



**Andrej Dynko**

## Between brotherly Russia and peaceful Europe

Andrej Dynko elaborates on Belarus' specific situation and Belarusians' mentality. Why do the Belarusians want to change everything while changing nothing? Dynko offers an explanation through an analysis of Belarus' history and wonders about the country's future.

Sociological surveys of the Belarusians' foreign-policy preferences in 2003 showed that two-thirds of the population would like their country to join the European Union, but only one-third would be ready to give up the common economic space with Russia for European integration. At the same time, two-thirds of the Belarusians would like to preserve union relations with Russia and four-fifths are convinced advocates of Belarus' full independence. These figures are above all perceived as a symptom of a serious disease. Intellectuals and moralists strongly criticize this schizophrenic paradoxicality of people's mode of thinking and these indiscriminate public views. The Belarusians want contraries to be reconciled, they are willing to live by illusions and vote for politicians that can create illusions best of all, they say. Despite political analysts' furies, most Belarusians regard the combination of independence and the union with Russia as an accomplished fact, and suspicions about its reality arise only when one ally turns the gas tap off for the other one.

It is more or less clear about Russia and independence. Like the characters of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, the Belarusians would like to change everything, changing nothing. It is understandable why my compatriots want everything to remain as it is. But why are the Belarusians seeking to join Europe, obtain membership in the European Union? We are currently separated from the European Union by a thousand kilometers of barbed wire with only a dozen border-crossing points. The border is locked from both sides. However, Europe attracts the Belarusians, and something prompts Eurosympathies. What do the population of Belarus and the residents of the great Europe have in common? What will be the solution of the Belarusian schizophrenia?

### **The centre of Europe**

Edifices built in the late Soviet period impress by their size and disfunctionality. They differ very much from the yet few projects designed and completed in the post-Soviet times, often built from a "Eurodesign" standard, through the implementation of European design ideas with locally available means. The authors' taste sometimes plays tricks on them, but the buildings are distinguished by their functionality and low cost.

All that is European is now in fashion in Belarus. People not only do "Eurorenovations" and install "Eurowindows" but also buy "Euroaspirin" at "Eurodrugstores". In Mahilyow, the homeland of President Lukashenko, a company bearing the meaningful name of Aposhni Shlyakh (The Last Way) advertises that their oak caskets "meet Eurostandards".

All people in Belarus know that their country is located at the centre of Europe. If we take it from Belarusian geographers that it is so, the centre of the continent lies in the waters of a small lake bearing the lapidary name of Sho.

Everyone in Lithuania also knows that the centre of Europe is somewhere near the town of Alytus. Meanwhile, Ukrainians would confidently locate this centre in the incredibly beautiful landscapes near the town of Rakhiv Carpathians. The remarkable beauty of all these centres argues geography to be an eminently human science. The location of the home country at the centre of Europe is one of the nation-determining myths that can be heard in all the countries of eastern Europe. The degree of this persistent "centrism" is directly proportionate to the level of the uncertainty of national consciousness and the duality of young nations' aspirations. In Belarus, the myth about the centre of Europe is especially popular. It seems as if the fact itself that this point is situated on our territory can miraculously help reduce the stench in the most public convenience at the bus station in Hlybokaye, which will not be missed by any careless hunter for the ice-age cup of Lake Sho, a sort of Holy Grail for the Belarusian Europhiles.

The location of the homeland at the centre of Europe is yet another manifestation of the craze for all that is European. This is also a result of the change in the Belarusians' national self-identification. In the Soviet era, there was no one even to think about locating the centre of Europe in Belarus' Lake Region. And if this idea occurred to someone, its expression would entail consequences that would kill all desire to repeat it. It was popular to compare the area of the country with the area of Austria or Denmark because this brought the reader to realize the largeness of the USSR, which covered one-sixth of the land surface of the globe. Speaking of Belarus as part of Europe was taboo. But in 1991, following the breakup of the USSR, the idea, which was promoted by nationalist groups, immediately became a stereotype.

### **Anything rather than war**

The Belarusians' Eurosympathies above all could be linked to their wish to share the well-being that all countries of the Europe Union currently enjoy. Today's Europe is a sort of miracle that amazes those living over the Bug, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Bosphorus Strait. If it were possible for any country to become a member of the European Union, all African countries, including the Democratic and People's Republics of Congo, would join Europe overnight. Fortunately, the wise Europeans select their allies themselves.

However, the European miracle consists not only of material well-being but also a new political thinking, an atmosphere of good neighbourliness and tolerance. The long-time dream of ending ethnic conflicts and wars, armed confrontations and arms race, and of abandoning attempts to settle conflicts by military means has come true in today's Europe. There is no possibility of war between European superpowers. Surrounded by permanent trouble spots, the new Europe does look like a peaceful paradise.

Europe looks like a miracle not only in comparison to conflict areas in other parts of the globe, but also in the context of the centuries of bloody wars that preceded the current times. The old position-of-strength policy ultimately fell away only after the Second World War. The culture of peace is a new occurrence for Europe.

The Belarusians harboured suspicions about the flourishing Europe for a long time. Until recently, an ordinary Belarusian above all associated Europe's *mission civilisatrice* with "Hitler the Liberator" posters. It was hard for a person who had gone through experiments in amputation without anesthesia in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz to agree that Europeanness means civilization.

The Second World War was an apocalypse for Belarus. In the minds of many, if not most, people, not only Germany but also all of Europe should be held responsible for that war. Firstly, because of the 1938 Munich Pact; secondly, because of the 1939 surrenders; and thirdly, because of participation in violence. German SS troops were surpassed in brutality by Latvians, and ethnic Ukrainians burnt down the village of Khatyn with inhabitants. Like Europe was a disciple of the Devil, anti-Semitic by nature, to many Jews, so had many senior Belarusians held grudges in their souls against all of Europe for a long time.

The Belarusians consider peace to be the highest value. The notorious phrase, "Anything rather than war," is the basis of their political behaviour. In the period between the 1950s and 1980s, Belarusian culture created a rich pacifist tradition. A humanistic message was contained in fine art masterpieces such as Mikhas Savitski's Partisan Madonna. Even mass culture could not avoid the anti-war theme. A lot of pacifistic songs appeared. "We want the peaceful sky not to know the fire of war... We wish friendship and sincere brotherly love to peoples," — these are lines from the unofficial anthem "Radzima Maya Darahaya" (My Dear Motherland), the tune of which serves as the station designator of Belarusian Radio. Literature, whose role was extremely important in society at that time, was the determining factor in creating the pacifistic sentiments. Essays by Ales Adamovich, novels by Vasil Bykaw and Ivan Shamyakin gained prominence for their deromanticization of warfare. Pacifism and tolerance were questioned by none of the more or less significant authors of that time. The presence of this theme in works of art was even intrusive. The authorities tolerated that pacifism. In Soviet Belarusian culture, it was one of the manifestations of conformism, a substitute for open dissent, upon which nobody among the front-rank figures of Belarusian culture ventured. That pacifism was so popular and consistent that it became one of the cultural and political canons and turned into a consciousness-determining phenomenon. Pacifism harmonized with the historic memory of people and came from previous cultural traditions. Incidentally, the influence of high culture, in particular literature, on the formation of the Belarusians' consciousness in the Soviet era is frequently underestimated, above all because change has now occurred in the methods of mass communication. For it is no longer the written word but sight and sound that dominate the communications industry. Anyway, pacifism and the propagation of tolerance in the Belarusian culture of the Soviet era are worthy of certain consideration. The replacement of the first lines of the state anthem, "We, Belarusians, with brotherly Russia," for "We, Belarusians, are peaceful people," which was initiated by Alyaksandr Lukashenko, on the surface looked like the result of a search for a solution that would insult nobody. But this choice in fact reveals the intuition and opportunism generally characteristic of Lukashenko's political style.

Belarusian pacifism took shape as a result of the evolution of consciousness very similar to the one that occurred in post-war Europe. That evolution started in the times of the Cold War, when a pacifistic canon was established for the purpose of preventing the horrors of the Second World War from recurring. "The modern European strategic culture represents a conscious rejection of the European past, a rejection of the evils of European *machtpolitik*," writes Robert Kagan in his "Power and Weakness". The European Union itself is the result of the horrible century of wars in Europe.

"Turning Europe into a global superpower capable of balancing the power of the United States may have been one of the original selling points of the European Union... But, in truth, the ambition for European 'power' is something of an anachronism," Kagan concludes. Europe is from "Venus", and the United States, the current military superpower, is from "Mars", he says.

The anti-war culture of the Europeans, which they brought from the Belarusian burnt villages, the Holocaust, and the bombed Dresden, is, maybe, the most solid basis of the common European space. It assumed its ultimate shape after the disappearance of the USSR. In Belarus, the last catalyst of such culture was the contrast between the European well-being and Russia's wars in the 1990s.

Even my generation, not to speak of the old people who witnessed the Stalin and Hitler occupations, lived in the 1990s with a feeling that things might take a bad turn. If the march of events had been a little bit different, if a couple of thousands more or less people had taken part in the Minsk violent demonstrations in 1996, if Yeltsin had exceeded his drinking limit by 20 grams, I might have found myself in the Caucasus, near Bamut, where my cousin Anton, a Russian citizen, currently performs his sacred duty serving with an Interior Troops special task force. There also could have been a different turn: the nationalist Zyanon Paznyak, incomprehensible to the East and the West, could have come to power, and Russia would now do with Belarus what it is doing with Chechnya. It is unclear which of these two scenarios would be worse for my personal skins. They both were realistic! Still it can be said, paraphrasing Eric Hobsbawm, history would not have cried over spilt milk.

### **Belarus is not Russia**

The Belarusians, as sociological surveys unambiguously suggest, reject wars in any form. The possibility of Belarusian troops being assigned to serve in Russia's hot spots has been unacceptable for millions of people while Belarusian-Russian integration has been underway.

Early capitalist Russia under Yeltsin was a big field of wonders where people were playing capitalism without rules. Putin's Russia has reached economic stability and tries to revive as a superpower with all ensuing — as it seems to many in Moscow — consequences, such as a controllable democracy and the reestablishment of Soviet-era symbols. These two so different Russias are united by the nightmare of the two Chechnya wars and terrorism that accompanies them. Russia does not possess such modern armed forces as the United States and the state of its economy excites pity, but by its mode of thinking, Russia, like America, is from Mars. As the two Chechnya wars show, warfare for Russia remains a continuation of politics by other means. "A culture of peace", a rejection of violence are foreign to Russian political thinking.

This difference between the world outlooks of the Belarusians and the Russians can only be explained by the difference in their historical experience.

Not dipping into remote history, I would like to note the difference in their historical memory of the Second World War. For Russia, the 1941–1945 war was another Patriotic War, the second one after the Kutuzov campaign. World War II required Russia to mobilize all internal resources and really put its all-out efforts into play, claiming millions of human lives. But after the war was over, it stuck in Russians' memory as a victorious war above all, as the greatest ever triumph of Russian arms. It hit thousands of square kilometres, but that was just a tenth of Russia's national territory.

For Belarus, the 1939–1945 war brought about a much greater tragedy, as it affected almost every family, split the nation into pro-Soviet patriots and pro-German collaborationists and drastically changed the ethnic composition of the population. Against the background of the global confrontation, it was accompanied by local mini-wars, such as the Belarusian-Polish one. In the Belarusians' recollection, the war is associated with Khatyn and Auschwitz. It connotes sufferings, not heroic deeds. Whereas for the Russians, Stalingrad means another Borodino, connoting the stoutness and exclusiveness of the Russian character. It does not look unlikely that there are some political figures in Russia who would like their country to win some more battles similar to the Stalingrad one, but I doubt that some nation may bring to the top of the government pyramid a person who wants a recurrence of Auschwitz. I will venture to affirm that it is the different historical memory of the Second World War that it is one of reasons the modes of thinking of the two nations differ despite the considerable degree of the language and cultural Russianization of the Belarusians. What Soviet ideologists wanted to become the cement that would bind the new historical community, the Soviet people, actually separates the Belarusians and the Russians at present.

Owing to the presence of a common information space, Belarusians can have an almost first-hand view of the Chechnya war. Speaking more precisely, it could be observed while there was relatively independent, or irresponsible, broadcasting media in Russia. People in eastern Europe, in Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania, are especially sensitive to the events in Chechnya because these events are taking place on the familiar territory to which they themselves belonged until not long ago. Some have even been to those areas. The Belarusians live in one cultural space with a 65-year-old retired woman in Khabarovsk who was raped and killed by a 22-year-old disabled veteran of the Chechnya war. The Belarusians were confronted by the same occurrences during the Second World War, when one brother pointed the finger at his brother and one neighbour killed his neighbour.

In the last two years or so, I have not seen Grozny's ruins on Russian TV channels. But this does not mean that a decrease has occurred in Belarusians' fear that they may find themselves in place of the Chechens or the Russian soldiers in Chechnya. The fear is present in the subconscious mind, being fueled by tales transmitted from generation to generation, by the family memory of the last war that Belarus went through.

There are little grounds for Russia to expect a rise in sympathies for it in eastern Europe unless an end is put to the Chechnya war. I do not know whether a steadfast rejection of any wars will eventually take shape in Russia as was the case in Europe after the Second World War. There have been no signs of that so far. Maybe this is like injecting a small dose of a virus which

only increases the immunity. Even my uncle, the father of the above-mentioned Anton, approves of that war. I have nothing to add here.

### **Love is fear**

The Belarusians want to find shelter and protection in Europe rather than see it as their natural homeland and goal. What do we want of Europe? We want Russia not to be there. For many advocates of the slogan, "Get Belarus into Europe!" it above all means "Get Farther Away from Russia!" Europe itself is not the main goal for them. Nonetheless, the Belarusians share one culture of peace with the Europeans. Warfare, dictatorship, arms race, the use of force in settling international conflicts are not acceptable things for the people of this culture. But this is by no means because we have lost what Lev Gumilyov in his quasiscientific theory called passionarity. We are from Venus, and not from Mars, as we have gone through the same ordeals and conceptualizations common for all Europeans: through Christianization by fire and sword, Hansa trade, Jewish competition, mob riots, the Renaissance rediscovery of man and roots of our culture, through the Reformation's upheavals and the Baroque's insolence, through the Enlightenment's rationalism and hardening by capitalism so that the hammer of the Second World War would eventually forge today's culture of peace and tolerance. In the central European love for Europe, there is really much fear of Russia, recollection of the offences of the past, and anxiety about the future. The Belarusians should not be reproached that they try to find in Europe asylum from danger, which many observers consider to be far-fetched. One should not link this tendency solely to Belarusians' inherent Russophobia. Here I will just repeat a thought of Yuras Andrukhovich about the Ukrainian-Russian relationship: it would be erroneous to reduce our feelings to this stereotype, to our younger brother complex.

No, we do not want Europe to take part of us, the part that Russian culture is. Anyway, it would not manage to do so, as this depends on our choice, not on Europe. The Belarusians, like other eastern Europeans, seek to run away not from Russia as it is, not from the culture of Saltykov-Shchedrin and Chaikovsky, they aim to run from Eurasian disorder, the cult of power, the right of strength, from all that developed and grew stronger when immense territories of Asia and Siberia were conquered, and what has not yet come to an end.

Our aspirations for integration into Europe are not guided only by fear. They are prompted by civilizational ties, our recollection of the former unity, which lasted from the Norman times to the Napoleon Bonaparte period. Integration is also suggested by economic pragmatism. Although the Belarusian realities still remain far away from the European ones.

### **Gateway to Belarus**

Minsk international airport, an air gateway to Belarus. It is unheated and has poorly lit corridors with a lot of narrow stairs and no elevators; its tattered doors reluctantly open just by half; its unhurried motor-trolleys carry suitcases eleven times slower than their counterparts in Frankfurt; its visa officers cannot accept euros from foreign guests: strict regulations tell them to charge visa applicants only in dollars. The airport's huge and empty halls, originally designed to welcome thousands of passengers per day, receive just several dozens. Its bus stop would welcome you with an impossibly red old Hungarian-made Ikarus — a material piece of gratitude to Soviet liberators

from the heirs of the 1956 events. And here you are: this is the centre of Europe.

The Ikarus starts off and leaves the airport yard with its suggestively sad billboard featuring a huge MAZ truck. Looking through the window, you would see nothing but numerous large areas covered with trees and bushes, as well as neat lawn-like fields and a straightly-running highway. Half an hour of those views — and you are in Minsk, the greenest capital on the European continent. Do not be afraid, this country will prove to be better than your first impressions.

### **A different world**

Brest is a railroad gateway to Belarus. Trains from Warsaw and Berlin to Minsk cross the Bug River at night — so that passengers can plunge into the bustling life of the capital city in the morning. After a short break at the Warsaw Side of the Brest Railroad Station, the train starts to roll back, in the direction of the border, and the passenger's bleary eyes (deprived of sleep by two customs and border checks) may see a mystic initiation ceremony. The train slowly moves into a seemingly endless hangar, powerful jacks lift the carriages, and invisible workers somewhere below, in the domain of Hephaestus, start making a lot of noise while taking out the train's heavy wheelpairs and driving in different ones. Travelers taking such a trip for the first time can think that wrinkled faces and crumpled uniforms of customs officers do not look that way usually, as the latter check any intelligent-looking passenger for illegal weapons, undeclared money, and even for printed matter and manuscripts. Incidentally, activists of the Belarusian democratic opposition try to get drunk every time they cross the border, which guarantees them against the humiliating procedure of personal checks: officers do not touch drunkards, they feel sorry for them. So, this is the beginning of a different Europe. After the wheel-change ceremony, any inquisitive traveler comes to understand one thing: he is now in a different world, a world that lives in accordance with its special laws. There are no "End of Europe" signs in Brest. There is no need for them, in fact. It is clear any way.

The first broad-gauge, non-European railroads were built in the nineteenth century in Belarus, when it was part of the Russian Empire. That was done primarily for defense purposes, to prevent enemies from using railroads for attacking Russia. The first railroads did not run through important cities. It was more important to locate them in a way to ensure fast transfer of troops from the centre of the Empire to its outskirts. That was how early capitalism emerged in Belarus in a somewhat distorted form. Incomplete and middle-of-the-road modernization came to Belarus from Europe but via Russia. Almost concurrently with the construction of railroads, the Western law (Lithuanian Statute) was abolished, the Western (Uniate, or Greek Catholic) religion was banned, and the Belarusian and Polish languages and cultures were stripped of their rights. That was when Belarus became a different Europe for the following 150 years. And it is since then that the train named Belarus rolls on the broad-gauge line and the question as to which civilization it belongs to remains a controversial issue.

### **East or West?**

Which civilization is Belarus part of? Since Belarusian nationalism is a natural contemporary of capitalist modernization and Russian cultural expansion over the territory of the former Grand Duchy of Litva, heated debate over this

question has been held ever since it rose. Lukashenko has his own theory: we are the centre of Eastern civilization, a fourth Rome or third Kiev, whatever you might call it. (Astana must be a fifth Rome then.)

There is no clear-cut, one-meaning answer to this question. Belarus is Catholic and Protestant by one fourth of its population and has years of Uniate traditions. And the Uniate philosophy is still deeply rooted in the country.

Dichotomy between two civilizations really exists in Belarus, but it reveals itself not so much in the presence of two major denominations (Catholic and Orthodox) or two languages (Belarusian and Russian) but in the coexistence of opposite political cultures, different philosophies of power. Post-Soviet conflicts, apart from religious or ideological ones, have clearly caused a clash between despotic and democratic concepts of power. Lukashenko, a despotic leader, was born in the easternmost part of Belarus, in the area noted for its unique black hares, and his career growth is linked with the eastern part of the country, too. Prominent pro-Western leaders, such as Paznyak and Domash, come from western areas, and even Hancharyk, a master of compromise, was born in the Lahoyisk area, at the borderline between east and west where Catholic churches were first built.

## A European dream

The practical task of making the country conformant to the standards of *acquis communautaire* will be a challenge for the after-Lukashenko generation of politicians, as they will not be overloaded with the cultural complexes of their predecessors. Preconditions are gradually emerging: Belarus is increasingly borrowing European experience, while its name is getting easily recognizable in the West. But that has not happened overnight. Belarus used to be a "nation from nowhere". Nevertheless, the Europeans have finally learned the name of the new country. That was easier for some of them and harder for others, both literally and figuratively.

Here is an anecdote in that respect. In 1992 the French were going to decide which gender the new word "Belarus" had to be assigned in accordance with the rules of the French language. The French Embassy in Minsk sent an enquiry to the French Academy. An official reply came in six months: masculine, it said.

A lot of people in the early 1990s believed Belarus was a geopolitical gaffe. However, political Europe has deserved the sincere respect of the Belarusian democratic movement because of the tactful attitude to Belarus' independence. Thanks to willing or unwilling efforts from both sides, Belarus' accession to the European Union no longer sound like just a bald rallying cry ("Belarus goes to Europe; Lukashenko goes to f\*\*\* himself!"). Instead, it is gradually becoming a realistic tomorrow of practical politics.

When will Belarus switch over to the narrow-gauge line? In the sense of railroad transportation, it may not happen earlier than railroads die out altogether. Lithuania, however, did build a narrow-gauge section from the Polish border to Vilnius — there is no wheel change there. But in the sense of acceding to European organizations, one can surely say that it can happen after Belarus makes a transition from authoritarianism to democracy. A common culture of peace is just a precondition for being fully included into the European continent's political and economic space. Apart from non-violence, the European Union is based on another fundamental value: respect for

property and ensuing respect for individual and communal political freedom. This value is not yet established in Belarus. National and political freedoms, unlike religious ones, are not yet taken for granted in the country. The Belarusians have not come to clearly understand that the country's leader has to be accountable to his people, just like the people have to be accountable to their leader. This consequence of totalitarianism, which, as Winston Churchill said, disallowed everything and made everything allowed compulsory, might be the strongest difference between Belarus and "one hundred per cent" European countries.

Nevertheless, the value of political freedom is permeating into the country through the barbed wire of the border infrastructure thanks to the freedom of movement, which *is* taken for granted in Belarus. Unlike the country's president, who said shortly before the election in 2001, which gave him the second term, "This is my country! I was born here, I was raised here and I will die here, no matter what it takes," thousands of young Belarusians do not think in that way. They pick up berries in Norway, build houses in Poland, make software for German railroads, sell second-hand cars from the Netherlands, and even, unfortunately, extend their business interests to the US pornography market. Freedom of movement brings cultures closer. However, the movement goes mostly in one direction. It is difficult to imagine now that some time in the future people will migrate not only from Belarus to Germany but also the other way round, like it was 500 years ago. Migration is also a way of generating respect for the value of political freedom. Democracy can take roots in just a few years, as the experience of Spain and Portugal shows.

A sequence of shocks and disturbances that the Belarusians suffered in the 1990s are comparable, in terms of their severity, to what happened to the Germans after World War I. Paraphrasing Mailer's genesis of Hitlerism, one can say that the inflation that came together with the post-Soviet economic crisis destroyed the basic Belarusian idea of a person's life. This simple idea boils down to one sentence: if a person works hard and saves money, he or she is guaranteed a comfortable life after retirement. Lukashenko might have never come to power, if it were not for galloping inflation and Chernobyl. But the wounds of the 1990s are gradually being forgotten. You may now live in a world without an impressive narration of social progress and without an ambitious political project for social justice, because such ideas and such projects have long been discredited by communist experiments, but just like European intellectual rationalists of the Enlightenment Age, you believe that a perfect world cannot embrace the whole planet but can exist within the boundaries of the common Europe, a continent without wars, without violence, without discrimination but with a place for your nation and for you.

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