

# Four corporations of Belarusian elite

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It is almost impossible to identify 'the elite' and the degree of its influence on society. Usually, one can know it by intuition. The more it is difficult to discuss views of the Belarusian elite. It is not the problem that the elite is very fragmented and a political consensus is not in sight, but its views often change depending on many internal and external factors. It is rather difficult to tell the difference between real opinions, pretense, ideological statements, extravagances and an inclination to say something others expect one to say. This is especially true as far as interviews are concerned. But may be it is not the point? Either way, altogether these interviews mirror a certain state of mentality.

The purpose of this afterword is to describe the main features of this nondescript social group called 'elite' and its understanding of 'Europe' and approaches to the 'European issue'. The book presents opinions of the main elements of the Belarusian elite, although there is a certain disproportion resulting from the reluctance of some top government officials, business executives, scientists and cultural figures to cooperate.

To analyze views of the Belarusian elite it seems to be better to classify it according to the subculture criterion. Imperfect as it is, the classification still can mirror certain thinking patterns and strategies in understanding Belarus' external context. Consequently, we will not consider functional groups such as the economic, political and cultural elite. Another important

factor that determines the elite's thinking logic is that the political and cultural landscape is divided along the government-opposition axis, which causes deeper divisions at the level of culture and values. The divisions are essential for determining what representatives of the elite could say in interviews and how sincere they were.

We use the term 'subculture' in a freehand manner to classify the elite on the basis of biographies, education, social origins, cultural backgrounds, political positions (which is essential for determining the degree of openness), corporate links and organizational evolution. Not all groups have the same level of consolidation and their limits are quite flexible. Nevertheless, such classification, to my mind, would help arrange the Belarusian elite's views into a system. One should keep in mind that views can change because the social environment or political positions also change. An almost classic example is Syamyon Sharetsky.

I should say a few words about the subject of the book, which features answers to questions about what can be described as 'a European issue'. Belarus' authoritarian regime considerably affects thinking patterns. Opinions about 'a European path' for Belarus are quite theoretical and have nothing to do with real politics. Apart from that, the opinions are personal and circumstantial rather than resulting from public discussions and assessments of real interests.

*Belarus' post-Soviet elite.* Although the history of Belarus begins long before, the Belarusian Soviet administrative elite began taking shape after World War II. It was formed in the early 1950s and continued reproduction within the limits of the Communist Party apparatus until the early 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence by Belarus weakened the Soviet elite's influence, but it regained its dominance shortly (Prime Minister Vyachaslau Kebich was the central figure from 1990 to 1994). At the end of the 1990s the Soviet elite lost its dominance because of the ageing of its key members. Therefore, members of the Soviet no-

menklatura continued to dominate the state apparatus for some time after Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected president in 1994. The Soviet elite lost its positions at the turn of the centuries after Mikhail Myasnikovich, seen by many as an informal leader of the post-Soviet elite was ousted from big politics following the 2001 presidential election.

The post-Soviet elite is probably the only Belarusian group that had a firsthand experience in public administration, its own rules, corporate connections, an education and personnel management system. Despite the collapse of this system, it continued to play a leading role for a decade. Most representatives of the Soviet elite had local roots and sympathized with Belarusian culture and literature in particular, but on the other hand, the elite was more Sovietized than their counterparts in other former Soviet republics. Ideals of independence and national rebirth were not popular with the leadership of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic who remained loyal to the Soviet Union until its collapse.

Nevertheless, representatives of the post-Soviet elite were quite flexible in politics and culture in the 1990s. In the first years of independence as public embraced ideals of sovereignty and the government articulated national policies, part of the elite accepted democratic values and even nationalistic ideas. After 1994 members of the post-Soviet elite took different roads. Some (parliamentary speaker Mechyslau Hryb and Uladzimir Hancharyk, leader of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus) went into opposition to the authorities, while most successfully integrated into the new political system partly retaining, it seems, relative independence (Mikhail Myasnikovich, the current head of the National Academy of Sciences and Prime Minister Kebich). Most chose the system for pragmatic, not ideological reasons, though the Lukashenka administration also offered high-paid jobs to hard-line communists (Syarhey Kastysyan, Anatol Malafeyeu).

As for an understanding of 'Europe' and 'a path to Europe', it falls neatly into line with Belarusian Soviet culture and Soviet identity. Belarusian Soviet authorities unequivocally considered Belarus a European nation, although the notion was more geographical, not linked to civilization, values or

Christianity. There was no alternative to such an understanding of Europe because the tendency of Russian nationalists to stress contrasts between Russia and Europe was flatly rejected by Soviet ideology. (New Russian ideals and Russian nationalism, exported to Belarus in the early 1990s and from 1995 to 1999, influenced the Belarusian authorities, but were alien to the post-Soviet elite). The idea of Europe as a system of values was just as alien. For most of its members, Europe remains a geographic notion free from additional ideological meanings. (Such an approach is similar to their understanding of 'the nation' and 'the state', which are viewed as merely territorial notions.) It should be noted, that such an outlook on Europe shaped when half of the continent was under Soviet control, whereas the European Economic Community comprised six to ten nations. It contrasts with the young generation's idea of Europe; in their minds Europe is usually associated with the EU.

Members of the post-Soviet elite are usually positive toward Europe and view it as an economic partner. They can even accept democratization requirements. However, they cannot understand its culture and consider internal divisions artificial from a geographic viewpoint. They like to stress the need to retain traditionally close ties with Russia. It was characteristic of a Soviet-era pragmatic approach to ignore cultural and non-economic aspects of politics. For instance, the post-Soviet elite is not very hostile toward democracy, but mostly considers democratization as an additional mechanism for 'improving conditions for cooperation'. The post-Soviet elite was flexible enough to adhere to the principles of democracy under certain external circumstances.

*The national elite.* The national elite is a group that emerged as an opposition to the Belarusian Soviet elite. It was mainly a cultural opposition and it was not until the late 1980s that the country saw the emergence of political groups uncontrollable by the Communist Party. It should be stressed that Soviet Belarus did not have strong dissident groups before the national movement formed in the early 1980s. It was founded on national traditions

of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Belarusian elements of Belarusian Soviet culture and the Belarusian movement in Poland of the 1920s and 1930s. Most members of the new national movement were scientists or cultural figures residing in cities.

In contrast to Soviet identity, the dissidents promoted national identity based on respect for the Belarusian language and culture, a new interpretation of history and a new approach to foreign policies. While the Soviet elite considered Europe a geographical notion unburdened by additional meanings and values, the national elite viewed it as a symbol of national rebirth. Europe has become the representation of real (not connected with Russian colonial heritage) political tradition dating back to the Duchy of Polatsk and the Great Duchy of Lithuania. The national elite declared 'Belarus' return to Europe' as its top political, economic and, most importantly, cultural and civilization priority referring to Belarus' European cultural roots.

The revival of nationalism and growing pro-European sentiments in Belarus came in parallel with an upsurge of Russian nationalism after the break-up of the Soviet Union. (The upsurge took diverse forms based on new interpretations of Pan-Russianism, West Russianism, Pan-Slavism and Eurasianism, but the former idea was dominant. Syarhey Kastysyan may be considered one of its few advocates in Belarus.) Various versions of Russian nationalism became popular with members of the Belarusian ruling elite and few intellectuals, especially after 1994 when Lukashenka elevated it to the level of state policies. Belarusian authorities often questioned existence of the Belarusian nation, while the national elite considered Europe and Europeanization as an alternative to Russification. But the national (in a broader context pro-democracy) movement put more meaning into the notion 'Europeanism' by building a bridge between symbols of the past, current values and the country's future.

From 1990 to 1994, there was a shaky balance between the national movement led by the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the Soviet elite that still clung to power, but made concessions on Belarusification and accepted national symbols. However, further political developments did not produce

a synthesis of national and Soviet cultures. The process slowed down under the influence of authoritarian tendencies and as a result of authorities' shift to radical nationalistic Pan-Russism positions between 1994 and 2000. Authorities rejected the national elite from the country's legal political system by 1996. At present, the national elite has no opportunity to participate in the government and its members are concentrated in the opposition, media and the cultural elite (where they often dominate). This fact emphasizes their dissident nature and determines its strategies and psychology.

*The new elite.* The elite also includes those who made their political or business career during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political transformation period of the 1990s (during the Lukashenka rule). For most of these people, the perestroika, independence, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the 1994 presidential election opened up excellent career prospects. These people of various backgrounds, who can be provisionally called the new elite, begin to dominate in government agencies and business.

The core of the new elite are people who achieved their social or political status with the help from authorities or government officials or those who succeeded in business after obtaining preferential treatment from authorities. The group includes Alyaksandr Lukashenka's friends, associates and acquaintances (acquaintances of his acquaintances) who held district-level positions before 1994, but were promoted to high posts after the election (Uladzimir Kanaplyou, Halina Zhuraukova), and also members of Lukashenka's 1994 campaign team (Viktar Sheiman, Dzmitry Bulakhau). But these are the most unusual cases, most other members of the new elite advanced to their positions slowly also relying on their connections with authorities. Since most members of the administrative elite grew up in the current state system, they know how to use it for selfish ends. Their personal convictions may differ, some even sympathize with the opposition, but their status requires them to look at politics through the prism of interests of the system (which decides their future), although until recently they were unsure of its viability. This group constitutes the core of the real political elite, but it

is closed to the general public. Therefore, it was difficult or impossible to get a clear idea of what it is in reality.

However, we are more interested in views of the 'hard-line center' of the new elite, which is more open to the public. This group produces official anti-Western rhetoric, gives a touch of radicalism to foreign policies and builds the government's ideological foundation (its main target being the United States, but it also sees Europe in a negative light).

In the late 1990s, the new elite offered various versions of Russian nationalism as the basis for state ideology, but at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it came up with 'ideology of the Belarusian state' (2003). It slightly changed its approach to Europe and conflicting civilization elements. Authorities returned to a geographic notion of Europe.

The new ideology stresses that geographically Belarus is part of Europe (center of Europe as officials often stress), but it does not belong to European (West and Central European) culture. Belarus is seen in contrast to Western culture (the domination of Orthodox beliefs is often cited as evidence). The ideology hardly mentions the possibility of integration into Europe and the value of European culture for Belarus, but underlines the country's proximity to Russia. Thus, on the one hand Europe is a geographic and historical notion that includes Belarus, while on the other Europe's culture and politics is alien to 'the Belarusian people'. Rhetoric of the kind intensifies when the European Union increases pressure on Belarus, something that authorities regard as interference in the country's internal affairs and attempts to impose standards of democracy unacceptable for Belarusian society. At the same time, authorities like to stress their readiness for equal and mutually beneficial cooperation. Therefore, it is evident that Europe is not only a geographical notion, but also a political community that conflicts with the current political system in Belarus.

*The young generation.* The group is even more fragmented and more difficult to define than the new elite. Tentatively, it is comprised of young people who came to politics in the late 1990s and later. They do not represent

a self-contained group, but a generation politically educated in independent Belarus. The generation's political activity varies depending on affiliation. They play a secondary role in the government system, except for active cynical technocrats, but they are becoming more and more influential in the opposition (youths took key positions in the BPF in 2003 and in the United Civic Party in 2006). The same situation is observed in the regions – old leaders are replaced with young functionaries, which may be considered a sign of crisis. Young people's engagement in opposition activity is linked to their convictions and ideological choice, although some are driven by cynical motives.

The young generation constitutes a reserve of recruits for the authorities. New functionaries are usually loyal to the government, but are often critical in their private life. It is difficult to say how much they are affected by the regime's ideology. Presumably, they accept ideological patterns at the operational level, but do not regard them as values. The two parts of the young generation stand aloof from each other and the distance between them is even larger than between other elite groups.

The new group of the Belarusian elite formed under new conditions of the Republic of Belarus, and this had effects on their mentality, although the mentality is not yet complete and independent. Generally, the new generation views on the main forms of identity of the existing elite groups have some peculiarities. Their perception of Europe seems to be less ideological and more critical in the sense of internal criticism and hope for a resolution. While the national elite considered Europe as a means of resolving contradictions in Belarus' national development; the young generation is less idealistic. For the part of the young generation integrated in the state system, the situation is the following: if they develop a negative attitude to Europe, they do so not so much under the influence of official propaganda and ideology (of the lack of knowledge about Europe), but because of the lack of fully-fledged contacts at the official level, and as a result a lack of interest in the issue of European integration. But this does not mean that they do not have personal contacts or never travel to Europe. Many do travel

to Europe and have friends there, but the idea of identity and integration never crosses their mind. They do not see any difference between Europe as an intellectual and cultural construct and the EU as a political and economic embodiment, therefore the borderline becomes more distinct.

‘The path to Europe’ remains to a great extent only a theoretical notion for the Belarusian elite. Its practical realization is nearly completely frozen because of the authoritarian government and the country’s political isolation. One can observe a certain conservation (as compared to neighboring countries) of ideas and stereotypes concerning Belarus’ prospects for integration into Europe. The option is still attractive but some consider it unrealistic and pointless, while others associate the idea with Europe that exists in their dreams. In addition, Russia keeps up pressure on Belarus and there is no national discussion of foreign policy issues in general.

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