

#### **4. Should Belarus make a strategic choice? If it should, should it seek closer ties with Russia, the European Union (EU) or former Soviet republics? Are these choices mutually exclusive? What should be done to put them into practice?**

**Volha Abramava**

We should be realistic. Belarus and Russia will continue building a political and defense union. Other unions are also possible – Belarus, for instance, can participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. If it is of benefit to us we should be there. If it is feasible we should be there. Honestly I do not understand why Belarus cannot have peculiar relations with Russia building at the same time peculiar relations with the West. There is a more ideal solution – Russia could move toward integration into Europe, naturally on the basis of a mutual desire and benefit.

Entry to the EU is not on Belarus' agenda today. It can be in the future, but traditional pragmatism will help the Belarusians understand that we, as well as the Ukrainians, are unwelcome in Europe. Many European politicians who carry some weight repeatedly said during the last decade's international conferences and high-profile forums, 'We should tell Russia, Ukraine and Belarus straight that they will never be in the European Union, not because they are unwelcome but because the West has financial obligations and a big responsibility before old members and Central European countries. We simply will not manage'. Probably, it is good. Sometimes, it is better to stand aside and see what all this will result in. I personally would not like to find myself begging either admission in the EU or Russia (a mover which

I oppose as a politician, though consider it pragmatic). Those who beg are treated as a banana republic that does not have any right to its own opinion. What can it claim if it itself was knocking at the door and fluttering toward it like a moth to a light bulb. It is not a solution. It is good that Belarus will have time, I believe some 10 or 15 years, to see well how neighbors live after joining the block and what the pluses and minuses the move has. This will help us in the long run choose a more efficient path and access this or another structure faster if a decision to this effect is ever made. This will help us avoid mistakes, reject everything what is unacceptable to us and negotiate in advance not only the host side's demands but also ours.

Since Belarus stands on the threshold between two civilizations it is difficult for it to articulate its national interests. We have refused to make any choice between the civilizations. But it was a kind of a choice too. Anyway, we should not hurry but wait until international policies take a more definite form. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw much turmoil, including the collapse of the Soviet Union. Let things get more definite and then Belarus will make a wise and sensible choice and find its place in not only Europe but also the world.

### Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

The most realistic choice is a union with Russia. But this should be a union of two independent countries, not one country. For that purpose, it is necessary to pursue effective policies and educate people starting from the kindergarten. It is necessary to foster the elite and give up illusions. In Soviet kitchens people always said that the goal was to overthrow the communists. The communists have been defeated but what is next? Nobody knows where to go.

It is impossible to enter Europe on equal conditions. Nobody is waiting for a ruined country in Europe. EU members, including the old ones, compete for markets. We have nothing to offer, except for our dream that we want to be part of Europe.

## Yauhen Babosau

Belarus has already made its strategic choice. It has chosen to pursue multi-vector economic, political and cultural policies, opted not only for a union with Russia but also with the European Union. But this should be done on the principles of understanding, mutual acceptance. Not only we should accept them, but also they should accept us as we are. In this respect, we should not part ways with Russia. And we should seek solutions to problems with the European Union. As for the CIS, this is a loose, inefficient organization that is good for nothing, frankly speaking. And when Ukraine and Georgia quit it (and they are likely to), it will be unclear what country we should unite with. With Kyrgyzstan? But it is likely to quit the organization either. With Kazakhstan? Yes, but half of its population is Russians and Belarusians – I know it because I was there once. Kazakhstan's northern part was mainly Belarusians, Ukrainians, Russians and only few Kazakhs. There are more of them there now...

So I think Belarus and Russia need the Union State. But this does not mean that we should drift away from Europe. We should conduct multi-vector policies that embrace both the East and the West, the South and the North. We should be friends with Ukraine! Because we may not be friends with Yushchenko<sup>15</sup> (assume that some don't like him) or with Yanukovych, but Belarus, Russia and Ukraine all stem from the same root. And Bahdanovich once said that we are one people but in three hypostases – Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian. And we have not the same Slavic culture but three different. Although they all share the same roots but they are different. And one cannot deny this. I knew the late academician Likhachev very well. He used to call Kyiv the cradle of the lands of Rus. Not Russia but Rus. And there were White, Black, Little and Great Rus. He was right to say that Kyiv is not Ukraine (Ukraine appeared much later), Kyiv is the origin of Rus lands. That's where Orthodox Christianity came from. And we must not reject this. That's why I think we should seek a union not only with Russia

<sup>15</sup> Viktor Andriyovych Yushchenko is the current president of Ukraine elected in 2004.

to the east but also with Ukraine. We may love or hate its government but it is our peoples that matter.

And why should not we be friends with Lithuania? We used to live in one country once. Our strategy should embrace all directions. Why cannot we develop relations with Eastern countries, with Israel? Of the five presidents that were in Israel, three came from Belarus, they are our people. Yes, they are Jews, so what? If we talk to them, they may even turn out to speak Belarusian.

So, these strategic choices cannot be alternative. They should complement each other and include both the North, the East, the South and the West. Belarus should be an open country and an open society. This is not the same. An open society absorbs much from left and right, from the East and the West, the South and the North, and contributes something there. Only this way can culture and civilizations be enriched. And only this way can Belarus win respect everywhere.

To put this strategic choice into practice, we must stay true to ourselves, remain Belarusians in this world and develop spiritual traditions that make our country Belarus. Because, what else distinguishes one people from another? What is the difference between France and England? They have different cultures! They share the same fashion, eat the same, drink the same cognac, watch the same porn movies and Hollywood films. And still they are different!

We should learn from the French in this respect. The older generation still remembers and youngsters also should know Mireille Mathieu, the renowned singer. After the beginning of the expansion of American culture, including this McDonald's, she gave a concert. She had not sung for 10 years before the show named 'Made in France'. She used the concert to deliver a message: compare what we consume, American culture, American movies with French ones. Do you understand? Compare American opera with the French one. Compare the American novel with the French one. Compare the American theater with the French one. So what do we say? Who should learn from whom? And she is still loved in France thanks to that. France once decided to have all signboards, except those at McDonald's because it is the

world-famous name, read in French. They all were translated into French. If you travel to France and take a business card that reads 'Ivanov' in Russian and English but not in French, you'll be regarded as an impolite person. If you go to France, write simply in your national language – they will understand you. And if not, they will find a translator. And if you write in your language and in English and go to France, why should you go there?

And another thing. Several French television channels have decided to limit the share of American movies to only 20 percent of all films broadcast. The rest of the programming is devoted to European movies. These are Italian, French and Soviet films, which they still like very much. When the Soviet Union's *Romeo and Juliet* was shown, they all cried abroad and said, 'Why couldn't we do this?'

So in order to realize these strategies, we must above all remain what we are. Second, we must know that we are Europeans and face the same requirements that the French, Swedes do. And we are not behind Swedes in any aspect. We may be behind only the great nations like France (in terms of culture) and England (as far as it concerns civilization). We're not behind the Germans in any sphere.

### Anzhalika Borys

I do not like the word 'should'. Belarus has the right to choose its strategy, but it should be determined by the will of its people. However, there must be conditions that would enable people to express their will. People should have free access to information and be able to freely express their opinion. There must be a public discussion in which the majority should listen to and respect opinions of the minority.

## Iryna Buhrova

Self-identification in most countries coincided in time with the liberal period.

After 9/11 and the beginning of the third millennium, a new era of national identity revival began. The world is returning to the system of political blocs: if you are a friend of mine, you must not be a friend of my neighbor's. This return to the system of blocs won't lead to any good results. The present-day globalist world is open, and the bloc system leads to the revival of archaic wars (regarding trade in wines, mineral water, etc.), which we see now. The G-8 and the Security Council do not have enough authority to settle such conflicts.

If Belarus pursued a normal foreign policy, its best choice would be the status of a neutral state. We are very far away from joining the European Union. We have yet to go through a rough period of adaptation.

## Henadz Buraukin

There must be a choice, but I do not mean to say that Belarus has a choice. I do not doubt that Belarus must be an independent country. Therefore, it should neither form a union with Russia nor it should seek to join the EU like an underprivileged member. Belarus should be an independent and self-sufficient nation that develops in the interests of its people on the territory given to it by God and has a history given by God and neighbors, and made by themselves. The Belarusians should learn to be equal and independent and teach others to treat them this way. Since a nation cannot be completely independent in this complicated world, it should maintain relations with its neighbors and other nations because it is not an unearthly civilization. It exists here on the Earth surrounded by other countries. Indisputably, it will have close state, cultural and human ties with Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania – its immediate neighbors with whom it shares much of its history. It can sign mutually beneficial treaties and form alliances, but,

I stress, not military ones because the Belarusians are a peaceful nation, as their current national hymn says. It was a good idea, which, unfortunately, has not been put into practice, to write down in the basic law that 'Belarus is a nuclear-free and neutral country'. This is the path it should take. It may form alliances with Russia, Poland, Lithuania, the United States, France, Germany and other countries on condition that these alliances benefit the independent Belarusian state and the Belarusians.

Belarus has many talented people. Only a person who is not educated and serious enough can say that Belarus lacks clever and talented people. The country has human resources, but lacks conditions, which the government must create for these clever and talented people to apply their intellect, education and skills, and have an opportunity to make a career adequate to their talents given by God, or their parents, or the Belarusian land. When such conditions are created, everything will be fine and the nation will strike a balance in relations with East and West, Africa and European nations. If people have arranged their country in a sensible way they will not have big problems. It is located on cooperation routes linking many influential developed countries.

Belarus had a wonderful nature. Its swamps are known as the lungs of Europe. You see how much we mean to Europe. The man needs lungs to breathe. The lungs are in Belarus.

I may have painted an idealistic picture, but that is how I want things to be. If Belarus is an independent, self-sufficient and respected nation, its politicians will find it a place where it will be in harmony with other nations.

The Belarusians can work hard. They have a big research and development potential and interesting and unique culture. They have hands and brain, as one politician put it. Not everyone has brain, but most people do.

The Belarusians do not need to decide which way to go – east or west, they should lead a normal life and maintain good relations with others and make friends with those (sorry for pragmatism) who can offer more benefits to the Belarusian nation.

## Ales Byalyatski

I believe that membership of the European Union is the only and shortest path Belarus can take to get on a right track. The country is located between two great powers – Russia and the EU. It will always be influenced by one side or the other and it will be subject to uncertainty and turbulence until it chooses its path. It is very important for us to decide and reform the economy, education, the social security sector, and change approaches to culture and human rights. I consider EU membership Belarus' top priority. The first and foremost thing we should have done was to join the EU, just like the Baltic states did to enhance their security. Belarus also should join NATO. EU membership is not a solution to all of the country's problems. It should enter the alliance because it has such an unpredictable neighbor in the east. NATO and the EU would give the country certain guarantees. As a human rights defender I believe the EU has the best human rights standards in the world. The EU maintains high standards with regard to the development of national cultures and local communities. These standards may not be perfect, but nothing is perfect in this world. European standards would be a good foundation for reform and for the rise of our nation after 90 years of decline. The nation must decide. It cannot be torn between the two sides forever.

But there is absolutely no need to quarrel and be Russia-phobic. I do not consider Russia a hopeless patient. The country has a good development potential, but its time has not yet come. It may come in 40 or 60 years. On the other hand, Belarus should seek closer ties with the European Union without waiting for what will happen in Russia in the next 20 to 40 years.

## Pavel Daneika

I again would like to put the question differently. Are the Belarusians Europe or Russia in terms of values? You mean that they are different political configurations or unions. But values are eternal, while unions, any unions, are temporary. That is why a prime question is how Belarus sees itself and



feels. I think it feels like part of Europe. We may do various sociological polls to get a direct answer to a direct question. But all this will be a lie. Apart from a clear knowledge that we are aware of, we have hidden feelings about reality and they emerge only when we have to make a choice. As the Belarusians have not yet had a choice and faced this problem, their feelings remain unarticulated. But I still have the impression that an overwhelming majority of the Belarusians have made an inner decision. And totally.

### Andrey Dynko

Belarus has the mutually exclusive alternative of choosing the Eurasian economic community or the European Union. We cannot be both in the former and the latter, and have to choose one of them. However, there is another possibility as Belarus can follow the Finnish scenario and get the status of a neutral country that have equally good relations both with Russia and the European Union. But I think we had the chance to put the scenario into practice in the 1990s but not any longer today. After what we have experienced under Lukashenka and in fact under Russia's protectorate and if we look at trends around Belarus and in Belarus itself, I tend to believe that Belarus will choose to join the European and Euro-Atlantic organizations within the next 10–15 years.

### Valery Fralou

We are on the civilization divide and we have to make a strategic choice between joining the West, which has its own values that we have yet to grow up to, or Russia. If we take the past 300 years, we seem to be closer to Russia. To my mind, we have our common Slavic mode of thinking, our religion, our common history, similar languages, huge economic ties... We need to choose something! In general, I back a pretty close union with Russia. Of course, Russia also should be a bit different. And we should by no means oppose Europe, should find common ground. Yes, neither we nor they are bad, we are just different. And there is no need to be copycats, we are who we are.

Russia's conduct and trends are pretty controversial. Russia aspires to influence in the world. They want to grab us by the ears and bring there, while in fact former Soviet Union countries should be encouraged to develop a liking for Russia, see serious changes going on there and see the point in cooperation with Russia and resulting benefits. Gas wars and other things (and it is the latter that matters most and it is the United States which wants to influence other things) are counterproductive and lead Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to believe that they will be better off in their own home, however small it may be. This is the main problem. One may criticize the Russian leadership for this, but I think after these daredevil 10 years, after Yeltsin, with all those traditions, it must be quite difficult to turn Russia to democracy in the European sense of this word, even if the Russian leadership wants this. Only a person who feels at ease can be turned. I guess, Russia has plenty of problems and a pretty difficult situation.

Strategically, I consider Russia to be our ally. The time we are living in prevents some from realizing this: CIS republics, like small children, have run every which way and we will not get a sober assessment of the situation until the countries (especially, their leadership), which have been carried away by freedom, get into mischief.

### Svyatlana Kalinkina

I believe that the CIS's days are numbered. That is why it makes no sense to speculate concerning its future. Although some interstate consultative agencies of post-Soviet countries, not alliances, may continue to exist. But I think that the CIS or any other formal alliances of former USSR republics will not exist. It is most likely that alliances will be formed on the basis of common interests and geographic neighborhood. A much-talked-of subject at present is the Union of State of Belarus and Russia and the possibility of Belarus' incorporation into Russia. There has been much speculation among political analysts and technologists in both Belarus and Russia about possible scenarios for the future political careers of Lukashenka and Putin.

It is obvious that one of the scenarios, which many regard as the simplest one, envisages the unification of the two states. This is going to be very dangerous for Belarus. It is dangerous because, among other reasons, there is a revival of chauvinistic sentiments in Russia at present and there have emerged a lot of politicians and political analysts who suggest that Russia should grow with new lands to resume being a great power. It is clear that Belarus is a very attractive 'partner' in this sense. This is a great danger. And I am afraid that here in Belarus, after hearing our ruler say that he would by no means surrender the sovereignty of Belarus, we have somewhat relaxed. However, we know Lukashenka very well. It is very easy for him to say one thing today and to do another tomorrow. That is why, it seems to me that this is what deserves our particular concern.

As for the European Union, it is evident that theoretically, being within Europe and a member of the European Union is an ideal for Belarus. But I think this is possible only if Russia joins the EU. This possibility is being considered. You know that NATO did not exist 60 years ago. And 20 years ago no one could imagine that that the Warsaw Pact would collapse. Everything changes and I think that Russia may eventually become a member of the European Union. If Russia does not drift to the authoritarian past and hardliners do not seize power there, I believe that the historic process will proceed in this direction. An alliance of Germany, Russia and France would be geopolitically founded and history is evidence that there were always attempts to form such alliances. Of course, those attempts had different outcomes. That is why I do not consider it absolutely unlikely that Russia and Belarus will soon become members of the European Union.

**Syarhey Kalyakin**

Belarus should not make hasty steps, in particular to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the union with Russia. Hasty steps can result in bad consequences for the nation. It should take a cautious approach. It should think five times before joining an alliance or signing

a treaty. If an alliance has been functioning for many years effectively addressing some problems, the nation should think even longer before pulling out.

EU membership is a difficult question. It does not depend on Belarus. The issue of Belarus' membership is not on the EU agenda. I do not think the issue will be on the agenda in the next 30 years. The EU needs to complete the current enlargement process and counter centrifugal trends following the accession of countries with different economic, political and other backgrounds. It would be premature to put the issue on Belarus' membership on the agenda.

Belarus should seek fully-fledged involvement in the European Neighborhood Program, which would enable it to establish a good relationship with enlarged Europe. The situation has changed. Belarus used to conduct a direct dialogue with Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and other countries, whereas now these countries must coordinate their policies with the EU. The EU has different interests. Poland often has to waive its interests in the framework of the EU. This may not be good for Belarus, but this is the path Poland has taken. Belarus should seek to secure better or exceptional opportunities in the framework of the European Neighborhood Program. It should seek to preserve economic, political and cross-border ties with its neighbors.

Belarus should persuade Europe to keep its door open for Belarus. The EU with a population of 450 million is one of the world's biggest markets. But it is not easy to sell our goods and services there without building friendly and good-neighborly relations. There is a tough competition for that market involving heavyweights like China and the United States.

However, Belarus should keep in mind that the EU is just one of its neighbors two other being Ukraine and Russia. Belarus has and should maintain a special beneficial relationship with Russia. If it breaks off ties it will get nothing in return. Russia supplies the country with energy resources and raw materials. Russia is a huge market for Belarusian products. It is the major market for basic products, although the EU is a larger partner than Russia in terms of exports to Belarus. Therefore, Belarus should not abandon that market, because everyone, including the EU, is eager to take its place.

It is not a matter of choice between Russia and the EU. Belarus should maintain close ties with both. It has a good relationship with Russia, but it needs to improve its relations with the EU. It must persuade Europe that friendship with Europe against Russia is as much detrimental as friendship with Russia against Europe.

Belarus should not have any geopolitical ambitions. It is not as big as China, India, the United States or Russia. It should use its geopolitical position and benefit from friendly ties with all countries. It may try to act as a bridge between these rivals.

### **Kasya Kamotskaya**

The EU or the CIS is a mutually exclusive choice. But no one has invited Belarus to the EU so far. I am a pro-European person. I have not been to Moscow for 20 years, but I often travel to Poland or Lithuania. I am more attracted to Europe.

But Russian influence is also strong. One cannot choose his/her neighbors.

The country also can stick to neutrality. I believe it is very important that the Declaration of Independence proclaimed Belarus a neutral state. This may help this small country to hold out in the face of attempts to annex it. Belarus is a small country and it is easy to swallow it.

### **Syarhey Kastsyan**

There are no independent countries. If Japan rebelled against the United States, its space industry would collapse within one week. If other nations broke off economic ties with Japan, its economy would collapse overnight. This is why I think it would be incorrect to say that a country can be absolutely independent. As for Belarus, it has already made its strategic choice – a union with Russia and Ukraine. The Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians need the union, just as other nations that once formed the Soviet Union.

A representative of Germany said at a forum (held probably in Athens): 'If the three Slavic peoples – the Russians, Belarusian and Ukrainians – survive and unite, Germany will survive as an independent nation in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. If the three nations fail to unite, people will not be aware in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century that the German national state ever existed'. That's what it is.

### Vyachaslau Kebich

Belarus should take a cautious approach. Time has been lost. As chairman of the Council of Ministers I traveled to nearly all the European countries. I was a member of the Communist Party at the time, but no one asked me about my affiliation in France, Italy, Spain and other European countries. They did not need to ask that question, because it was clear that a non-Communist could not be chairman of the Council of Ministers. I negotiated loans and was treated as an equal partner. The issue of membership was not on the agenda. Now relations have become much more politicized.

As for a choice, there is no alternative to close ties with Russia. We are not ready to be fully independent of Russia. We rely on Russia for energy resources. Other European countries also buy oil and gas from Russia. Norwegian gas and oil reserves are not enough to meet the EU demand. Energy resources may be the reason EU countries still try to maintain good relations with Russia.

But EU-Russian relations are not really very close. There was friendship when Gerhard Schroeder was chancellor of Germany or Silvio Berlusconi was prime minister of Italy. Russian-EU relations depend on personal relations between leaders. When leaders change relations also change.

### Anatol Lyabedzka

People must have a right to make a deliberate choice. Without adherence to values we will not be able to find out what people choose. Opinion polls are currently unreliable. People need information to make a well-considered

choice. People lost a sense of perspective without information, facts and figures concerning the CIS and the EU. Only political analysts have these facts and figures, while most other people do not. It is necessary to establish democracy in Belarus in order to see what road people want their country to take. Opinion polls suggest that some 30 to 35 percent of Belarusians want their country to join the EU and simultaneously maintain close ties with Russia. This is also evidence that people lack information.

The CIS is losing competition to the EU. Ukraine and Georgia consider pulling out from the Commonwealth of Independent States. If it were an effective economic bloc, they would not do so. The only function of the CIS is to provide well-paid jobs for people like Borodin<sup>16</sup> and other bureaucrats.

Belarus should choose Europe. Or, what else can it choose, the export of Chinese or Asian civilization? The choice has been made already. I think it's illogical that officials in Minsk seriously discuss the possibility of Chinese language instruction nearly at every school. English is OK because we are part of Europe geographically, politically and historically.

But Chinese? Is it a way to reverse the population decline? Will Belarusians be dying out in 20 years and will the country have to import Asians and set up China towns in every district center? It seems the authorities seriously consider China a top priority for the future. To boost ties with China they need to set up a special team of professionals rather than change the entire education system. The country needs to train people to negotiate contracts with China because this is a huge market. But it would be enough to establish a Chinese department at Linguistic University for the purpose.

### Vasil Lyavonau

Yes, we should make this choice and reach an agreement to what the nation should be like. The Belarusian-Russian Foundation for a New Belarus has sent its proposals in this regard to political parties and non-governmental organizations. I hope that we will return to this subject after post-election disputes.

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<sup>16</sup> Pavel Borodin – state secretary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia.

## Aleh Manayeu

I am a realist and try to take a realistic approach to things. If I did not see the situation in society, of which I spoke above, if I did not see that we have a serious basis for a European path, i.e. if the Euro-Belarusians accounted for three percent, not 30, I would not think this way. It is quite probable that my personal biography would have been different. I would have emigrated to the West long ago or have been engaged in something different. But good European prospects for Belarus provide me with certain grounds for hopes and a basis for activities.

The serious matter of the country's geopolitical choice – irrespective of whether we are talking about the Asian-Pacific region, Latin America, Africa or Europe – is above all about the choice of people, the citizens, the choice of society, the choice of elites, and the choice of the leadership. And this choice should be made in our country.

I know many people who believe that Belarus does not need such a choice. They say that we should use the advantages of both sides. The president once said, 'Laskavaye tsalya dzvyukh matak ssye' (The affectionate calf suckles two mothers). I consider this point of view to be erroneous. It is erroneous not in some abstract political or cultural sense but in an absolutely specific sense. The world develops increasingly rapidly decade by decade. It quickly grows profoundly globalized. Consequences of this can be seen everywhere: in the economy, culture, the information sphere, the military sphere, and so on. If a nation, its people, elites and leadership are reluctant to make such a choice, which would be on a rational basis to get certain cultural, political, economic and other benefits, they fall behind and cannot adapt themselves to these processes. Life goes ahead, and the nations and states that do not make such a choice not only lose prospects for the future but also miss quite specific benefits today. The pace of globalization is becoming faster. And the longer we postpone the choice, no matter under which pretext, the more we will lose. Here I should note that I am talking about a choice in general, as the nation's geopolitical self-determination,



not the European choice or a Eurasian one. This would be an irreparable loss. We can retrospectively look at the history of the states and nations that failed to make such a choice in due time. They disappeared altogether or became part of another nation, another state and another culture. The Belarusians may eventually suffer the same fate if we postpone our choice time and time again.

What choice should we make? This is a political question, not scientific. The logic of reasoning here should be different. I want to note again that I am not a political technologist or a politician. But I can imagine how I would reason if I were a politician. I would reason proceeding from the reality that have been given to us in feelings, above all from the interests of the Belarusian people, their real interests, not from what the authorities or the opposition think they are, from the interests of Europe and, certainly, from the interests of Russia. This means that I would act accurately and gradually. In the present geopolitical situation, one would hardly manage to immediately pose a dilemma – whether Belarus should turn its back to Russia and its face to the European Union. Let us assume that another leader, Ivanov, Petrov, Sidorov, or Milinkevich, not essential, will come to power tomorrow. How will he manage to materialize such a choice? It would be impossible to do it as was done in old times, when the most important decisions were made by elites. It would not be enough to go to Brussels and strike hands with Barroso and Solana, sign an agreement with them as Hitler, Ribbentrop, Molotov and Stalin once did and concealed the content from the people. I think that this would not work now. The leader should enlist the support of the people. At present, in most countries, and Belarus will hardly be an exception, this is carried out through a national referendum. This means that the leader should ask people's opinion and take it into consideration.

So let me return to my thought: if we today put the question point-blank: If you are to choose between unification with Russia and membership in the European Union, which would you choose?' the distribution of answers would be 56 percent to 30 percent, i.e. almost two to one in favor of the

unification with Russia. Here I should note that this by no means suggests that most of the Belarusians want to unite with the Russians. When asked a straight question about unification with Russia, 44 percent said that they would vote for this and 30 percent would vote against this. In a referendum on the Constitutional Act of the Union State, only 35 percent would vote to adopt it. But if a black-and-white question, which provides for only two options, is posed, most of the Belarusians will vote for unification with the Russian Federation, not the European Union. That is why if a new, pro-European minded leader put today such a question to a referendum, he will fall hostage to its outcome. What should he do afterward? Will he tell the people, 'You are mistaken, it should be done my way'? He will have to go against the will of the people or implement a policy that would run counter to his own convictions, to what he fought for when he was running for power. I believe that any responsible political leader will try to avoid this.

That is why I say that it is necessary to act very accurately, i.e. to do adequate information, propaganda, educational and organizational work to prepare the public for this. People are people. An ordinary Belarusian, like common people in France or Poland, does not think all the time in which direction his country should move, to the West or to the East. Most people think about their everyday affairs, about their families, jobs, vacation and so on. When candidate countries had to hold referendums before the European Union's big enlargement in the spring of 2004, the governments of those countries prepared the public for this during several years, conducting large-scale cultural, educational and information campaigns. The same should be done in our country. We should gradually prepare the public before calling a referendum.

Are these choices mutually exceptional? At present it looks so because, despite all statements and geopolitical concepts, there is a real political practice from the Russian leadership. It is obvious that the Kremlin does not want Belarus and even states who have already gotten free from Russia's direct influence, such as Ukraine or Moldova, to go to Europe. In this situation – the Union of Belarus and Russia on the one hand and the European

Union on the other hand – there really exists serious antagonism between the possible geopolitical choices. But if the system of steps of which I spoke above is carried out – it goes without saying that the government should be changed for this, I believe that it would be possible to find ways to solve this problem. Incidentally, in his campaign speeches in the run-up to March's presidential election, the common candidate of pro-democratic forces, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, repeatedly emphasized the priority of partner relations with Russia. And his first foreign visit after his election as the common candidate at the Congress of Pro-democratic Forces was to Moscow, not to the European Union.

### **Alyaksandr Milinkevich**

Integration is a global trend. Belarus should seek closer economic, not political ties with Russia, because it benefits from economic cooperation. Independence and sovereignty are of great value. I believe that Belarus should integrate into European organizations. This is a long process, which is unlikely to be completed by our generation of politicians. The country's short-term objective is to take advantage of its cross-border position.

### **Anatol Mikhailau**

The future of any country is uncertain if it fails to choose a strategic direction. However, the choice cannot be simply declared. It must take root and grow in the mentality of the intellectual elite in the first place. Is our consciousness free from myths and prejudices of past ideologies that we continue to rely on subconsciously?

What should be done? We should be critical of ourselves. We must have courage to admit our mistakes and open ourselves to others. We must resist the temptation to blame others for our mistakes. We must start taking real steps that would contribute to the self-determination of the nation. European Humanities University was an attempt to contribute to this long

and uneasy process. It is not that all our efforts are perceived with an understanding, even by those who are expected to embrace them.

### Ales Mikhalevich

I think the CIS will live forever. It does not obstruct anybody. It is not an institution of a serious kind. It is an absolutely symbolic institution. After the fall of the Soviet Union, some peaceful and attractive solution was needed to formally preserve some ties between nations. The CIS was the solution. As for the question where Belarus should be, I do not think that the point is about whether we should join the European Union or form a union with Russia. There is surely such a question in the air. Should Belarus change its economy, security policy and every other aspect of the country's life to integrate into the Western community, which can be provisionally defined as Euro-Atlantic community as it also includes the United States, Australia and New Zealand -- the countries that are 'islands' of European civilization located outside Europe's territory? Or should we move to Russia, the country that has many nations on its territory at present? I am sure that after Belarus joins the Euro-Atlantic community, a number of nations in Russia and other regions also will express intention to become part of it. There are such strong sentiments in Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, where most people say that they want to be part of the European Union, the other civilization, despite being similar to other Russians in terms of ethnicity as ethnic Russians still form a larger group there than Belarusians and Ukrainians.

Neutrality and attempts to be a bridge between the East and the West are not a viable solution in my opinion. If someone wants to be a bridge, they should be prepared to see others regularly 'trampling' and marching on them. It is not a best life.

Belarus should decide: here or there. I believe that Belarus' future is still in the Euro-Atlantic community.

I do not want to call myself a Euro-optimist, I do not like the words 'Euro-optimist' and 'Euro-skeptic'. The European Union will hardly preserve

its present form by the time when we really get close to acceding it. After the expansion, the EU has become something different from what the new members, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and the Czech Republic had dreamt of before the accession. Obviously, there should be a platform for identifying common interests inside Europe in order to simplify as much as possible travel and the movement of the labor force by easing visa formalities for instance. But what Europe will look like in 10 years? In my opinion, we will move close to accession in 10 years – we will submit our bid to entry, complete accession talks and do other necessary things. But a big question is what Europe will be by that time.

But we should follow this way. I do not say that it is a salvation, not the European Union budget would save Belarus. No But we should be integrated as much as possible into Euro-Atlantic structures.

### Tatsyana Protska

This is a question concerning the government's policy. The political situation is quite complicated – there are problems in the EU, in the CIS and issues of uneven development of countries. Policies can be rather flexible depending on the current political situation. The government has good economists who calculate economic benefits and advise decision-makers.

The Belarusian government used this kind of flexibility. Realizing that the Russian elite and public are nostalgic for Soviet values, Belarus offered them those values in return for oil and gas. It offered its services as an intermediary in trade with Western Europe. This flexible policy yielded its results – our country is better off than many other former Soviet republics. The economic upturn that our government boasts of is not based on industrial and technological development, but is a result of the government's engagement in a sort of state business.

Our government's flexibility implies a great degree of cynicism – it would have accepted European values if that guaranteed immediate profits, but if it finds that something can generate more profit, it opts for closer ties with Russia.

A choice to be made by civic society is a more difficult question. The Belarusians are torn between two approaches, two systems of values and different religious denominations. There are many other things where we face a difficult choice. If we chose something, that would upset the other part of the population. I do not think this would benefit Europe or the Slavic community. We may remain a bridge between the two sides because we know quite well advantages and flaws of one side and the other. We can facilitate a dialogue between these two civilizations to the benefit of the humankind.

### Andrey Sannikau

I am confident that Belarus must join only united Europe, the European Union. It is only by formally declaring our Europeanism that we can secure the revival of Belarus. I have absolutely no doubts that it is only this way that we can become a Belarusian state.

At present, these options are alternative. The CIS has ceased to exist, this can be seen from what is going on between member states of the so-called CIS, from their efforts to create new organizations, the entire list of which I cannot even name – the Eurasian Economic Community, customs unions, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization... Now we can see two centers. The first is Russia whose initiatives I have just named. The second center (not very successful either) is GUAM, the Democratic Choice Community. These are not quite successful efforts, which I believe are not aimed against Russia or seek its isolation, to do something based on European values until former Soviet countries make their ultimate choice.

For me there can be no other choice than the European Union. I doubt the worth of all other for Belarus. Yes, this is a game for Lukashenka. And Belarusians simply get no information.

It is not even information that matters. Even the countries that decided to join the EU right after obtaining independence (the Baltic states) held information campaigns to explain the move's benefits to the public. Even

if people needed not to be convinced, such campaigns were necessary for ensuring that people make a conscious choice. When we have freedom, we will be able to learn whether the Belarusians want to be with Russia, stay in some CIS or join Europe. This choice should be made consciously, not on the basis of misinformation.

It is clear to me that no union (no kind of union!) with Russia will help support a democratic and independent Belarusian state. That's why if we speak about the Belarusian state, this can only be in Europe and NATO. Because there must be certain guarantees of security, guarantees of independence and the opportunity to make a conscious choice that only NATO can give today. We should not listen to propaganda lies about NATO, we should realize that membership in the bloc protects a country's independence, provides opportunities for getting involved in international processes and influencing them. And the fact that Russia would object to our possible membership in NATO means its refusal to recognize Belarus' independence and democratic development. Russia agreed to the Baltic states' accession to the bloc because it had had to recognize their independence.

### Stanislau Shushkevich

There has been such a choice and it will be in future. I believe that calling this choice 'alternative' is too categorical. Between the categorical prospect of becoming 'a Russian colony on the border with Russia' or being 'a European country'. This is this categorical choice! But this is the categorical choice proposed by 'Russian hawks' that want to force us into a certain type of relations – a paternalistic, command-style one. This is absolutely unacceptable.

Whatever we may do today, the previous century created East and West, Russia and the European Union. And if we start joining either of them, it will do us no good. It seems to me that a formula created back in 1990–1991 was not bad: Belarus, as a country that has statehood experience, as a country that has its own intelligentsia, is capable of becoming a normal

neutral state in both political and military terms. But in order to become such, we must get approval from Russia and Europe. As for Europe, there are no problems. As for Russia, there are problems. And if Europe and the United States could guarantee Belarus' neutrality... I mean only political and military neutrality because absolute neutrality is impossible. And there's no point in referring to Switzerland whose neutrality was determined by its geographical position. But we can speak about the Finland-style neutrality that was guaranteed by the Soviet Union and the United States. Finland and Austria had such guarantees. It seems to me that this is the most logical option. Joining either NATO or the Warsaw Treaty would be both bad for Belarus. I'm not an advocate of accession to the EU and NATO. I like NATO as far as it concerns the standards that the bloc sets for member states. But I'm against Belarus becoming a military member of NATO, this is unacceptable. I want to say once again that we are on the political and military border, and the best way to handle the situation would be friendly relations with both Europe and Russia.

When Belarus was declared a nuclear weapons-free country, we had guarantees from the United States and Russia. But they were more of a declarative nature. There was no such agreement concerning our status as was the case with Finland and Austria. We aspired for this but our plans were frustrated by Russia's efforts. And this was in fact confirmed by a doctrine proposed by the Karaganov-led Council on Foreign and Defense Policies. Adopted in 1999, Russia's foreign-policy doctrine was in fact a fine-tuned version of Karaganov's proposal. I met with Karaganov and told him, 'How could you do this? You now have such a good attitude toward Belarus and what did you suggest once?' What did they suggest? 'National consciousness and self-identification is developing in Belarus and other former republics of the Soviet Union. The sooner we halt this process, the less victory will cost us'. This is the imperial aspirations they had!

Fortunately, Karaganov later reversed his stance. In fact, he even apologized, saying that 'we didn't know and see much...' Karaganov is an intelligent person, he could change his mind. As for others, they continue



insisting that Belarus is part of Russia and the Belarusian language is a dialect of Russian. This is a purely colonial, empire-style policy that is not based on any serious grounds, only on impudence.

### **Uladzimir Ulakhovich**

Belarus' strategic task, which is also a challenge for it for the time being, is to survive and build gradually its own statehood, to put it plainly.

### **Alyaksandr Vaitovich**

Belarus should be guided by national interests in its foreign policies. The country's economic interests and geographic position require it to maintain good relations with its neighbors in the East and in the West. The current state of these relations suggests that Belarus should maintain strategic partnership with Russia and seek closer economic and humanitarian ties with the EU.

I would like to note that the term 'Union State' is legally incorrect because it means one, not two independent countries.

The head of our country lambastes various countries, neighboring and more distant ones, almost in every speech. Their statements cause great damage to Belarus. Since I grew up in a village, their behavior evokes associations with a quarrelsome man hated in the village.

### **Andrey Vardamatski**

It should not be a choice between one and the other. It should be a choice of both. It is adequate to the nation's character, mentality, economic situation and geopolitical position. It is our geopolitical, mental and economic fate. There is nothing humiliating about it.

In economic terms, the country is not oriented only to Russia or to the EU. Big financial flaws go in both directions. Our mentality is oriented to the east and to the west because we find our roots on both sides.

### Vintsuk Vyachorka

The question is a bit formalistic. Let us not discuss how real is the CIS or the so-called 'union state'. The country can be formally a member of the CIS (like Ukraine), but advance toward its goal. The country has to choose between different civilizations, while institutional forms and the sequence of steps – first membership of NATO and afterward entry into the EU – are a matter of tactics.

Another option – first Russia, afterward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or something like this – attempts to go against the European mentality of Belarus are doomed to failure.

### Usevalad Yancheuski

Actually, I do not have much to say about the CIS. There was something strange about its establishment and there is something strange about its operation. I do not know what to say. Perhaps, the organization is needed for some non-strategic tasks but these things are of secondary importance.

So, I would put the question aside.

Belarus has found itself between two interesting places, Russia and Europe, that are both in deep crisis.

Russia has a very 'cloudy' fate. There are serious allegations that the Russian Federation is under threat of breakup. There is a huge problem with Central Asian countries that are thinly populated, have enough resources to live by their own and begin looking to China. There is also a huge problem concerning oil. Today's petrodollars are killing Russia. They do it more harm than the economic woes of the 1990s did. Pacified and lulled by oil wealth, Russia misses her chances to correct mistakes of the 1990s. It does not produce anything strategic to make a technological breakthrough and

bring the nation into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The oil and gas drug is terrible. And there is a big risk that it will kill Russia some day.

It is not a coincidence that many in Russia look at the Belarusian model. Whatever one may say, the Belarusian model is a model of how the society should mobilize. We live by manufacturing goods and services, not at the expense of nature's gifts. We survive by our own. The life itself forces us to adhere to sound and flexible policies. We do not have humus rich soil, nor the Samotlors<sup>17</sup>.

Lukashenka's project is aimed at mobilization. Its major plus is that it is aimed at development.

The country gradually moved away from the brink of a disaster to stabilization and sustainable development. It is true that there is no brisk development at the moment. But brisk development will come next. I hope it will happen. The president accurately identifies painful issues – he emphasizes the need to tackle excessive bureaucracy in the government and economy, major minuses that we really have.

One may argue that it is impossible to fight bureaucracy by bureaucratic means. But what kind of means should be used? Government has always used bureaucratic means. Even market reforms are started by BUREAUCRATIC means.

Look at the economy of Singapore, Malaysia or some other Asian country that live under authoritarian rule. Their successes are evident. But I would like to emphasize the fact that they have authoritarian regime, which is tougher than ours, and that their economic policies are far from being liberal. There were very strong liberal elements in the economy of the Asian 'tigers' but there also were very strong elements of control smartly entwined with the former ones.

I believe that Lukashenka follows this path as well, naturally trying to adjust it to local peculiarities.

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<sup>17</sup> Samotlor Field is the largest oil field in Russia located at Lake Samotlor.

In my opinion, Russia would have a chance if it did things like Belarus does. Perhaps, it is the only way that Russia should go.

Meanwhile, Russia continues its own path copying the worst in its sad experience of the Soviet era and the 1990s. The Soviet era gave modern Russia an over-monopolized economy and the gas and oil drug that does not very much encourage it to make a technological breakthrough. Oligarchs and shocking social disparities are something what it has inherited from the 1990s.

At the same time, Belarus paid due tribute to the Soviet Union, refraining from dancing on the bones of the defeated Communist regime, and started moving further. President Lukashenka is really reducing Belarus' dependence on natural resources, which was the country's worst 'vice' in the Soviet era. Belarus bets on high technologies, research and information. We do not follow the path of Nigeria or Ecuador but that of Singapore and Malaysia.

It is true that we do not carry out privatization reform. But it is nice. We should wait until a generation of modern businesspeople who will not mooch but pay comes. We should wait until foreign businesspeople who will be ready to pay come. Citizens of Russia may freely come here but if they are willing to do something they should pay a real price.

Why do not opposition activists hail the president for his reluctance to give some bastards something what does not belong to them? I laugh when I hear opposition activists rebuking the government for charging what they call incredible sums of money for Beltransgaz<sup>18</sup>. What money should the president have asked for? You should be happy that he did not quote a low price. We should attack and criticize the president when he intends to sell something cheap. It is very good when he tries to sell something at a profit.

Even Yushchenko and Tymoshenko showed that Krivorozhstal could have been sold for much more money<sup>19</sup>. I am not a supporter of 'orange'

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<sup>18</sup> The Belarusian government offered Russia's gas giant a stake in national gas pipeline operator Beltransgaz during a dispute in 2004, when Russia briefly cut off supplies, but the two sides could not agree how much it was worth.

<sup>19</sup> Krivorozhstal, Ukraine's largest steel mill factory was sold in 2004 for \$800 million to the IMC consortium, which was owned by two insiders of Leonid Kuchma's regime, tycoon Rinat

politicians but it was a really marvelous move. It showed that everybody in Ukraine, Russia and other Central European countries fell victim to a mega fraud. Something what could have been sold for real money (to whatever Western businesspeople), something what could have been sold honestly and in open auctions was given to insiders. Chubais' idea<sup>20</sup> that the owner runs a business better did not work. The question is what the owner is.

The owner who has set up a business will really run it better. The owner who has bought a business at a real price will manage it better as well. But the owner who has gotten it for free brings to mind the Soviet era's practices.

Russia saw the natural evolution of the Soviet ruling elite which decided to gain more control over the country and privatized property that it had been running on behalf of the people before.

Russia's problem is not that it does not have social justice. The problem is that new owners just sit and cash in on what they have not earned instead of moving ahead.

Things were different in America. There was natural selection there. Companies were set up by clever people because only such could do that. But when you give a factory to a man in the street (or a bandit or a former official), what will they do with it? They will not do much because they simply do not have proper skills.

There were a lot of unprepared and poorly prepared people in Russia and Ukraine after the Soviet Union's fall. They were good at seizing property but they did not know how to manage it.

We have nothing to learn from Russia.

We are in an intricate situation sandwiched between the ageing Europe and a seriously ill Russia. That is why situational tactics is the only one that

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Akhmetov and the former president's son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk. The factory was auctioned for around \$4.80 billion after Viktor Yushchenko came to power.

<sup>20</sup> Anatoly Chubais was Russian President Boris Yeltsin's privatization minister. He is seen as a symbol of the controversial privatization which has transformed Russia since 1991.

we should use. Every day should we look at what is of benefit to our country. Lukashenka is doing so. It is an absolutely sound pragmatism!

We should not rush into anything headfirst. Yushchenko is totally wrong when he says that Ukraine should move toward Europe. It will take at least 10 or 15 years for Ukraine to become part of Europe. It will be a hard and lengthy process. But that is not a major problem.

I have another question. What will Europe look like by that time?

Many politicians make one mistake. They believe that things are static, but we do not live in the Stone Age, or the Middle Ages. The world is changing at a fast pace and it can change radically within five or 10 years. Everything can change enormously.

We all seek stability and predictability. We wish to plan things for many years to come. That is a major problem of modern people because their nature that wants tranquillity is in an appalling contradiction with the swiftly changing civilization they gave birth to. Everything is being done for the sake of changes. Everything is changing here. And people lag behind. Perhaps, this immense controversy will end in a huge disaster for our entire civilization some day.

We still cannot get over this pace and we still feel inclined to make long-term forecasts. But time when it will not be any longer possible to make long-term forecasts is near at hand.

How can you fix a target when mist is around? It is wiser to move within visual range and avoid making plans for years to come.

By the way, this killed the Soviet Union. They liked very much to make long-term plans, but they however failed to foresee their own death.