

## Meeting With the Opposition in Belarus

Written by David R. Marples

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# Meeting With the Opposition in Belarus

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 23 2020

**This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.**

Since Aliaksandr Lukashenka became Belarus' first and probably last president, those who disagree with his policies and have the effrontery to suggest that perhaps the country might like a new president after a quarter of a century are known as the 'oppozitsiia'. The term itself, when phrased by Lukashenka, sound like an obscenity, a motley group that is there to cause problems, undermine society, act as a fifth column for the West, takes western funds and competes for them with each other, and is generally a nuisance. Those who dig somewhat deeper would soon uncover something very obvious. There is no opposition, at least in terms of a unified movement with a common goal. Moreover, even the emergence of a new generation has not changed this dictum. It either follows the footsteps of its predecessor or else supports more radical actions. But it fares no better. It cannot get around the combination of political apathy, ingrained obedience to authority, and a fear of change. In addition, there is also fear itself.

I learned of this firsthand when giving a lecture in 1998 at the Belarus Economic University. It was a talk that was quite critical of the Belarusian government, which had become highly authoritarian. I had decided as a visitor to be as open as possible, not permitting myself to be limited to the niceties of decorum. I was free to do so. Still, I was taken aback by the size of the audience, some 200 students. And they looked like students anywhere, mostly clad in jeans and unkempt. There was one exception, a tall youth who was dressed in a blue suit, shirt, and tie, with a fierce expression on his face.

When scanning the room while speaking, I often caught his eye. The expression on his face never changed and it seemed obvious that he was either from the Union of Patriotic Youth or had been sent there by the KGB to report on my talk. I did not moderate my talk but by the end I had become increasingly wary and uncertain. There were dozens of questions, many asking how to emigrate to the West or about Western life in general. Some thought that Belarus and Canada were similar countries. Most seemed quite disillusioned with life in Belarus, disappointed that the fall of the Soviet Union had not brought a better life.

At last the suited student raised his hand. "Here it comes," I thought, "the admonishment from on high." He rose to his feet and cleared his throat, "I think," he began, "that we are all doomed." My suspicions instantly dissipated. He proceeded to lash out at the backward policies of the government and failure to reform the economy. The incident illustrated to me, a foreigner, that suspicion and fear in public situations still existed as it had in Soviet times. I was more than a little relieved. But my fear was still well grounded because other manifestations of the old Soviet system were still apparent, such as the monitoring of phone calls, and careful monitoring of foreigners, especially those who associated with opposition figures or took part in demonstrations. At a similar talk I gave at the European Humanities University in Minsk, some professors had walked out.

In 1992, I had attended a meeting with Stanislav Shushkevich in the parliament building in Independence Square, along with, among others, Ivonka Survilla, who is head of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic, one of the oldest surviving governments in-exile. At that time, Shushkevich was the leading statesman of Belarus as the Chairman of the Parliament. It was under his leadership that Belarus declared independence on August 25, 1991, and renamed itself from the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) to the Republic of Belarus. He was aged 57

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at this time, a bustling little man, a renowned physicist who had moved into politics. No sooner had he greeted us than Ms. Survilla stopped him with a phrase I had last heard in Kyiv: "Esteemed Stanislav Stanislavovich, have you forgotten your native language?" Shushkevich looked startled, but switched instantly from Russian to Belarusian, a language in which he was comfortable but clearly less so than in Russian.

Shushkevich is linked with the first years of independence, which Lukashenka likes to paint as years of disaster and corruption, a time when many former Soviet states made the mistake of trying to emulate the West and introducing shock therapy and market reforms, which ended – in Russia at least – with economic collapse. His time in high office was brief, and he was removed, as noted, on trumped up charges early in 1994, then placed fourth in the ensuing presidential election campaign with just over 10% of the vote. At that time over 1.4 million residents voted for the opposition candidates, Shushkevich and leader of the Belarusian Popular Front Zianon Pazniak, perhaps the only accurate reflection of the popularity of the opposition in post-independence Belarus. Thus about 25% of the country voted for them at a time when establishment figures like Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich and the leader of the parliamentary commission on corruption, Lukashenka, were leading the race.

Shushkevich has recently written his memoirs, which should soon appear in English translation. As much as any single individual other than Gorbachev, he carries responsibility for ending the Soviet Union. I had a second interview with him in October 1996, once again in his office in the parliament building, this time as a member of the opposition. He explained at that time how he served as the intermediary between the leaders of Russia and Ukraine, both of whom he brought to the Belavezha forest hunting lodge, where former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev used to hunt wild boar. It was the first time, he noted, when leaders of Russia and Ukraine recognized the independence of Belarus, albeit for negative reasons. Kravchuk could not have met with Yeltsin alone and anticipated Russian recognition of the independence of Ukraine. Yeltsin was anxious mainly to hold a meeting without the presence of Gorbachev, who would have whined about a revised Union agreement. The result was the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, an agreement of dubious legality, creating a meaningless entity soon forgotten, but nonetheless signing the death warrant of the crumbling Soviet state.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the various links between its component states ended. Belarus had been a center for machine building and refineries. Almost overnight its secure ties with Russia in particular became uncertain. Moreover, there was considerable nostalgia for the Soviet state, linked in part to memories of the wartime victory and the legends engendered in the Brezhnev period about the heroics of partisans and underground resistance. The new state seemed alien to many, and the new state language introduced in 1990 – Belarusian – utterly foreign. As the country entered a period of economic uncertainty, it was Shushkevich who became the principal target of the critics in parliament. He had few supporters, unlike Pazniak, who had the backing of the Popular Front.

Pazniak was the most popular figure among Belarusians in the diaspora, but in his own country his brand of fiery ethnic nationalism was considered extreme by some. A tall ascetic looking man, he was 50 years of age when he ran for president in 1994. Already he had achieved much. In addition to being a co-founder of the Front 'Revival' movement, he had rediscovered the mass graves at Kurapaty and published a famous article in the literary newspaper (Literature and Art) with Jauhien Smyhalou entitled 'Kurapaty – The Road of Death'. The article, which claimed that up to 100,000 corpses were buried in mass graves in this suburb of Minsk, caused a sensation. The article reported the following:

On the hills there stood an old stand of conifers, surrounded by broadleaf trees and thickets. Some 10 – 15 hectares of the coniferous stand had been surrounded by a fence, more than 3 meters high, made of closely fitting, overlapping, wooden planks, with barbed wire on top. Outside the fence were guards and dogs. The people were brought there along the gravel road which ran from the Lahoj highway to Zaslauje. They used to call it the "Road of Death."

Questioning the people of Zialony Luh and neighboring villages – Cna-Jodkava and Drazdova – observers and witnesses of these terrible events – helped us to establish not only the facts, but even to plot the scenes of the mass murders. But in the 1970s, to go public, to tell everyone about this, was impossible.

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In 1987-1988, we located several former inhabitants of Zialony Luh, which by now had been demolished, and once again we questioned old people and witnesses of the events in neighboring villages, we elucidated circumstances and details, and recorded the answers.

The shootings began here in 1937. At first, three times a day – at dawn, at 2.00 p.m. and in the evening, at dusk. They brought a few truck-loads of people into the forest and shot them. They threw down the corpses, as ordered, into deep pits which had been dug there, layer upon layer. When they had shot enough to fill the pits right up, they put a layer of sand, not more than 20-25 cm thick, on top of it. Sometimes they planted pine saplings on top.

In the second half of 1937, they enclosed the site. They began to carry out the killings according to a different timetable: after lunch, in the late afternoon, and all through the night. The transports went on rolling up, every day, without a break on Sundays. “They used to shoot every day,” – says Kaciaryna Mikalajeuna Bahajcuk (born 1919), a resident of Cna-Jodkava, – “and the trucks went on roaring. Sometimes, in the evenings, when the men came home, they would go out into the yard and listen to the shooting; they would talk about it quietly, grieve together, and disperse.”

Having exposed such a crime, one might have expected an uproar, and indeed in Belarus there were public marches to the Kurapaty site and demands for further investigations. The Belarusian Popular Front made the massacres an integral part of its program of national revival. Yet, it was not possible, in the Belarus of the late 1980s to mid-1990s to delve deeply into a Stalinist crime of 1937-1941. The links between the modern state and the Soviet one had never been thoroughly severed. The Commission set up to investigate the crime, to which Pazniak was added, composed mostly of former party leaders, military leaders, and public figures. Very few of them were interested in ascertaining the truth. Pazniak felt himself hounded once Lukashenka came into power and within two years had fled into exile, where he has remained, mostly in Warsaw, though he has refugee status in the United States. Unlike many others who followed similar paths, he has never returned.

Without Pazniak there was no obvious leader of the opposition within Belarus itself. Moreover, there had been a natural tendency in the late 1990s to form political parties, which then subdivided into smaller groups. The Social Democrats are a classical example since most Belarusians, if they express political views at all, fall somewhere within the confines of socialist democracy. Lukashenka, according to a story once told to me by Grushevoy, was on the margins of this group in 1990, desperately seeking support to run as Vice Chairman of the Parliament, but was not taken very seriously. By the mid-1990s there were three separate branches of the Social Democratic Party.

In the late 1990s, divisions between the president and the parliament widened. According to the Constitution, elections had to be held every five years. But in 1996, after the president amended the Constitution, he also altered this term to date from the time of the referendum, meaning that he had an additional two years before he needed to call an election. The opposition did not recognize these constitutional changes and the confrontation became serious. Many former allies of Lukashenka now began to oppose him. The question, then as now, was how to unite the opposition, but within these groups there was very little impetus to follow one leader. The opposition included not only people in the Popular Front – who could be termed ethnic nationalists – but also the Communists on the left with their long-time leader Siarhei Kaliakin. There did not appear to be much hope of making a common cause between all these groups, all of which were fairly small and struggling to gain influence among the general population, which tended to regard all politicians with intense suspicion.

In this period, an important role was played by an office that is today virtually defunct, the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group. It had an office in the IBB hotel southwest of the city that was designed by a German architect. Its head was a seasoned German diplomat called Hans-Georg Wieck, who was a former German ambassador to the USSR. White haired and slim, and quite short in stature, Wieck was a determined and energetic emissary who took his duties very seriously. I met him on several occasions and gradually we became quite friendly. He perceived as one of his goals the uniting of the opposition on the grounds not that Lukashenka needed to be overthrown, but that a strong opposition was healthy for democratic development.

In this way I began to take part in activities involving the opposition. In truth, I was more inclined to socialize and

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associate with them than any government figures, had that even been possible. Staff members at the US Embassy were also involved in such projects, including the then ambassador Daniel Speckhard, and especially his wife, Anne Speckhard, who took up the mantle with great enthusiasm. Daniel had the title of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary and took up office in August 1997, i.e. just after the controversial referendum and prior to the troubled period of 1999-2000, in which he was to play a subsidiary role. As there was no Canadian Embassy in Minsk – the closest one was in Warsaw – I frequently met with the Speckhards and found them to be excellent hosts and friends.

One evening I was invited over for dinner to their home in the suburb of Drazdy with a Belarusian friend and they described how their house had been subject to sudden power cuts and gas shortages. The president's residence at that time was nearby and regularly they would see Lukashenka jogging around the neighborhood. Evidently, he resented such proximity and later he forced all the foreign diplomats to leave the Drazdy complex by cutting off heat and water and closing off roads. The moves affected the ambassadors of most EU countries as well as the United States, but not the Russian Federation because the Russians owned the house in which their ambassador was residing. Subsequently, Speckhard and the EU ambassadors departed from Minsk in protest. The Europeans returned after a suitable period but Speckhard did not.

Meanwhile Wieck soldiered on, despite his critics, and organized a conference on possible liaisons between the Belarusian government and the opposition, as well as democratic reforms. I was invited to attend and for the first time was whisked through the International Airport into the VIP lounge and then a waiting vehicle. We then labored for several days on various facets of Belarusian political and economic life, with reports presented and then discussed in groups of around ten people. One conclusion was that Belarus was in a strong position for economic reform with a well-educated population, relatively few debts – at least compared to a country like Ukraine – and had remained relatively free of the corruption that had overrun its neighbors to the east and south. The idea of common goals was attractive to many, but unsurprisingly not the ruling authorities headed by the president. Before long, Wieck was presented in vicious fashion on the television program *Panorama* in the form of a Western agent trying to undermine the Belarusian leadership.

In 1999-2000, I visited Belarus several times, and tensions escalated between the president and a now much broader opposition that included some of his former close associates, such as Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Viktor Hanchar, who had been his campaign manager in the 1994 presidential elections. On May 7, 1999, Yuri Zakharenka, who had been the Minister of Interior before being replaced in 1995, was abducted in Minsk and, as reported subsequently by a former member of the ministry who fled to Germany, he was killed on the orders of the president. One of the killers, in exile, later described the murder in lurid detail.

Later in the same month, the Minsk authorities sanctioned an open-air concert in the Niamiha area. I was driven by earlier in the day by Yulia Shymko, whom I had met through the Irish Chernobyl Children's group, and crowds were starting to gather. Alcohol was being served even though the ages of those assembled appeared to be in the early teens and sometimes younger. Later I noted how quickly the skies had darkened and presently a massive thunderstorm ensued. The storm brought about one of the darkest tragedies in modern-day Belarus. As the youngsters fled into the Niamiha metro station, a train arrived carrying passengers who were heading up the escalators. The ensuing crush brought about the deaths of at least 53 people – the official total – and probably many more, all young teenagers. Today a carving of flowers at the entrance to the station captures something of the horror of the event. But the Minsk authorities managed to evade blame for an unspeakable human tragedy that even today resonates among many residents.

In August 1999, the Supreme Soviet originally elected in 1990 declared that Lukashenka's term as president had ended and appointed Syamyon Sharetski, chairman of the parliament, as acting president pending new elections. By this time Sharetski had moved to Lithuania. On September 16, Hanchar, who was now in theory the leading official residing in the country, was abducted in Minsk, along with his friend, the businessman Anatol Krasouski. Neither man has ever been seen again and they are presumed murdered on the orders of Lukashenka, most likely by the security forces. The disappearances represented the culmination point of the tyranny in Lukashenka's Belarus, though by no means the end of it.

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The presidential elections were now scheduled for 2001, the fifth anniversary of the controversial amendments to the Constitution, which incidentally were to be followed in 2004 by another referendum allowing Lukashenka to run for office beyond the officially guaranteed two terms. In 2000, I again visited the office of Ambassador Wieck, who had shrugged off the abusive depictions of him on official TV, and had become decidedly disillusioned with the Lukashenka presidency. He informed me, logically, that the best option was a unified opposition candidate who had some clear connections to the industrial workforce. The choice was the Chairman of the Trade Unions of Belarus, Uladzimir Hancharyk, a 59-year old politician from Lahoisk. The choice astutely sidestepped the leaders of the numerous political parties who were constantly reviled in the official media. The other popular choice, Semion Domash (born 1950), a former mayor of the city of Hrodna, quickly withdrew to allow the opposition to unite.

The outcome, unsurprisingly, was another victory for Lukashenka, one carefully engineered by the authorities in the first of several elections that went largely unrecognized in the democratic world. Nevertheless, Hancharyk, who lacked public speaking skills and appeared uncomfortable in the role of presidential candidate, garnered almost 1 million votes according to official totals, and he was leading the polls in the city of Minsk just prior to the vote. It turned out to be Wieck's last stand because his accreditation was not renewed for another term and the powers of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group were greatly reduced on the orders of the angry president.

Anyone trying to make sense of opposition politics in Belarus runs up against the problem of the plethora of parties, official and unregistered, and rivalry between the various leaders. Analyst Grigory Ioffe, who could reasonably be presented as an admirer of Lukashenka, and even a friend, frequently dismisses the opposition as a group of greedy individuals fighting with each other for handouts from Western agencies supporting democracy. The viewpoint overlooks the conditions in which they operate and dismisses the incredible fortitude with which they continue to work in an atmosphere of either constant harassment or outright repression. On the other hand, they do suffer from longevity in their positions (the Popular Front being a notable exception).

My acquaintance with the opposition is not as close as that of French scholar Alexandra Goujon, who once gave me an account of a very entertaining train journey in their company. Gradually, however, I have either made the acquaintance or come to know well most of those who comprise the opposition, sometimes in the most unlikely of circumstances. I have already described the two meetings with Shushkevich, whom I did not encounter again at close quarters other than the fact that we once travelled on the Minsk-Vienna flight together. Others I met during my early years in Belarus were Vladimir Glod, a brilliant journalist with Belapan, and Oleh Manaev, the sociologist who founded the polling agency National Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research. Strictly speaking Manaev is not a member of the opposition, he is an academic, as was illustrated by an incident in Bratislava over a decade ago. He is also now in exile in the United States, following attacks on his company by the authorities that made it impossible for it to continue population research.

In the summer of 2004, I was invited by the Latvian Foreign Ministry to attend a meeting in Riga, devoted to the question of democracy in the former Soviet space. Many figures from the Belarusian opposition were in attendance, including Mikalai Statkevich, General Valery Fralou, Andrei Sannikau, Anatol Liabedzka, Oleh Manaev, and Uladzimir Padhol. Senator John McCain was making a keynote speech, and there were delegates from the United States representing the International Republican Institute, including Lindsey Graham, Susan Collins, and John Sununu, as well as Latvian officials, and at least two representing the Lukashenka government. The Americans had been refused visas to enter Belarus. Thus, it was one of the few occasions of open discussion between members of the government and opposition.

McCain's speech was predictable. He denounced Lukashenka as a tyrant who should be removed from power as well as for arresting and detaining opposition activists. Lukashenka had introduced a climate, in his words, "of fear, repression, and arbitrary rule." After the main speeches, some panels had been arranged, and one featuring members of the opposition was to have been chaired by Vladimir Socor, my former colleague from RFE/RL and the Salzburg Seminar. Socor unexpectedly asked to be absolved from that duty, since I was present and, he insisted, a much stronger specialist on Belarus. It was a kind gesture but placed me in the unprecedented position of moderating a panel of the main opposition leaders before an international audience, at least one of which was relaying the proceedings back to the Belarusian KGB. My involvement with groups seeking an end to the

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Lukashenka regime was in fact only beginning.

I had attended a workshop in Slovakia in 2006, organized by the German Marshall Fund of the United States' office there, led by former Foreign Minister Pavol Demes. The gathering preceded the next presidential election when once again there were attempts to unite the opposition around a single candidate, in this case a Hrodna professor named Aliaksandar Milinkievič. Manaev was presenting the results of his latest surveys and all should have been well. There were no invited representatives from the Belarusian government; rather a coterie of opposition activists, leaders of democratic initiatives, diplomats, and the odd scholar (me) were in attendance.

Nevertheless, when it came to question time, the chief interrogator was Andrei Sannikau, leader of the European Belarus movement (and later a presidential candidate in 2010). He berated Manaev for his presentation, saying his statistics were "unhelpful" and only of benefit to the government. Visibly flustered, Manaev responded that he was a scientist, and his figures were based on research, not politics. Sannikau was unfazed by the comment, and maintained that the polls only benefited the government, which controlled the conditions in which they were undertaken. The following day Sannikau, Manaev, and I were members of a panel at the Foreign Ministry of Slovakia. The two were no longer on speaking terms. On the way back to the hotel, I had to walk in the middle so that they did not have to communicate with each other, and I heard later that they had taken separate trains home, such was their mutual hostility. It was unfortunately a typical example of how easily rifts could develop between the various opposition leaders.

Pavol Demes arranged several meetings to discuss Belarus, involving internal players and public activists, with a few scholars added to the mix. The GMF was funding a number of newspapers and journals within Belarus, as well as some informal groups such as environmental associations. In 2006, Pavol, Joerg Forbrig (who heads the Berlin office of GMF), and myself published an edited book on *Prospects for Democracy in Belarus*, which came out just weeks before the 2006 elections, during which Joerg joined oppositionists in the tent protest on October Square following the announcement of results with Lukashenka again returned to office. The authorities broke up the camp several days later.

Minsk in the late 1990s had been a rare place to find foreign scholars. The only one I saw there regularly was Rainer Lindner, who organized the German-sponsored Minsk Forum, which eventually prompted the participation of the Belarusian government, mainly through Foreign Minister, Uladzimir Makei. But in the late 1990s there was a sudden wave of activity in the West, spurred by the dramatic events in Belarus. Conferences followed at Harvard University, and the University of Bath in the UK, both of which published many of the papers presented in book form. Still, the number of Western scholars, born outside Belarus, was relatively meagre: Jim Dingley (UK), Astrid Sahm (Germany), the already mentioned Alexandra Goujon (France), Andrew Wilson (UK), Grigory Ioffe (US), and Stephen White (UK) were the most prominent names.

My main contact among the opposition was with political scientist Podgol, an imposing bald man of casual appearance and frenetic energy. He was and remains the essence of a political animal, though there are many sides to him. A political analyst for the Belarusian Popular Front, he is the author of many articles, books, and especially ventures into Belarusian folklore. He is perhaps best known for his popular book series of quotes from the president, which has appeared in multiple editions, published by a firm in St. Petersburg.

Podgol can walk into a room and start a discussion almost instantly, setting aside any niceties or introductions. He knows well every Western ambassador in Minsk and has met most of them personally at their homes. In this same period of the late 1990s, he invited me one afternoon to the residence of the German ambassador to Belarus, Horst Winkelmann, who had coordinated the departure of European ambassadors from Drazdy after their water supplies had been cut off. He now lived in a pleasant house in the west of the city and had prepared an outdoor meal for his two guests. He was a polite and formal diplomat, extremely courteous, and very interested in politics.

Podgol surveyed the food table like a lion looking over a delectable antelope. There were plates filled to the brim with ham, and it was clear that he did not quite comprehend how to undertake the process of transferal from plate to mouth. Eventually he spread out his enormous hand over both sides of the plate, enclosed the entire ham in it and

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consumed it in a single mouthful. Winkelman observed the phenomenon but appeared completely unmoved. Podgol then drank the entire bottle of red wine on one side of the table and started into the white on the other. All the time the discussion focused on the political situation and how to resolve the current impasse.

On another occasion, Podgol and I took a bus from the western part of Minsk into the center. It was so crowded that we were standing on the steps of the central exit door. Podgol suddenly bellowed:

“Lukashenka says this bus has to go to the terminal without stopping!”

The entire bus went silent for about two minutes. Then there was some worried whispering.

The woman next to us remarked:

“Lukashenka is a relative of mine.”

We were interested and encouraged her to continue:

“Yes, he is Aleksandr Gregorovich and I am Ludmila Gregorievna.”

On Saturdays, leaders of the opposition and some friends would play soccer in the Park Chaliukintsau on a red clay surface with proper goal nets. The pitch was small and the game played with passion and energy. The rivalry there matched anything in the political arena and took place in the growing heat of mid-day. I noted that the shirtless center forward on the opposite team to mine was always close to goal, in a position that would be offside in a regular game with a referee. Nevertheless, without fail, he missed every chance to score. His name was Anatol Liabedzka, and he was the leader of the United Civil Party, who took over the party leadership around the same time the current leader, Hienadz Karpenka, had a sudden cerebral hemorrhage in March 1999, yet another death that the opposition attributes to foul play. Liabedzka has been arrested so many times for various offenses that he has likely lost count of the number.

The aforementioned Sannikau and I got off to an unfortunate start because of an article I had co-authored with Podgol – and largely written by him, as I served mainly as a translator – that was critical of some of his activities, even implying that he worked for the KGB. But I met him personally at the conference held by the Latvian Foreign Ministry in Riga, and subsequently at many gatherings in Europe, including the one in Bratislava and was able to smooth relations. Sannikau is linked with Charter-97, perhaps the most outspoken media outlet in terms of criticisms of the Lukashenka presidency. He was formerly a Deputy Foreign Minister, a brooding, quiet-spoken man in his 60s married to a well-known journalist, Iryna Khalip, and with two sons. In some respects, he is a protégé of Shushkevich, and the two formed a close alliance in the 2010 presidential election, which proved to be yet another time of crisis in Belarus.

In the 1990s, I published two books on Belarus. The first was a general history that incorporated the impact of Chernobyl as explained by the title: *Belarus: From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Castastrophe*. It was my fifth and final book published by the Macmillan Press and its partners, with the Canadian edition in this instance taken up by the University of Alberta Press. The second book was part of a series that appeared under the imprint of Harwood Academic Publishers, based in Amsterdam. The editor of the series imposed a strict word limit, which meant that a final chapter I had prepared on relations with Russia had to be omitted. The title – *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* – originally ended with a question mark, making it more emphatic than I had intended. Though smaller than its predecessor in size, its focus on contemporary politics rendered it more accessible to many agencies in Belarus, and it was used by foreign embassies as a primer for those starting a sojourn in Minsk. This was a lesson for me, namely that the future of one's books – or articles – can never be determined in advance. I became known throughout Belarus through this one book even though I had never imagined it as a text that would have much influence.

Through Yulia Shymko's father, Aleksandr, a professor in Minsk, I was able to gain access to the National Archives of Belarus, which enhanced my knowledge of the interwar period in particular. The documents I found were not

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categorized in any meaningful way, but obtained largely by chance from the general subject area of “reunification of Belarusian lands in September 1939,” but they were very frank about the continuing purges, especially of the Ministry of Education in what was then termed “western Belorussia.” Though my stay was limited by having to return to teaching duties in Canada, Yulia made further visits and photocopied numerous documents for me. The service there was hardly amicable. Every time I wanted to copy a document I was asked for a written explanation and the process was laborious. The KGB Archives, which would have been equally valuable, had been closed in 1994 when Lukashenka took office. There were firm limits to what one could study in Belarus.

Still, one could talk to people. Two of the notable interviews Yulia and I conducted in the late 1990s were with Svetlana Alexievich, the mercurial writer, and passionate critic of the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster; and, perhaps by contrast, Natalia Masherova, daughter of Piotr, former party leader of Soviet Belorussia in the period 1965-1980. Alexievich had not yet acquired the fame that arrived with her Nobel Prize in Literature (2015), but was a fierce and unabashed critic of Lukashenka. She talked virtually nonstop for about two hours and at such a speed that it was impossible to keep pace – we used a tape recorder.

Masherova was a popular candidate in the 2001 presidential election, but had dropped out suddenly, accused by Lukashenka of “stabbing him in the back.” Lukashenka sometimes made the analogy between himself and Masherou, both populists who led the republic for long periods. Masherou had been killed in car crash in 1980, which some attributed to a political murder conducted by more faithful followers of the Brezhnev leadership. Masherou, a devout Communist, had distanced himself from the corruption in the Moscow hierarchy. Natalia told us, frankly, that she had feared for her life and opted to withdraw.

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### About the author:

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