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## **The Republic of Belarus (1990–1996): transformation of a parliamentary republic into an authoritarian state**

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**Abstrakt** Masowe protesty Białorusinów przeciwko sfałszowaniu wyborów prezydenckich (sierpień 2020) zwróciły uwagę badaczy na charakter postradzieckich reżimów autorytarnych, po raz kolejny postawiły pytanie o przyczyny dojścia do władzy dyktatury na Białorusi (lipiec 1994). Artykuł analizuje siły napędowe reform demokratycznych na Białorusi w pierwszej połowie lat 90., ich osiągnięcia i błędne kalkulacje. W artykule podjęto próbę identyfikacji grup społecznych, które poparły wezwanie „powrotu do ZSRR”.

**Słowa kluczowe** Białoruś, rozpad Związku Radzieckiego, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, transformacja ustrojowa, demokracja parlamentarna, autorytaryzm

**Abstract** The mass protests of Belarusians against the fraud of the presidential elections (August 2020) have drawn the attention of researchers to the nature of the post-Soviet authoritarian regimes and raised once again the question of the reasons for coming to power the dictatorship in Belarus (July 1994). The paper analyses the driving forces of democratic reforms in Belarus in the first half of the 1990s, their achievements and miscalculations. In addition, the article attempts to identify social groups that supported the call “back to the USSR”.

**Key words** Belarus, collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society, political transformation, parliamentary democracy, authoritarianism

### Introduction

In the summer and autumn of 2020, thousands of people participating in peaceful demonstrations expressed the desire of the Belarusian society to force the illegitimate regime of Lukashenka to leave. However, the dictatorship, taking advantage of the protesters' lack of necessary coordination and a specific action plan, and with guarantees from the Kremlin, brutally suppressed the popular protest. The Belarusian authorities could no longer maintain their existence with the help of previous balancing methods and began to rapidly degrade from the authoritarian rule towards totalitarianism (they intensified the persecution of the independent media, massively destroyed non-governmental public organizations and actively intruded into privacy of the citizens in search of dissent). The Belarusian case was perceived by domestic and foreign experts as a political anomaly of the XXI century, when the tightening of the regime and the repressions carried out by it in the spirit of Stalinist terror took

place against the background of the rapid development of information technologies, of the intensification of international contacts and of strengthening of the civil society.

Dictatorial logic led the Minsk regime in February 2022 to material and moral support for the Kremlin's unprovoked aggression against the independent Ukraine, which was not supported by the overwhelming majority of Belarusian citizens<sup>1</sup>.

According to many available criteria, the Belarusian anomaly is doomed to failure even in the short term. This failure will largely depend on the success of Ukrainian weapons. How and when will the reverse transformation of the Belarusian dictatorship into a democratic state take place? What obstacles will the new leadership of the country and civil society face on this path? In answering these and other questions, it becomes relevant to study the dramatic experience of Belarus in the late 1980s and through the first half of the 1990s, when active democratic transformations were taking place in the country, and after the free presidential elections in July 1994, a rapid rollback to authoritarianism began. A lot of domestic and foreign publications are devoted to this historical period, however, referring to the past events from the standpoint of today allows us to assess them more objectively and impartially, as we are aware of the latest subsequent political development of Belarus and of the fate of famous politicians of the past.

The significance of the short period of democratic transformations in Belarus is also highlighted by the fact that the authoritarian regime has been making efforts to destroy the democratic legacy of the parliamentary period for all the subsequent years. This destructive process accelerated after the dramatic events of 2020.

Belarusian authoritarianism is closely associated with the name of Alexander Lukashenka. It is believed that his character traits, habits, political, cultural and economic stereotypes have largely influenced the repressive political regime. Recognizing the importance of the negative subjective factor associated with the mentioned populist and a demagogue, it is still necessary to analyse more deeply the objective prerequisites of the political and economic model that has developed in Belarus. One of them is the low national awareness of the Belarusian population which consists of several large social groups with opposing interests and the weak desire to create a sovereign democratic state.

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<sup>1</sup> Богуславская 2022.

## Achievements of the Belarusian democratic forces during the parliamentary republic

It is well known that the authoritarian rule in Belarus was preceded by a short but very eventful period of democratic transformations. According to many experts, Belarus got a chance to become an independent state largely due to favourable external conditions – the position of neighbouring countries, primarily Russia and its first president Boris Yeltsin<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time, no external conditions would have led to the creation of an independent Belarusian state without the activity of internal driving forces. It was a great success of the Belarusian people to develop a small but highly motivated national democratic elite. It was a minority who at the right time and at the right moment proposed a national agenda to the Belarusian society, managed to make important decisions through the amorphous and conservative Belarusian parliament – the Supreme Council of the XII convocation (1990–1995)<sup>3</sup>. The scale of the merits of the small Belarusian democracy is especially noticeable against the background of the public sentiment that existed at the turning point. Thus, according to opinion polls, in 1990, only 12% of the population of Belarus supported state sovereignty<sup>4</sup>.

What were those democratic forces which actively advocated the independent choice of Belarus, political freedoms, and the market economy in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s? Most supporters of the creation of a democratic state in Belarus, as in many other countries, would come from the so-called middle class, whose representatives have largely succeeded both in moral and material terms.

The most prominent group among the adherents of the independent democratic Belarus were the representatives of education and science, culture and art. They became the “engine of the second Belarusization”, which began in the late 1980s and made serious efforts to develop and popularize the Belarusian language and national history. This group was actively supported by high school students as well as by students and postgraduates of Belarusian universities. Thanks to the activities of these groups, secondary schools began to switch to the Belarusian language. Belarusian-language lecture streams were created at universities, many courses were taught in the national language, including natural science subjects<sup>5</sup>.

In 1991, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus established a committee to develop a new concept of historical education under the

<sup>2</sup> Mironowicz 2021, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> Навумчык 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Котляр 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Buhr 2011.

leadership of Professor Mikhail Bič, which by 1993 presented the main directions of the concept of historical education. According to this concept, since 1993, 4th grade pupils for the first time began studying a separate course on the history of Belarus. The course presented the events in the history of the Belarusian lands from a new perspective. The amount of study time allocated to teaching Belarusian history has increased several times<sup>6</sup>.

Notable successes have been achieved in expanding the use of the Belarusian language. Thus, according to the Law “On Languages in the Belarusian SSR” adopted in January 1990, the Belarusian language was declared the only state language. Real measures to implement the adopted legislation gave quick results. In 1978 there were 905 preschool institutions and 18.3% of the total number of kindergartens in Belarus where all the classes were held in Belarusian, while in 1993 there were already 3277 of them (68.6%). Until May 1995 the educational process has been fully translated into Belarusian in preschool institutions in many districts and cities of the country. In the 1994–1995 academic year, about 80% of first graders started their studies in the Belarusian language (in 1986–1987 – this figure was only 15%)<sup>7</sup>.

The establishment of the authoritarian power in Belarus (November 1996) did not stop the growth of the number of supporters of the independent democratic Belarus. It continued to increase due to introducing into the active life the representatives of the younger generation. Although at a slow pace, there was a process of expansion of civil society whose representatives supported national democratic values, maintained hopes for democratic changes in the country, and tried to accelerate this change as much as possible. The protest potential of citizens who did not accept the authoritarian regime was most clearly manifested during the presidential election campaigns (2001, 2006, 2010, 2020). However, the protest electorate failed to displace the dictatorship that was held by the authorities with the help of cynical propaganda, brute force, moral and financial support from the Kremlin.

As an example of the drama of the passionate part of the Belarusian nation, I would like to cite a story told by a primary school teacher from one of the Minsk schools. During the video shooting in March 1997, the 2nd grade pupils were asked to talk about their cherished dream. The pupil Sergey replied that his biggest wish was to “remove Lukashenka”. It is obvious that the child’s views were formed in a family that accepted independent Belarus and passed on their critical attitude to the established regime to their son. More than a quarter of a century has passed since the interview, unfortunately the boy’s dream remains unfulfilled.

<sup>6</sup> Бич 1993, pp. 15–24.

<sup>7</sup> Шадурский 2016, pp. 94.

The second fast-growing group advocating democratic changes in the country included Belarusians engaged in small and medium-sized businesses, including those associated with foreign capital. Thus, already in the period from August 1991 to July 1994, 1,309 private enterprises and 452 foreign companies started their businesses in Belarus. Almost half of them were established in the period from January 1993 to July 1994. More than 80% of the funds invested in them came from Poland, Germany, the USA, Italy and Canada<sup>8</sup>.

Due to the nature of their activities, these businessmen were forced to look for effective solutions in their area of responsibility. Belarusian businessmen had to manoeuvre between the growing claims of the state bureaucracy and the need to make a profit. Private business, despite the obstacles of the authoritarian regime, won the competition against the inefficient state-owned enterprises that were on permanent subsidies. Every year this circumstance became more and more obvious, especially with the development of the high-tech IT sector, which provided high incomes. Namely, representatives of the Belarusian business, including employees of the information technology sector, became active participants in mass protests in 2020 and after the brutal repression were forced to leave Belarus in masse<sup>9</sup>.

The insufficient number of democracy supporters, divisions among the entire population of the country, the coordination and consistency of protest activities have been some of the most serious challenges for the democratic forces of Belarus. One of the manifestations of these difficulties was the underdevelopment of the system of Belarusian political parties. It is known that the organizational formation of supporters of democratic transformations began in the late 1980s. The first official political association of democratic forces was established on October 19th, 1988. The public organization “Martyrology of Belarus” set as its task the study of Stalinist political repressions. The organizing committee of the “Belarusian Popular Front” (BPF) was formed at the meeting of the “Martyrology”. It continued to work on convening the Founding Congress of the BPF “Vozroždenie” (“Revival”) in Vilnius (June 24–25, 1989). It was the BPF that became the main opposition political force in Belarus that contributed to the most important achievements in the creation of an independent state<sup>10</sup>.

In the spring of 1991, 5 parties in opposition to CPSU–CPB were registered in Belarus: the United Democratic Party of Belarus, the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada, the National Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Union and the Belarusian Peasants’ Party<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Marples 1999, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Кошелев 2022.

<sup>10</sup> The BPF Party 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Политические партии 2003.

The presidential elections in 1994 contributed to the intensification of the activities of political parties. By the beginning of the election campaign, 34 political parties that began to create electoral associations were registered in the country. The bloc of right-wing parties (National Democrats) was represented by the Belarusian People's Front (BPF), the National Democratic Party of Belarus, the Belarusian Christian Democratic Union. The national revival was declared the main line of the bloc. Zenon Poznyak was nominated as a presidential candidate. The bloc of parties "Viasna-94" (Liberal Democrats), which proclaimed the ideas of freedom, equality, solidarity, national revival, democracy, and human rights, formed social democratic parties (the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada, the Belarusian Peasants' Party and the Liberal United Democratic Party). The leader of the bloc was the former speaker of the Parliament Stanislav Shushkevich. The bloc of left-wing parties was formed by the Belarusian Communists Party, the Agrarian Party of Belarus, the Republican Party of Labor and Justice, as well as socio-political associations "Movement for Democracy, Social Progress and Justice" and "People's Movement of Belarus". The presidential candidate from this bloc was the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party Vasily Novikov. The Union of Agrarians of Belarus, which nominated Alexander Dubko, the chairman of a large collective farm from the Grodno region, for the president, went to the elections independently<sup>12</sup>.

The parties mentioned above were small, their members gathered around some charismatic personalities, having no specific programs. There was no effective coordination of actions between the democratic parties. This was clearly manifested both in the first presidential election campaign, when two non-partisan candidates entered the second round, and in all the subsequent ones. In the conditions of the coming authoritarianism, the parties found themselves on the periphery of the political process, they existed *de iure*, but were *de facto* absent as serious political forces and did not have significant support among Belarusian citizens.

The activity of public organizations (NGOs) was characterized by greater dynamics and mass character both during the period of the parliamentary republic and during the years of the authoritarian regime. The most notable work was carried out by the non-governmental structures of human rights, of the analytical, environmental and cultural orientation. With the support of foreign foundations and local activists in the conditions of an authoritarian regime, they often remained the only support of democratically minded citizens in the implementation of socially significant initiatives. It is not surprising that NGOs were the first to fall under the regime's repressions in 2020. Until the beginning

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

of July 2022 (starting from August 2020) about 800 Belarusian non-governmental organizations were liquidated or were in the process of liquidation. So, there is not a single human rights organization left in the country<sup>13</sup>.

It is obvious that in the conditions of the transition period, due to the lack of experience, the supporters of the democratic change inevitably made mistakes, as they could not always objectively determine priorities in their work and acted without the necessary coordination.

### Contradictions and challenges in the activities of the Belarusian democratic forces

One of the missed opportunities of democratic forces during the parliamentary period was when democratic deputies of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of the XII convocation (1990–1995) prevented early parliamentary elections. According to many researchers, new elections could have contributed to a much greater representation of the supporters of change in the Parliament, which could have made the transformations that had begun in the country irreversible. Members of the BPF parliamentary fraction in early 1992 had taken the initiative to hold a national referendum on the issue of new elections. By April 1992, they had submitted 440,000 signatures to the Parliament in support of a nationwide plebiscite. The Supreme Council, including its leader Stanislav Shushkevich, did not support the initiative, referring mainly to the invalidity of many signatures<sup>14</sup>.

However, it should be taken into account that the democratically minded chairman of the Parliament and his supporters did not have the necessary majority in the legislative body. According to the current legislation, only a majority of deputies could take a decision on holding a referendum. It is unlikely that representatives of the so-called “silent communist majority” were willing to voluntarily lose their parliamentary privileges. Low political culture was the reason why democratic procedures in a transitional society were vulnerable.

The prospective content of the future Constitution of the Republic of Belarus was more unpredictable and complicated. The most controversial topic of the constitution was the introduction of the presidential power. As the subsequent experience of Belarus and other similar countries has shown, the rejection of a parliamentary republic in conditions of weak democratic institutions, vulnerability of the population to demagoguery and populism, expectations of a “heavy hand rule”, became a serious (fatal) mistake of Belarusian

<sup>13</sup> Мониторинг 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Marples 1999, p. 61; Навумчык 2013.

parliamentarians. Although democratically elected parliaments did not always ensure the sustainability of their countries' development, they were a serious obstacle to the emergence and strengthening of authoritarianism. Thus, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of the XIII convocation (1995–1996), elected already under the presidential power, became the last bastion in countering the dictatorship and was illegally liquidated by Lukashenka with the assistance of the Russian authorities in November 1996<sup>15</sup>.

As you know, the “party of power” led by the Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, who claimed the post of the president, mobilized its apparatus to support the introduction of a presidential republic and won in this case.

The new Belarusian Constitution also contained other deviations from the democratic achievements of the late 1980s and early 1990s. BSU Professor Vladimir Snapkovsky drew attention to the different use of the fundamental concepts (terms) in the Declaration on State Sovereignty (July 1990) and the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (March 1994). Thus, the term “Belarusian people”, which in the Declaration was understood as a set of citizens of Belarus of all nationalities united around the indigenous Belarusian ethnic group, was replaced in the Constitution by the legal concept of “people of the Republic of Belarus (Belarus)”. This definition, according to the professor, was largely devoid of ethnic content and national flavour, which the Constitution of any unitary state cannot avoid<sup>16</sup>.

A serious problem of the small democratic camp concerned the lack of unity and coordination in their activities. The democratic forces in Belarus in the first half of the 1990s were represented by national democratic and liberal democratic streams, the ambitions and uncompromising nature of individual leaders began to turn into a serious obstacle. This was particularly evident during the presidential election campaign of 1994 and the elections of the Supreme Council of the XIII convocation (1995). Unity was absent not only in the coordination of actions during the most important political campaigns, but also in the choice of prospects for the development of the country (geopolitical priorities, bilingualism, national version of history, etc.).

The problem of leadership has become a constant obstacle for the democratic movement. In our opinion, the Belarusian politician Gennady Karpenko had a good chance of becoming the leader of the democratic forces in 1994. In the spring of 1994, as the mayor of the city of Molodechno, he was nominated as a presidential candidate with 78 signatures of deputies (with 70 required). However, on the eve of the completion of the procedure for submitting signatures to the Central Election Commission, 14 deputies withdrew their

<sup>15</sup> Silitski 2003, pp. 45–46.

<sup>16</sup> Снапкоўскі 2012, pp. 100–104.



signatures. Counting on the support of deputies, Gennady Karpenko did not pay due attention to the “backup” option – the collection of 100 000 signatures of voters. It turned out that out of the 108,354 signatures collected for him, only 93 472 were recognized as valid. In 1995, Gennady Karpenko was elected the deputy of the Supreme Council of the XIII convocation, and then – the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Council, became the deputy chairman of the legislative body. After the illegal dissolution of the parliament, he headed the National Executive Committee created by the Belarusian opposition. Unfortunately, this well-known politician died in April 1999 under circumstances that were not fully clarified<sup>17</sup>.

It was a serious challenge (it can hardly be called a mistake) for the democratic forces of Belarus that they did not receive the proper support of Western democracies. For the latter, Belarus, like other post-Soviet states, except for the Baltic states, seemed to be a traditional zone of Russian influence, which did not imply too much national political and economic presence. Perhaps this explains the serious delay in signing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Belarus. This agreement, which had been in preparation for several years, was signed only in March 1995 during the visit of President A. Lukashenka to Brussels.

It is obvious that young democracies in transition need strong external support. This is clearly seen in the example of the Central European states, which have received huge assistance from the “old democracies”. Belarus has not received such support.

### The establishment of authoritarianism in Belarus as the revenge of the “Soviet man”

In accordance with the new Constitution, Belarusian citizens had the opportunity to elect the first president of an independent country by democratic vote in June–July 1994. The democratic forces went to the polls in several camps and as is known, suffered a crushing defeat. The “party of power” of Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich was also defeated. The former director of a sovkhoz (state farm) with great political ambitions, but without specific experience and a program of action, took the presidential post, gaining 80.34% of votes.

Alexander Lukashenka focused on the Soviet experience familiar to him, which he tried to implement in politics, economics, culture, education, and other significant spheres. The analysis of the success and the support of most of the population for the subsequent actions of this figure leads to the

<sup>17</sup> Гарэцкі 2017.

conclusion that even a more coordinated and successful activity of the Belarusian democratic forces could hardly prevent the transformation of the parliamentary republic into a personalized autocracy. Scattered and few Democrats could not resist the more numerous and rather aggressive supporters of the “Soviet people”. The election of a politician whose program was based on the call “back to the USSR” became a revenge of the “Soviet man” who dreamed of the revival of the Soviet (Russian) empire. The views of the supporters of the winning approach largely depended on nationality, place of residence, age and level of education.

Obvious support for the future dictator was provided by most of the natives of Russia, who for various reasons moved to Belarusian cities and occupied a privileged position in them. The creation of an independent state with a unique language, history and culture on the territory of the former Union Republic (“Russian province”) seemed to them and their like-minded people to be a big misunderstanding. Belarusian national values, primarily in the assessments of the historical past, caused rejection among the opponents of Belarusian independence, accusations of “polonophilism” and oblivion of common roots, etc. The Belarusian language was evaluated by its opponents as a “dialect of the Russian language” artificially shaped into a literary form in the 1920s<sup>18</sup>.

Military pensioners and officers of military units stationed in Belarus were an integral part of the “Russian world”. So, at the end of 1991, only 20% of officers were Belarusians by nationality. The highest officers of the Belarusian army, with rare exceptions, remained pro-Russian. In order to reduce the Belarusian national influence among the military, in May 1993, the head of the Belarusian Military Association, Lieutenant Colonel Nikolai Statkevich, who became a well-known opposition figure of Belarus, was dismissed to the reserve<sup>19</sup>.

A typical representative of the noted pro-Russian group was Colonel Vladimir Zametalin, who began his civilian career in the government of Vyacheslav Kebich, and then worked for many years under the leadership of Alexander Lukashenka, which included holding high posts of Deputy Prime Minister (1997–2000) and first deputy head of the presidential administration (2000–2001). As a part of his official duties, the former military man supervised the issues of ideology and socio-cultural sphere, including the development of the Belarusian language. The attitude of the former high-ranking official to the national language, which he had to maintain in the duty of his former service, was vividly demonstrated by the scandal that occurred in May 2018. In response to the cashier’s appeal in Belarusian, Zametalin rudely remarked that

<sup>18</sup> Ioffe 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Mironowicz 2021, pp. 198, 202.

he did not want to talk “in your f\*cking language,” then demanded to read the constitution and answer him in Russian<sup>20</sup>.

The largest group of opponents to the changes were the indigenous people of Belarus employed in agriculture and the so called “first generation city dwellers” – people from rural areas who received a city residence permit along with a workplace at industrial facilities in Minsk and other cities. Belarusian cities, growing rapidly in the post-war period, became a kind of “a melting pot” in which rural Belarusians were turned into “Soviet people”<sup>21</sup>.

Belarusians who worked in collective agricultural enterprises and large factories were showing their growing dissatisfaction with the economic changes and the inevitable crisis phenomena. The rigidly centralized directive economy in the USSR which eradicated the initiative for decades, did not develop the necessary management and business skills. Peasants were frightened by the dissolution of the collective farms and of the state farms proposed by marketeers who were the main employers for the villagers (the basis of the social and cultural life in the countryside). Most of the villagers were not tempted by the prospects of independent work. In turn, low-skilled representatives of the industrial sector feared the closure of inefficient production and, as a result, job cuts. Many of them did not see prospects for themselves in a new society with strong competition and the need for constant improvement of their labour qualifications.

For various reasons, the inhabitants of the already sovereign Belarus, for the most part, remained carriers of the consciousness of the so-called “Homo Sovieticus” or “Soviet people”. The Soviet people is a concept that characterizes the multi-ethnic civic community of the USSR. Russian imperial idea (the Russian language, the Russian version of history, the world mission of the Soviet (Russian) people, conformism, constant search for external enemies, etc.) was laid in the basis of the ideology of the Soviet people with some modification. It is not surprising that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of the “Soviet people” was rapidly transformed into the concept of the “Russian world”.

The form and content of the “Soviet people” and the “Soviet man” will attract the attention of researchers for a long time. Soviet and post-Soviet propaganda portrayed them as highly moral people fighting for universal justice, equality and collectivism, ready to sacrifice personal benefits for the public interest. However, in reality, the essence of the “Soviet man”, the “Soviet way of life” was constant hypocrisy and lies, pervasive censorship, lack of freedom of opinion and information. Spells of universal equality were combined with

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<sup>20</sup> Мужчина, похожий 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Bekus 2022.

mass poverty and the presence of numerous hidden privileges for the employees of the party-state apparatus and their entourage. Loud calls for peace coexisted with the imposition of militarism and imperial consciousness from early childhood, the constant build-up of weapons was undermining the already weakening administrative and command economy. Declarations on the friendship of peoples and internationalism of Soviet citizens covered up anti-Semitism, hatred of other, more successful economic countries, coming down from the highest level.

As a result of state terror, the atmosphere of constant fear and personal humiliation, as well as cynical propaganda about the advantage of the “Soviet way of life”, a negative moral selection of the “Soviet man” took place. Obviously, the majority of such people were not ready to abandon their usual conditions and rules of life, to support democratic reforms.

Nostalgia of many Belarusians for the Soviet past was reinforced by their positive attitude to the results of the post-war modernization of the BSSR. Large financial investments aimed at implementing the Kremlin’s plans to equip the “western gates of the USSR”, to make Belarus an example of the success of socialist construction, allowed for large-scale industrialization of the formerly agrarian territory, and significantly raised the standard of living of the inhabitants of the republic. One of the consequences of the rapid industrialization was the rapid growth of the population of Minsk (it became a city with a million inhabitants in 1972) and other cities largely due to the migration of representatives of Russia and all other republics, which became the trigger for the rapid Russification of the population.

Thus, in the eyes of many Belarusians, the Soviet socialist system seemed less discredited than among the residents of other Soviet territories. Many Belarusians preferred Soviet stability to the unpredictability of economic transformations, a “heavy hand rule” to political pluralism. Belarusian citizens did not see the advantages of democracy, did not want to compare their situation to the practice of developed countries. People did not consider it necessary to develop and correct their views but tried to find simple answers to their expectations in the proposed election programs. Populist politicians took full advantage of this.

Despite the fact that most of Lukashenka’s supporters were Belarusians by origin, the Belarusian language was not of high value to them. The villagers who moved to the city sought to get rid of the status of a “kolkhoznik” (collective farmer), “a native of the village”, trying to speak Russian. However, many former villagers did not manage to completely get rid of the characteristic Belarusian pronunciation and mixed vocabulary – “trasyanka”. With the beginning of active Belarusization, they did not want to return to the Belarusian language, because it negated their previous efforts to adapt to the Russian-speaking

environment and required a new strain of strength. The People's writer of Belarus Vasil Bykov, in one of his interviews in 1993, very figuratively called this category of the population "people starved without cheap sausage and frightened by the "terrible" Belarusian language<sup>22</sup>."

It should be noted that among the Belarusians who supported the ambitious populist in the elections, there were many democratically minded citizens who believed in Lukashenka's loud promises to strengthen society's control over the bureaucracy, and to take the necessary measures to combat corruption and crime. Representatives of this group of Belarusians could not be called opponents to the Belarusian history and culture, they only considered it necessary to legislate the actual practice in the language sphere, they hoped for equal coexistence and development of the Belarusian and Russian languages. They sought to find the necessary compromise in the conditions of the increasing confrontation.

Speaking about the high electoral support of Lukashenka, it is necessary to pay attention to the behaviour of the state bureaucracy. It was difficult to call the central and local bureaucratic nomenclature of Belarus monolithic in the first years of independence, but in general it was characterized by little interest in strengthening of the independent state based on the national Belarusian values. For the most part, the bureaucracy was indifferent to the national democratic programs, it did not seek to show independence, preferred to focus on Moscow in its decisions. Most likely, the more and less important officials were in favour of the status quo, that is, they supported the head of the government Vyacheslav Kebich in the first round of elections. However, seeing the inevitable loss of their patron, they began to bet on the winner. With the election of Lukashenka to the post of president, the tensions in the ranks of the nomenclature that had emerged in the conditions of a parliamentary republic were stopped. The bureaucratic machine was forced to unquestioningly follow the instructions of an authoritarian politician.

The groups of Belarusian citizens listed above, despite their heterogeneity, differences in motivation, made up the majority for the population of the young state that voted in the election of the future dictator, and then supported his further steps to create the authoritarian system in Belarus.

Lukashenka's success was undoubtedly facilitated by the active purposeful activity of his election team, which mainly consisted of ambitious deputies of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of the XII convocation, who had a reputation of democrats. In journalism, these people were called "young wolves". Based on the effective demagoguery of their poorly educated colleagues, they expected to receive the status of "power brokers" in the new

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<sup>22</sup> Васіль Быкаў 2022.

leadership of the country. Indeed, after the election of Lukashenka to the presidential post, members of his election team received high state posts. However, gradually most of them lost their leadership position. Viktor Gonchar, Yuri Zakharenko, who were part of Lukashenka's electoral team and went into opposition, disappeared, Anatoly Lebedko, Alexander Feduta, Valery Tsepka and others were subjected to repressions of the regime in the subsequent years<sup>23</sup>. The tragedy of politicians who, for the sake of their personal career interests, contributed to the breakthrough of potential dictators to power is not uncommon in the political history of many countries and peoples.

### Strengthening the personal authoritarian regime

Belarus was one of the first countries in the post-Soviet space to adopt an authoritarian course. It has become a kind of laboratory of measures to restrict democratic approaches at the state, regional and local levels, and increase the repressive measures against dissent. Then this trend was picked up by other states, primarily Russia.

Having come to power, Alexander Lukashenka (according to the apt expression of many analysts – a “political animal”)<sup>24</sup>, feeling the mood of the electorate, from the first days began to put into practice his political stereotypes. Gradually, his pro-Soviet and pro-Russian views, which aroused the approval of a significant part of the population, with the help of his assistants who joined him, began to acquire specific guidelines and legislative initiatives, supported by practical actions of the state bureaucratic apparatus.

Lukashenka's understanding of his power was based on the thesis that the president is an institution ruling over all the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial). On behalf of the people, the president, in his opinion, should control all state institutions in the country, if necessary, regulate and change legislation at his discretion.

The first “significant” initiative of the new head of state was the elimination of the national and ethnic principles of the country's development. Along with three other questions, the President proposed the question “Do you agree with giving the Russian language an equal status with the Belarusian language?” to the referendum (May 1995). 83.3% of the referendum participants supported the initiative of the head of state. The majority (75.1%) of the referendum participants supported the change of national symbols and closer integration with Russia (83.3%). 77.7% of the citizens who took part in the referendum

<sup>23</sup> Карбалевиц 2010, p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Светлана Алексеевич 2019.

voted for the president's right to dissolve parliament if it violates the constitution<sup>25</sup>. Mass support, repeated at the first referendum, gave Lukashenka self-confidence in the effectiveness of his course to strengthen his personal power, gave him free rein in the further elimination of democratic achievements of previous years.

Lukashenka made the so-called vertical of power (the “presidential register”) his main tool for strengthening personal rule, within which careful selection of managers and employees from the upper to the lowest echelons of governance was carried out. The Law “On Local Self-Government and Local Economy” of February 9th 1995, introduced the practice of appointing heads of the regional and district executive authorities, the heads of major enterprises and institutions. This event was the most important stage in the process of forming an authoritarian regime<sup>26</sup>.

For example, the Kremlin leadership subsequently took advantage of this “experience” of Belarus. So, in 2004 Vladimir Putin decided to cancel the elections of the heads of regions of Russia. This dead-end initiative was opposed by many Russian politicians and experts, including one of the leaders of the opposition forces, Vladimir Ryzhkov. In the discussion on this issue, he noted that the cancellation of the local government elections would lead “to the stupid fooling of people, complete censorship on television and mass election fraud.” Ryzhkov also concluded that in Russia, the vertical of power and the heavy hand rule always ended in chaos, war, and ruin<sup>27</sup>.

When selecting for a particular position in Belarus, preference was given not to the business and professional qualities of candidates, but to their personal devotion to the dictator, their readiness to unquestioningly carry out orders from above, even in cases where they contradicted the existing legislation. Communicating with the students of the Academy of Management (October 2019), Lukashenka said that the above-mentioned register included 850 people appointed by him who have “protection and immunity”<sup>28</sup>.

High manageability of the bureaucratic apparatus was achieved by reducing its initiative in a professional management training. Statistics showed that agricultural specialists, former employees of law enforcement agencies, who did not have the necessary educational foundation to perform managerial activities, were recruited to high positions<sup>29</sup>.

Particular attention was paid to the selection of candidates for senior positions in law enforcement agencies, recruiting employees for the repressive

<sup>25</sup> Сегодня 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Ровдо 2009, р. 97.

<sup>27</sup> Что оппозиционер 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Лукашенко 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Лукашенко 2022.

structures providing the material encouragement. Their numbers grew rapidly, much attention was paid not only to the characteristic training of personnel, but also to their ideological processing. In terms of the number of employees of paramilitary structures per capita, Belarus is ahead of all European countries<sup>30</sup>.

Lukashenka quickly appreciated the importance of “referendums” to strengthen his personal power. The so-called “appeal to the people” in conditions of full control over the executive power (1995, 1996, 2004, 2022) gave the ruler ample opportunities for psychological manipulation of the public consciousness of the uninitiated in the details of the population. The regime was not stopped by the objective criticism of the falsifications of the results of referendums and election results at all levels by democratic states and internal opposition. As the dictatorship strengthened, the noted falsifications became more and more extensive and sophisticated.

In November 1996, Lukashenka once again took advantage of the nationwide referendum held with violations (November 24, 1996) to destroy the Supreme Council of the XIII convocation that resisted him and to establish a personalistic authoritarian regime in the country that exists in Belarus to this day. The internal opposition and democratic states assessed the events as a coup d'état. According to the figurative expression of the Belarusian political scientist Vladimir Rovdo, the political system of Belarus under Lukashenka has degraded almost to the level of the despotic regime described in the XVIII century by Montesquieu, in which the sovereign alone adopted laws, implemented them, judged and punished subjects for their violation<sup>31</sup>.

## Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis of the studied events in the designated period, it should be confirmed that the rollback of democracy that began in Belarus in 1994 after the first presidential elections was a natural, rather than a random phenomenon. The experience of Belarus and other post-Soviet states has clearly demonstrated that democratic transformations could be consolidated only with the combination of favourable internal and external conditions. Unfortunately, these conditions did not work out in Belarus in the mid-1990s. Most of the Belarusian population remained carriers of the consciousness of the so-called “Soviet man”, for whom it was more usual to exist in the conditions of an administrative-command economy and an authoritarian-totalitarian political system.

<sup>30</sup> Кисляков 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Ровдо 2009, p. 96.



Low political culture did not allow them to understand the prospects of democratic transformations. It is obvious that the reformist forces of Belarus have not received the necessary moral and material support from democratic states.

Belarus was not unique in the curtailment of democratic transformations and the transition to authoritarianism. This path was repeated by many republics of the former USSR and, above all, by the Russian Federation. To some extent, Belarus is called a “testing ground” of authoritarianism, a source of “experience” for the ruling regimes in suppressing internal protests and neutralizing external pressure.

It can be assumed that the experience of the Belarusian protests in 2020 against the authoritarian regime, the further struggle of civil society for the return of Belarus to a democratic form of government will also have not only national, but also the international significance.

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