

Research Report IREX STG

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The topic of my research is "Belarus: A Case of Blurred Identity." That ethnic identity of Belarusians is indeed blurred had been revealed during my previous visits to the republic and can also be inferred from relevant publications. The goal of my research trip in May-June 2002 was to flesh out this preliminary conclusion and to reflect on its consequences for US policy makers.

During my trip to Belarus I managed to accomplish the following. **First**, I established a good working contact with two local consultants, Isaac Khasdan and Yelena Maslenkova. **Second**, I conducted a pilot survey of 62 secondary school teachers in Minsk, Grodno, and Vitebsk on the basis of the questionnaire that I compiled before going to Belarus. **Third**, I discussed the possibility of conducting a sociological survey of approximately 2000 respondents with the cooperation with the Minsk-based Independent Institute of Social and Economic Research; should funding be provided, this research will be quite feasible (its cost will not exceed \$5000). The results of my pilot survey will provide me with guidance for the improvement of the questionnaire. **Fourth**, I contacted and interviewed seven personalities, who either played an important role in the Belarusian national movement or did advanced research on issues related to it. These included Dr. Stanislaw Shushkiewich, the first leader of Belarus; Uladzimir Arlou, one of the most prolific authors writing in Belarusian; Aleh Trusau, the Chairman of the Belarusian Language Association and former member of the Supreme Soviet; Dr. Vadim Glinnik, architect (ICAMOS); Dr. Andrei Yekadumov, philosopher (Belarusian State University); Dr. Emmanuil Ioffe (Belarusian Pedagogical University); and Irina Khalip, journalist (Beloruskaya Delovaya Gazeta). These people were interviewed on the basis of a separate questionnaire, which aimed at a more sophisticated reflection over the issues of Belarusian identity as compared with the above-mentioned pilot survey. Currently I am processing the results of the pilot survey and the interviews. **Finally**, I conducted many informal discussions with local residents about the political and socio-economic situation in Belarus.

A fragment of survey results: out of **62** secondary school teachers surveyed, just 3 speak only Belarusian at home, while 37 speak only Russian. Only 2 respondents said that Belarusian can become the language of mass communication in Belarus fairly soon, while 27 said that this is hardly possible at all; 29 respondents out of 62 (46.7%) do not want to send their own kids to a school with Belarusian as the language of instruction. As to what prevents Belarusian from becoming the language of mass communication, the highest number of respondents (34 or 54.9%) pointed to "irreversible consequences of forcible Russification," while the second largest group (30 or 48.4%) referred to "the lack of desire of the people themselves." In the latter case multiple answers were allowed. A preliminary impression from the seven personal interviews is that there doesn't seem to be a consolidated national elite that would be in favor of "Belarusization" and democratization at the same time. There seem to be no unity on crucial societal issues even among the narrow circle of Belarusian speakers. The latter are also torn apart by bickering about the standard language (should it abide by the norms canonized by Bronislaw Taraskiewicz in 1918 or by the norms introduced by the 1933 reform?)

Some preliminary conclusions boil down to the following: Today Belarus is no less part of the Russian language information space than under the Soviets. Even street names in Minsk reveal this. There are still such weird-sounding names as Prospekt Gazety Izvestia (Newspaper Izvestia Avenue) and Prospekt Gazety Pravda (Newspaper Pravda Avenue). And the US Embassy happens to be located at the corner of Starovilenskaya (Old Wilno) and Kommunisticheskaya (Communist) Streets.

In Belarus, a critical mass of people who would be keenly aware of their differences/alienation from ethnic Russians is absent. At the grassroots level the only real obstacle to the unification with Russia is the reluctance to commit Belarusian draftees to various hot spots on the post-Soviet space with active Russian engagements, especially to Chechnya. There are no culture- or identity-related obstacles to the re-unification.

The current Belarusian political regime by and large reflects local political culture. The regime is authoritarian but far from totalitarian, as movement across all Belarusian borders is not restricted from within and the political opposition undoubtedly has outlets for self-expression. For example, *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, an independent daily, subjecting president Lukashenko of Belarus personally and his policies to scathing criticism on a daily basis, is widely available in Minsk and regional centers. Also, the Polish minority has its independent media and schooling, while the Polish language continues to be practiced in Catholic churches in Western Belarus. While there are signs of a decrease in the president's popularity, there is no sign of any opposition leader whatsoever who could possibly sway the electorate away from Lukashenka. Local sociologists believe that although the results of the September 9, 2001 presidential elections were falsified, this was done out of a desire to play it safe; however, even without falsification Lukashenka would have captured at least 57% of the vote. It looks like political apathy reigns supreme in Belarus and everyday chores, like making ends meet and/or getting extra money through shuttle trading with Poland, etc. have consigned political goals and aspirations to the back burner for most Belarusians.

It would be advisable to concentrate future research on economic ties of Belarus. Its economic gravitation to Russia, while definitely the most salient feature, is not the only one. According to some Russian researchers, Belarus is more deeply involved in the international division of labor with Europe than any other CIS country (Muzlova 2001).

Recommendations for the US Policy Community are not easy to come up with based solely on my research focused on ethnic identity. Yet because this topic by its very nature overlaps with many other issues (e.g., democratization, foreign relations, geopolitics, etc.), one thing can't help but come to mind. It seems to me that in the light of the overt and presumed geopolitical goals of the US, further ostracizing the Lukashenka regime is counter-productive. Not unlike that of Slovakia's Meciar, this regime's policies are rooted in provincialism and immature statesmanship more than in anything else, like a carefully crafted anti-Western strategy. Much delayed urbanization of Belarus and blurred ethnic identity are crucial underlying features that explain the nature of the regime. If the goal of the US policy is to prevent Belarus from being reunited with Russia, then however paradoxical it may sound, Lukashenka's regime is the only hope. With no mature cultural preconditions of Belarusian statehood only the existing political regime has vested interests in retaining more than just the trappings of independence. The most recent (June 2002) incidence of a tiff between Lukashenka and Putin seems to prove this. Lukashenka was quite emphatic about his reluctance to join

the Russian Federation as its 90s' "subject". By issuing his statement Lukashenka positioned himself as a much more effective defender of Belarusian statehood than the entire nationalist opposition simply because the latter has no clout. Also, demonizing Lukashenka's personality because of his antics doesn't seem to make sense anymore. He is no Saddam Hussein by any stretch of imagination and may in fact be interested in strengthening ties with the West right now.

At the end of May, I came across one curious side effect of the exceedingly obsolete US policy toward Lukashenka. Because the Belarusian equivalent of the word "embassy" is rendered differently on the plaques of the two nearby embassies, that of the USA and that of Ukraine («амбасада» and «пасольства» respectively), I wanted to take a picture of both plaques. This would have helped me to make a point that standard Belarusian has two versions, Tarashkevitsa (hence «амбасада») and Narkomovka (hence «пасольства»). Little did I know that photographing embassies is prohibited by some "Vienna convention," a point made by a Belarusian hillbilly policeman on guard near the US Embassy. Together with the US embassy guard (!) this policeman confiscated my film. I later received it back by mail from the embassy and bear no grudge, but the whole incident was comical and bizarre, as the reason for confiscation given to me by an anonymous security officer of the US Embassy over the phone, was their "special security situation" in Minsk. To me, incidents like this suggest some conscious efforts to create a semblance of tension where no real preconditions for it exist. (It may be that somebody benefits from this personally.) Of course, no one would ever ban a pedestrian from taking a picture of the US embassy, say, in Moscow where political life is so much more colorful and footloose than in Minsk and therefore security threats cannot be excluded. Anybody who has intimate knowledge of Belarus and Minsk would suggest that if there is any place on earth where a US Embassy is more safe and secure than anywhere else, it is probably the capital of Belarus. Local police and KGB are vigilant and stand guard around the clock and anti-American sentiment is absent at the grassroots level. A recommendation for the US Policy Community? Just relax so you can release energy and personnel in order to concentrate on places wherein threats to American national interests are quite real.