinist era. Given the nature of exposures and revelations in other former Soviet republics, this is a considerable achievement. One must take into account, however, the very high degree of public apathy in the republic. The attempts by the BPF and by the individual historians to uncover some of the worst excesses of the Stalin period in Belarus have been greeted with a deafening silence, or by covert hostility on the part of general public. The suppression of public information has been enhanced by the continued propagation of the achievements of Soviet people during the war, and the Belarussian based partisans in particular. In short, those in authority who have links with the past Stalinist era are anxious to prevent further details from coming to light.

Early in 1995, two surveys were conducted. The first survey was conducted among 1,018 respondents from diverse regions of the republic, and asked the public to cite problems causing the greatest anxiety. In order, the list was as follows: rising prices; the drop in living standards of the population; the dissolution of the Soviet Union; the increase in crime; the consequences of Chernobyl; and unemployment. In the list therefore nine years after the Chernobyl accident, Chernobyl ranked fifth as an issue of concern. Significantly, national existence and the question of language did not feature on the list. One academic noted that although he generally

supported the advancement of the Belarussian language, the process had to take place gradually, alongside the preparation of adequate textbooks and scientific journals. At that juncture (April 1995), the Belarussian language was not yet in a position to replace Russian in all facet of life. The danger, however, was that if Belarussian were to loose its position of eminence, both the language and its mother state might eventually disappear altogether.

However, Chernobyl did not bring about the collapse of the Soviet regime, nor did it alter fundamentally the political spectrum in the country, but the ramifications of the disaster were nonetheless drastically affected by the political changes and concomitant economic crisis that has beset Belarus, like other countries. That crisis is likely to continue and grow. In the Spring of 1995, there was little evidence of either economic or political reform in the country. The currency remained relatively stable against the dollar only as a result of the employment of the state reserves to support the Belarussian rouble. There was every indication of an imminent and devastating economic collapse within a 6-12 months period as prophesised by western scholars, but this did not happen. In the interim period, an unpredictable and ruthless President was consolidating his power.

Ironically, the disastrous events of Chernobyl, which proved to be significant in the dissolution of the Soviet Union, (and thereby the bond of Belarus with Russia) were also likely to be a factor in the collapse of Belarus as an independent state. The fiftieth year anniversary reminded the

demonstrators of the time when Belarus had been rescued from the east at a critical juncture in its history. Was it about to happen again? And, what of the Russians? Would they be prepared to take on the additional burden of the struggling republic that had failed to embark on significant economic reforms?

It remains to be said that there is an alternative route for Belarus, namely the long process of democratic development that must be accompanied by increased self-awareness of the events of the recent past. If Belarus enjoyed a golden age of culture in the 1920s and if today majority of children are studying the Belarussian language in school, then such has to be attributed to the efforts of nationally conscious democrats, many of whom are embraced by the Belarussian Popular Front (BPF). Belarussians are in general highly educated and adaptable to difficult conditions. The impact of Soviet regime on this republic has yet to be revealed fully to the population. The Belarussian people's protest against Stalin's tyranny was openly expressed when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. But the German occupiers were not the liberators of Belarus. On the contrary they sought in Eastern Europe a living space for the Germans, the "master race", and the death or enslavement of slaves.

Conditions in the Belarus greatly improved after Stalin's death. Although the Belarussian national leadership was destroyed during Stalin's political purges in 1930s, the people's national feeling became more intense than it had ever been. They realised that the Soviet government under

Stalin offered them nothing but hunger, political terror and exile to Siberia. In these circumstances, there started to grow a silent protest against social and political injustice and national persecution. However, the situation changed drastically in the post-Stalinist era. In comparison with former Soviet republics, Belarus experienced relative stability and prosperity during post-Stalinist phase, with a wider variety of consumer goods available than in other republics and the belief that a return to Russia would bring about economic prosperity and progress, however, is naïve in the extreme. One only has to look at the decline and degradation of the Russian Far East to perceive how Moscow has neglected areas outside the immediate purview of its political leaders. On the other hand, the BPF must, in turn, recognize that 'instant' change is unattainable; that the population has not yet emerged from the Soviet Chrysalis; and that any attempt at forced 'Belarusification' would only alienate further a majority of the population. If national nihilism is to be overcome; if Belarus as an independent State is to have a future; and if new generation is to emerge from the disaster caused by Chernobyl with renewed hope; then the attitude of national intelligentsia must change also. Russian-speaking Belarussians in Vitsebsk may as yet have little in common with Belarussian speakers in Brest region. They cannot, however, be belittled or admonished for either their lack of national consciousness or their failure to adopt their native language after 70 years of non-usage. The same applies to ethnic Russians within Belarus who have to be treated as equal citizens in the new republic,

with tolerance and patience, then Belarussians may learn to recognize the salient fact: that from the East Slavic nations of the past has emerged not one, but three States, two of which are Russia and Ukraine. The third, Belarus, at present lacks the population, international prestige and political security of the first two. Yet it is by no means an anomaly created by the collapse of an Empire. Historically and morally, it has an equal right to exist. What is lacking as the twentieth century draws to a close is the will to survive alone.

"Now, the union of Belarus and Russia has become a reality", President Alyaksandr Lukashenko said in a message to the people of the two States on the occasion of the anniversary of the union. The two peoples have seen real improvements in their life since the union was set up. On the international scene, the union pledges never to threaten any other state and comes out against the use of force in solving international problems. The following is the text message, read out by the Prime Minister Syarhcy Linh at a meeting in Minsk marking the anniversary of the union with Russia and broadcast by Belarussian radio on 2 April 1998. Celebrations marking the day of the unity of Belarussian and Russian peoples have culminated in a gala meeting at Belarussian National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre. The union of course, developed naturally from the aspiration of the Russian and Belarussian people to re-unite themselves within a single economic, political, scientific and cultural space and their striving to restore the ruptured logic of history. The path to unity of course, has been long and

thorny. Many obstacles had to be overcome to bring down the artificial borders between both the countries. However, it seems that union of Belarus and Russia has become a reality. It is based on solid principles of mutual respect and equality and provides their people with specific benefits, not in future but already now. Both in Russia and Belarus people have seen real improvements resulting from coordination of economic policy and the consolidation at regional level.

The granting of equal opportunities to Belarussian and Russian citizens, including in such vital spheres as employment, wages, health care and education, as well as the establishment of a unified regulatory and legislative basis and information links, are just some of the many benefits, which the union has already provided for Belarussian and Russian peoples. Cooperation in culture, science and education is becoming more extensive and substantial. Coordination between Belarus and Russia on the international scene has shown that the voice of the union of Belarus and Russia is more audible than the voice of each of the two states taken separately. The union of Belarus and Russia consider inadmissible the use of force to solve international problems. It has now become a solid basis for the dynamic development of both states. It has also given a powerful impetus for the integration processes in all the post-Soviet countries. The memory of the nations of former Soviet Union, sober economic calculations and considerations of collective security will undoubtedly attract other countries towards closer cooperation within the union of four [Customs

Union of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan] and within the CIS. Recent decree of Lukashenko which was signed on 2 April 1998, aimed at implementing the decision of the High Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia on a programme of coordinated actions in the sphere of foreign policy by the two states during 1998-99 is an obvious illustration of close and integrated cooperation between two countries. Of the 500 Minsk residents interviewed on 2 April 1998 by the Belapan Zerkalo Sociological Service indicated that they supported the Belarussian-Russian union to one degree or another. Of them, 29 per cent completely supported the union. The supporters were dominated by people having higher education and those aged 30 and older. 28 per cent of the respondents were opposed to the union, half of them (i.e. 14 per cent) were strongly opposed. The remaining 9 per cent of respondents did not give any specific answer. However, there is another half story in which Russian flags were burnt and trampled on Yakub Kolas Square in the centre of Minsk and about 300 people demonstrated against closer ties with Russia.¹

Whether or not such a response mean that Belarus is on the road to national self-destruction as an independent state remains to be seen. Its international revival may be dependent upon its finding a role as a mediator within the CIS countries, and as a state that can forge close ties with its historical neighbours of Poland and Lithuania. Recently (i.e. on 5 Mach 1998), President Lukashenko has called for the transformation of CIS into a

¹ SWB. SU/3193/D/3, 4 April 1998.

powerful economic and political alliance along the lines of the European Union. He further added that the break up of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th Century and they should also admit responsibility for the tragic consequences that the break up of the Soviet Union brought to millions of people. He rather recommended on the occasion of sixth anniversary of the CIS for establishing a free trade area by lifting all trade restrictions and a closer interaction among member countries on political, legislative, informational and peace keeping issues, as well as in relations with other states. He also called for the transformation of CIS into a Union of Independent States and a fast move towards "Multitrack integration". He stressed for a greater role of Russia and said "I am confident that, having analysed the main trends in the development of our country - the Soviet Union - one will come to the conclusion that the greater part of experience gained by it should today become the basis for the future development, unification, integration or convergence of the nations that used to live in that same powerful state."²

Therefore, we have seen how Belarus is slowly moving towards close integration with the Russia. The recent poll amply demonstrated how most citizens back union with Russia. The establishment of an independent state was the result of several factors, but its impetus came from outside, with the collapse of the union and Gorbachev's plans for a revised agreement between Moscow and the republics. It cannot be said to have

² SWB. SU/3168/D/4, 6 March 1998.

occurred because of a strong movement for independence from within the country: such a movement did exist but was hardly a dominant factor.

The Soviet legacy has also provided a basis for the existence of a Republic of Belarus into twenty-first century: a state with clearly defined borders; and a seat in the United Nations. Its history has shown on the other hand the problems that can be caused by the rule from distant Moscow in terms of repression from the past; and the threat to the very existence of the Belarussian language and national culture, but the nostalgia for the Soviet Union is still there. History itself dictates that they should be together in the interest for their dynamic development. Therefore, these are all reasons for Belarussians today to wish to determine their own future, but international survival will depend on a greater commitment of all citizens to their state than hitherto has been exhibited.

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