

Belarus: Neither Europe, nor Russia

Opinions of Belarusian elites

Stefan Batory Foundation
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STEFAN **BATORY**
FOUNDATION



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Introduction

The interviews published in this book were recorded between March and May 2006, during and immediately after a presidential election in Belarus. It is not incidental that respondents often allude to that political campaign.

In the spring of 2006, independent pollsters said it was impossible to conduct surveys in the country because of the lack of proper conditions for interviewing people. The conclusion came after nearly 25 percent of respondents refused to say who they voted for on exiting polling stations. Those who were taking interviews for the book came across the same difficulties. More than half of the potential respondents refused to cooperate. Among those who declined requests for an interview were all athletes and businesspeople approached, a majority of cultural figures, artists, journalists with connections to the authorities and officials.

Refusals may help identify spheres whose representatives are more exposed to the government's pressure.

The material does not purport to be exhaustive and comprehensive, but it should be of interest to people curious about the Belarusian elite's views on national identity and Belarus' relations with European countries and Russia. It shows that ideas and mentality of people belonging to one group, the pro-democratic or pro-European part of society, are very diverse and often conflict with each other.

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*Valer Bulhakau
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Dilemmas of choice

By Vital Silitski

One of the respondents gave a genially concise and accurate explanation of the project. ‘One should be someone’, said Pavel Daneika, an economist and businessman. The questions definitely implied one more related requirement, ‘One should be somewhere’.

So, why do we look for an answer to the question ‘Where are we?’ while trying to determine who we are? May be it is not a matter of excessive politicization of identity projects being discussed at present, because politicization is inevitable under the political, social, geographic and geopolitical conditions in which the nation is being shaped in Belarus. In any case, attempts to establish identity of the state and nation (or refusal to do so) are bound to change the balance of power, status, influence of political, social and intellectual actors. To a considerable degree, an answer to the question ‘Where are we?’ is intended to help define the substance of national identity – what moments in history we should be proud of or ashamed of; who should we call heroes as an example for our children to follow and who are traitors; what events should be remembered and what should we avoid to mention. One may question the need for including these elements of national mythology in the national project. But it is evident that the current political regime in Belarus also picks certain myths in an effort to prolong its existence. It is also evident that it has obvious political goals: to preserve itself as long as possible. Lukashenka has sent a challenge and we should respond to it or accept what he offers (or someone would say imposes on) us.

Therefore, it is natural that to define the Belarusians as a nation, we sought to associate them with ideas that determine civilization patterns such as 'Europe', 'Russia', 'the Slavic community' etc. I place a particular emphasis on ideals as distinguished from real geographical and political borders. (Although unlike the European Union, it is difficult to draw the border of Europe – either along the River Bug, or near Orsha, or along the Urals or one may even include Australia and New Zealand depending on his or her personal perception of Europe.) But to find out where we are, everyone refers to an imaginary, not real community or civilization. For example, a picture of Russia drawn by the Belarusian ruling elite and public often differs from Russia as it was or is in reality. The misconception is largely to blame for confusion that we often observe during the show called 'Belarusian-Russian integration'. This is also the reason why many pro-Russian democrats became disillusioned with the possibility of political changes in the country under influence from the East. The same concerns Europe, even to a greater degree. Discussion of Belarus' role in Europe and its prospects in terms of EU membership would make no sense if we viewed the subject differently from other Europeans (it would be the same if others viewed us differently from the way we see ourselves). It is not a question of whether we know or do not know each other. (Regretfully, the Belarusians have a very limited political, intellectual and human contact with the rest of the world and Europe particular). 'The other' is, like we, in the process of transformation and re-identification, not a fixed structure. The other can also be confused and disoriented. Whereas our own perception of ourselves could be a starting point or a stimulus for certain social modification, for adjusting the reality to a certain idea (this is what a national project is about in general), it is much more difficult, or even impossible to change others. But it may be possible to change the way we are seen in the bigger world that we seek to enter.

It is primarily the national and cultural elite that deals with the establishment of national identity and civilization choices. 'Creativity of the masses' cannot be ruled out, but it is obvious that few ordinary people can achieve

a moral and intellectual breakthrough. Or let us put it this way: those who prove to be able to deal with these issues become the national elite.

Therefore, the elite are not those who talk more than others. The elite are those who are heard better than others. According to the former criteria, the elite would be limited to Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Belarusian television show presenters and those who write and edit their texts. This book, however, presents views of representatives of the political, cultural and intellectual communities. These are people whose status and achievements make them entitled to be elite under normal conditions. The book mainly presents views of ‘the counter-elite’ – those who resist political dominance and ideology imposed by the current political regime. The pro-government camp is represented by figures prominent and particularly conspicuous by their attitude to the issues raised by authors.

The counter-elite includes representatives of diverse circles – politicians and cultural figures, journalists and economists, writers and human right defenders.

Judging by the composition of respondents, authors have managed to bring together people who can give detailed and clear answers to the above-mentioned questions. Do not only they offer an insight into the Belarusians’ true nature, but they also visualize the future. This vision helps define in a way the public moral code and legitimize or cast aside certain political and cultural practices. The real elite cannot and should not impose its visions. It should rather think of ways to have its vision accepted by the public. This is the main difference of the elite from the regime, junta or executive vertical. On the other hand, if it recycled mass mentality stereotypes in order to get recognition, it could hardly be distinguished from the masses. One should keep a tricky balance between pragmatism and intellectual timidity.

One should not expect a national project to be formulated in one book. Even so, this book is of great value because it offers an opportunity to see whether the Belarusian elite (of course I mean the counter-elite in the first place) is prepared to give the answers. Analyses of the answers can give rise to polemics since the author of this article also has views that differ

from that of respondents. By no means, I want my thoughts to be taken as criticism. Instead, I would like to highlight, to my view, issues on which there is no consensus in society or among the elite. I will try to find where we are in our reflections and aspirations, and whether we have any aspirations at all, as Uladzimer Matskevich put it, ‘think Belarus’ and I would add ‘the world around us’.

Who are we?

How do we imagine ourselves? Who are we or who should we be? There were different answers to this question. The opinions of respondents appear to prove that Belarusians’ sense of identity is taking shape. Many say this in their answers (Kalinkina, Litsvina, Buhrova and Vardamatski). This is a process of understanding that the Belarusians are different from others, rather than identifying what unites them in their own world and in their society. Iryna Buhrova says that a distance from other states and peoples helps shape national identity. (Kasya Kamotskaya reflects on such a negative identity in a bit different context). However, the external distance does not reflect on the internal state, consolidation, a sense of unity and proximity. As Kasya Kamotskaya said hesitantly, ‘Nationals of other countries would probably describe what is a Belarusian. But to me... it seems the process is still underway’.

What direction has it taken? Several respondents (Dynko, Vyachorka, Buraukin and Sannikau) noted the importance of the national language and culture. Interestingly, Yauhen Babosau, a representative of the official side (the scholar who failed in his effort to squeeze *Belaruskasts* into Lukashenka’s ideology), offered the most succinct and challenging wording of the idea, ‘Belarusian identity is the *Belarusian national language*’. Few respondents, except, strange as it may seem, for representatives of the ruling elite, make references to collective memory and the historical path of Belarusians (though Usevalad Yancheuski says that the Belarusians’ main trait is their Soviet mentality, and many would subscribe to this point of view). Others avoid direct answers or say that classic language-based national identity is

impossible in Belarus, 'In my opinion, at the beginning of the 21st century, Belarusian identity, based on the principle of ethnicity, including its fundamental elements such as the common territory, blood, history and culture, is not that inadequate but it does not have clear prospects' (Manayeu). Abramava put it straightforwardly, 'With jingoistic slogans put aside, being a Belarusian means feeling that you belong to this land'.

Manayeu, above all, means to say that the so-called 'Belarusian-language national project' – building a state and a nation on the common language, ethnicity, culture and history foundation as proposed by Belarusian nationalists (although I doubt that such a common project exists) – is not feasible. However, with language and culture left off the agenda, we would have to answer the question 'what is instead?' or 'what else?'. Indeed, the lack of a unique national language does not necessarily mean that a nation cannot be founded without a common cultural code (the United States is often cited as an example). Common citizenship also is not an ultimate solution. Nearly everyone would subscribe to Vasil Lyavonau's statement, 'to be a Belarusian means above all to love the Belarusians and Belarus and contribute to prosperity of our country'. But one could love the Belarusians and Belarus when the country was part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union.

In their reflections on national traits of Belarusians, most respondents give priority to external, psychological (kindness, tolerance) or behavioral (adaptability) factors. To cite a few examples: 'This reveals one Belarusian feature – the intention to survive by all means, without caring about anything else. This may be a correct approach but if you are a human, a social being, you should be guided by the God-set principles and not only think about saving your own skin' (Fralou). 'I knew the rural type of Belarusians who are serious people who do care about their property and household' (Shushkevich). These examples, both positive and not, mirror the Belarusians' perception of themselves. However, such reflections can create illusions and myths. Are we as much tolerant as we describe ourselves? If we seriously care about our property and household, who else does not?

Therefore, the question remains open as to what makes Belarusians a cultural nation and what is the substance of their culture. Considerable part of the Belarusian elite, especially the counter-elite uses negation to describe identity – ‘we are not like others’ (see above quotes by Buhrova and Kamotskaya). This is a natural phase in the identity establishment process, a phase that Belarusian society is going through. But actions to set and achieve certain collective objectives are possible only on condition of positive self-identification (we are...). It is not enough to identify oneself with a territory (Abramava) because such identification would not help make that area legitimate. Only the community that inhabits it can make it legitimate.

The question of cultural identity rises again and we cannot dodge it. I do not mean to give priority to one project or another. For instance, if we choose bilingualism, it is necessary to detail what it means (the current authorities use bilingualism to disguise Russification) and how we interpret and establish bilingualism as a national cultural feature. Failure to identify the cultural code of the nation leaves a room for the identification of broad masses ‘with that unusual political regime’ as Dynko put it, and the regime gets an opportunity to create its own cultural code for the nation.

Where are we?

Only some of the respondents offered a meaningful idea of the Slavic community (which to a certain degree testifies to the ephemeral nature of the concept), the question about Russia dealt with politics, so let us discuss our outlook on Europe. For the time being, the Belarusians can only dream of Europe. A nation that is geographically located in Europe has the right to do so just as Europeans have the right to consider or not to consider Belarus part of their community or culture. There are no general rules for determining cultural or civilization borders of Europe. There are more or less generally accepted geographical borders of Europe (although the EU says in its official documents on the New Neighborhood Policy that the issue of further EU enlargement may be raised only after Europe’s borders are

finalized). Belarus is a member of some European institutions (the OSCE), but not all (the Council of Europe and the EU). Membership of most of these organizations may be only a formal sign that the country belongs to Europe, but formalities often play an unexpected role. The author of this article once told an audience in Brussels that the Belarusians could not be deprived of European identity (or dream) as long as the country is a member of UEFA. The statement triggered a heated debate.

Europe is not a nation (independently on Habermas and Derrida, who try to construct a 'European identity' as opposition to the Americanism) and it is impossible to determine what makes us Europeans unless we understand what makes us a nation (if we want to), is impossible without definition of a nation. Naturally, we can try to agree, for instance, to accept unilaterally all European rules on October 1 as national law. But when we come across the first manifestation of European bureaucracy's idiocy (let's say, strawberry should be precisely so long, and in order to exchange a lamp on a high ceiling, we should mount scaffolds for several thousands of dollars), we will ask ourselves why we need it and who we are to need it. The general can be understood in particulars and Vyachorka has a point when he says, 'European identity manifests itself only in national identities'. (American philosopher Francis Fukuyama contends in a recent article that the dilution of national identity in EU countries leads to certain erosion of European civilization values and causes social tensions and crises. The most pressing problem is integration of national and religious minorities – the aboriginals of old Europe are less and less in a position to define and formulate what distinguishes this community, what is its cultural code, 'civic religion' and how an emigrant from Morocco or Senegal can eventually integrate.)

Our potential elite (the counter-elite in the first place) has an idea of Europe based on the recognition of existence of 'European civilization' and the acceptance of the so-called European values such as Christianity, rationalism and dialogue (Daneika); 'the type of civilization that imposed this civilization on the whole world' (Shushkevich); 'the concept of democracy and the concept of civilization, which I consider suitable for Belarus'

(Buraukin); 'Europe is the world of wise mutual tolerance' (Vardamatski). Many respondents tend to idealize Europe ('Europe is a place where a new system of human values has been formulated and implemented. This is the place where people live like I would like to live' (Protska); 'it is the top standard in many areas of society, politics and economy' (Kalyakin); 'Europe means cultural values, general human values, something what is important to a majority of the population' (Abramava). However, some representatives of the ruling elite do not share this opinion: 'Europe has more often than not drawn various nations in troubles, wars and bloodshed. Recall who attempted to invade our land in the past!' (Kastsyan). Valery Fralou defines Europe as 'not America': 'if we compare the United States with Europe, the latter is more democratic, closer to us and has milder manifestations of democracy than the United States which is making much effort to help even those countries that do not want to become a democracy', and Zhanna Litsvina as 'not Belarus': 'to me Europe is a society without the mad, insane, immoral propaganda and brainwashing'.

The potential elite, except for a few supporters of a geographic concept of Europe (Ulakhovich and Kebich), who believe that Belarus has been and will always be part of Europe, think in terms of values and civilization harmony. Few members of this group can admit that Belarus shares some European civilization values: 'Europe means Christianity, rationalism and a dialog' (Daneika); while others say that the country is not yet up to standard: 'a small group of intellectuals have formulated ideas on what this place should be like, pro-European ideas, but they have not yet been fully embraced by the people' (Aleksiyevich); 'I believe that this is just a historic accident and everything will fall into its right place in due course, maybe in ten, five or fifty years' (Kalinkina). Milinkevich says that Belarus will return on the European path: 'we are an anomaly in the European family', but 'Belarus will never disappear from the map of Europe'. Some respondents conclude that Europe is not ours: 'there is a civilization rift on the borders of Belarus, Russia caused by different modes of thinking in the two countries and the other part of Europe' (Fralou).

The association of oneself with one community or another is a matter of choice ('Have you ever heard a Belarusian saying, 'I am a European'? It happens very rarely. And representatives of other nations do say this, they say, 'We are Europeans, and that is why...' – Buhrova). A collective choice is always a combination of individual choices. So far Belarusians may be fated to move closer to European civilization individually and this is not unusual. Timothy Garton Ash, a prominent social philosopher, noted that Soviet-era pro-democracy dissidents in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary who internalized the West-declared values are somewhat more entitled to be individual members of the European community than certain countries to be collective members. Therefore, Abramava's complaints that Belarus' contacts with the EU have been privatized by part of the political opposition are unfounded. It is natural that people close in spirit and values find a common language easier.

The same concerns the other side, which is supposed to recognize us as members of their community. Other Europeans should also decide if we are of their kind, as Vyachorka put it 'not exotic'. However, it is not just about persuading the French, Poles or Cyprians that we are 'not exotic'. The notions of European values, European identity and Europe are not static. An endless and often futile search for own identity, the demographic crisis and economic stagnation, old Europe's pathological fear of the Polish plumber, Paris' ruined suburbs, cartoon scandals, murders of politicians and journalists in the Netherlands, political correctness that forces journalists to stop short of identifying a woman who intended to use her child as a bomb – this is also Europe. On the other hand, Europe can take us or leave us as a whole with all our 'weaknesses', our 'tolerance', moderate temper and Chernobyl.

It should be noted that European integration is a very conservative ideology. The EU enlargement livened up a discourse based on notions 'freedom', 'democracy', 'human rights', 'a free market economy', 'tolerance' and 'equality', and refreshed an understanding of European civilization as free world. The enlargement helped the rest of Europe return to its original ideals from various 'post' and 'anti' notions (postmodernism, post-Christianity, post-

nationalism, anti-Americanism, antiglobalism etc.), which invade the minds of those who 'think Europe' in Europe. Therefore, the main asset that Belarus can give Europe is not its kind nature, hardworking people, stability or even human potential and culture (Russia can offer the same), but an impulse to rethink and revive the values, if we can give such an impulse.

However, with every new twist of integration the concept of Europe as civilization of freedom becomes less topical as the shadow of the existential enemy – the East or Soviet Communism – disappears, and those trying to catch the departing train find it more and more difficult to reanimate the romanticism of founding fathers and heroics of 1989. Actually, the fact that Belarus is the last fragment of the defunct East (Russia still is a special case) does not mean that the rest of Europe wants to add this fragment to its mosaic, no matter how Vyachaslau Kebich may wish it to be so.

Integrating and achieving certain cultural and civilization unity is not an act of selling or preparing for sale. Naturally, we offer ourselves, as we are, with all our real or imaginary strengths and weaknesses.

What do we choose?

One of the undeniable features of 'the Belarusian national character' is inclination to avoid tough choices and fear of historical and political Rubicons. Some of the respondents consider it a blessing: 'we have refused to make a 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' (Abramava). But others disagree that Belarusians are reluctant to choose: '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' (Daneika).

The elite's attitude to the issue is similar to what is inside ordinary people's heads and souls. Not all admit that a choice is inevitable. ('It should

not be a choice between one and the other. It should be a choice of both. It would be adequate to the nation's character, mentality, economic situation and geopolitical position' Vardamatski). Others hope that there will be no need to choose a path as external conditions change. ('But the EU tends to develop. And if Russia joins the EU, Belarus also will do so sooner or later. How can it be other way? If, say, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland are there, where will Belarus be? It also will be part of the European Union' – Babosau; 'It is evident that theoretically, being within Europe and a member of the European Union is ideal for Belarus. But I think this is possible only if Russia joins the EU' Kalinkina). Few respondents are decided about the country's choice. 'We need to choose something! In general, I back a pretty close union with Russia. Of course, Russia also should be a bit different' (Fralou). 'I am confident that Belarus must join only united Europe, the European Union' (Sannikau).

Respondents' understanding of the question of choice differs. Some believe that the choice is about integration and closer economic and political ties, while others think of bringing Belarus closer inside to one community or the other. The two aspects are not fully connected. A civilization choice is not about neighbors (there has been no choice of neighbors since 1945) or economic partners – it is impossible to change geography, this is why pipelines that pump oil and gas from Russia to the EU run cross Belarus. Economic integration is possible and underway with both Russia and the EU (as Kasya Kamotskaya noted sadly, Russia supports the dictatorship with gas and oil and the EU does the same. 'They buy oil from us and squeal with delight'.) Therefore, Belarus can have close ties with both (regretfully for some Belarusian politicians and intellectuals, regret that such a coexistence does not help make a political and civilization choice, but strengthens authoritarian presidential absolutism). However, it is hardly possible to blend Europe and Russia in political institutions, civic culture, attitudes to human rights and liberties – all that determines a choice of civilization. This would be a short-lived hybrid vulnerable to internal crises and destined to mutate into something more definite (like our neighbors Russia and

Ukraine). Finlandization suggested by Andrey Dynko is not an option. When part of the Soviet Union, Finland had no say on its military, political and economic relations, but internally it belonged to Europe. I would also call into question the statement by Aleh Manayeu that it is necessary to change the government first and afterward make a choice. The choice is not a result but a cause of power struggle. It is crucial for rallying voters and winning political battles. A proposal that does not meet with support is doomed. However, the lack of any proposal even more definitely programs to failure those who avoid formulating and pressing it.

This position 'between the two worlds' may be a natural stage in political development and nation building. But I have serious grounds to doubt that this is really so. Balancing between the two civilizations would be possible if communities on both sides of the former Soviet border still had illusions about a bigger alliance, for instance a Europe-Russia bloc (and all between these two ones), if both sides were undecided about their future direction. There is a fast process of political, institutional and cultural identification. The world is changing and if we fail to change together, there is a big chance that we will be left behind with what we've got.

Evidently, the Belarusian elite and counter-elite in the first place has just started looking for answers as to who and where Belarus and the Belarusians should be. So far we mostly replicate elements of mass consciousness than give answers or a search for answers. This proves the irrelevance of speculations by politicians and analysts on the existence of 'national Belarusian- or Russian-language projects, or other ones'. We have yet to formulate them. There is little clarity on how to select one, and its implementation is a long way off.

In general, the book mirrors the condition of Belarusian society as a whole and its intellectual elite in particular. Society atomization fragments the elite, deprives it of forums and media for discussion and dialogues within

the intellectual and political community, and of an opportunity to receive feedback. Often it may seem that we have too many current political and other problems and it is not time to reflect on high matters. But failure to break this circle, and begin a dialogue and a search for answers means to reconcile oneself with the fact that the nation will be created in the image of its current leader. The Belarusian elite is left with very few options and little time to prevent this.

Vital Silitski, born in 1972 in Minsk, is an independent political scientist. He earned a master's degree from Central European University in Budapest in 1994, and a Ph. D. from Rutgers University New Brunswick, NJ. Silitski worked as assistant professor with European Humanities University in Minsk between October 1998 and September 2003, but was sacked for public criticism of the Lukashenka regime. In 2006, he was awarded a fellowship from Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law. He edited Historical Dictionary of Belarus (Scarecrow Press) due to be released in early 2007.

1. What does Europe mean to you?

Volha Abramava

I cannot say that Europe is our everything. But it should be in a given context. Europe means cultural values, general values, something what is important to a majority of the population. A human life is short. Our citizens do want to have an average European income and strong social support, which is also common in many European countries. But it is important to preserve our authenticity, everything what is typical of Belarusian culture (I do not take into account the political aspects of opposition, as in today's life it is strongly interconnected, that watershed on which pretensions of both parties trespass.). I only wish Europeans understood better Belarus' peculiarities, its national character.

As a politician, I look beyond the boundaries of a human life. When I became a politician, I started thinking what our country should be in 50 years. I set a target. I believe that Belarus should become a normal European country with high living standards and highly comfortable life in 50 years. The only things that I do not want us to borrow from Europe are European bureaucracy and certain philistine values. Most Belarusians, particularly those who were to Europe many times, see European living standards as a target to achieve. But as for everyday life and beliefs, I wish people had a critical attitude to information they get. I wish they did not accept media

reports blindly and moved further after achieving something. I wish they lived a more interesting life than an average European. It is not something what a politician can offer to people. I just wish people had a big interest in life and not only material values were of a paramount importance to them. Obviously, in any country, people foremost think about their family. They think how to increase its consumption, how to protect their folk, how to provide a good education for their children and how to ensure a decent life for elders. But as an extravert person with choleric temperament, I wish people had an inexhaustible interest in life and continued looking for new goals to achieve and new peaks to conquer until growing very old.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

The longer I live in Europe, the less I understand what it is. I have stayed there for five years already, in France, Germany and now in Sweden.

This is a more or less perfectly arranged place on Earth where a human life is of the highest value. In the East, state matters take precedence. A survival philosophy is currently dominant in the former Soviet republics. America is an empire. Europe has normal human dimensions; it is designed for human beings.

Yauhen Babosau

Europe is the most extraordinary continent in the world. Why? Because Christian culture on which modern knowledge and modern technologies, the present-day idea of what state, man and his love are based was made in Europe. That's why Europe is the core that gave birth to the entire Christianity-based modern civilization. In this sense, Europe is the mother of modern civilization, modern culture. Civilization is a broader notion than culture, as it embraces culture and science... Europe is the nucleus of modern civilization built on the basis of Christianity and its various interpretations, including Marxism and atheism.

Anzhalika Borys

Europe is a cultural and historic area where peoples coexist, share the same values and rules, and recognize the unique contribution of every nation to the European civilization.

Iryna Buhrova

As for me, I've been 'spoiled' by scientific knowledge, 'spoiled' by an endless stream of information from books that I read on the subject of how the notion 'Europe' and 'European mentality' appeared, whether it is more about geography or political functions. It includes the formation of Europe, the period when its territory took final shape, the creation and destruction of bloc systems, cultural, religious and ethnic aspects, i.e. virtually everything! Europe itself remains a quite vague notion so far. There's much discussion on the matter, and I can't stay away from this, I've been too deeply involved in this...

For me, Europe is connected with a certain area. Certainly, geographical identification plays an important role, but it is the mode of thinking that comes to the fore. Now when we speak about Europe and say 'European consciousness', 'European culture', 'European values', we, of course, refer to the cultural background, history and establish how Europe was formed, on what cultural codes this process was based. For me, above all, these cultural codes have the Christian origin plus some Moresque, Muslim and Balkan features. It also includes Slavic, Baltic and Scandinavian elements, and everything that is connected with the cultures of other tribes and peoples.

And the religious context also is important. It was the two powerful Christian branches that made Europe what it is now. And I cannot but say that Europe accepted and absorbed (especially in southern parts – in the Balkan region, Spain, Portugal) some elements of Muslim culture. And we cannot but notice this.

For me, as Bulgarian Maria Todorova, a professor at Paris University, said, Europe is a notion of variable geometry. That means, you draw your

own figure, make your own sculpture depending on from what point you see this. Maybe, that's why some still wish to regard Europe as a broader notion and add Russia, in particular its European part. But by adding Russia, we are losing Europe.

On the other hand, the European nucleus emerged in western and central parts of Europe – on the level of small states that, first, entered some alliances, were parts of a large empire but played their important roles. I'd like to avoid politics, but this is impossible because Europe, unlike Africa, for instance, is a very politicized structure.

That's why Europe for me is a sense of belonging to a certain culture in which I feel at ease, in which I like languages and like the value of the person. The value of the person is very important. It should not become absolute anthropocentrism, but the person should be respected as the highest level of divine creation.

That means Europe is a multi-level notion for me, but it is the cultural and mental aspects that are most important.

Henadz Buraukin

In short, I associate Europe with democracy and civilization, which is suitable for Belarus. Why? Due to historical reasons. The country was part of the European civilization, geographically and spiritually, although the Belarusians were not very lucky and did not have good opportunities to fulfill their spiritual potential. I must recall the great contribution of [Francišak] Skaryna¹ and Hussowski² to the European civilization.

¹ Francišak Skaryna (or Skoryna; the first name also spelled as Francis, Franciszak, Frantsizak, Francisk, Frantzisk, Francysk; Belarusian: Францішак (Францыск) Скарына) was a Belarusian famous for being the printer of the first book, the Psalter, in Belarusian in 1517 in Prague.

² Mikołaj Hussowski (Belarusian: Мікалай (Мікола) Гусоўскі; 1470–1533). Notable Renaissance poet and humanist, cultural and social activist.

Kalinowski³ and Wróblewski⁴ are notable for their role in the establishment of democracy in Europe. These figures were sons of that civilization in Belarus and were also physically involved in European processes. Skaryna was recognized as an outstanding figure in Italy, the Czech Republic and other European countries. Wróblewski is known for his role in the French revolution, without which democratic traditions that saw both tragic and glorious days would not exist. I mentioned just two figures. But when I look back at our history and recall all sons that Belarus gave to other nations, its presence in Europe is undisputable. I associate democracy laws with Belarus – this is something most interesting and unique that the European civilization gave to humanity.

Ales Byalyatski

Europe means a lot to me. Ninety percent of information that I have learnt to date – at school, from books, history etc – is linked to Europe. The information is about European culture, literature, history and other aspects of the great civilization. The younger cultures of settlers (American, Canadian and Australian), which have European roots, are more simplistic versions and copies of the real civilization, although we can comprehend them also. What is the difference between bread baked in a home oven and at a big bakery? There is roughly the same difference between European and American cultures.

³ Konstanty Kalinowski (also known under his Belarusian name of Кастусь Каліноўскі; 1838–1864) was a writer, journalist, lawyer and revolutionary. He was one of the leaders of the January Uprising (1863) in the territory of the present Belarus.

⁴ Walery Antoni Wróblewski (1836–1908) was an associate of Kalinowski. He took part and was wounded in the January Uprising and later fled to France. He was a Paris Commune general, commander of the southern front, in 1871.

Pavel Daneyka

To me, European means Christianity, rationalism and dialog.

Andrey Dynko

This means homeland for me. My father was born on the left bank of the River Bug which is now part of Poland and the European Union. And my mother was born on the right bank of the Bug. Both were born 10 kilometers away from Brest. However, I need a Polish visa to visit my fatherland today. The Stalin-set border along the Bug had existed almost never before. This Stalin-set border forced massive relocations. My grandfather and dad had to move from their birthplace as Orthodox Christians headed back to Belarus and Catholics moved to Poland. And it was not until the 1990s that we could get there and see the place where my father had grown up.

As I grew up I listened to my parents' and grandmother's stories about the River Bug. The Bug for me is some kind of a mystic river which I have never seen because it was surrounded by barbed wire on the Soviet border and one could not get near to it. I believe that one day all this barbed wire on the Stalin-set border between Belarus and Poland will be removed.

I come from the place where cultures were mixed, and that is why Europe is a spiritual rather than a geographic notion for me.

The European idea for me is above all the idea of solidarity. The idea of solidarity of various nations, various people who share common values. Not only common economic or political interests, but also values. That is why Europe means values for me.

Valery Fralou

Europe is part of a continent that is home to Western and Eastern European countries, which, having united into the European Union and expanded it, are guided by certain approaches (which are often adopted

by joint decisions) that help the countries live in affluence, considerably develop their economies and secure very high social standards thanks to it. In this part of Europe (I am speaking about Eastern and Western Europe) democracy and universal human values (which are often blasted and called differently in our country) have become a well-established standard thanks to people's multiyear struggle (including for their own rights).

But, unfortunately, in my view, Europe's pace of development has slowed down. Once Mayakovsky said, 'Capitalism had been a good guy until he was afraid that he may stain his clothes'. And now again a certain part of Europe is resting on its oars, while all dirty work is done by immigrants, non-Europeans. And this creates certain tensions in these countries. Although, if we compare the United States with Europe, the latter is more democratic, closer to us and has milder manifestations of democracy than the United States which is making much effort to help even those countries that do not want to become a democracy. In our country Communists also wanted to grab everyone by their ears and force them into Communism. If a person is not ready yet, why force him into something? And so they tore the ears off, and sometimes severed the heads together with ears, and so people disappeared. The United States, perhaps, is taking too harsh steps (Europe is acting more gently) to force everyone into democracy and freedom of speech, and create civil society.

Of course, I would like Asia to have democratic countries, but milder methods should be used for that. A pupil cannot be transferred from the first directly to the eighth grade and feel at ease there. What methods should be employed? Probably, a dialog is needed. Probably, certain assistance is needed. Probably, they can also display their strength to a certain extent, but this is a very sensitive and delicate matter. I guess it is a sense of delicacy that the United States lacks.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

I consider Belarus to be a European country both geographically and historically. That is why Europe is a greater motherland and Belarus is a smaller homeland to me.

Syarhey Kalyakin

Europe is a continent. Europe is one of the world's largest interstate alliances (I mean the European Union). Europe is a concentration of problems in human history. On the other hand, it is the top standard in many areas of society, politics and economy.

Kasya Kamotskaya

Europe is a cultural or socio-cultural notion. I was in England – the country is different from the rest of Europe. Europe is a sort of cultural community.

With open borders between all countries, Europe is no longer a geographic notion. I do not agree that Europe stretches as far as the Urals. To me, Belarus' eastern border is the end of Europe.

Syarhey Kastsyan

Europe to me is a geographical notion because of diverse culture and history. Southern, Eastern, Northern and Eastern Europe have different cultures, histories, customs and traditions. Only an ignorant person would say that Europe is a single civilization. The representation of Europe as a common civilization insults European peoples. To me, Europe is a conglomerate of diverse cultures, histories, languages, customs and traditions.

Vyachaslau Kebich

Europe means my native country, Belarus. They are inseparable. When addressing politicians and businesspeople at a Crans Montana Forum in Switzerland, I said stop dividing Europe into eastern and western parts. There is just one Europe. No one divides Asia into East and West Asia. This is one continent that does not need to be divided into southern, eastern or northern parts. My proposals, in general, met with an understanding among politicians, including politicians from Western Europe.

Europe is a single economic space, a community of people having a long-established relationship with each other. It is an old community – it does not matter, are you French, Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian – between people having mutual contacts.

Zhanna Litsvina

Answering this question, I could have mentioned an absolutely different level of European politics, European values etc. But to me Europe is a society without the mad, insane, immoral propaganda and brainwashing. For me this is a distinctive feature of European civilization where no one imposes stereotypes, a way of life or thinking on others.

I am outraged by the presence of this unprincipled propaganda machine, which imposes its views on the people.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Opposition protesters in Belarus used to chant, ‘Belarus to Europe!’ I think time has come to change that slogan for ‘Europe to Belarus!’ It means that the first thing Belarus should do is to implant European values.

Europe is associated with European values in the first place. As for possible membership of the EU, my position slightly differs from the classic one. When we meet European politicians in Brussels and Strasbourg, we

are always trying to persuade them that Belarus is a European nation. This is right, but present-day realities require a different approach to the issue of EU membership. It is a weak position to ask the EU to admit Belarus. The Belarusians must make an effort to qualify for EU membership. The adoption of European values – an opportunity for the people to elect their government and the separation of powers – is the first step in integration into European Union.

The second step, which also depends on the Belarusians, not on European officials in Brussels, Strasbourg or some other city, is to adopt European standards in economy and daily life. When we will adopt these standards – I mean separation of authorities, presidential and deputies' elections, not nomination, and economical and everyday standards...

If Belarus made these two steps, politicians would not need to curry favor with Brussels. The country would assert its right to be a European nation. We will say: 'We are Europeans, we have European history, the first written constitution has been created here'.

There are many examples that prove that Belarus belongs to European civilization. The world's first constitution was written on this land. But these are things of the past. Our generation should make an effort to meet European standards. Then it would be much easier to negotiate with the EU. Then we would say, 'We meet the Copenhagen criteria adopted by the EU. We are a European nation with European roots and our place is within this alliance'.

That is how I see Europe and prospects of relations between Belarus and the EU. Europe means values, standards and common efforts to address all problems concerning politics, security, economy etc.

Vasil Lyavonau

This is my country, the land of my parents and grandparents, 'my sweet homeland' after Yakub Kolas.

Aleh Manayeu

I put both a geographic and cultural sense on this notion. Geographically, it is a continent on which we all live and at the center of which Belarus is situated. Many continental features, such as the landscape, climate and so on, are also important. But, of course, Europe is above all a cultural notion. In other words, this is a system of certain values that emerged and began developing in ancient times. This is the system of values that the entire Western world is based on.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I have a small homeland, Belarus, but Europe is my big homeland. I consider myself a citizen of Europe, the cradle of culture, in which Belarus has been developing. Europe to me is a great civilization above all. Belarus is waiting for an opportunity to return where we belong.

Anatol Mikhailau

Apart from the fact that Europe is a geographic continent, Europe has vaguely formulated historic, cultural and intellectual distinctions from other civilizations. A European identity does not boil down to a set of certain features. European cultural values have passed from generation to generation for many centuries. The 20th century was marked by unprecedented radical reassessments of the notion of Europe, which shaped for more than 2000 years. As a result, what recently seemed to have a clear meaning and vital force has become much more complicated to grasp.

Ales Mikhalevich

To me, Europe means common cultural values that unite people living chiefly in the geographical space of Europe. To me, Europe is the concept of values and culture rather than of a geographical entity.

Tatsyana Protska

Europe is a museum that holds the best heritage that the humankind amassed throughout its civilized evolution. Europe is an excellent example of what humankind can achieve if it follows certain principles of the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

Europe is a place where a new system of human values has been formulated and implemented. This is the place where people live like I would like to live.

Andrey Sannikau

Europe for me is above all culture, history, traditions reflected in architecture, music, museums. While visiting the latter, one can realize that it is truly something expressive, peculiar, which differs from Asian, North and Latin Americas not only geographically but, what is more important, from the point of view of culture and civilization.

Stanislau Shushkevich

Europe is a certain type of civilization. It is not the same everywhere as it is composed of a number of cultures, so to say. But it has finally become common culture. I thought it is based on Christian values until recently, but now I know that it is a broader notion.

The Europe that I know from books differs significantly from the Europe I've seen with my own eyes. So, this is a type of civilization that imposed this civilization on the entire world to a great extent.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

It means part of common living space to me. It means a common European house to be more precise as to general intentions, desires and pros-

pects. Perhaps, the idea is trivial and does not sound that much romantic as it used to in 1989.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

Europe is the cradle of ancient Greek and Christian civilizations to which I and my ancestors belong. Modern Europe inherited human values from that common civilization.

Andrey Vardamatski

Europe is a world of wise mutual tolerance. Tolerance characteristic of Belarusians too. The rightists and leftists, conservatives and liberals, representatives of various movements peacefully coexist with each other philosophically and politically. They cross swords at discussions only. People do not get arrested or called 'thugs' for a different opinion.

This is an advantage, but this is also a disadvantage because the decision-making process in Europe does not keep pace with modern requirements. The process of obtaining approval for decisions from 25 countries does not meet effective management standards. All positive things have negative aspects. I would not elaborate on trivial things like Europe is an older culture than North America. Although, the latter has its advantages.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

First, I should point out what Europe does not mean to me. It does not mean that a European identity is an all-sufficient notion. The European identity is manifested through national identities. What Europe means to me? Europe is where we belong mentally and culturally (it is nothing exotic).

Usevalad Yancheuski

Europe is a word that has many meanings. There are words in our language that people use in various senses at their own discretion. They understand them as they want.

When saying 'Europe', many above all mean Western or Central Europe, countries with Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions.

The citizens of Russia however feel different. They like to call themselves Europeans and they often say exultantly that Russia is part of Europe. There are also many people in Belarus who will be offended if someone tells them that they are not Europeans. If you tell such a thing to a Ukrainian he will not do any business with you altogether.

I personally intend the narrower meaning when saying 'Europe'.

We may endlessly tell ourselves that we are Europeans and that everything should be European here.

But our own language betrays us. When we go to Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark or Spain we say that we go to Europe. A Frenchman, for instance, will never say that he goes to Europe when leaving for Germany. I can cite a lot more such 'slips of the tongue'.

Even at a linguistic level, we subconsciously DO NOT ASSOCIATE ourselves with Europe, while the language and linguistics are very precise and very sensitive things. It often reveals what we cannot or do not want to acknowledge.

2. Is Belarus (as it is) part of Europe? May be it should strive for it? What Belarus should do to achieve that goal? (Do you consider Europe a community based on common values or a geographic location?)

Volha Abramava

It depends on what criteria we use. Geographically, it is surely part of Europe. From the point of view of history and the contribution Belarus has made to European culture, it is also surely part of Europe. From the point of view of European bureaucracy, it is not. From the point of view of dominating public opinion in European countries, it is surely not. I do not think the situation is so dramatic as claimed by one side. Nor do I think that it is so superb as claimed by the other. I always tell people (particularly when talking with Western partners) that Belarus is a country which is not that much good as state-run media writes but also not that much bad as private newspapers say. There is a dynamic movement here, not a static one or stagnation as many allege.

Try to look at Belarus from a different angle. This point of view also has the right to existence. There is no absolute truth. I have a diploma in philosophy and I am calmer about many things compared with other people who wish to get everything here and now in both politics and economy. I will accept installments!

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

Belarus is not yet part of Europe. This is a deformed post-Soviet space plagued by various problems. A small group of intellectuals have formulated ideas on what this place should be like, pro-European ideas, but they have not yet been fully embraced by the people. Belarus is a very fragmented nation. I am half-Ukrainian. When I go to a Ukrainian village, I feel that Ukraine is a wholesome, integral nation. In our country, Russian influence is strongly felt in the east and Polish influence is felt in the west.

Belarus has not yet started moving closer to Europe. The country is still in the old socialist time. May be it is not so bad, because we have avoided Russian-style savage capitalism.

Yauhen Babosau

Belarus is part of Europe both in terms of geography, civilization and culture. And it's not on the outskirts as some say. And it is neither a 'black hole' as some think. Belarus is Belarus. This is a normal country that has big traditions, that has its national culture and its basic Belarusian values, including tolerance, scrupulousness, well-wishing and hard work. These are the values of a people that has preserved its independence from various invasions and annexations to Poland, Lithuania and Russia. It is these traditional Belarusian values dating back to the times of Euphrosyne of Polatsk and Cyril of Turau that make Belarus what it is. Both Euphrosyne of Polatsk and Cyril of Turau are European-level personalities. I'm not saying about the Great Duchy of Lithuania⁵, the Lithuanian Statute written in Belarusian. This is what cemented Europe in spiritual sense. And Euphrosyne of Polatsk and Cyril of Turau, the Statute and the Polatsk Duchy is the level

⁵ The Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Lithuanian: Lietuvos Didžioji Kunigaikštystė, Belarusian: Вялікае Княства Літоўскае (ВКЛ), Ukrainian: Велике Князівство Литовське (ВКЛ), Polish: Wielkie Księstwo Litewskie) was an Eastern European state, which covered the territory of present-day Belarus, Lithuania and parts of Poland, Russia and Ukraine during the period of its greatest extent in the 15th century.

of the 10th–11st centuries when Belarus was Belarus and was in Europe and played a notable role. I don't think that it was much behind Germany, which was split in many pieces at that time, or France. Maybe, France had a bit different culture but everything was OK at that time.

At the same time, Belarus was first under Polish and then under Russian rule, and there was some neglect of the Belarusian language, Belarusian national culture, there were no universities here except for the one in Vilnius. Belarus did suffer in this sense. But not because it did not want, it simply had no social and economic conditions to create a university like Sorbonne or Cambridge in Britain. And what about Francišak Skaryna or Symon Budny⁶? These are European-level figures. Hence, Belarus was, remains and will be Europe. And it will never cease to be part of it. And it should not.

Some European Union members described the EU borders as the eastern frontiers of Europe. But the EU tends to develop. And if Russia joins the EU, Belarus also will sooner or later. How can it be other way? If, say, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland are there, where will Belarus be? It also will be part of the European Union.

It is a normal European country, no worse than others. I've been to many countries, including almost to all European. Belarus is no worse than Slovenia, Slovakia or the Czech Republic... It may be behind such large countries like Germany and France but it looks no worse than other 10-million nations. It [looks] even better than some in certain aspects! It does not need to get into Europe, it is in Europe! Some European countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, especially like Romania, have much to learn from us. I know these countries as far as it concerns their culture, civilization, science, and routine behavior. They now broadcast flooding footage from Romania – how poorly they live! People in our country lived like this 20 or 15 years ago when there was chaos here.

What should Belarus do? It should remain as it is now, develop its national traditions, devote more attention to the Belarusian language (more than it does now) and national culture. More attention should be given to

⁶ Symon Budny (Belarusian: Сымон Будны, Polish: Szymon Budny; 1530–1593) – a humanist, educator, philosopher and historian.

such great figures like Bykau⁷, to whom people have different attitudes, like Ryhor Baradulin⁸, a good acquaintance of mine. Such people should be given every kind of support. And conditions should be created to discover young talents. Unfortunately, I don't see any young talents of the level so far. What should Belarus do? It should ensure that gifted young people stay here and serve their people instead of leaving for Western Europe.

Anzhalika Borys

In some sense the United States or Australia is also part of Europe. These are territories that were colonized by Europeans and adopted the European system of values. Belarus, a community of people who consider themselves ancestors of residents of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, is also part of Europe. To the one who considers the 1917 Bolshevik revolution the starting point of Belarus' history, Belarus does not look like a European nation, but a chunk left from an experiment to create a community of Soviet nations. To be part of Europe the Belarusians should realize that they have never left it. They should give up their Soviet identity.

Iryna Buhrova

It's a tough question. If we regard Europe as self-identification, as the realization of the fact that 'I belong to this territory', I cannot say that Belarusians have clear European identity, an awareness of being a European. Have you ever heard a Belarusian saying, 'I am a European'? It happens very rarely. And representatives of other nations do say this, they say, 'We are

⁷ Vasil Bykau (Belarusian: Васіль Быкаў; 1924–2003) – a prolific author of novels about World War II, is a monumental figure in Belarusian literature and civic thought. The writer's talent and the moral courage that permeates his writings earned him endorsements for the Nobel Prize nomination from, among others, Nobel Prize laureates Joseph Brodsky and Czesław Miłosz.

⁸ Ryhor Baradulin (Belarusian: Рыгор Барадулін; born in 1935) is a prominent Belarusian poet, essayist and translator. Baradulin was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2006 for his poetry collection *Ksty*.

Europeans, and that is why...' There's a well-known survey by Eurobarometer that compares the strength of the sense of European identity in different countries. In particular, Italians were found to have a stronger sense of being a European than the French. Eurobarometer offers a very good tool for measuring the pace of a nation's movement toward a stronger European identity or a new wave of nationalism, or internal consolidation.

It seems to me Belarus is going through extremely rough times. On the whole, obtaining national identity is a difficult process for Belarusians. The process has been controversial and involved many negative aspects since 1995. There was a time when people just could not understand where they were living, there was a union of Belarus and Russia, they had the Soviet Union in the past and no Belarus in the future, but the latter still existed as people were compelled to obey certain laws. The European component of identity also was developing. In addition, there were plans for the Belarusian National Republic citizenship.

I remember a time when there was some chaos, because identity was somewhat 'twisted'. That prompted certain polarization in society, the appearance of different groups including people united by shared features.

It's hard to say to what extent these differences have been ironed out and whether there's much consolidation within the country on the level of the people. The process is going on. National identity is already taking some shape.

And here we witness the process of Belarus' identification as a state that will make up its mind on whether it is West-leaning or pro-Russian.

In this respect, I can say that today there's not a single phenomenon that we would have a strong sense of. Belarus, of course, does belong to Europe. But as far as it concerns its current shape, its belonging to Europe appears controversial, as Ericsson said, this is like a duel. We belong to Europe but we are not there. We want to be Europeans, but we are not let there. Some our rights or our readiness to assume responsibility for what is now... That's why I'd better divide the Belarusian population into two groups. Members of the first are more ready to regard themselves as Europeans and the

other is simply not ready, although it is not leaning toward a union with Russia either. It is not national, European identity that matters for them. These people describe themselves as being from Mogilyov, Vitebsk or even Polatsk. This is local-level identity. I've done much research on the subject: local identity is still very important for people.

We often see an economic element, a regional, advanced, globalist one, in present-day local-level identity. The globalist element is only beginning to take shape in Belarusians' identity. They remain patriarchal, with patriarchal origin, roots. Is it good or bad? I never rate anything as positive or negative. I simply say that this is a natural process. For me Belarus, as a country, is not ready to join the global world today.

Do we belong to Europe? I believe yes, we do. But the Belarusian perceives this not through the state policy but through routine life. This is what the situation is like.

Henadz Buraukin

It is part of Europe. However, deep processes should be distinguished from political, economic and cultural realities. But I do not doubt that Belarus is part of Europe and the Belarusians want to be and consider themselves part of Europe – the most educated and democratic environment. What culture and political history do Belarusians know better? American? No. Asian? No. They know better European culture and political history. We know better events connected with France, Italy, let alone Russia and Poland. Although our country is little known around the world (this is one of our biggest problems), it is better known in Europe. A deeper analysis of the current developments in our country suggests that the Belarusians meet with more understanding in Europe. Although politically sometimes it seems America is more willing to support Belarusian democracy advocates than some European countries, there is a sense of unity with Europe (probably hidden deep inside and unsupported by official agencies and bureaucrats). This is why Belarusian pro-democracy groups and political parties press for integration of their country into Europe.

Europe is not limited to the European Union borders. The EU is a political and international organization, whereas Europe means a civilization. Europe is a big community with a big potential and various internal trends. Recall European history. Rome took the upper hand first, later France took the lead, and afterward Russian culture gained much prominence. Therefore, Europe changes inside. Belarus, by far not the largest nation in Europe, can get closer or distance itself from the rest of the community.

Ales Byalyatski

I am absolutely certain Belarus is part of Europe. Even with its twisted system and ridiculous Soviet-style government Belarus is an absolutely harmonious part of Europe's culture and history. We were backward compared to other nations in some aspects, and more advanced in others. Belarus was more advanced in law, culture and translation (Skaryna's Bible). The Great Duchy of Lithuania played a key role in Europe's geopolitical processes. More glorious days lie ahead for Belarus. There is something to be proud of today, but it does not come to mind immediately. I just did not think about it. It is not my duty to sit about and reflect on what is good in Belarus. Our vodka may be better than in the rest of Europe, I do not know.

Despite certain deviations in the process of history, this territory has always been part of the European context. Even during the era of communism, during the Brezhnev's rule, the nation's basic evolution pattern did not differ much from that of the European community. After the sociopolitical situation changes in Belarus it will not take the country longer than 15 years to meet all European economic and other standards. It may take longer – two generations – to change the mentality and bring our mass culture to the European level. But two generations is a very short span in the history of a nation. Therefore, differences are negligible, but transparency is very powerful – many capillaries link Brest and the European Union, and Hrodna and the European Union. It is impossible to build a system in Belarus that would take a different path from the rest of Europe.

Geographically, Belarus is in a much better position than Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia – countries that are formally part of Europe. These nations' mentality differs a lot from the rest of Europe, especially that of Azerbaijan where Muslims account for 90 percent of the population. Geographically these countries are part of the European civilization, but in reality they are influenced by their southern neighbors – Turkey and Iran, as well as Iraq and Syria located farther south. It will take these nations one, two or three generations to choose a development path. Belarus is different. The most unbelievable fears and scenarios – the loss of independence and incorporation into Russia – can never materialize, because this would be inconsistent with history and the evolution logic. Belarus is in a more comfortable and better position than the above-mentioned countries, which will be in a state of confusion for quite a long time.

Belarus has an advantage over Russia. A few days ago I talked to prominent Russian human rights defender Sergei Kovalyov, whose father came from the Rahachow district in Belarus. Although Kovalyov grew up in Russian culture, he still has a Belarusian mentality. He said, 'I absolutely clearly understand the situation in Russia [he was talking about culture, and European orientation – the Russians often classify themselves as Westernizers and Slavophiles]. It will take 100 years to achieve the goal I strive for. I am absolutely sure'.

If we take a look at Belarus from the same perspective, it would take 20 years to achieve that goal. May be it would take the prodigal son 40 years to come back to the European community. The country can correct its course during this period.

Pavel Daneika

Of course, I consider this problem from civilization point of view. Belarus has all the three things I have just mentioned. It is a Christian country that bases its behavior on rationalism and is disposed to dialog.

Some time ago, Europe ended on the German-Polish border. Poland also was not part of Europe – it was not a member of the European Union. The question was about where Russia began. It is quite obvious that Europeans now think more globally – they started looking differently at Europe's borders after Russia's borders shifted. I would say that they see the Russian border as the end of Europe. As far as I understand, Europe now believes so. The idea of a common Europe is still strong. People are struggling to understand where this common Europe ends.

Andrey Dynko

Present-day Belarus is certainly part of Europe, although a very poor one. It is poor and, at the same time, is still under the influence of the Soviet ideology that questioned basic European values. But Belarusians remain Europeans in terms of their mode of thinking.

Valery Fralou

In my opinion, there is a civilization rift on the borders of Belarus, Russia caused by different modes of thinking in the two countries and the other part of Europe. We are in the center of Europe geographically. But it seems to me we are still far away from the principles that European countries are guided by.

On the other hand, we cannot be compared with the Asian countries that have Islam, etc. Asia has its own traditions, views, even its own religion which are pretty different from European approaches. We are European people. I think we are capable of going through this stage and reaching

all European standards. We are somewhere in the middle between Europe and Asia for the time being.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

From a geographic point of view, Belarus is certainly part of Europe. Speaking about Europe we say that Belarus is a European country, meaning geography.

If we talk about this in terms of civilization, it is clear that we currently have a sort of Asian government and Asian community in our country. In this sense, it is very hard to speak about a European Belarus. But I believe that this is just a historic accident and everything will fall into its right place in due course, maybe in ten, five or fifty years. It seems to me that our people, even those who now suggest that we need the formation of a union with Russia and even the restoration of the Soviet Union, think of themselves as residents of Europe.

In fact, Belarus lacks a lot of things to become a normal European country. In the first instance, Belarus does not have a proper government system. As is the case in any other country, Belarus has an elite, which accounts for 10 percent of the population at most, the rest is common people. But now we can see that this Belarusian elite, the leadership of Belarus, is quite not European. Moreover, this elite, this stratum of society is very small in Belarus unlike in developed European countries.

Syarhey Kalyakin

Yes and no. We are a part of Europe and we are not, as we are out of the general context: not only European, but also world one. Belarus is geographically part of Europe, but it stands alone in its refusal to accept European and international standards. Belarus is not part of Europe from the civilized development viewpoint. It isolates itself from the rest of the world, including Europe.

To get closer to Europe, the Belarusians need to carry out a political reform to meet political and social standards and commitments they undertook within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Belarus should join the Council of Europe and meet all commitments associated with its membership. Paradoxically, Belarus is the only country in Europe outside the Council of Europe. All other European countries, including Russia which is a Eurasian country, are members of the Council of Europe. Belarus does not meet united Europe membership criteria.

Kasya Kamotskaya

It is beyond doubt that Belarus is part of Europe. I do not mean the European Union, but culturally it is part of Europe. The Soviet authorities or the Lukashenka regime cannot change the mentality that people had throughout their history. Belarus has always been part of Europe, even during the darkest years of the Tsarist or Soviet rule.

It would be enough to compare Belarusian, Russian and Polish villages to see that the architecture and structure of Belarusian villages is very similar to the Polish ones. For instance, Russian villagers consider it stupid to plant flowers in front of their houses.

Syarhey Kastsyan

Belarus does not need to move closer to Europe. It has always been a European nation. Belarus, when it was part of the Great Duchy of Lithuania, adopted a constitution as early as 16th century. Britain, or the United Kingdom, still does not have a constitution, while other Western European countries enacted constitutions in the late 19th or early 20th century. Therefore, Belarus does not need to learn anything from Western Europe, especially in terms of democracy and politics. What it needs to learn to develop and apply new technologies.

Belarus should not seek to become part of Europe. It should be as it is. However, it should prove with its economy and politics to be equal to other countries in Europe. Belarus' history and the education level of its people make them even more advanced than other Europeans in many respects.

Vyachaslau Kebich

Belarus is part of single and indivisible Europe. From the political point of view, Belarus is not yet part of Europe; it has yet to join it. But Europe is not limited by the EU borders. Imagine if Belarus were a member of the EU. Does this mean that it was not part of Europe before and became part of it as soon as it joined the EU? This is ridiculous. This is an incorrect interpretation of the notion of 'Europe'. When someone says 'North America', we understand it as the United States and Canada, although these are two different countries. 'South America' or 'Latin America' is associated with the continent, despite the presence of different political systems there.

There are so many nations in Europe that I cannot describe it as a single civilized community. Let us recall history. When we had tribes without religion in Belarus, there were other civilized countries, China for instance. Civilization implies a long historical period. Therefore, I would say that Europe is a geographical notion.

Zhanna Litsvina

Belarus has found itself in an absurd split-mentality situation. On the one hand, the Belarusians would like to use the benefits created by the European community, but on the other, forced sovietization makes them fond of the Russian way of life. I understand their nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Probably, they are nostalgic because they do not know how they can live better. The current regime has deprived people of spiritual freedom to dream of something else but the Soviet Union, for instance about spiritual values and some spiritual support. Belarusians often travel abroad, but

when they come back propaganda renews its grip. Our people are insincere as a result of brainwashing. There are many examples of that – when they say something (for instance at state ideology lectures) they do not mean it. They hide their views and ideas. But hidden deep inside, the views and feelings manifest themselves, for instance in the fact that as many as 64,000 Belarusians emigrated last year, according to official data cited by the *ONT* television network in late March. Despite the stereotype that no one needs us in the West, 64,000 people associate their future with the West and tried their luck abroad.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Geographically it is part of Europe. Part of its population advocates European values. These people create opportunities for the country's integration into Europe. It makes no sense to raise the issue of European values in Russia. Attempts were made to instill European values in Russians, but they rejected them.

Belarus can embrace these values and many people have already done so. Opinion polls prove that most Belarusians are pro-European. They have a positive attitude, probably even at the genetic level, to privatization, a free market and democracy, because the nation is close to Europe and has a European history.

Vasil Lyavonau

Belarus is now only a geographic part of Europe. It must and will be part of a singly European community, political, economic and cultural. For this purpose, we, the Belarusians should make Belarus a European country. Europe is a community based on common values, which have been developed and are implemented in practice. Europe reached them through numerous wars, bloody conflicts and discord that lasted for centuries. All political parties, non-governmental organizations, all residents of Belarus should

make a decision and reach an agreement on what Belarus should be now and in the future. This is a very complicated process. We, the Belarusians, our Belarus, are situated between two geo-political forces and two civilizations. This crossroads has evolved from geographic into mental. Very many people in Belarus hold a stereotype that the nation should be with either Europe or Russia. But above all Belarus should be itself. In this regard, we should take into consideration the interests of both the East and the West. The recent election farce – there was no proper presidential election in Belarus – dramatically revealed the existence of irrepressible differences in the views of the West and Russia about the future of Belarus. Lukashenka skillfully uses these differences.

Europe is a community based on common values, worked out and existing due to practice, to which Europe came after several long bloody conflicts, massacres and zonings.

Aleh Manayeu

From a cultural viewpoint, Belarus is part of Europe only partially now. Starting the 12th century, if we do not go back to more ancient times, i.e. since the times of the Polatsk Duchy and then the Great Duchy of Lithuania, this region was already part of the European cultural area. But, at the same time, it belonged to another world, the Eurasian one. This geopolitical and cultural duality lasted for centuries and was especially strong in the past three centuries, when Belarus was in fact part of Rzeczpospolita, and then of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. At present we have the same: Belarus is in fact a two-part cultural entity. There are many people who share European values. And from this point of view, our country belongs to the European cultural area. But there is another Belarus. There is a huge gap between them in terms of values.

A decade ago, the Independent Institute of Social, Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) published data proving that the Belarusian public consists of, speaking roughly, three parts. One part is pro-European, of course, not

in the full sense of the word, but it shares many European values. It constitutes approximately one-third of the population. Since some 10 million people reside in Belarus, one-third is about three million people. If these Belarusian were transferred there, I think that they would smoothly blend in with the European politics, economy, management and lifestyles. Another part – also one-third of the population – does not understand and does not accept this system of values. This is so-called Soviet Belarus. But there is a third one-third. Economically, it is pro-European, but in other spheres, for instance the legal one, it is Eurasian. So in this context, we can say that Belarus was and remains a dual cultural formation.

What should be done in this regard? I am neither a political technologist nor a politician and am not going to give recommendations as to how the social and political process should be organized. Everyone should deal with his own subject. For our team, I mean the former IISEPS, and for me personally, the purpose is to strengthen the position of the pro-European Belarusians and work so that more hesitating people will join them, and that the Soviet Belarusians will live comfortably and not feel discriminated against but will not impede the development of the country. Guided by my experience, I can say that it is almost impossible to make ‘EuroBelarusians’ of them. But this is not very important. If the EuroBelarusians are a majority, the real integration of our country into Europe as a political, economic, legal, information and cultural community will be a technical matter.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

Certainly, Belarus, as it is now, drops out of the European context. We are an anomaly in the European family, something difficult to deal with. Belarus is a real dictatorship in Europe. But I would not exaggerate the problem. From a long-term perspective, Belarus is a little sick. It has a high temperature. Belarus will never disappear from the map of Europe. The country has its traditions and history. Foreigners often ask whether Belarus is more an Asian or a European country. In response, I recall the

Magdeburg law – more towns were granted Magdeburg rights in Belarus than in Germany. All fine art styles featured prominently in Belarus, whereas, for instance, Russia had baroque only. Belarusians wrote the prototype of Europe's first constitution in Belarusian. The Belarusians have a European mentality and cultural traditions. We are a bridge between East and West, but our traditions are more European.

Anatol Mikhailau

It is part of Europe in a geographic sense. But the question is not about the country's geographic position. To my regret, the Belarusians have succeeded in distancing themselves from Europe than identifying themselves with it. The country geographically located at the intersection of various paths, and at the meeting point of various cultural traditions, could be a place for a dialogue and a bridge for fruitful cooperation, but it engages in a confrontation with Europe and the rest of the civilized world. The absurdity of this is obvious. It results from its earlier lengthy isolation and the domination of the ideology of resistance to the unknown. But both we and our descendants will have to pay a high price for our mistakes.

Ales Mikhalevich

Today Belarus has one foot in Europe and the other somewhere outside it. To me, a European country is a country where people take responsibility for their lives. It is a civilization that has evolved through citizens' active participation in decision-making. There are some 30 percent of such active people in Belarus and I believe that it is this 30 percent that make up a European part of our country. In my opinion, it is a very good proportion – it is little away from a majority. As soon as it reaches 50 percent, we will be able to legitimately say that we are part of Europe.

Today we should bring up people who will not be afraid of taking responsibility for their future.

Tatsyana Protska

Geographically Belarus lies in the center of Europe. Belarus is not only a territory; it also includes people and the government. Each part of it should seek to have a better image to become part of Europe. The civic society has its tools to influence people, while the government has its tools. If representatives of civic society (people like me) feel themselves to be part of European civilization, they understand that they should promote the system of values inherent in this civilization.

But many Belarusians have not yet accepted the values that were developed in Europe and helped it achieve a high cultural and technological level. Belarusians have not accepted the values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The latter notion is limited to *charka i skvarka*⁹ in this country even in the government's perception. Social and economic rights take precedence over human liberties.

The government has more tools than civic society. Our state publicly accepted the European system of values, but in practice, it maneuvers between the so-called Slavism (which has a little bit different system of values) and Western Europe. It seems that officials currently in power have not yet chosen Western Europe. This is why we sit in two chairs at the same time. On the one hand, we declare that we are the center of Europe and advocate European values, while in practice we reject these values.

A new notion, Eurasia, has been often used lately to describe an allegedly new community combining West European values and the Eastern, or Slavic ones. We can accept that system of values, but we must realize that Belarus will never have cities that look like museums and adopt a European lifestyle. It will be a different society with different opportunities.

⁹ *Charka i skvarka* – a special expression in the Belarusian language to denote the condition of being happy with a glass of vodka and cracknels.

Andrey Sannikau

It is definitely part of Europe geographically. It even has similar lifestyles. Of course, we can now speak about united Europe where each country and even each region have found their own place. And in order to return to Europe (I'd like to call it 'the return' to Europe), we must first of all complete the path of democratization, however banal this may sound. I'm sure that only this will give us an opportunity to build a country that will be considered European. Without democratic political institutions (and our present-day situation is a vivid example of this), it is impossible to develop almost anything – be it economy, culture or history science.

Europe is above all a civilizational notion. I say 'united Europe' because it is already a fact of life. This is not a mechanical union between countries. This is a form that confirms that a country is part of the civilization in this historical period.

Stanislau Shushkevich

There are no stiff divisions between 'European' and 'not completely European'. In general, Belarus belongs to Europe, is a European entity. And the fact that we've had problems with the system of government for the last couple of centuries (although there were attempts to bring it back to normal) does not mean that Belarus is not part of Europe. I think that Belarus and the Belarusian people are Europeans.

I can tell you that even some places that are unquestionably considered to be Europe – Portugal, Greece, certain areas in Italy differ much from what we've learned from classical French and German literature. So, Belarus does belong to Europe and Belarusians are Europeans. I have no doubts about that.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

In any case, Belarus is part of Europe, which is very different, versatile and contradicting, which is encumbered with the burden of old misgivings and insults, as well by modern fears, and which has been painfully developing into something new in last decades.

In the former and latter instances both, Belarus is surely part of Europe. Unfortunately, there are a lot of European politicians and experts who are yet to be persuaded. But it is absolutely needless. Those who believe that Europe ends on Land Strasse in Vienna, the Oder or the Bug, or that Europe is solely a mentality concept, understand the word in a very narrow sense.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

On the one hand, Europe is a geographical term, but on the other it is a community of peoples sharing the same values. The community is largely associated with the European Union, a political and economic alliance based on common civilized values. It currently unites most European countries.

To my regret, Belarus is only geographically part of Europe. The current government isolates the country from civilized development with the only purpose to satisfy the dictator who wants to rule all his life. The authorities' policies are very dangerous and harmful for Belarus. They hamper the country's economic development and are fraught with instability and crises. I would draw parallels between Belarus and the Soviet Union or China of 'the cultural revolution' period.

Andrey Vardamatski

So far, Belarus is only geographically part of Europe, but it has a greater European integration potential than its neighbors, former republics of the Soviet Union. It has a greater potential than Ukraine or may be even a greater potential than the Baltic countries. I mean the infrastructure, size,

manageability, education and skills of the labor force. Belarus had the most educated population in the former Soviet Union after the Moscow and Leningrad administrative units. The Soviet Union's main final assembly lines were concentrated in Belarus, which required the presence of high-skilled labor force. Possible reform could be carried out rapidly because the country is small and manageable. As compared to Ukraine, Belarus is one nation, not a nation of split mentality.

Tolerance, one of the basic European values, is characteristic of the Belarusians. It is a different matter that their tolerance has turned into conformism. Conformism is a manifestation of tolerance, but it is different from European tolerance – openness to different views and values.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

Certainly, Belarus has been and will be part of Europe in both mentioned senses, just like Georgia, Malta, Portugal, Montenegro and Albania (I mention the countries located on the very edge of Europe). But it is necessary to prevent the current authorities from de-Europeanizing Belarus.

Usevalad Yancheuski

It is again about what we mean when talking about Europe. A formal reply to the first question is quite simple.

If we mean that Europe is Roman Catholic and Protestant countries than the reply is surely 'no'. If we use the word 'Europe' in a broader sense, implying also an Orthodox tradition, then the reply is surely 'yes'.

Belarus is certainly a part of a large Christian world.

But we are also part of a large Eurasian region that existed in the days of the Russian Empire. And what is more important is that we are part of a large post-Soviet region. We are one of the broken pieces of the giant Soviet empire that also was a civilization and a pretty unique one in the history of the humankind.

It has turned out that the Soviet era had had the heaviest impact on us. Soviet rule 'ploughed up' everything here and in Ukraine (excluding its western part) and also in Russia. Moreover, it had such a dramatic and sweeping effect that we had all links with our past traditions irrevocably broken as a result of it.

We may feel sorry, we may feel happy but that is a fact. Belarus' history is above all and most of all the history of the country during the Soviet era.

Western politicians who believe that Europe ends on the EU's eastern border are right to some extent. Perhaps, someone in Moscow or Kyiv will be offended, but a too broad interpretation of the word 'Europe' is wrong. And it becomes disastrous when it takes a specific political form.

Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are part of a different world.

It also shows in the language. We, for instance, often say on various occasions, 'They do it like that in Europe, while we do it like this here'. I would like to point out once again that we subconsciously do not associate ourselves with Europe.

There is nothing bad about that. On the contrary, attempts to portray yourself as someone you are not always look ridiculous. Those who are trying to show at any price that they are Europeans show actually their complexes and provinciality.

And Europe's attempts to 'drag inside' elements that are apparently non-European ones will not do it any good.

All talks about Turkey's accession look very strange to me. They may lead to a disaster for Europe. If they have practical consequences, it will be very bad. The concept of Europe will lose its value.

There is one more point. Those who are too willing to get into Europe turn a blind eye to one sad thing for unclear reasons.

Unfortunately, Europe is becoming increasingly less European. And with the passage of time, it is becoming increasingly more evident.

Europe is losing itself. It is turning into a secular, atheistic and consumer society. It has almost totally destroyed its cultural and historic foundations – Christian traditions.

Maybe, the process is natural. But anyway, it does not make things better for Europe. The process is underway and Europe is losing its cultural and historical roots. European tradition (in the broadest sense of the word) is under heavy pressure from modern technological developments. All historical, sustainable and traditional values that make Europe European are being swept away by the storm of globalization.

But after the European culture dies, it will be Europeans turn. The new Great Migration brings in strong Muslim traditions. When a majority in Europe will become Muslim, will they be ready to accept European values? Will they understand them in a way that Europeans do? Will they accept a European style of life and a European vision of life?

These are big questions and there are no definite answers to them.

Meanwhile, Europe does not mobilize. It retreats. The offensive of the new culture, the new aggressive mentality (let us provisionally call it Islam mentality), does not prompt Europeans to mobilize but agree, make concessions and misinterpret the concept of human rights in an absurd way.

A remarkable achievement of European civilization, the concept of human rights, is being turned into a mockery, with the public losing confidence in it. Drugs? You are welcome! Sexual perversion? You are welcome! Family breakup? You are welcome! Jeering at Christian values for the sake of a misinterpreted freedom of expression or commercial success? You are welcome!

Any thing can be reduced to absurdity, including such a nice thing as tolerance is. That is what is happening in Europe now.

Europe is very weak. Europe lacks will. Europeans look like a dying, ageing nation. They are not able to resist outside pressure.

After World War II, Europe surrendered to the winners. One of its parts came under Soviet rule and the other under the United States.

By the way, Italy and France could have become Communist states but for America's power. History has no subjunctive mood but still... The continental Europe could have been under Soviet rule!

Following WWII, Europe did not have its own resources. There were American ones there. Europeans lived and evolved under America's 'um-

brella', shutting themselves off from the remaining world with the help of the US. It is true that there was de Gaulle and there was France's independent policy, but still Europeans followed America's course at large.

Europe has a very weak political will. Europe is reach and it can decently compete with the US, but it does not want to do so! Europeans have a mentality of an ageing nation that is about to pass away.

Europe advocates overlook one more thing. It is absolutely incorrect to say that European values are about liberal democracy.

Actually, Europe has clouded relations with democracy.

Europe gave birth to the most monstrous tyranny – Nazism. Only arms helped put an end to the Italian and German dictatorships. Democracy was imposed in Germany forcefully and against the will of people. Meanwhile, Germany is a central European state.

France was tearing between despotism and democracy for two centuries surviving a series of bloody and cruel revolutions similar to those in Asia. And its blood flooded path toward democracy was over in the latter half of the 20th century only.

Spain and Greece are only some 30 years out of their dictatorships.

Liberal democracy is chiefly an Anglo-Saxon invention. Probably, the marine environment inspired the nation to such an invention. Historically, the first democracies were created by maritime nations. The Greeks are sailors, whereas the first European parliament was formed in Iceland, a country discovered by Vikings. The first European democracies were established by the British and Dutch sea powers. And finally there is the United States which was established by outcasts and migrants who set sail for America in search of a better life.

A sailor, traveler, colonist, outcast is above all an individualist. It is a strong person. It is a man who lives by the sea and counts on himself only. The sea is an alien element for a human being. Everything is against him there, including willful wind, salty water that is not suitable for drinking, an unsteady deck under feet and a scorching sun. There is no one you can count on in the sea.

The mentality of sailors, travelers and pioneers is the mentality of individualists. The mentality of maritime nations is the mentality of democracies.

Democracy starts with an individualist, with a man who relies on himself. Individualists established democracy in the United States. Most desperate and strong people came there. America attracted most active citizens of Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland and other European countries who failed to be of service in their homeland, who were at odds with the government and who did not want any longer to put up with their lives. They believed in themselves only, relied on themselves only and worked for themselves only. Only such strong and tough people can create democracy.

Democracy is the rule of individualists who are able to survive by their own without someone else's support and who do not want to have a firm grip on them. Historically, the mentality of a landowner or peasant differs from that of a sailor and colonist. The latter have an unsteady deck under their feet, while the former stand on firm ground. Sailors and colonists are looking to move to a new place, while peasants are tied to the land. A sailor is desperate and brave, while a peasant is slow and cautious. A sailor who is normally a man of no family relies on himself, while a peasant on his kinfolk and community. A sailor is in search of something new, while a peasant holds on to the past.

That is why the continental Europe of farmers had a difficult path toward democracy, which was marred by blood, revolutions, wars and millions of deaths as was the case in Germany.

In conclusion, I would like to say the most important thing.

A key problem in our attitude to Europe is that many do not understand the complexity of this body. We do not fully understand that Europe is not an ideal project and is far from being such. Moreover, many have the impression that if Europe is not at the beginning of its path then it is surely somewhere in the middle... But as a matter of fact, it is at its end.

The further Europe moves the more severe problems it faces. And its major problems will be growing acute. That is what the Belarusians should base their attitude to Europe on.

The old Europe is turning into a museum. A museum should be treated with respect. A museum does have some useful things that you can add to your arsenal in the future. But it is impossible to live in a museum!

3. What can Belarus offer Europe?

Volha Abramava

In terms of resources, Belarus can enrich Europe's human potential, if its higher education quality does not slip. One music note makes the entire orchestra sound different. I do not think that Belarusian culture will sink into oblivion and will be razed to the ground. It is too authentic. It cannot dissolve whatever devastating impact integration processes and globalization may have on cultural matters. I believe that intellectuals will always remain the consciousness of the Belarusian nation and will defend Belarus' authenticity. The Belarusian authenticity should be promoted. At the same time, it should enrich the development of diverse Europe.

Speaking about human resources, Belarus can come up with new achievements in the coming 50 years, also in the scientific sphere. I believe that Belarus will put a stake on the development of science and education, on human capital and practical return (however, I feel pity for fundamental sciences). Belarus will focus on the development of high technologies – it has everything for this. However, a political will is needed to attract funds from everywhere possible to fund the efforts. We have every opportunity today but there is no understanding. For some reason, the government believes that we need the light industry. I personally do not understand why we need it. I am not talking about crafts and the production of some

secondary things that we have got accustomed to and cannot any longer do without. It is clear that the Belarusian light industry will not be able to compete with the Chinese one. It is doomed to failure because of many factors. Only some companies that have a good marketing policy, employ first-class managers and pursue personal interest instead of working for the state, can manage to remain afloat.

So, it is clear what we should develop. Belarus is a country with good human capital which should be exploited.

I would not like to reduce the question of what Belarusian could give to Europe to a down-to-earth issue. In general, acting together is better than acting alone. Integration into Europe is better than an economic autarchy to put it plainly.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

This is a very difficult question.

I grew up in a Belarusian village. I wrote about old village women, I like the topic very much. Later in Paris, I met old Arab and African women. That was so exciting. I talked to an old Iranian lady in Sweden. Her philosophy was great!

The question is about internal family affairs, but the world is currently divided in a different way. The Muslim East can enrich Europe. Or, for instance, western intellectuals took a great interest in India and Indian culture. The interest remains quite strong. Or there is much interest in China. Cultural energy remains on vast territories and in old civilizations! Belarusian culture cannot even compete with the Polish one at present.

We can offer Europe our patriarchy and Chernobyl philosophy. This is something that can be of interest to the world, because the Chernobyl vision of the world is full of future fears. This is the only text that we can offer. We must realize that the world is cruel and be realistic.

Yauhen Babosau

Belarus can bring its traditional values: tolerance, respect for any religion, respect for any culture – that’s what we have. We have no such conflicts like, say, in Armenia (Nagorny Karabakh), etc. This is this Belarusian tolerance and well-wishing that we can bring to Europe. And in this respect Belarus can add something new to the spiritual potential of Europeans. This is not the worst country in Europe, it is somewhere in the middle. It is probably not the main country either, although some in our country call it the center of the Slavic community. I don’t believe in this but I know that such opinion exists. It is hard to be the center of the Slavic community. Russia claims to occupy this position, but why can’t, say, Poland do this? One should prove this and this cannot be proved!

I think that Belarus is an ordinary European country that meets European standards as far as it concerns culture, education, science, religion and whatever else. In this context, the country can contribute something valuable, in particular its traditional values, to Europe. And this will be a normal contribution! And they will appreciate Belarus for this even more that they do now.

Of course, there is a certain dislike for us on some political grounds and this bars Belarus from closer integration with the European civilization. But it has nothing to do with culture or civilization; this is pure politics.

Anzhalika Borys

Europe’s riches are diverse cultures, traditions and ideals. Belarus like any other nation can enrich Europe. The country should develop national culture, revive traditions and adopt national ideals that are not hostile toward the rest of the world.

Iryna Buhrova

I don't like this question. Belarus is not a woman who wants to get married! If I understand that I want someone to fall in love with me, than I think of what I should wear. I should first examine everyone and then try to look pretty for someone I like...

That's why it is mutual interest that is important for me. Mutual interest appears when a country lives a vibrant, full life, when it maintains many contacts. Because identity, and you can look it up in any good dictionary, is formed in interaction. That means that identification is constant interaction. I constantly look at myself and think whether my dress is appropriate for this or that environment. I can sport whatever coat I have in a forest but I can't do this in my office. I constantly identify myself with a certain environment, circumstances, the time of day, etc. There are periods when the person undergoes resocialization, crisis periods. And the same happens to society. Why do we say that the political pendulum swings from the left to the right and back in Europe? This is the process of identification and re-identification of sorts. Or people's misidentification and re-identification. And we see what processes are taking place in France, Germany as far as it concerns policies regarding emigrants, migration, ethnic minorities (which are becoming a majority actually).

What can Belarus give? I would put it this way: Belarus will be interesting when it starts interacting with other people. Then its absolutely incredible opportunities will be discovered. I believe that Belarus can above all show its flexible, very quiet nature, which contains very big discoveries. Belarus can interest others through its unusual ability to be a conformist and a pioneer alike. If you look at the map of the world and start studying the biographies of famous people, you'll see than many of them come from Belarus, irrespective of whether they are Jews, Poles, Russians or Belarusians...

Henadz Buraukin

Like any nation, Belarus can offer its unique mentality, its national character. It is interesting that some of the leading European nations with big cultural traditions are wary of globalization. This is a peculiarity and a big advantage of Europe. It respects national cultures and identity. The Belarusians, like any nation, have their unique strains and, mentality, their kindness and tolerance – the qualities that are not always good for our cruel world – that enrich the European race.

Belarus is interesting to Europe because it has been involved for quite a long time in its intellectual process. Take the Renaissance for instance, it was a great period in European history. Belarusians were involved and contributed to it. May be not so much as other nations, but they did make a significant contribution. Along with other nations, the Belarusians can claim to author the first constitution, the Lithuanian Statutes. Regretfully, the Belarusians at home have not yet realized the importance of that act, whereas other nations in Europe used the Statute to draft their democratic laws.

Nations like Belarus have not exhausted all of their resources and possess an intellectual potential for the future. Some nations had better historical and political opportunities to show and fulfill themselves. Belarus has not yet shown what its worth for historical reasons. I believe that an independent nation can better fulfill its potential. To my regret, Belarus was not an independent country for quite a long time. If national history gave Belarus at least some limited opportunities, it would produce Belarusian talents. Our nation has not yet given the world what it can. It is of big importance to Europe, often referred to as old Europe. It is true Europe is old, while Belarus is young. The young part of Europe can energize the old one.

Paradoxically, we feel guilty or weak because we lag behind, but we do not realize that we have an advantage because we can still give something. When others have exhausted their potential, Belarus will start taking advantage of its possibilities. Since it will be using its possibilities in this period of human evolution, it will have even better opportunities. This is

why I believe that Belarus is a very interesting, important and necessary country for the European civilization.

The Belarusians enjoyed many privileges in Great Duchy of Lithuania – Belarusian was practically the state language and many rulers had Belarusian origins – but it existed for a short period for the nation to fulfill its potential. Many opportunities were lost when the Belarusians found themselves in the Russian Empire or under the Polish rule. Both Polish and Russian authorities passed decrees banning the Belarusian language. When the language, one of the distinguishing features of the nation, is taken away from the people, it cannot succeed like other peoples that can freely use their languages. The Russians have never been oppressed as a nation. Every Russian bum dies or lives feeling himself a representative of the nation that has its language and history. Belarusian people, even prominent and talented ones, often lacked national self-esteem and knowledge of the national history and language. It was taken away from them.

The Great Duchy of Lithuania has not yet been studied seriously enough. It was a poly-ethnic state. The peoples that were once part of it now have their separate countries and national histories, but seek monopoly of the history of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. Their position can be understood from the human and state viewpoint. But since the Belarusians are not aggressive or extremely resolute people, our neighbors use it by stealing our common history bit by bit. For instance, our neighbor seeks to represent Konstanty (Kastus) Kalinowski as its national hero.

The Great Duchy of Lithuania period proves that the Belarusians are an old nation in a certain sense. The potential we failed to use in the Great Duchy of Lithuania was not lost forever. If the nation is alive, it will have an opportunity to develop and use its potential. It is like people who have not lived in their native country for a long time start speaking their mother tongue before death or during a hard time in their life. A nation may also have a period when unused potential manifests itself. I hope very much that the Belarusian nation will have an opportunity to use the potential it failed to use during the Great Duchy of Lithuania period, after the declaration

of the Belarusian National Republic and in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. I hope the world will be surprised to see how much Belarus can give Europe, the humanity and the nation and its history in the first place. Let's hope the time will come sooner.

Ales Byalyatski

A lot! My visits to European countries helped dispel illusions that the Belarusians are underdeveloped in a way, that they lack something or are worse than other people. They are an absolutely normal Central European nation. As any people or nation, they have good and bad traits. They have enough qualities that make them competitive in Europe. Belarusians have found themselves a niche in sports, for instance in track and field events. Occasionally they show surprisingly excellent performance in other sports. Our girl¹⁰ won a 100-meter race at the Summer Olympics – fantastic, it never happened before.

Belarusians can succeed. They are very optimistic people, they have been optimistic for centuries. They are cheerful people, who never sit and complain doing nothing (there are such peoples). We are the people who will always find themselves a plot of land to work on. They will bring bricks there, build something, grow something and sell the harvest with a profit. I am absolutely convinced that Belarus can successfully compete with other European nations, make its contribution, push through its ideas, find niches and be reckoned with. It is beyond doubt that we will not die out, will not be exploited or used by someone to make a fortune.

I did not mean cultural contribution – culture is a more delicate matter. It is not an economy, a sport or something that can be created within five to 10 years. It requires a greater spiritual effort. In this sense, the Belarusians trail behind the rest of Europe. The nation is more competitive in other areas

¹⁰ Yulia Nestsyarenka (Belarusian: Юлія Несьцяярэнка; born 1979) won the women's 100 meter sprint at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, in 10.93 seconds, becoming the first white and first non-U.S. athlete to win this event since the American boycott of the games in 1980.

like the economy, sports, social security etc., while in culture it is a complete emptiness and wilderness. The nation has created wonderful things – folk music, which cannot be found elsewhere, prose, music, fine art works – all that has been ignored and underestimated. It has not been promoted and marketed the way it should. Anyone who wants to sell something must have a plan and think about packaging. The government would not do it. Some efforts have been taken by amateurs, but this is not enough. Money is required, a lot of money. With government funding such efforts would be much more productive. There are very good prospects for culture, but an enormous amount of work has yet to be done.

Pavel Daneika

It is a good question, but perhaps it is better to put it in a different way. How important are the Czechs or, say, the Bulgarians for Europe? What categories should we use? If we mean that the Bulgarians can give a piece of the Black Sea, while the Slovaks can present the Vysoké Tatry, then we can give forests!

If we are talking about cultural values and peculiarities of national characters, we have something to offer as well. If we see Europe as some 'synergy' that promotes diversity to have more opportunities for growth, then Belarus' contribution could be no smaller than that of any other Central European country that is already part of a united Europe.

Andrey Dynko

Belarus is an area of approximately 207,000 square kilometers, which is not very densely populated. It is also an inexhaustible source of clean fresh water: many Eastern European rivers flow from our country. Belarus is an important component in the security system of Eastern Europe: this is an area through which many supply lines run and more can be built.

There is no such sphere in which Belarus would not have its important contributions. Take, for example, art: we have a vibrant art life. Take

economy: Belarusian-made goods, from petroleum products and potassium chlorides to foodstuffs, farming produce and software made in Belarus' 'Silicon Valley' all can find brisk demand in Europe. Although the very question 'What can Belarus give Europe?' is not correct. And what if it could give nothing? Should we be surrounded with barbed wire then?

Valery Fralou

What could we give to Europe? Well, we have no mineral resources... We could give them a sense of a bigger European family guided by common principles. I guess our serious asset is a very powerful human potential. Mutual access to markets also can be of certain interest for both us and them.

If we conducted a bit different policy, a more predictable one, they would be more calm.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

From geographic and historic viewpoints, Belarus is a crossroads. It is impossible to invent anything other than being a crossroads and a buffer zone between two great continents: almost Asian Russia and old Europe. That is why I believe that Belarus has no alternative in the geopolitical and cultural aspects. It is our major goal to remain such and preserve this status of our country.

Syarhey Kalyakin

It is abnormal that Europe has one unaffiliated country. If several countries stayed out for political reasons that could be understood. But it is strange that just one country, not a big or self-sufficient one, is not a member of the Council of Europe. It is a problem for Europe. Belarus' membership of all European organizations would help consolidate Europe

and achieve a progress in establishing a common mechanism to resolve various conflicts.

On the other hand, Belarus is interesting to Europe as a bridge, a transit corridor for economic cooperation with the Asian continent. The shortest route from Europe to Asia runs through Belarus and Russia. This is why the country is attractive from the economic viewpoint, but it should be predictable. It should fulfill its obligations to make Europe interested in the country economically, not only politically.

Belarus is one of the world's most educated nations with a high-skilled labor force. The country could find a very good niche in the European labor market.

United Europe is not a single whole. It consists of many nations, peoples and cultures. Belarus could contribute to diversity in Europe.

Kasya Kamotskaya

Like any other country. The countries that have joined the EU recently livened up Europe, in cultural and other senses. Belarus could also give some fresh blood. Europe was very boring, very old. It did not take interest in anything. Young blood is much needed.

Syarhey Kastsyanyan

The Belarusians can offer Europe their humanism, because Europe has more often than not drawn various nations in troubles, wars and bloodshed. Recall who attempted to invade our land in the past. Crusaders – various orders from Western Europe. Fascism emerged in Western Europe. Who supported Hitler? Who gave him a free hand to invade countries in the east? France, Italy and Britain. Who accuses the Belarusian government of being undemocratic today? Javier Solana who was born and grew up in the fascist country, Spain. Who is Barroso, president of the European Commission? He was born, grew up and learned fascism at mother's knees in Portugal. Who

promotes democracy today? Descendants of former fascists in Western Europe. Therefore, we have the right to say that Belarus is a European country and it will keep on imposing its Slavic values – humanism, internationalism and brotherhood – on the rest of Europe.

I would like to add one thing. Western Europe is dominated by Roman Catholic believers. Who blessed Hitler to begin a war against the Slavs? It was Pope Pius XII who blessed Hitler. Therefore, I insist that the Orthodox Church is the most humanistic faith. Our customs, traditions and culture have always promoted progress, humanism and a high Slavic civilization.

Vyachaslau Kebich

The question has political and economic connotations. From the political viewpoint, the EU wants Belarus to be a member of the EU. Although Russia considers itself a member of G8 and tries to maintain friendly ties with other countries, the EU and NATO policies are directed against Russia. Russia has always been in opposition to the EU and America. Belarus' membership would expand the EU and NATO to the Russian border.

From the economic point of view, Belarus would find it difficult to enter the EU because all of its markets have been divided already. Belarus has goods it can sell, but it would not benefit in the near term if it joined the EU. Belarus should gradually capture new markets through bilateral relations with EU member countries. It cannot join the EU automatically.

Zhanna Litsvina

Maybe it should not so much give something to Europe, but to take the historical place it lost two centuries before. It needs to restore historical justice in the first place.

It is not because of some threat from the East that Belarus needs to return to Europe. Our future depends on our language, cultural and national identification. Until we understand who we are and why we are here, until

we develop our own perception of interests, Belarusian interests, it will be difficult for us to say what we can offer Europe.

The political aspect of the problem is much more complicated. The current authorities seek closer ties with Russia. During these 12 years Belarus was on the brink of incorporation. The authorities have forced integration ideas on the Belarusians. This effort has been supported by Vladimir Putin. The Russian president's statement that 'the Belarusians and Russians are one nation' came as a real insult. Remember, how many nations are there in Russia!

But on the other hand, the Belarusians have failed to formulate their strategy. The nation's fate is decided by European organizations, which initially declared a step-by-step approach (which did not work after the 2001 presidential election) and later put forward an even more dangerous idea to democratize Belarus through Russia. I do not think Europe has a strategy with regard to Belarus. Belarus should propose a strategy and implement it in cooperation with European institutions. The EU countries should make it clear that Europe needs Belarus only as an independent and sovereign state. This is the main issue at present that takes precedence over the legitimacy of authorities and presidential elections. Europe must stress all the time what it wants Belarus to be.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Belarus could give stability to the EU, its neighbors and Europe as a whole. The issue of European values is not only an internal matter of Belarus. Values are adopted inside the country, not imposed by someone else. But this is also a European issue. This is why opposition politicians insist that the EU should put it on its agenda. This is a question of stability and security in Europe. Belarus is the scene of a conflict between European values and a neo-authoritarian ideology called *Lukashism*. *Lukashism* is a commodity that sells briskly in the former Soviet republics. Asked to choose between Vladimir Putin and Alyaksandr Lukashenka, 80 percent of

Ekho Moskvy radio station listeners said they would vote for Lukashenka. The poll is indicative of how significant the issue is for Europe. Lukashenka is not only the Belarusian ruler; he is the leader of revanchist forces in the post-Soviet zone. Revanchism is a big problem and Belarus plays a key role in creating it. Poland, Lithuania and the whole Europe cannot be secure as long as the problem persists.

This is a matter of political and economic security because transport and energy supply routes run through Belarus. Stability is a long-term issue for Europe. In addition, in a certain period Belarus could act as a bridge linking the EU and Russia. The 'bridge' idea can be used effectively to obtain economic and other benefits for the country and its residents.

Vasil Lyavonau

We need not to bring anything from anywhere. We are at the center of Europe and we should arrange a decent life for our people in our country and end confrontation between the Belarusians and our neighbors.

We should learn to respect each other, to reach agreements, not to fight. In addition, we should not expect to live as a parasite on either the West or Russia. There will not be such opportunities or they will be only in the form of free cheese in a mouse trap. Our unique culture, our Belarusian style of life, our national traditions and national features such as industry and tolerance of others' opinion – all this is and will be our contribution to the European civilization.

Aleh Manayeu

I have two things to say in this regard. The first and most important one is that if we regard Europe as a system of values and a certain culture, one of the most developed in the modern world, then for Belarus as a nation, society and state, this would be a return to the European family. Imagine that we are members of a large family. We have a brother or a sister who left

somewhere and were absent for a long time, but they have now returned. Would the family benefit from this? Of course, it will. Everyone will be happy that they have rejoined the family and it has become stronger. A new labor force and potential will be added. From this point of view, Belarus' comeback to Europe would strengthen not only us but also Europe itself. That is why Europe has been enlarging in the last decade.

The other thing is more pragmatic. It is about the geographic aspect of Europe rather than its cultural one. The return of Belarus to Europe would give the big Europe an opportunity to more efficiently cooperate with Eurasia in the economic, political, military, information and other spheres, and open up new prospects. There can be many examples to show this. For instance, energy resources could be imported from not only Russia but also Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Since Belarus is currently part of Europe geographically rather than culturally and politically, this creates certain problems for the entire region. Recent years have already seen crises such as Belarus' gas row with Russia in February 2004. In this context, the return of Belarus to Europe would help solve many of these problems, and not only the problems of transit via Belarus. Roughly speaking, the eastern border of the big Europe would be near Smolensk, not along the River Bug. And this, I repeat, would certainly strengthen Europe from a pragmatic viewpoint.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

It could offer its traditions, including its archaism, which is of great value. Our people have not been led astray by mineral resources, which often slow the evolution of nations. We are people who gained everything with hard labor. Belarus has a tragic history, one of the most tragic histories on the continent. In this sense, we are blessed with kindness, industriousness and the long-suffering tolerance, not indifference, but tolerance with regard to other cultures.

Anatol Mikhailau

For the time being, it can offer only bad experience in establishing a dialogue with the European culture. Let us hope that we and others will learn a good lesson from the bad experience.

Ales Mikhalevich

I believe that Belarus' attitudes to ecology, environmental protection and the survival of human beings in general are important to Europe, as well as to the entire civilized world. Belarus, which was affected worst by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, will definitely oppose the construction of nuclear plants and any other facilities that can kill humankind if exploding. The understanding that people are imperfect and that we should not play with things that can wipe out humankind is something what Belarus can bring to united Europe. In my opinion, it is the major unique thing that Belarus can bring. It is something that Europe does not have today.

Tatsyana Protska

Every country has talented people. If we lived in an environment created by European values, we could give Europe a lot. Look what kind of reception our opposition figures get in the West. It is not because, as *Belarusian Television* claims, they say bad things about Belarus. In fact they are outstanding people. They speak the same language as Europeans and have a broader understanding of challenges facing the European Union and the European community. European politicians realize that Europe needs Belarus.

This is why our artists enjoy warm reception in the West. Marachkin¹¹ is more popular in Germany than in Belarus.

If the question is about how much Europe needs Belarus, I would say that Europe needs every country because every country has its place and

distinctions. We do not give Europe a dollar or ten dollars. We give Europe something unique that no one else can give.

Europe is like a patchwork – every country has its place, color and is part of a unique needlework of European civilization. The patchwork can be marred by a country that looks like a black hole. Belarus is still a colored square of the European community. But anything may happen. Europe does not have a common ideology. A certain ideology guides Belarusians in official arts, literature and show business. If we try to impose our ideology on European countries, they would not accept either our ideology, or our Palina Smolavas¹² or others who ignore European standards and principles.

Andrey Sannikau

A huge human potential first of all. Despite all Lukashenka's efforts, we have well-educated, hard-working and gifted people...

Belarusians are now forced to emigrate. Lukashenka has showed that the Belarusian people is obedient, too obedient. This means that Europe will be joined not by a problem-stricken country but by a country that, first, can give much and, second, will observe laws. This is proved by our entire history: we abided by Soviet laws during the Soviet era and now abide by Lukashenka's laws, just like we abided by laws set by magnates and princes long ago. We are pretty obedient. And this means that we can promise that European laws will be observed on our territory.

Belarus can give much to Europe, and has already given. We may recount names well recognized in Europe. And not only Chagall. There are many eminent people coming from Belarus who have given much to Europe. This is the only Belgian Nobel prize winner Ilya Prigozhin, Barys Kit, whom Vasil

¹¹ Aliaksei Marachkin – a prominent Belarusian artist.

¹² Palina Smolava – a Belarusian singer often criticized for campaigning for President Alyaksandr Lukashenka before the March 2006 presidential election was voted last but one at Eurovision 2006.

Bykau called the first Belarusian among Belarusians in the world. And there are many such people.

Our art is well-known in Europe. Many artists today live and work successfully in Europe. And not only Barys Zaboraw, but also younger generations – Tsishyn, for instance, or, say, Lyavon Tarasevich, who is one of the best-known artists in the world. I know that many researchers (and very prominent ones) live there and lead the world’s scientific community in their fields. This is an interesting study, it would be interesting to read if anyone did this (like Maldzis did once). To look what and where we are in Europe.

Some ethnic Belarusians have already joined Europe – through Lithuania, Latvia and Poland where they reside.

Stanislau Shushkevich

If we tear a small bit of something, the latter will never be the same. Belarus belongs to Europe and has always given something to it. I am lucky to have visited different continents. Belarus is a country where one can feel himself a European, and Belarusians are people who can feel themselves Europeans in Europe. There are no differences here!

What can it give? In terms of culture, it has already given by creating the European-level literature. It is no worse than the Ukrainian one, although it emerged some 50 years later. Our Bahdanovich¹³ and Kupala¹⁴ appeared 50 years later than Shevchenko. Belarusian art, architecture... We now have few monuments remaining – but they remain and are European-style palaces, Catholic and Orthodox (to a lesser degree) churches, estates. And peasant’s cottages! For instance, when I was in Finland which we all regard as Europe some 10 years ago, I saw there the same primitive houses that are in Belarus.

¹³ Maksim Bahdanovič (Belarusian: Максім Багдановіч; 1891–1917) was a famous Belarusian poet, journalist and literature criticist.

¹⁴ Yanka Kupala (Polish: Janka Kupala, Belarusian: Янка Купала; 1882–1942) – penname of Ivan Łucevič (Іван Луцэвіч) was a famous Belarusian poet and writer. Kupala promoted the Belarusian language and attempted to shield it against russification.

They had simply not managed to reach the absolutely European level by that time, and we've got plenty of such houses in Belarus.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

Itself. It can give Europe its civilization, identity and culture in a broad sense.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

Belarus can offer Europe its cultural and spiritual uniqueness. This is an important contribution because diversity enriches a civilized culture.

Andrey Vardamatski

Not only we have European character and European values, but also Belarus could contribute a lot even in economic terms. Its transit geopolitical position determines what it could contribute.

Transit does not only imply roads and pipelines, but also industries and economy as a whole. It is a good place to have a concentration of manufacturing enterprises for servicing both Eurasian markets. Mentality and high skills make Belarusians more open to new technologies than other nations.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

Without reference to its history, taking the synchronic slice only, Belarus has already brought to Europe a problem associated with European borders and its right to democracy, national identity and independence.

Usevalad Yancheuski

I am very much skeptical about the EU project.

However, a skeptical attitude to the EU and many European values does not mean that we should turn our back on Europe. It is simply silly.

Anyway, many 'European values', such as tolerance, non-violence, respect for another person's opinion and dialog, are a valuable thing for the entire humankind. They are all very valuable! If they cease to exist under pressure from young aggressive civilizations, the humankind may slide back in its development.

What could Europe find interesting in Belarus?

Europe should be interested in everything because it is a heart of the world.

Belarus borders the European Union. Belarus, Russia and Ukraine have always been, and remain to be, an outpost on a route of drug traffickers, illegal migrants, criminal and extremist groups from Asia.

It just happened so. No one has ordered us to do that, but we have always been assuming the responsibility and fulfilling our duty in a decent way.

Political correctness is a nice thing but we should acknowledge that civilizations have tense relations and that the relations are about to grow into conflict. We have been, and remain to be, a sort of a barrier that prevents this stuff from getting into Europe.

Due to our authoritarian system that often comes under fire, we do not provide a perfect barrier, but we still provide some, which Europe underestimates for the very simple reason that we do that for free!

Let us recall the Chernobyl disaster. The lion share of relief expenditures has been, and remains to be, on our shoulders. For some reason, the international community thinks that it is Ukraine that has been affected most by Chernobyl. And it hurts to hear foreign media saying so. Ukraine was really affected, but we were hit worst. We were left alone with the disaster and had to tackle it by our own.

What are the results? Belarus makes good efforts to fight illegal migration, smuggling, trafficking in drugs, the movement of criminal and extremist groups. Belarus has really ensured a peaceful and tranquil life on its territory and does not foment conflicts. However, no one appreciates our efforts. No one thanks us for them. Countries are paid for such efforts, while we do not get a penny.

So, we really do much good to Europe. Europe also could do something good for us.

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 20th 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 Aleksiyevich

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 Yushchenko¹⁵ (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

¹⁵ 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 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 Kastyan

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 22nd century. If the three nations fail to unite, people will not be aware in the 22nd 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 Borodin¹⁶ 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.

¹⁶ 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, Alyksandr 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.

Alyksandr 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 21st 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 Samotlors¹⁷.

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.

¹⁷ 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 Beltransgaz¹⁸. 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 money¹⁹. I am not a supporter of 'orange'

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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' idea²⁰ 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

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.

²⁰ 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.

5. Does Belarusian identity exist? If it does, how to characterize it? What is a Belarusian identity? What does it mean to be a Belarusian?

Volha Abramava

With jingoistic slogans put aside, being a Belarusian means feeling that you belong to this land. Being a Belarusian means longing for home after spending three days in whatever wonderful country. Being a Belarusian means having Belarus inside you and feeling that it is yours with all its faults and problems. Being a Belarusian means that there is no place in the world where you can feel better and also worse when something bad happens there.

And nowhere else in the world will you find such beautiful landscapes as in Belarus. It is something what cures your soul when you feel blue. The job of a politician is stressful here. Sometimes it feels like you are struggling to swim in a swamp. Not only relatives and friends cure your soul but also forests, lakes and rivers whatever the weather is doing outside.

They rightly say that landscapes define us as a nation. When I am talking about a nation I do not mean some ethnic group people belong to. Our landscapes make us contemplative and reluctant to act. We are moderate in everything, In general, we are not inclined to take radical and harsh steps.

In my work about Belarusian national character released in Moscow a few years ago, I showed what we can have on the political front and what we cannot. It is impossible to abruptly change an internal political situation without changing the national character. The latter normally takes centuries.

Political changes are not something what a majority of people living here are ready to accept. I made a try to give a philosophical ground for what is possible here and what is not.

Why did Americans consider it necessary to spend energy, money and considerable funds on developing a strategy for bringing democracy to Germany and Japan after World War II? They did not want people there to see democratic change as artificially imposed from outside. They wanted democracy to gradually penetrate into the nations through their 'flesh' and remain there for a long time. So why do they hold Belarus in contempt? Belarus is a unique country. Its political history is probably similar to that of Slovakia only in the region.

In general, the Belarusians are a unique nation. They are many points ahead of almost every European nation in the ability to survive. The Belarusians survive any conditions and can adapt to anything in fact. That is why this contempt for a fairly small European country and unwillingness to accept what we have here is intolerable. European values should be smoothly blended and fused with our national character, if they want us to accept them. There is no absolute democracy. Each country has its own way toward democracy.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

The emergence of [Alyaksandr] Milinkevich as a candidate in the recent presidential election led me to believe that a new identity is rising. He positioned himself as a Belarusian-Polish intellectual. The image of a collective farm manager or a Soviet nomenklatura leader is part of the past.

However, the new image has yet to be sold to the masses. The cultural community, students and intellectuals have accepted it, but not common people.

It takes long to create that image because all work is performed by enthusiasts. The authorities are not involved. A handful of people cannot cope with the task, no matter how noble their goal is. Authorities and the media also promote that image. If we have had at least such situation that

we have had on the time of Shushkevich and Kebich, the task would have been done yet.

They need a program, a system of views and ideals. So far, the new image has failed to take root in the human mentality. Authorities could help, but they cultivate some kind of rude backwardness.

It all seems very shaky. We are always latecomers.

Yauhen Babosau

Belarusian identity is the Belarusian national language. ‘Mother’s tongue’ sounds much better in Belarusian than in Russian. When we say ‘mother’s tongue’* in Russian, it means explicit language. This phrase in Belarusian has a different meaning. One needs to know and love ‘mother’s tongue’ and ‘my native corner, how dear you are to me’. This is what Belarusian is. I call it Belarusianism, Yanka Kupala called it ‘belarushchyna’. Belarusian identity is when one regards himself as ‘belarushchyna’. This originates from Kupala. ‘Who is coming there, who is coming there?’ – this is where it begins. It began 100 years ago. And this question ‘whom shall we call ourselves – Belarusians’ – is Belarusian identity. When we understand ourselves as Belarusians who live in Europe, have our national roots, our national traditions, our customs and rites and whatever else are Belarusian identity. We have Dzyady and Radunitsa. This is important. We have both these holidays! Catholic and Orthodox Easters are equally important in our country.

Remaining ourselves, that’s what Belarusian identity is, I guess. This means ‘mother’s tongue’, our ‘homeland’, our state, our independence, our peculiarity – this is our identity. It is determined by our belonging to these roots and new things added to these roots, with nothing deleted – be it culture, education or any other spheres that involve fewer national features.

Speaking at a conference once, I used the word ‘Belaruskasts’. The medical university’s rector misheard the word and asked me: ‘How can the

* In Russian ‘mother’s tongue’ – matershchina (материнский язык, матерщина) is translated from Russian as foul language.

Belarusian bone** exist?’ He even does not know what Belarusianism is... There are such terms like Polonism or Russianism, why can’t there be Belarusianism? And this is ‘belarushchyna’ like Yanka Kupala once said.

Anzhalika Borys

The Belarusians still need to comprehend their national identity. The notion ‘Belarusians’ includes ethnic Poles who live in Belarus and must take part in shaping a Belarusian identity.

Iryna Buhrova

It is yet to take final shape, of course. I can’t say that Belarusians can be regarded as a nation today, no. Because state identity is very important. And it is not only identity determined by the state border, although we do have problems even in this sphere because of very strong pressure, strong influence from Russia. It is very politically-charged, that’s what causes such problems. The level of state identity depends on whether people accept the system of values and laws established by the state. And we see a divided country even here.

That’s why it’s pretty difficult to define Belarusians’ identity, considering that political identity also plays an important role in the process. And now that we have a split society, a divided country (with the sides adhering to completely opposite values), we have to acknowledge that national identity has yet to be obtained. Our government’s policy, with its certain ideological priorities, symbols, influence by media outlets, creates a strange phenomenon named ‘identity without identity’. It has been described in books: a person identifies himself with certain symbols but does not have a sense of belonging to these symbols. And psychologists who have examined the problem of individual identity say that people who suffered from ‘identity without

** Belaruskasts – literal translation ‘Belarusian nature’. The word sounds like a compound made up of *belaruskaya* (‘Belarusian’) and *kosts* (‘bone’).

identity' tended to have a mental shock after this identity fell apart, with its symbols changing, etc. I guess similar unpleasant processes can happen to peoples as well. There are two major identification factors for Belarusians today: first is keeping distance from other countries and peoples: so much comparative negative information is poured on Belarusians. And they start thinking: who are we? These cultural distances are formed in affinity with some country. Look, as soon as Russia's policy regarding Belarus becomes more aggressive, the Belarusian public immediately leans toward a bigger distance with Russia. This is evidence that Belarusians are not ready for a close union with Russia. And despite official propaganda, they do not feel so much brotherly love. This is mystification! On the contrary, psychologists until Berdyaev wrote that peoples with affinity (linguistic affinity) often need to find a difference between them, find a distance in order to feel more comfortable. They do not embrace one another but rather try to keep distance.

The second factor is economic. Not ethnic or cultural but economic! A nationally, ethnically interesting phenomenon – Belarusians' individual economy – is formed through the economic factor. This deals with the development of some local communities at a certain level, etc. What is connected with ethnos and culture is emerging and reviving through economy. There are very interesting processes in the sphere, but they get little attention from scholars. And on the whole, there are few sociological studies focusing on the subject, there were many more in the past.

In my opinion, the process of identification is still underway. It is more overt than it was in the past, but I still can't say that Belarusian identity exists and what it is.

I don't say that there is no such identity at all, it is forming. There are some economic features accumulating, then the realization of themselves as an ethnos, as a people: 'Why are we such? We are no worse!'

When I worked at European Humanities University, we were often visited by Germans and the French. And we created identification images: what perception one people has of another, what expressions, symbols and key words it uses to describe it. Students had to describe some other

people and then identify themselves. It was Belarusians who had the most negative identity. They described themselves as closed. There were some contradictory words like 'independence' and 'conformity', the inclination to hide the head in the sand like ostrich, etc. There were such key words like 'swampland' and 'guerillas' and something of the kind. On the one hand, I wouldn't say that this is good. There is an image: guerillas hiding in some swampland, etc. It was Belarusians who interpreted themselves like this! That means that people did not see themselves as a people creating something historic, a people that is recognized. It's very important to be recognized. It seems to me that people in this area are starting to want recognition. Recognition not only as a country but as a people that can have a say, can contribute to culture and show itself as independent and adhering to different values in the sphere of social policy.

We now see not only how the government perceives Belarus, not only an image created by official propaganda. We see now certain attempts by certain groups in a certain environment to create another image of Belarus. I'm speaking not only about the [Kastrychnitskaya] Square – I'm speaking about different things. For instance, about some interesting, absolutely surprising things in science. People say, yes, we are Belarusians, we have an interesting computer culture, we engage in tourism...You know, tourism now encourages what people wanted to do themselves long ago. This is the kind of local pride: this is what we have in Belarus, these are our lakes! I was surprised when I met people who are doing local history research, saw attempts to create true, mundane patriotism, not a fake one. I can say that Belarusians want to be proud of their land, want it to be seen, heard and recognized in Europe. This is very important for me! That's why one cannot say that only political identification is important in society. I want to say once again: politics is the essence of what is going on in other spheres. If it were not for this multi-year, controversial, difficult formation of the sense of identity, nothing might have happened in politics. And we did see that the elections were very unusual. We saw some very interesting

trends. If someone does not notice them in Belarus, he can miss the most important thing.

People often say in our country: ‘Oh, this Europe! It wants to cause harm to Belarus’. This is complete stupidity! When you visit other countries and talk to people much, you feel that they simply want to see people who can speak about themselves and do this in a loud voice. For God’s sake, politics is politics, but it is impossible to get fixated on it.

Henadz Buraukin

Belarusian identity seems to exist. Identity is a very delicate matter. It is not easy to define. Who is a Belarusian? Who is a French? What does his/her identity consist of? It includes the awareness of a unique character, history and national pride. Regretfully, the Belarusian masses do not have that sense of identity. Many of their difficulties stem from the poor understanding of the nation’s value, of the need to have a national state and national politics, and respect the nation’s history and language. This is something that most other European nations have already. The problem is that instead of helping the nation to go through this identity establishment phase smoothly without going to extremes, the current authorities do just the opposite. On the surface the authorities oppose political globalization, but they consistently work in line with global trends toward cosmopolitanism and the elimination of diversity. It a different matter that their efforts contribute to a regional process, not a European or global one. I mean, above all, the government’s orientation to Russia, unparalleled Russification and its lies about history.

History is complicated. Modern educated people should make a sober assessment of historical events. It is true that Aleksandr Suvorov²¹ was a great Russian military commander, but for Belarus he was one of most ter-

²¹ Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov (Russian: Александр Васильевич Суворов; 1729–1800) – Count Suvorov of Rymnik, Prince of Italy (was the fourth and last Russian Generalissimo (not counting Stalin). One of the few great generals in history who never lost a battle, he was famed for his

rible and cruel executioners. Russia may be proud of him and his talent, but the Belarusians should not honor him. Should the Belarusians forgive him for spilling absolutely innocent blood of our ancestors? But the authorities keep on paying him respects, maintain a museum in his honor, and name farms and streets after him. The Russians, if they were wise people, would not be offended by the representation of Suvorov in Belarusian history books as one of the bloodiest executioners to invade our homeland. But if they are unwise, it does not make sense to rewrite or correct our history in order to please them.

The Belarusians have yet to establish their identity and understand what they are. The Belarusian are usually associated with the verse, 'I am a Belarusian man, a master of the wooden plough and scythe' after Yanka Kupala. That time is long gone. Now the Belarusians are masters of much more serious things. It is wrong that we got used during the Soviet time to attribute all our achievements to the country leaders. The Belarusians usually credit the leaders with bringing about economic growth or other good things, thereby making themselves seem small and unimportant. It is people who make everything. They are working hard at factories and in the fields – they are the ones who bring about economic growth. The leader has powers to help them or prevent them from performing better. But the leader alone should not be given credit for economic growth and other benefits. Workers should be given credit in the first place, and then the leader. The Belarusians do not understand it. They are ready to give their work and merits to someone else. We need to teach people respect themselves and their work. As Tvardovsky put it in *Vasily Tyorkin*, 'Give me what I deserve!'

What I especially like in the Belarusian character is that they very sincerely (may be not as quickly responsive as other nationals) sympathize with people in trouble. But I do not like when others abuse their sympathy and kindness. They have had a lot of troubles through that. For instance, the

manual *The Science of Victory*. He is known for dispersing the Tadeusz Kościuszko anti-Russian uprising in Belarus and Poland in 1794.

Belarusians can tolerate high-ranking officials abusing in public their native language. Can you imagine someone doing the same in Georgia? I am not suggesting that we should immediately kick the abuser's ass, as Georgians would probably do. But we must give a lesson to the abuser.

The Belarusian character lacks resolution, will and dignity above all. The Belarusians have a very kind, I would say, Slavic character. We are part of the Slavic world and we took a lot after the Slavs. Moreover, the Belarusians have retained the best, the purest and the oldest of the Slavic traditions in their language, character, habits and daily life. This is good. The Belarusians have something to be proud of and material for self-exploration. They need to examine and understand themselves first and afterward give what they have found to the world.

The Belarusians have yet to understand that they have a place among the nations, an honorable place, and they must not let anyone else to take that place. Yanka Kupala, who is officially called a prophet but many people are still not aware of his prophecy, said, 'Every Belarusian must realize his well-deserved place among the nations'. And no one should be allowed to take away that place! Of course, Belarusian literature has lost forever Dostoyevsky²² and Belarusian-born Polish author Mickiewicz²³, but we must not give our place to anyone anyway.

Ales Byalyatski

It does exist, in principle, in sub-consciousness, everyday life and traditions. I felt strongly my ethnic identity for the first time in the Army, although I was conscious of my identity at the time. Belarusians made friends with each other. They differed from Russians and Ukrainians, let alone other ethnic groups.

²² Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Russian: Федор Михайлович Достоевский; 1821–1881) – one of the greatest Russian writers.

²³ Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) – one of the best-known Polish poets and writers was born near Navahradak in today's Belarus.

Identity manifests itself in multinational communities where people of the same roots group together. We may not notice it in Belarus, but foreigners see the difference when they come to our country. They see that Belarus is not Russia or Ukraine, and its people are different, as well as culture, customs and traditions.

What makes us different? Probably, these are distinctive national and social traditions that were passed from generation to generation for centuries. Why do you spit over your left shoulder when you see a black cat?²⁴ You never think about it. Or when you shake hands with someone on the doorstep, you are invited in or the host comes out of the house?²⁵ You also do not think about it. There are hundreds and thousands things we do not notice, but others do.

Pavel Daneika

What identity is? In my opinion, the Belarusians existed, they exist and they will exist. There is some Belarusian identity, but the question is how much it is evident for others. There is a need to carry out work to define what being a Belarusian means and render the meaning to others. People cannot be aware of you if you keep silent about yourself. We should tell the world about us. But first and foremost we should understand ourselves. However, people do not want to do that! One of their tasks is to survive, live and be what they are. A ruling elite should attach meanings to this. It should load everyday life with noble goals. People perfectly cope with the task of survival, but the elite however fails to cope with the task of attaching some meaning to the survival.

That is why I believe that we still have some way to go to form groups that will be ready to do this quite hard job. Such job requires from the

²⁴ A black cat is considered a bad omen. Spitting over the left shoulder is believed to break the spell.

²⁵ It is widely believed that those who shake hands across the doorstep will quarrel with each other some day.

elite a big responsibility for the future of the country, and also for things that they say. The process is underway. And it does not depend on what this or that political group wishes, nor on how the authorities act. Their wishes and actions can only regulate the pace but not stop the process. It has kicked off and like some mechanisms, it cannot stop once started. The problem was identified – one should be someone. It is evident that one should be someone!

Andrey Dynko

Belarusian identity consists of different elements. This includes a sense of belonging to the Belarusian community, a sense of Belarus' citizenship. This also includes such cultural components as the Belarusian language and Belarusian culture. These are the common cultural codes that Belarusian citizens share. And of course, people at large identify themselves with that unusual political regime.

Valery Fralou

I guess, this is the most painful topic. Many of us call themselves Belarusians but so far have not gotten a sense of ourselves as a nation. And we don't always understand what Belarusian is, although we usually speak about national features. I may not understand this completely as well...

We usually mean tolerance when speaking about Belarusian. Belarus appears to have a rough history: with Swedes, Germans, Poles and Russians crisscrossing its territory. The Belarusian 'hid in potato plants' and tried to survive during these periods. If we take, say, the Great Patriotic War, we call it the 'guerilla war', etc. But we had nearly as many 'polizei' who collaborated with the Nazis! And this intention to survive under any conditions (as the saying goes, 'one sat on a nail but got used to it') has penetrated our minds, our consciousness so deep... Only God knows when we will quit doing this.

I have recently met my friend Ihar Baslyk. He says, 'Thanks to my friends, I've had a look at what has been written about me and who's done this. I thought some were my friends but they have written such nasty things!' There is a painter in our country, Ales Pushkin. One of his townsmen who has no aspirations to a high office wrote such a nasty complaint about him. This reveals one Belarusian feature – the intention to survive by all means, without caring about anything else. This may be a correct approach but if you are a human, a social being, you should be guided by the God-set principles and not only think about saving your own skin. Unfortunately, there are many such features in the Belarusian character.

I know very many people in the army, the Federal Security Service, the KGB, some of them were my friends in the past, with some I served in the army. Their ability to adapt to new conditions is disgusting. Some now even cross the road to avoid talking to me. I don't believe they think about Belarus, its state system at the moment – they are simply guided by their instinct. 'I'd better hide. If only it were peaceful and quiet. Anything rather than war. I will wait this out in potato plants' – that is what they think.

They lack what was typical of Pavka Korchagin, Prometheus... I do not want everyone to be Prometheuses and Pavka Korchagins, but each Belarusian should have their qualities at least to a certain degree. But they do not, as far as I can see.

I may be speaking about a too high standard. Humans are not meant to struggle for something throughout their lives. They are meant to live, love, raise children, go fishing, play chess, they should have a decent standard of living. But I believe the difference between humans and apes is that the former are the work of God, they possess some spirituality... I think that although many now go to church, they are still far away from the Ten Commandments.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

I think it rather does not exist. The self-identification of the entire community, not a small group of people, as Belarusians has not yet occurred.

There are certainly many explanations for this, but, in my opinion, the main factor is that over the 15 years of the existence of the independent Belarusian state, the nation has not developed along a definite path. At the beginning we replaced the Soviet-era emblem and flag for historically national ones and started to revive the Belarusian language, then we decided that we did not need them. At one moment we were going to join Russia, at another we were not. And this zigzagging appears to have prevented the Belarusians' self-identification. Belarusians do not feel themselves as a self-sufficient nation. They feel that they are to be subordinate to someone else, Russia or Europe.

Syarhey Kalyakin

I think it exists and is getting more conspicuous. To establish identity the nation needs to understand that we are Belarusians living on this territory and having a peculiar culture and history. The Belarusians should establish themselves as a nation living in this country and having specific interests. They are not Europeans, Russians or Lithuanians. The country's history is quite short because it was not independent for the last few centuries. It gained a limited independence in the Soviet Union and full independence in 1991. The nation had only 15 years to establish identity.

More Belarusians want their country remain independent. However, many people still want the country to be part of Russia or the EU. This is a sign of split mentality. It may seem illogical, but on the other hand it is quite logical – Belarus needs both Russia and the EU. Up to 70 percent want the country either to join the EU or merge with Russia, and about 40 percent want both. Therefore, Belarus should be both with Russia and the EU, but remain an independent country.

Kasya Kamotskaya

It seems to me that Belarusian identity is being established. It may not seem so from the outside. But inside, it is being established. The process of self-identification is currently underway.

Nationals of other countries would probably describe what is a Belarusian. But for me it is an unfinished nation.

It has never had a national state. It is impossible to call the Lukashenka-ruled country a national state. It may be described as a socially-oriented or anything, but not a national state. The government pursues anti-national policies. It does its best to prevent identity being established. Any nation must go through this formation period and then move on to the next stage. It may be possible to skip a phase in history, but nation establishment is necessary for our country. The nation should speak its language and promote its culture. Then people would understand what it is to be a Belarusian.

Syarhey Kastsyan

The identity of the Belarusian mentality is determined by the nation's economic pattern, history, traditions, customs, education, culture and nature. To better explain identity, I would recall that this land was invaded dozens of times from the West and from the East, but the Belarusians have retained their language, culture, traditions and the names of villages and towns. In Ukraine and Russia, many towns were renamed after Bolshevik revolution leaders. It was not the case in Belarus. Dzierżyński²⁶ was the only town renamed. But he was born in that area. We did not rename towns and streets. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, all former republics started returning old names to towns, streets and villages, but Belarus did not need to do it. This is what Belarusian mentality is about.

²⁶ Feliks Dzierżyński (1877–1926) was famous as the founder of the Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka. Dzierżyński was born into a Polish noble family, living near Iryanets located in today's central Belarus.

Vyachaslau Kebich

I wish I knew the answer. I know my ancestry to 1755. Can you tell me whose blood flows through you? I do not think so. I would say there are no indigenous Belarusians. We had such a difficult history that it is hard to say who we are. The word 'Belarusian' is more associated with the state than with the race. We cannot establish our genetic roots today. The same in France, in America, in Brazil: there is no notion of the nation. That's why I said 'Belarusian' is a notion more associated with the citizenship than with any external characteristics. We are unable to define our genetic roots today. Fortunately or not – I am not sure what is more correct – not so many countries call their citizens Americans, or French, or Brazilians. The majority use another definitions... Try to tell the Germans that they are not Germans! Or tell the Chinese or the Japanese that they are not Japanese. A Japanese means a representative of the race, not the state. There are 'pure' races – not nations – without mixed blood.

Therefore, it would be better not to raise the issue of Belarusian identity.

Zhanna Litsvina

Belarusian identity has not yet shaped. To be clear, it is rather not explicitly defined than not shaped. The national elite has yet to define it, describe it and make it comprehensible for Belarus. It is really not defined, people do not understand the value of this identity. Two years ago someone said that Belarus is a chess piece that fell off the chessboard. Somewhere under the table. How could it happen? Why did it happen? It is the national elite which must give the answer.

Anatol Lyabedzka

No, identity has not formed yet. Our people (irrespective of what language they speak) have an intuitive awareness of how different they

are from other peoples. However, the government is not doing enough to promote national identity. It has very effective tools like television, radio, newspapers, the Internet, but it does not have a targeted policy with regard to national identity. Authorities represent our history as if it started with the 1994 presidential election. On rare occasions they recall World War II veterans. They do not seem to remember anything else.

This is a big obstacle because many Belarusians understand that they are different and would like to know who they are. Even when we are waiting to cross the border, and a Russian trespasses without waiting, some Russian-speaking Belarusians comment it. They understand: we are not like others.

I think polls reflect how the issue of sovereignty and independence is important for people. Fifteen years ago it was a top issue on the agenda. There were Duma and presidential elections in Russia and this was one of the top three or four priorities. Nobody discusses the issue today. All polls find only four to five percent of respondents who would like Belarus to be a Russian province, provided the wording of the question is clear (as Zhirinovsky put it, 'Belarus is the eighth federal district', I consider this a correct wording, not some gibberish about relationship with Russia).

Although authorities have not promoted national identity, Belarusians came to realize that they are different from other nations. Lukashenka and the authorities are coming to terms with this fact. He even used slogans of his opponents – 'For Belarus' etc. – during his 2006 election campaign. This proves that Belarus is a European nation and the Belarusians have national interests. Lukashenka realizes that unification with Russia is impossible not only because he would not have any political prospects, but also because more than 90 percent of the Belarusians want to live in their own country. And it costs! I think it is much through efforts of advocates of European values that the public opinion has changed in favor of independence. One of the European values is national identity and an awareness of national history and culture.

Vasil Lyavonau

Yes, it exists. Above all, 'we are not like them'. The Belarusians seek to live a good life and, thereby, are ready to work well and hard for this if necessary. We are inclined to do intellectual and highly skilled work. We are patient but not unlimitedly so. I flatly reject the recently widely spread opinion that our tolerance has evolved into cowardice. No, we are just practical in our behavior. But our land has not ceased to give life to heroes.

To be a Belarusian means above all to love the Belarusians and Belarus and contribute to the well-being of our country, be proud of being a particle of the nation, respect other nations, not to thump the chest, not to get into self-isolation, and not to oppose ourselves to either the West or the East.

Aleh Manayeu

In my opinion, at the beginning of the 21st century, Belarusian identity, based on the principle of ethnicity, including its fundamental elements such as the common territory, blood, history and culture, is not that inadequate but it does not have clear prospects. Owing to various reasons, this identity has not taken shape in full measure.

Nonetheless, I cannot say that there is no Belarusian identity. I believe that it is in place now but it is of somewhat different nature. For instance, I was born in Russia and am a Russian by nationality but identify myself as a Belarusian. Although from an ethnic viewpoint, I am not a Belarusian at all. In my opinion, Belarusian identity is currently of a social, political and civic nature rather than an ethnic one. An independent state and the rights of its citizens is the basis of this identity. This means that the Belarusians have the right to regard themselves as people who live in Belarus. They consider themselves citizens of Belarus, not Russia, Poland or Guadeloupe. They enjoy certain advantages not only in a pragmatic sense but also in legal, political, economic and cultural respects. They are citizens of their country, are proud of this and ready to uphold this status. This is what it is to be Belarusians. It is

a secondary question whether you were born in a Belarusian village or in the asphalt jungle of a modern city, which language you use in everyday life and whether you prefer draniki to sea-kale. It is not unimportant but secondary.

The formation of national identities on the basis of ethnicity and, consequently, national states in Europe 150 or 200 years ago took place in absolutely different historic conditions. That train has already left the station and we'll never manage to catch it. Never! That is why if we want Belarus to become a fully modern country, it is necessary to strengthen not only its statehood but above all its civic identity.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I am proud to be a Belarusian. However, we have a sick situation: there is a mess in people's heads and there are so many mentality problems. The people are really excellent. I love my homeland selflessly without asking for anything in return. I would describe my country as something lyrical, mystical, green and blue, and tender. The land is like a beautiful and attractive lady whose pride and self-confidence are still a bit overshadowed by her *tuteishasts'i* [nativeness]. I know my genealogical tree way back to seventh generation. It includes ancestors persecuted for their role in the 1863 anti-Russian uprising. My grandfather was a Belarusian national movement activist in the 1920s in the region of Hrodna. The Belarusian identity is shaped by events and personalities. It is very important to realize one's place in history.

Anatol Mikhailau

It is very naïve to think that there is an unambiguous and accurate definition of identity. Trying to find the sense of identity is a never-ending process, not a fixed result of someone's reflections. The problem is that the effort to establish our identity is predetermined by our mental state, which leaves to be desired.

Ales Mikhalevich

Certainly, there is national identity because Belarusians feel that they differ from the Russians, Poles, Lithuanians or Ukrainians. They do identify themselves as a different nation. I should acknowledge that the feeling has become stronger over the last decade or last fifteen years. When abroad, I see increasingly fewer common Belarusians, including those who still have some Soviet mentality, rushing toward people speaking Russian as if there were their brothers. Belarusians already feel that they are different. When they meet their compatriots abroad, they really show great joy and happiness – they have met someone close! We do draw a line between ‘them and us’.

When identifying themselves, some people have negative feelings because ‘we are not them’, but some feel positive – there is anyway something what unites us. What unites us? They say that Chernobyl and Lukashenka. It is already enough! In the West, it is mostly Milinkevich around whom Belarusians are united.

Consumer preferences for Belarusian products unite us. We believe that our products are somehow better. We believe that we have some quality mark. Lukashenka said once, ‘Belarusians are the same Russians but with a quality mark’. I am sure that the Belarusians do not think so, but certainly, there is a feeling that we have some quality mark, that we are better.

The state has undoubtedly contributed a lot. The state did much – it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the fact that we have national currency and no ethnicity box in our passports. There are increasingly fewer people in Belarus who identify themselves as Russians. I think that the number of those who consider themselves Russians will drop from the recent 15 to few percent in five years.

There are things that really unite us. Our athletes who win various contests from time to time unite us. We remember Belarusians beating Russians in an important tennis tournament. Everybody saw this as a major victory and as evidence that we are better and that we are independent.

Lukashenka immediately decorated them with government awards. This shows that Lukashenka also sees Belarusians as different from others.

Tatsyana Protska

The Belarusians are distinguished from other nations. These are tolerant people as we used to say. They do not seek to change people they deal with, but accept them as they are and try to adapt themselves to others. People like it. They do not take Belarusians as enemies, but as people who create an opportunity for everyone to be kind.

I can cite an example. My daughter lives in the United States in a locality inhabited by various ethnic groups – Italians, Vietnamese, Americans, Chinese and Irish. But these people group around my daughter. They party or discuss various issues together. This community was formed after a Belarusian came to that area. Belarusians are very kind and hospitable. They do not ask for anything and work hard. For instance, when my husband comes, he builds verandas and small houses for children. People who like to work, do their work well and provide for themselves are respected everywhere in the world. Belarusians behave this way abroad.

But they are different in their home country. There is a contradiction between Belarusians abroad as they are viewed by other people and Belarusians as they are viewed by Belarusians. They are surprisingly envious in their own community, but that feeling disappears when they find themselves in different conditions.

Take for instance their attitude to their history and language. They are proud of their history and language abroad just like nationals of other countries, but not in their home country.

Belarusians never share their worries with other people. They are always doing fine. This helps them to be European people who also do not like to tell public about their woes.

Belarusian Television has exploited this national trait – everything is fine. When foreigners visit Belarusians, the latter do not say that things

are going from bad to worse. No, they are doing fine. When they invite a foreigner for a sit down dinner, they lay the table with caviar and other delicious food they do not normally eat.

The Belarusians behave in politics the same way. On the one hand, the economic situation is quite difficult, while on the other they make an artificial show of prosperity.

They could be the most admired nation in Europe and elsewhere, but for the internal contradictions that make them envious at home. There is a mess at home, but on the surface, they are nice people.

Andrey Sannikau

It is a difficult question, I can only refer to personal experience. I have never considered myself to be a Russian or anyone else. It was natural for me and I was proud to be a Belarusian. In the Soviet Union we even had a passport of a citizen of Belarus. It's surprising for me when some of my acquaintances state in questionnaires that their former citizenship was Soviet. I never write like this, I indicate only Belarus. There is even a formal reason for that: I had a passport of a citizen of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

As for identity, well, identity should be based on culture, history and language in the best-case scenario. I would say, it can be based on language, culture and history. But we don't have this. We've seen all Belarusian characteristics destroyed but so far have not seen their revival. After three or four years of relative liberalization, they are trying to drive Belarusian identity underground, reject it. But this identity does exist. Even those people who advocate closer ties with Russia feel themselves Belarusians. And when asked 'will you become a province?', most would say 'No'.

I believe we will have to go, one way or another, through this nation-state-building process. All European countries have gone through it since the 16th century. Today, Slovakia is in the process of nation building. Belarus and the Belarusians have not gone through it yet.

There is Belarusian identity, it is growing. Paradoxically (or maybe, naturally), the heavy-handed regime has made Belarusian features a symbol of resistance, struggle against the dictatorship. And has somehow identified cultural niches. This artificial art, these pop singers that we can see on TV cannot be named Belarusian acts. Well, they are formally, but this is not a Belarusian phenomenon. We can see the same in Moscow and other ex-Soviet countries. And these pretty strong underground music acts and magazines (Arche and pARTisan) support the Belarusian identity. This is natural that the underground culture is nearly completely Belarusian-speaking. We've seen Russian-speaking bands start playing songs in Belarusian. And this is pretty good, this is natural evolution. There's an interesting alternative. If you want to become a faceless pop act, sing in Russian. If you want to be a true artist, to have your own audience, you must sing in Belarusian.

Artists featured at the Slavyansky Bazar festival have as much Belarusian characteristics as they did in the Soviet Union. This is purely artificial. I haven't seen anything worse than that.

Stanislau Shushkevich

For me the Belarusian identity does exist. Because my father and his father (I don't remember my mother's father, he died early) all were Belarusians who had national consciousness.

An average Belarusian for me is... I knew the rural type of Belarusians who are serious people who do care about their property and household. He is not stingy but cannot afford spending much, because Belarusians have always had to survive under hard conditions. But this person carefully plans everything so that to have enough food to last until the next harvest whatever enemy may come and whatever may happen.

I guess this good feature (one of the most important features that Belarusians have) has made us undemanding people who settle for much less than other Europeans do. When the situation was changing, when the level of technologies, living standards, energy supplies was rising and

new equipment and materials were appearing, we stuck to the policy of 'a cup and a bit of fried fat'. This is this Lukashenka's 'rubbish' that has done so much damage, cutting the lives of people short. Imposing these agrotowns also is damaging. The Belarusian is always a businesslike master of his property when he is independent.

I can say the same about intellectuals: the Belarusian teacher has always been the main authority for me. It seems to me that there are no people more intelligent than he is.

Unfortunately, there have been anti-Belarusian changes in society. But they can be easily reversed and I know very many true Belarusians, intellectuals who have remained Belarusians and have not surrendered to these changes. Our intellectual level has been influenced by Russian literature, music and art, but at the same time Russian explicit words, lies, mismanagement and thefts. Mind that many Belarusians have overcome these features. For instance, a businesslike peasant who manages his farm well has evolved into a highly skilled factory worker. The proportion of top-qualification workers in our country is four times as high as in Russia: they have six percent of such workers and we have more than 20 percent. That is why Belarusians still manage to survive. When one opens the bonnet of his auto in Western countries (like I did), passers-by look surprised as they don't understand how an ordinary driver can do this. And I don't know a single driver in Belarus who does not open the bonnet of his car and cannot do some minor repairs to a Russian-made car.

This thriftiness, good management and hard-working skills are typical Belarusian features.

It was foreign professionals who pioneered scientific research in Russia. In fact, Russian science is western-style. The academy also was created after a western pattern. And they also came to Belarus. And there's nothing bad about this. And the fact that certain works of Belarusian culture were created by ethnic Tartars who settled down here does not upset me at all. On the contrary, I'm happy about this. And I'm also glad that Belarus' ballet developed thanks to the Russian school. We do have this European level.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

Belarus' sense of national identity is barely comparable to that of European nations who have built theirs in centuries-long clashes between sovereignties. Firstly, our identity is only being established in parallel with our statehood and sometimes the process is inexplicit and non-traditional. One should not overestimate the importance of traditional cultural and philosophical factors. For instance, the national soccer or hockey team's win, which has nothing to do with issues of ideology, contributes much more to the formation of national identity and the country's sense of national pride than hundreds of educational lectures and conferences. Secondly, national identity is an issue of how ordinary people feel and whether they are able to survive tough times in their history, a major problem of a would-be nation. The inexplicit, flexible and even vague nature of Belarusian contemporary identity is only the reverse side of a dramatic historical experience.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

No doubt, a Belarusian identity does exist. Its distinctions include the language, culture, mentality and traditions. Therefore, the preservation and support of the Belarusian language should be a priority objective. To be a Belarusian that is to feel, maintain and revive our identity, and work to the benefit of the nation and its citizens.

Andrey Vardamatski

Belarusian identity is being formed at present. Speaking of identity as of now, it is the fast identity-building process that is important, not its state or existence.

I will not talk about the construction of identity in terms of values, but I can judge on the basis of national surveys that we have conducted. Polls show that just four to five percent of Belarusians would like their country to

be part of another country. Such a percentage of Belarusians would like their country to be a Russian province. If this is the case, then identity does exist.

But it is very difficult to describe it. It is easier to tell the difference between the Italians and Scandinavians because differences are great, than between the Belarusians and Russians because their national characters are so close. But we all understand that they are different. The difference is less vivid, not like between slow Scandinavians and expressive Italians. But still there is a difference between Belarusians and Russians at the level of national characters.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

Naturally, it does exist. It's a normal, sound national identity with all elements, including, I stress, the language. No matter what, most of the country's residents call Belarusian their mother tongue, which adds to the list of the nation's basic values.

However, identification of Belarusians with their state remains a problem. The state was not ours for the last few centuries; it repulsed people like an alien and strange force. The Belarusians will associate themselves with the state and become a nation, which means the same in West European languages, only when our country has a transparent democratic government.

Usevalad Yancheuski

The Belarusians are very Soviet people. Our modern history is the most important part of our entire history.

Our nation has a long history but its development was repeatedly curbed.

The nation should have some elite, some brains. How can a head live without a body? The formation of the Belarusian nation began in the Great Duchy of Lithuania but the process was held back as soon as some ruling elite emerged and the area was taken over by Polish rulers and then by Russian ones.

Meanwhile, we had to start with a blank sheet.

The Belarusians were gradually evolving as a nation in Soviet times. The process began in the countryside above all. Intellectuals came from villages. There is nothing bad about that because almost all nations underwent similar developments.

Even today nearly everybody has village roots, which means that people have a peculiar mentality and particular habits.

Lukashenka made a considerable contribution to the development of the nation. Lukashenka was a person, who had identified the nation, draw a line that separated it from others. We can freely say today that Belarus is neither Russia, nor Ukraine, nor Europe.

During Lukashenka's rule, Belarus started developing as an INDEPENDENT AND PECULIAR country.

By the way, the so-called democratic choice was imposed on Belarus in the early 1990s. The country was part of a big region and was forced to accept 'perestroika processes'. But as soon as Belarus was left alone it immediately rejected liberal democracy (it occurred between 1994 and 1996). The country rejected it gradually, showing its self. The current political system is a direct result of Belarus' independence.

As for Belarusian character, I would like to point out that it is wrong to say that there is something bad or good in the character of a nation. It is something that exists. Perhaps, the Belarusians lack dynamism, aggression, energy.

Fear for new things does not do us good. But it also has benefits – we do not make mistakes that many do. However, I think that we fear too much sometimes. Our fear for experiments is too big. It is bad that we are out of tune with the remaining world. Modern world is an experiment; progress is an experiment and a risk, whereas the Belarusians do not like to risk. It is good to some extent. Perhaps, we will overcome our fear some day. Anyway, we are involved in various global processes.

I personally wish we moved faster, experimented more, were pioneers and had less fear for new things. I wish we got rid of the bonds of our traditional habits without losing respect for our past.

6. Does the notion 'Slavic community'/'community of former Soviet peoples' exist?

Volha Abramava

When talking about Slav unity, people refer to cultural matters to be polite. But actually they imply bonds of blood. However, it is wrong to define a unity as nations tied by the concept of blood because not only Russians, Belarusians and Serbs but also Czechs and Poles are Slavs. Meanwhile, we all are moving in absolutely different directions in many spheres today. That is why I do not believe in the concept of Slav unity. To me, it is a political or even an ideological thing. Unity can be defined in terms of shared values that are a result of shared faith. A faith that dominated a country for many centuries cannot but affect people's values. A political regime that a country has is also a result of a predominant faith in the culture.

But surely there is unity among post-Soviet states, excluding the Baltic states that have always been something alien due to cultural and historic differences. We have similar mentality in general. We understand each other at least. Why would it be easy for Belarusian businesspeople to do business with Israeli partners? Because there are many people from the former Soviet Union in Israel. We speak one language and also think alike. They understand exactly what we mean and vice versa.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

Soviet peoples are an imagined community. I traveled to various former Soviet countries – Georgia, and Turkmenistan etc. – I saw separate Soviet individuals, but the nations return to their roots.

However, the Slavic unity is a thing of the future. I do not like pan-Slavism, but I do not doubt that the Slavic community has a great future. The whole world is united according to some principles. Sweden, Finland and Norway are different countries, but they have something in common. I can say the same about Japan and China.

Belarusian intellectuals are trying to fight with the past, recalling some old insults. I think that time is gone. The modern Belarusian intellectual should not talk about hatred for Russia.

Yauhen Babosau

There is no such historical community like the ‘Soviet people’. The Slavic community does exist. Slavyanski Bazar in Vitebsk, a recent congress of Slavic peoples in our country – this is what we have. The Slavic community exists but we must ensure that Eastern Slavs do not drift far away from Western Slavs, namely the Poles, Czechs, Slovenians.

I believe, we must have a broader view: there are Slavs in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. We must look at a broader picture! By the way, there was such unity during the war. It lost its polish after the war and it would be good to revive it. This community exists.

Anzhalika Borys

I like the European community better.

Henadz Buraukin

There is a notion and a sense of Slavic unity. Like in a village: you can have very good relationship with your neighbors, but if the family is normal, it remains the most close to you. Another matter is that politicians should not use links among Slavic peoples for their ends.

It is much easier for us to understand a Slovak or a Slovenian than a Finn or a German. There is something in common despite the fact that we were closer or more distanced one from another during various periods in history. The Slavs are the Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, but also the Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, Slovenians, Serbs and Croatians. I do not like when politicians single out some Slavic nations and entitle them to speak on behalf of the Slavic community. It is unfair to ignore the interests of other nations, or to treat some Slavic nations as brothers and other as enemies. There is a Slavic community and it should continue to exist. I am an advocate of diversity. There must be a Slavic community of nations, a community of French-speaking nations, of English-speaking nations and African nations. The communities should not be hostile toward each other. Let us compete peacefully and give as much good as possible to the world. If the Slavs give more good than others, we should praise them, if the Africans give more, we should praise them and if the Chinese give more, we should praise them.

I am not sure about the existence of the community of the Soviet people. The Soviet Union consisted of diverse nations – some have recently abandoned feudalism while others were quite advanced, like the Baltic states. It was an artificial or forced union. That is why it disintegrated like a troubled family. Many nations were part of the Soviet Union for 70 years, and all nations for 50 years. That was a long period during which they established close economic, political and cultural ties. I, for instance, regret very much that I cannot follow literature in Georgia, Armenia or Central Asia as closely as I did during the existence of the Soviet Union. I know less about literature in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine than before. Therefore,

I wish that ties and that cultural community remained. When I meet people from Moldova, the Baltic states, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Russia, I feel that we need each other. In literature and culture, it is essential to know each other better in order to learn from each other. I want these nations to maintain ties (especially cultural ones. I am not sure about the economies, as I am not an economist, but it must be the same.) If ties are effective and work for progress and democracy, they must be kept.

Ales Byalyatski

Certainly, the Slavic community exists in a mental sense. The Slavs have similar identity with around 80 percent of patterns of behavior in various situations – in the Army, at parties, work and holidays – being absolutely the same. They differ from the Germans, French and other non-Slavic groups. When I go, for instance, to Croatia, some 1,500–2,000 kilometers from Minsk, and find myself in a company of boys who are drinking wine, working or doing something else, I always wonder how they act in a way similar to people in Belarus.

The Slavic people are not yet so far apart as to say that they are absolutely different. One can only note differences in customs, behavior, thinking, the manner of working etc. at close examination. It is exciting to feel yourself like home wherever you are between the Adriatic and East Sea.

The Russians are not an exception. The Belarusians should distance themselves from the Russians in politics and strategy, but they should maintain close cultural, economic and human and other ties. It may be unusual for me, who has worked in Belarusian culture for so many years, to admit that we do not realize how much we have in common with the Russians or Ukrainians. Although scientists say that the man also bears resemblance to the chimpanzee – 95 percent of the genes are the same and only five percent differ (*laughs*). I think the difference between Slavic peoples is less than 0.01 percent.

There is a greater difference between Slavs and German peoples. The Swedes, Norwegians and Germans are pedantic and accurate. Slavs do not like it. Interestingly, the German traits are more strongly felt in the Belarusians and Poles than in other Slavic nations. The Belarusians and Poles are more prudent than other Slavic peoples. I think these traits were inherited from German tribes. The Croatians and Russians are like the two hands of one body. They are much alike in their lackluster attitude. Our jaws dropped when we mixed with them. A lackluster attitude is in our nature too. It is possible to identify traits common for all Slavs, but this is subject for a serious research.

On the community of former Soviet nations, I was quite comfortable in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan – the countries I visited quite often in the last few years, exactly every year. We have much in common, something that allows us to maintain a close psychological contact. Belarusians make jokes about them – this is OK, they got used to it. I feel much better in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, than in any Western country. They were educated by the same standards as our generation of Soviet people. The same template was applied to all nations across the Soviet Union. Our children probably will not understand each other. Or most likely, Belarusian and Azeri children will understand each other like the Swedes and Germans. As for our generation, I feel very comfortable there [in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan] in terms of understanding.

Pavel Daneika

There are facts behind this. It is clear that we can sit and drink vodka with Poles and that we can sit and drink vodka with Russians as well, but we can hardly do this in a similar way with French people. There will not anything Slavic in the latter party. But Slavs also differ, because countries and even regions opted once to adopt different values.

As for unity among post-Soviet states, it is difficult for me to speak about this. When we want to speak about unity between two nations we should refer to a traditional indicator – history. However, history is the

Battle of Orsha and the Battle of Grunwald²⁷, events that either united the nations or separated them! If the Radziwiłłs²⁸ had learned about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster they would have said, 'The Sapiehas²⁹ have always been a mess'.

Common history and similar aesthetics indicate that Slavs have much in common. But post-Soviet states are a totally different thing. The Turkmen have nothing to do with us, although they do speak Russian. They are different. They have different mentality, rules and attitudes. In my opinion, being close means having common values, not speaking one language. Slavs have common values, starting from the language and linguistic archetypes.

Andrey Dynko

I do not see any traces of Slavic unity. The Balkan peoples obviously do have neighbor solidarity. The Vyšehrad Group countries – the new members of the European Union – also have a sense of solidarity caused by common history and shared current economic interests. Neighboring countries here share a certain sense of solidarity as well. But we often see that Belarusians have expressed solidarity with Lithuanians, Czechs with Hungarians and Poles with the Baltic peoples.

As for Pan-Slavism that certain circles in the Russian empire attempted to promote, it had a very specific purpose. A Czech thinker said in the middle of the 19th-century that Russians like to call everything Russian Slavic so as to be able later to call everything Slavic Russian.

²⁷ The 1514 Battle of Orsha saw armies from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland fighting against Muscovites. The July 15, 1410 Battle of Grunwald took place between the Kingdom of Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and their allies on one side, and the Knights of the Teutonic Order on the other.

²⁸ The Radziwiłłs are a noble family from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

²⁹ The Sapiehas are a Polish-Lithuanian princely family descending from medieval boyars of Smolensk.

To a certain extent, this is what is going on inside the former Soviet Union. On the one hand, Estonia and Turkmenistan have absolutely nothing in common today. It's hard to imagine more different countries than these two. However, it is also hard to find similarity between Belarus and Moldova, the countries situated not far away from each other but that have completely different vectors of development. Of course, attempts to use the Soviet identity, the Soviet culture or economic contacts between these countries for political ends do exist and meet with support from the current Russian political elite. Gazmanov, a singer close to Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, once had his song 'I was made in the Soviet Union, I come from the USSR' get much promotion. However, one cannot describe this unity as something homogenous and coherent. And, I believe the revival of this unity would not serve Belarus' national interests.

Valery Fralou

I think there is some awareness of Slavic unity, they are now promoting it.

There is a community of the former Soviet peoples. Even if we take our Belarus, there are so many national minorities living here!

This is a different matter when politicians start using it for achieving their ends. This is horrible!

There is unity, it is difficult to destroy it over 15 years. But turning it into a tool for pursuing a political career, for earning money from this (I know that many do earn money from this), for promoting oneself is heinous.

I often visit Ukraine, Russia and the Baltic states and I feel that there's something left of it. I don't want to magnify the positive trends that existed in the Soviet Union, but there were many good things during this era. And we, as always, join either the whites or the reds. We used to worship Lenin, calling him a 'curly-haired boy', and now we call him a 'tyrant'. Life is not that simple, it is not black-and-white, it has many colors.

Of course, we must say 'thank you' to Lukashenka for the fact that we are starting to have an awareness of our own country, our own republic. Yes, indeed, this is not related to national qualities, this is formal. But nevertheless... I belong to the people who lived long in the Soviet Union. I see a new generation growing up. I like the way Chernomyrdin said about this when he was the ambassador in Kyiv, not the prime minister. 'Some in Russia think that we are the elder brother. We are neither elder nor the brother, we are already different. We need to realize that a new generation has grown up that views these things completely differently'. I guess some time will pass and we will increasingly regard our country as independent and sovereign with its peculiar mode of thinking and its own traditions. But it will be great if we are guided by the same principles that could make peaceful coexistence possible across the continent and the globe! When a nation preserves its peculiarity and adds something new to a multi-color mosaic! And this mosaic should look beautiful and not take the shape of a Nazi swastika...

Svyatlana Kalinkina

It is hard to say. I do not have a definite answer to this question. While pursuing certain ends, politicians always refer to some common roots. We could see this when a so-called Assembly of the Slavic Peoples of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine was held in Minsk not long ago. Of course, we are Slavs. If propaganda constantly highlights Slavic unity, this may become a popular idea among the public.

From a historic viewpoint, we also can talk about a Soviet community, as we all originate from the Soviet Union. That is why however different cultural roots Belarus and Turkmenistan, for instance, may have, there is something that unites us thanks to the Soviet Union.

I think both a Slavic and post-Soviet communities may exist. But another question is how important this will be for nations and for people. This will depend of political developments and on those who will rule the country.

All post-Soviet countries, except the Baltic states, have found themselves between two civilizations, the western and oriental ones. That is why it is very important who will be in power, as they will determine which community should be prioritized.

I would not make little of such 'patriotic' sentiments if I can put it so. They are very strong. Much depends on who would fuel them and for what purposes. Many generations should change until this smoothes over.

Syarhey Kalyakin

There were such communities, but they broke up. As long as communities exist their members have more and more things in common. But when they break up, these common features slowly disappear.

European researchers have recently concluded that there is no European community despite the fact that the nations appear to be on track to form a single state. There is a big difference between the Dutch, French, Germans etc. It was the same in the Soviet Union. One could call the Soviet Union a community of Soviet people, but there was a big difference between the Georgians, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Chukchi. After Belarus gained independence, its people gained new national features and developed its identity.

As for the Slavic community, I must admit that the Slavic nations have common roots. But it depends how far one looks back in history. If we take a span of 100 to 200 years, one can say we have much in common with the Poles. If we look back 300 years, we would recall the Great Duchy of Lithuania in which old Belarusian language was the official language of the state. However, politicians should not use common roots to set off the Slavs against the Europeans for instance.

No one knows what the Belarusians or Germans will be like in 500 years. Some big and prosperous nations that once dominated the world have disappeared. Therefore, attempts to use common roots in politics may lead to the emergence of hostile blocs. We need to consolidate the nation on the basis of common traits. In the last few years, the political leadership has done

a lot to split up the nation into Belarusian speakers and Russian speakers, the old and young, rich and poor, city and village residents, supporters and opponents of the president. This is not good for society. Split nations never prosper. Prosperous nations have political competition, not a big divide. If they ever have disputes, the disputes are of scientific nature.

Kasya Kamotskaya

Surprisingly, the Slavic community does exist. I feel it when I visit other countries. The Slavs differ from other nations by their carelessness. When you come to the Czech Republic, it feels like a very cultured country. Then you go to Germany and think, the Czechs are slackers.

The former Soviet peoples have some historical memory. Older people in the Baltic countries may have this kind of memory also. I do not mean Muslim countries because I do not know what is going on there. I was making a concert at Cambridge. There were a lot of Belarusians there, but many Kazakhs, Ukrainians and other former Soviet nationals turned up. There were no Britons, or just two or three did show up.

Syarhey Kastsyanyan

The former Soviet nations are grateful to the Slavs for preserving their values such as language, faith and traditions. Not a single Muslim country was converted to Christianity in the Soviet Union. The Baltic republics were not forced to adopt the Orthodox religion instead of Catholicism. Any nation that respects the Slavic civilization, culture, traditions and history can develop under its umbrella.

Slavic brotherhood does exist. It is another matter that Slavs have been obsessed with internationalism in the last few years. They have not noticed having lost the possibility to elect their leaders independently. Today, Brussels and Washington decide who governs one Slavic country or another. However, the fact that the leaders of some Slavic nations do not promote

Slavic unity and brotherhood does not mean that the brotherhood does not exist. Slavic peoples are close to each other regardless of whether their leaders like it or not. However the current leaders of Poland may criticize Belarus, the ordinary Poles support Belarus and do not support their government's actions hostile towards this country. It is the same in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria and any other Slavic country. Do not they only support Belarus with words, but they also maintain close economic ties.

Vyachaslau Kebich

I would not distinguish the Slavic community. It was interesting to watch films about Soviet troops fighting the Germans. The Soviet soldiers usually included two Russian faces and the rest were slant-eyed guys. However, the commander calls all of them the Slavs. Russia has no right to describe itself a Slavic nation because they are not Slavs any longer. One can historically distinguish between the Slavs and non-Slavs, but I would not say a definite Slavic community exists at present.

A community of former Soviet nations remains quite prominent. Whenever President Saakashvili leads Georgia, most Georgians dream of friendship with other former Soviet republics. People will be nostalgic for the former community until politicians, especially nationalistic ones, persuade them that they are the greatest and most unique nations.

Anatol Lyabedzka

There is a unity of former Soviet peoples at the political level. It is a political tool. And there is also the word 'sovok' to describe Soviet mentality that has been conserved in Belarus. Lukashenka's governance model boils down to the conservation of *sovok*. It is a very simple model – there is his residence and about 10 million people waiting in the line. All these people are waiting for the tsar to give them something. The *sovok* mentality is about someone doing everything for you and you do not need to use your internal

potential and develop it beyond the limit allowed by the authorities. This is part of the current Belarusian authorities' policies aimed to return the country to the Soviet Union format. Authorities exploited that mentality actively before, and continue to exploit it less actively now. But there are still a considerable percentage of people with the *sovok* ideology.

However, time is not on their side. Older generations are nostalgic for the Soviet Union, but this is natural for the transition period. Nostalgia prevents people from exploring and using their internal potential. When you were 30 or 40 years old, you were taught to behave in a certain way, adopted certain stereotypes. It is difficult to expect people to adapt themselves quickly to new conditions, even in an environment where they have more opportunities. A recent poll in Lithuania showed that about 50 percent of the respondents are nostalgic for the past directly or indirectly. Nostalgia remains despite the fact that Lithuania is a member of the EU and has achieved a significant success. As time goes by and a new generation grows up, the issue will become less topical.

As for the Slavic community, I think it is not a matter of any importance to Belarus. There is a small group of people. Organizations like the Slavic Assembly are all dead, because the idea has no solid foundation.

It was not based on a consolidated position like, for instance, the position of Islamic countries. There are Slavic nations in the EU and in the former Soviet Union. But they do not have a common ground, like the Islamic world.

Vasil Lyavonau

Was or is there a Slavic community? It may have existed but does not exist now. Because when we talk about Slavic nations, we do not mention the Poles, the Czechs and others. The Slavic community has split by religious differences. Even if we talk about the East Slavic community, which includes the Russians, the Belarusians and the Ukrainians, there are also problems and they are very complicated. We are not just close nations. We are very

close nations. But this closeness and kindredness caused and continue causing a lot of problems. This is a big and separate subject.

As for a community of post-Soviet countries, I cannot put it better than Vladimir Putin: 'The Commonwealth of Independence States is an organization for a civilized divorce'.

Aleh Manayeu

Prominent Russian political figures and their followers in Belarus and Ukraine, where there are many of them, like to highlight Slavic unity in an ethnic and geopolitical sense, saying that we had common history and a common state, that we fought together against the Tartars and the Teutonic Knights, and so on. Just in the same way, some politicians in Belarus try today to strengthen Belarusian identity on the basis of the golden era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In my opinion, this view of the Slavic community as well as Belarusian identity does not meet the present realities times. These no longer exist.

But in other aspects, in cultural, psychological and, in some degree, religious aspects, I think that a Slavic community as a feeling of commonality, not Slavic unity, does exist. It is the same like, for instance, a Chinese tourist who meets a Korean or a Vietnamese national somewhere in the African jungle or in Manhattan probably feels his cultural and psychological commonality with them. In this sense, I think that it is possible to talk about the cultural and psychological commonality of Slavic nations and closer ties between them than between the Slavs and, for example, the French, the Brazilians or the Japanese.

As for the community of post-Soviet nations, this is simply a bluff. The famous formula, offered as far back as the Stalin era, that a new historic community, the Soviet people, had formed was a bluff. There were special cultural and psychological ties between certain close nations and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. (There were more than one hundred nations and ethnic groups within the USSR.) For instance, such ties were between

the Slavic, Baltic and Caucasian nations. But the so-called unity of the Soviet people was maintained on violence and false propaganda. If we take an average Estonian and an average Turkmen, their social and cultural commonality was on a minimal level. Of course, the 300 million people who lived in the Soviet Union and were called the Soviet people had some common features. But those features were common not because of national similarities but because of the peculiarities of the Soviet social and political system. In particular, those common features included poor initiative and responsibility if compared with the Western Europeans or the Japanese, but a increased feeling of fear and an intention to get something for nothing. As soon as the system collapsed, those common features started to vanish. That is why present attempts to restore the unity of the Turkmens, Estonians, Georgians, Yakutians and other nations and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union are doomed to failure.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

Various hard-line politicians have been manipulating notions like these for a long time. They say, for instance, that the Slavs are all Orthodox believers, or the Slavs are those who recognize Moscow as the center of Slavic lands. These are the people who consider that Belarus is not a nation.

Anatol Mikhailau

One cannot deny the existence of distinctive features that can be expressed by the notion 'the Slavic community'. Shared history and cultural traditions, language similarity to name but few. The nations that were part of the Soviet Union have even much more in common because they were not divided by state borders.

Ales Mikhalevich

As for Slav unity, I always cite a Russian whom I met in Czech Republic, in Prague. He said that the Czechs only speak a Slavic language but in fact, they are Germans! To me, Slav unity means common values. If you look at those who represents Russia at international forums and people in power you will have doubts that a half of them is of Slav descent. That is why it is hard to see Russia as part of a Slav community.

My mother has very strong Lithuanian roots. And I could never understand why some Slavs from remote Russian regions are somehow closer to us than Lithuanians who live 100 kilometers off Belarus.

People from former Soviet states have common experience. They have an advantage over countries that have not been in the socialist camp or in the Soviet Union because they know how dictatorship works. They have a common language for communication and I personally am not ashamed of using Russian as a working language at joint conferences between Belarusians and Azeris. We know this language well, so why should we feel ashamed of using it when talking to each other? It is a means of communication. It is one of the few things that we have inherited from the Soviet era. However, things that unite us, including the knowledge of Russian, will vanish with the passage of time.

Tatsyana Protska

There is a notion of Slavic community. It appeared long ago, before the Soviet Union. It implies religiousness, devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church, collectivism and the way of life and attitudes of Russian villagers before the Bolshevik revolution.

Western Slavs, who belong to European civilization, differ from the Russian ones. Urbanization has considerably changed the Russian Slavism. Now it seems that the concept of 'Slavism' is an ideology with a system of values, which differ from that of Western Europe. Freedom, democracy and

human rights are the support pillars of European civilization. Slavic civilization takes a different approach – the state, economy and submission to the authorities are the top values.

The West European approach is quite liberal – the human being takes precedence over everything, including the state. Humans are responsible for themselves and decide for themselves. In Slavic civilization, the state is in the center and humans exist for the state. Collectivism plays a big role, whereas freedom and democracy are not important.

The community of Soviet peoples will exist as long as people who lived in the Soviet Union are alive. Around 100 years ago, generations were raised with a particular outlook on life. There are fewer and fewer people who have the same outlook.

I would not say that that the Soviet community is dead. The ingrained feeling that the state decides for you is very popular and more characteristic of the Belarusians than of other former Soviet republics. They want a new Stalin to think for them and they do not want to take responsibility for their fate. The European system of values implies that people seek happiness themselves rather than wait for the state or the public to bring you happiness.

Andrey Sannikau

Slavic unity is a political term, a political phenomenon. For some unclear reasons Slavic unity as former Soviet countries understand it does not include Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic or Slovakia. Slavic unity means ‘we are building the Soviet Union’. The Serbs were recognized until Milosevic’s departure from office. Neither Poland, nor the Czech Republic, nor Slovakia are recognized as Slavic countries by the politicians who advocate the Slavic unity idea. However, when the Republican Party in the Czech Republic was organizing a Slavic congress, a reactionary event aimed against democratic principles, they were recognized as Slavs at once, with delegations from Minsk and Moscow coming to attend.

Slavic unity does exist, it means certain cultural traditions. But what politicians today call Slavic unity is a political phantom, something used by politicians in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

And ties between ex-Soviet countries will remain, I think. Unfortunately, there are some artificial obstacles to the contacts and the constructive environment which came into existence in the perestroika period has been destroyed. I lack serious intellectual support from Russia. Support from the people who exemplified dignity and freedom for us once. We were together while destroying the empire and supporting each other.

I've recently attended the celebration of the 15th anniversary of the Riga events, their barricades. They also regretted having lost these ties. Because if it were not for these people, intellectual leaders, dissidents, human rights defenders from Russia who came from St. Petersburg, like members of the Leningrad City Soviet, to support the Latvians, no one knows what might have happened. I guess things will never be like this again and I regret this. We don't see this anymore. Only few people can have a correct idea of what is happening here at present.

Stanislau Shushkevich

As for the Slavic community, I have an impression that there's nothing but the mere ability of poorly educated people (who don't speak foreign languages) to understand each other. I don't see any unity here, there's rather some contradiction. One group of Slavs includes Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, while Poles, Czechs and Slovaks are different Slavs. Serbs are a bit like Russians.

Apparently, this all is the result of common origin, but I'm not a historian and cannot say for sure.

I feel at ease in a place where I can share thoughts with another person, understand his language. In this context, the Slavic community does exist for me. While visiting a professor in Ljubljana in the Soviet era, I suddenly realized that I had no problem talking to him although I had not learned

the Slovenian language. The same was in Bratislava, Slovakia. It was more difficult in the Czech Republic. As for Poland, I had no problems whatsoever there: I speak Polish as I lived in places where Polish is spoken. In this context, this community exists for me.

But these unions often were not very decent, I would say. For instance, the Serbian-Russian union contributed to the slaughter of Muslims. I don't feel that much close to the Muslim culture but I do find it very easy to contact with people who practice a different religion. The people has hidden those guilty of the genocide like national heroes. Probably this has been caused by flaws in upbringing, this is far short of European standards.

I'd put it that way: the Slavic community exists but it has partially evolved, and sometimes contacts with other communities, say, with the French or Finns, seem to me more efficient and more useful for both sides.

As for the Soviet community... I'm a Soviet person, you know I traveled through the Soviet Union much and once said that one cannot manage Uzbek cotton farming and Chukchi deer farming in the same manner. But I felt well both in Dushanbe and Tbilisi, and later in Bishkek thanks to our common history. We appear to have common history because of the same social problems.

I've recently come back from France. The French have long staged revolutions. This spirit of protest is the spirit of the people, it cannot be banned. They are taught how to protest in a civilized manner. Of course, they can overdo sometimes, even during student protests. But this is the spirit of the people. By the way, they all once united into the single French people. I believe that if the principles of the Soviet Union had been based on truth, the country could have had chances to be more solid. And the principles were based on lies, and the leadership's actions differed from its words much. Only those people who were misled (and I was too, because I liked the Soviet principles for quite a long time) are nostalgic for this community. For me, a Belarusian, it was a humiliation that my father, a Belarusian language teacher, earned 12 percent less than Russian language teachers did. This difference did exist. These are humiliating principles imposed by

the colonialism, and people do understand their essence only thanks to free media outlets.

The only thing that still unites us is the knowledge of Russian. I can't name any other shared features. European peoples like Poles and Czechs have already abandoned this. Just like the Baltic peoples... And we still remain *homo soveticus*.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

Certainly, some community mechanically continues its existence after the Soviet Union's collapse and the fact explains a lot in our modern life.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

The existence of Slavic nations, peoples with the same roots that speak Slavic languages, is a historical fact. These nations share many cultural elements and traditions.

As for the community of former Soviet peoples, these were part of one big state not so long ago, therefore such a community still exists and manifests itself.

Andrey Vardamatski

There are two levels of Slavic unity. There is no longer unity of national mentalities. Unity implies a large degree of connection, big similarities and interaction. There is not much connection, similarity and interaction at present. Although Slavic nations have similar national characters, cultures and mentality. This is as far as the first level, the level of national psychology, is concerned.

In politics, however, a gap between some Slavic nations is widening for functional and pragmatic reasons. On the other hand, some nations empha-

size and advertise their similarities, which are attributable, in fact, to other, pragmatic reasons.

The same applies to the post-Soviet space. Residents of the former Soviet republics aged of 30 and over have much in common. They were born in the Soviet Union. But on the other hand, the nations have been torn apart by centrifugal forces.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

These are different things.

To a humanities scholar like me, language similarities of the Slavs are natural and useful in a way, because they give food for comparative studies of cultures and mutual enrichment. I mean all Slavic nations, not only the nations viewed as ‘the Russians’ by imperial doctrines. There is no mental or political Slavic community.

From the nation building viewpoint, more typological proximity is found among the Central and East European peoples that experienced national rebirth in the 17th–19th centuries (independence of Montenegro was the most recent example) regardless of language, ethnic and religious divisions. (By the way, most Slavic nations, except Russia, may be included in this group). Most of these nations were under control of the Soviet Union in the 20th century. This is why these peoples sympathize with each other and express solidarity with those still fighting for independence and freedom. This is where the term ‘new Europe’ comes from, although these nations are not a new Europe, just Europe.

As for the former Soviet republics, they form a group called Central and Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. They are part of the community mentioned above. The old civilization divides were restored immediately after the collapse of the Soviet empire. The next generation will not associate themselves with *mundus sovieticus*.

Usevalad Yancheuski

Someone made a smart remark that the four economic formations identified by Karl Marx existed simultaneously on the territory of the Soviet Union. There was a feudal formation in Russia, capitalists in the Baltic states, a slave formation in Central Asia and savage conditions in Chukotka.

Those who live in Central Asia and the Caucasus differ from us. When were the Central Asian countries actually incorporated into the Russian Empire? When did Skobelev³⁰ defeat the Khivan Khan? Historically, it did not happen long ago.

There was, and there is, the concept of Soviet people. Just like in physics, you join mechanically some things together and they adjust to each other despite being very different. The molecules of one element start penetrating into the other one. That was the case in the Soviet Union. Sometimes, things were harsh. Sometimes, the process was natural, but sometimes it was forcible. There is nothing strange about that. Russia was a classic empire during both the Romanov dynasty's rule and the Soviet era. Empire is just a type of a society's self-organization. Russia absorbed different cultures. It had a superior idea, super values, super task.

The empire fell apart. It happened partly accidentally. Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan could have remained parts of one state by some quirk of history, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote. It could well have happened so.

The Baltic states were something alien despite being part of the Russian Empire for 200 years. Galicia (Halychyna) was never part of the Russian Empire in fact. It was annexed to Russia by Stalin.

Then the Soviet Union collapsed. Its parts started moving apart from each other. Many of them do not feel any need to unite and they will continue moving further apart from each other. What can Tajikistan have in common with Estonia?

³⁰ Mikhail Skobelev – General, one of the military commanders responsible for the Russian conquests in Turkistan, took a prominent part in the capture of the Khivan capital in 1873.

I have a strange attitude to the concept of Slav unity. Let's look at Russia and Serbia, which are traditionally cited as an example of brotherhood. But the countries do not have any historical links. Their histories have never come in contact with each other.

Brothers Bulgarians. We liberated them once but they were fighting against us in two wars.

The Slav people of Poles. If you look back you will see that Russians were fighting with Poles too often. I do not know whom they were fighting more with. The Poles and the Ukrainians have never been great friends.

The Czechs. Their language is very much similar to Russian, but what does their history has to do with Russia's? Nothing.

To put it short, there are few barefaced facts speaking for some Slav unity. The language is certainly among them, but what can I cite more?

7. What do you think of Russia's policies with regard to Belarus?

Volha Abramava

Russia's behavior is pragmatic and in line with its national interests. Perhaps you know that I have always been a Pro-Russian politician and simultaneously a pro-European one. I am trying to maintain a balance. I realize that this region is under two influences. As a pragmatic person, I believe that the situation should be preserved in the national interests of Belarus. Russia's policy toward Belarus does not simply meet its national interests. It has support among the Russians. Alyaksandr Lukashenka acts in a similar way – he pursues foreign and internal policies that have support among a majority of people here.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

Russia is in a difficult situation. The empire has collapsed, but the imperialistic ideals still exist. Moreover, these are the only ideals Russia has at present. There were precedents in history. Empires disintegrate, but an imperialistic mentality remains. The loss of control over Georgia and Ukraine prompted Russia to take a tough stance in advancing its geopolitical interests. I do not like its imperialistic mentality.

Paradoxically, at the moment in Belarus Lukashenka's selfish interests coincided with the interests of the nation.

Yauhen Babosau

I think Russia's policy with regard to Belarus has two sides. Unlike Belarus, Russia has tycoons who are interested in forcing Russia into subjection to the West rather than into a union with Belarus. That's why these tycoons obstruct the unification of the peoples. We have every reason to do that... Thirty-eight percent (!) of Belarusian women are married to Russians and Ukrainians, this is scientific data. Thirty-eight percent, more than a third! And 36 percent of men are married to Russians, Ukrainians or representatives of other nations. This can't be determined by any borders or treaties.

My former post-graduate student comes from the Ural region. When his mother died, he had trouble attending her funeral. Travelling there costs much. And if she had lived in Vladivostok? There is an acquaintance of mine, a professor, living there. He is Belarusian, from our country. How can I visit him? This is not a problem of interpersonal relations, this is an economic problem, I have no money to buy a ticket to visit him. This is an obstacle... I've been invited to attend a congress of Russian sociologists in Moscow. But one has to pay a fee of 450,000 rubles. And now I'm thinking whether I should go there. This is the problem. And what about a university student? He would never manage to do this!

The problem of the Belarusian-Russian relationship has two sides. On the other hand, they are very much interested as we are the western frontier, a buffer with the West. If anything happens, Belarus will be the first to stand in the enemy's way! We all remember what happened to the Brest Fortress.

Anzhalika Borys

Russia pursues imperialistic policies.

Henadz Buraukin

Unfortunately, I have an impression that the Russian government and public reanimate ideas of imperialism. Many Russians, including cultural

figures, want Russia to be great and impose its will on other peoples, former Soviet nations in the first place. Have you noticed that the Soviet Union has been perceived lately as a version of the Russian Empire? Such a perception is very strong in Russia. From the history viewpoint, the Soviet Union was not an equivalent of the Russian Empire. Even Lenin wanted to do away with the Russian Empire. At present, Russian politicians, including top officials, allow others and take liberty themselves to draw parallels between the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. They accept the fact that the Soviet Union no longer exists. They even accept the fact that the Soviet Union cannot exist. But they want the Russian Empire restored. They want Russia to control Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Georgia. I do not know, may be they want to control, the Baltic states, but they are cautious about it. I am wary of such political trends in Russia.

The Russians are very much concerned about the reversal of Russification. In Belarus, they believe, Russian speakers do not have problems. But they take an absolutely imperialistic approach to language policies of Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and Moldova.

I worry about trends in the political circles of Russia reminiscent of something associated with fascism. Zhirinovskys³¹, Zatulins³² and others have an opportunity to use television and other means to call for the use of force against countries that behave not in a way they consider appropriate. The

³¹ Vladimir Volfovich Zhirinovskiy (Russian: Владимир Вольфович Жириновский; born 1946) – a Russian politician, deputy and vice-chairman of the State Duma, has done a great deal to foster a reputation as a loud and boisterous populist who speaks on behalf of the Russian nation and people, even when the things he says are precisely what many people, at home or abroad, do not want to hear. He is also well known for his boasts pertaining to other countries, having expressed a desire to reunite countries of the ex-Soviet ‘near abroad’ with Russia, and dreaming of a day ‘when Russian soldiers can wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean’. ‘Ukraine does not exist. Russian governors must sit in Kyiv and Minsk’, ‘True Russian borders are the borders of September 1917’, he once said.

³² Konstantin Fyodorovich Zatulyn (Russian: Константин Федорович Затулин; born 1958) – a member of the Duma who, along with Zhirinovskiy was banned from entering Ukraine over his anti-Ukrainian statements.

public does not denounce their statements, or very few representatives of the public voice concern, while others applaud. These statements heightened sentiments and led to attacks on foreigners, especially with a different color of skin, and synagogues. I worry because Belarus is becoming more involved in Russian political affairs. If we get infected with the same disease, it will be a tragedy for our history, for our young national state.

Ales Byalyatski

Russia pursues shortsighted and narrow-minded policies with regard to Belarus based on basic instincts. It does not have any strategy in relations with Belarus. Its policies are based on a dim-witted, military-style pragmatism. Russia pursues the same policies in relations with the other former Soviet republics. This is why the Baltic states promptly withdrew from all 'union' treaties and economic blocs involving Russia. They did it despite all the economic losses they incurred and continue to incur. These nations realized that if they remained in that post-Soviet swamp, they would have paid five times the price they paid by severing ties with Russia. Russia has imposed an economic blockade on Georgia and Moldova. The same fate awaits Belarus if Russia does not change its policies. But it has no reason to revise its policies. It is such a huge country. Only Ukraine, probably, means something to Russia as a big economy. Other countries are nothing. Belarus and Ukraine also are important transit routes to Europe for Russia. Since small countries like Georgia and Moldova are of little geopolitical importance, Russia taunts and bullies them. Russia treats all small nations surrounding it like a drunken soldier treats prostitutes in a brothel.

I don't think it will change its attitude to these nations in a foreseeable future. Therefore, Belarus should escape to the EU. Figuratively speaking, Belarus should build a five-meter wall on the east as soon as possible, leaving only 10–20 crossings for cultural and family contacts. Otherwise it will end up in trouble. The history of unions with Russia is a big tragedy with millions of victims. I don't mention economic losses, only human ones.

Pavel Daneika

I am sure that Russia does not have any foreign policy. Russia is just unable to produce any meaningful foreign policy for the simple reason that it is unable to articulate national interests. Imperial thinking determine at large Russia's actions today. I believe these actions conflict with Russia's priorities. The point is how we define priorities. If we think that a major task of a state is to achieve prosperity, which will be safely protected from outside and internal threats, then apparently Russia's current foreign policy runs counter to such developments. Russia bases its foreign policy on other assumptions, on some ideological assumptions. They still think in territorial terms. They still consider it important to be feared. The attitude is a result of a complete jumble of various legacies that has nothing to do with modern Russia and people that live there.

That is why it is wrong to say that Russia pursues some policy toward Belarus. Some imperial structures do display our-satellite, younger-brother and our-ally attitudes and conviction that something depends on them. But this affects either 'mainstream' people through inherited propaganda tools or 'lunatic' intellectuals that know much but understand little. Serious ruling groups see this as a game. In a rather cynic way, they exploit a set of existing stereotypes to achieve their own ends.

Andrey Dynko

I regard this policy as cynically pragmatic. But I also view it as short-sighted. Russia's policy in the past decade was based on the unconditional support of Lukashenka's autocratic regime, with Moscow keeping secret hopes that Belarus will finally return to Mother Russia. This policy ignores the fact that the repressive regime in Belarus runs counter to the interests of many layers of Belarusian society, that it is not natural for a Central European country. Belarus is the only country to have such a regime, there are no such regimes anywhere

near. The regimes in Croatia and Slovakia crumbled long ago. And this leads to the Belarusian civil community's great disappointment at Russia.

I called this policy cynical. If we set aside all half-words and apophysis phrases, the policy provides for the assimilation of the Belarusian people as such. I have difficulty finding another example of a European country pursuing a strategic goal of capitalizing on a favorable situation and annexing another country, destroying its specific national character. This is what has caused reasonable misgivings among the Belarusian national elite and Belarusian businesspeople. And this adds to earlier psychological traumas in relations between Belarus and Russia.

However, I hope Russia will remain a democracy and a responsible member of the Euro-Atlantic community. Belarus and Russia have pretty significant economic contacts, even despite the fact that Belarus has been raising its exports to the EU and decreasing exports to Russia in recent years. Nevertheless, Russia remains Belarus' largest neighbor, a country with which Belarus has the longest border. I consider it to be a major task of Belarusian intellectuals to find scenarios of cooperation with Russia whereby Russia would cease to be a source of insecurity for Belarus and would contribute to its sustainable development instead.

Valery Fralou

I don't quite understand it as far as it concerns common sense. Well, I do understand it in terms of short-term interests. Russia's intention to retain its sphere of influence extending beyond its borders is logical. Some transient economic interests, the gas pipeline also matter.

But strategically I don't understand this policy. Russia still continues supporting Alyaksandr Ryhoravich Lukashenka although he has long been an obstacle on Russia's way. Some issues at certain stages are resolved but this does not help create an EU-like union in which we would co-exist as two brotherly nations.

I make no secret of my pro-Russian views. Nationalists here consider us to be enemies who are surrendering Belarus. We don't want to surrender it! Our views simply stretch beyond theirs. And Russians deem us nationalists. The pro-Russian, sober-minded, constructive opposition seems to be needed by no one.

There is some progress in Russia which I visited before the New Year. There is the European Forum bringing together 200 to 300 people from former Soviet Union countries. The Efficient Policy Foundation led by Gleb Pavlovsky invites constructive pro-Russian politicians to attend. I visited the forum before the New Year, there were not 300, but some 60 delegates, who got together to have a New Year party. I was there, as well as Kazulin... After a conversation with Modest Kolerov, a department chief in charge of the CIS affairs, I had an intention to toss away the forum and head home, to Minsk. I talked later to Kokoshin, Gleb Pavlovsky who placated me a bit, but I still left Moscow in a bad mood.

I care not only about Belarus. I care about Russia as well, because we and Russia have so much in common. Here, in Belarus, the traditional opposition seeks to bar us from the political space. Mind you, they were very cautious to all proposals that we came up with while serving in the House of Representatives (changes to the Electoral Code, the contract system). If they support our initiative, this will mean that we have reached a high level and gained influence, and who then are they? This is what they thought. There was a quiet internal war between major forces in the opposition (and it continues now), and they are not letting us enter their space. That is why they sometimes stick some labels on us: 'They will surrender Belarus! They don't speak the mother-tongue!' or something of the kind.

When we were holding a hunger strike in my apartment, there were many UCP representatives and Viktor Ivashkevich, deputy chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front. We used to sit with him on my balcony and talk about our views, have some arguments. I say to Ivashkevich: 'I have a much better sense of Belarus than our liberals have. Because I grew up here, because I was raised by my Belarusian grandmother who was illiterate and

my aunt who dropped out of school after four grades'. Of course, I have some Russian features as my father is Russian and mother is Belarusian. I served in Russia for a long time and Russia is dear to me.

They want to divide us. 'Well, if you are for Belarus, then you're against Russia. If you are for Russia, you will pressure Belarusians'. This is a stupid thing to say. The European Union has united, while we still consider who of us is more democratic, who is guided by what principles and who wants to incorporate whom, etc.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

Russia's policy is the policy of an empire. Generally speaking, Belarus is a colony for Russia. Moscow seeks to take as much as possible from Belarus. All other things are of no interest to Russia.

But not only Russia is to blame in this regard. Because we are also to blame in many respects. We have allowed ourselves to have this government. And we ourselves intended to be strangled in a brotherly clasp. Nonetheless, this policy is not for many years. It is a short-term policy. It seems to me that certain attempts are being made in Russia to review its policy regarding Belarus and take a different view on what is happening in relations between it and Belarus. But these attempts originate with individual politicians and analysts, not the government. But such attempts are in place and I believe that Russia's policy regarding Belarus will undergo changes in the near future.

It is another matter that this may not occur at all if plans to establish the Union State as a unitary and monolithic state materialize.

Syarhey Kalyakin

Russia has pursued a shortsighted policy with regard to Belarus lately. On the one hand, the Russian government declared Belarus a strategic partner, but on the other it has turned a blind eye to the growing differences between the two countries. The countries have been trying to form

a union for ten years since 1996. But Belarus was much closer to Russia in 1996 than in 2006 in economy, politics and society.

Russia advances its interests in relations with Belarus, Poland advances its, the EU advances its and the United States advances its interests. This is natural. But to my mind, the Russian government does not correctly understand the country's interests. By supporting the current regime Russia alienates half of the Belarusian population and slows down Belarus' transition to democracy. Opponents of the regime – a younger and more educated part of the population – view Russia as an obstacle to democratization and development of their country. The longer Russia supports the regime the more supporters it loses in Belarus and abroad. Russia should change its attitude and let the Belarusians decide their fate. Russia could even speed up the democratization of Belarus by insisting that the country stand by its human rights commitments within the union. Russia has a bigger influence on Belarus than the EU or the United States. It should show its willingness to help Belarus deal with its problems. Russia could join the international effort to resolve the crisis in Belarus.

Kasya Kamotskaya

Russia supports the dictatorship with its gas and oil. It also provides information and diplomatic support.

Syarhey Kastsyan

There are two directions in Russia's policy with regard to Belarus. On the one hand, Russia's workers, villagers, progressive intelligentsia, and part of politicians push for a strong union of Belarus and Russia. However, some politicians, who are not ethnic Russians, oppose the union. Gazprom's recent decision to raise its gas price for Belarus was taken under pressure from forces guided from Washington. It came a week after an economist from Western Europe suggested in an interview with *EuroNews* that Rus-

sia should be pressured into increasing the gas price. It would undermine the Lukashenka regime, which cannot be changed through an election, he said. But the Russian people oppose the move – a demonstration against Gazprom is set to take place in Moscow on April 3. On April 2, an assembly of non-governmental organizations of Belarus and Russia is expected to address a resolution against the gas price hike to President Putin and Gazprom. I think the Russian people will be able to force Gazprom to reverse the treacherous decision aimed to prevent Belarus and Russia from forming a strong union.

Vyachaslau Kebich

There are two policy lines in Russia. One political – Russia does not want to lose Belarus and seeks to maintain good relations with the country because Belarus is its only corridor to the West. There is also an economic policy line. Gazprom, for instance, it is not engaged in politics. It seeks to sell gas at as high price as possible. But the political line has prevailed so far in relations with Belarus.

Anatol Lyabedzka

Russia does not have a well-considered clear strategy with respect to Belarus. Moscow was just as unprepared for the presidential election in Belarus as Brussels. This is why Moscow did not want any changes to happen in Belarus. Since Russia was unprepared to be an active player in Belarus it wanted Lukashenka to win the election and it also wanted the poll to be fraudulent because that weakened the Belarusian leader. Lukashenka's weakness gave Russia leverage in economic and political relations with Belarus.

I expect Moscow (and Brussels) to change its tactics. Moscow will start to invest in the political infrastructure. It will be funding pro-Russian political groups in Belarus and raising a Belarusian 'Yanukovych'. As soon as this has

been done, Russia will be taking tough and pragmatic actions. There are advantages and disadvantages in such a situation. The advantage is that Lukashenka would have two battle fronts – the First and Second Belarusian – in the East and in the West. It would be much more difficult because his resources would be stretched.

The disadvantage is that Russia may be able to 'sell' a candidate supported by pro-Moscow forces.

Vasil Lyavonau

This is an erroneous and shortsighted policy.

Aleh Manayeu

Speaking a scientific language, I would term it inadequate, i.e. not corresponding to reality. Specifically, this inadequacy reveals in the fact that Russia is making an all-out effort, especially after the recent color revolutions, to restore its influence in those countries, supporting hard liners and conservative elites instead of attempting to establish mutually beneficial cooperation with the new leaders and elites. Russia's policy thereby naturally runs into conflict with the national interests of neighbors. Whatever attitudes may be to these new leaders and elites, it is obvious that the national interests of any country should be fixed on the future, not the past. Putin said in public that Russia was accustomed to dealing with the elites in neighboring and other countries that are in power. He linked Russia's support of Akayev, Lukashenka and Kuchma to this. This is what I call an inadequate policy. What he meant saying that Russia was accustomed? What his predecessors did had more minuses than pluses. The collapse of the Soviet Union was evidence of that. He should change that policy irrespective of what was before. But, unfortunately, does not do so. We could see this during the recent presidential election in Belarus. Even at the end of 2005, there were some hopes, disputes and discussions based

on previous relations of Belarusian counter-elites with Russian partners. But now it is evident that the Russian leadership has decided to preserve the status quo. I would not judge how this met the national interests of Russia. I think it did not. But that certainly did not meet our national interests. I do not know how long this will last. Some change is happening. The 2004 gas row is evidence. But does this mean that Russia's policy regarding Belarus is becoming more adequate? If we saw that these steps are taken to make the Belarusian government follow a more democratic policy, respect the rights of its citizens, be more open for the external world, and so on, we could assert that the policy of Russia is becoming more adequate. But we see that these steps are for absolutely other purposes.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I believe that Russia is making a big mistake by trying to use a 10-million nation for advancing its geopolitical interests. This policy has no prospects. It is a day's strategy. Having recognized the rigged election and the illegitimate president, the Russian government alienated many people, primarily the young ones who will steer Belarus in the future and with whom Russia would have to build relations. We have always told Moscow's political elite that Russia is strategically interested in democracy in Belarus. I would describe our approach as pragmatic. Russia is a neighbor with whom we intend to maintain open, mutually beneficial and friendly relations based on economic ties and prosperity of the peoples, not selfish political interests.

Anatol Mikhailau

Russia lacks the sense of reality in its policies with regard to other former Soviet republics. Surprisingly, even its attempts to pursue what could be viewed as national interests are often counterproductive.

Ales Mikhalevich

Russia treats us as its vassals. We are a country that is de facto governed by Russia in key areas.

Tatsyana Protska

Russia does not have a long-term well-considered foreign policy with regard to any country. It takes sporadic actions. There are various trends in Russia and it is unclear where it will end up. On the one hand, it backs America, but on the other it flirts with China. It is trying to improve its relationship with the EU. All those movements affect its relations with Belarus.

Russia considers it important to maintain friendly relations with Belarus. Belarus is a European country and a member of European organizations. Every vote counts if you want to push through a decision. Belarus is a transit country and Russia is aware of its geopolitical importance.

In addition, many Belarusians speak Russian and both nations are nostalgic for the Soviet Union. The latter is of special importance. There are many people and politicians in Russia who would like to revive the Soviet system by correcting its 'defects'. Belarus remains the most sovietized nation of the former Soviet Union. The Communists sought to establish an exemplary buffer between the Soviet Union and the West. Efforts are underway to revive that model.

Many Russians settled down in Belarus after World War II, which also makes the Russian government interested in the country.

Russia is a bargaining chip in Belarus' internal politics. Both democratic opposition and authorities always turn to Russia for financial support. Russian money is the most attractive.

One should also note close economic ties between Belarus and Russia.

Andrey Sannikau

I don't see any serious and positive policy with regard to Belarus so far. Because there is this stubborn support of the regime (which existed both under Yeltsin and continues now under Putin), of all these processes that drove Belarus to dictatorship and totalitarian rule. Despite all things, Russia still does not notice its errors. Russia does not make friends for the future. The Russian leadership, as always, is busy creating an image of a strong global power. Maybe, we should not expect Russia to behave differently. But three-four or even five years ago, when it was yet unclear what policies Putin would pursue, there were some voices saying that 'if we want to be a democracy, why don't we support democratic trends in neighboring countries?' One cannot make friends through force! I believe that most Belarusians do not have so much liking for Russia as Russian and our state-run media outlets represent it. It is obvious that if Moscow had conducted a different policy, one could have speculated about the existence of a choice between the European Union and certain ties with Russia (not with the Russia – Belarus Union State!). But now I say categorically: our history has taught us a lesson and we won't have such a choice in the future.

Stanislau Shushkevich

I view it as an imperial one... But I would like to make a clear separation... I like Russian people. I have an impression that all peoples across the world like Belarusians. And Russians like them very much. But the Russian leadership has always been an enemy. The Russian authorities, whoever they may be, have always been enemies of Russian and other cultures. Russian art figures, from Pushkin, Tolstoi, Chekhov to Solzhenitsyn have criticized the government. I don't know where such leaders whose consciousness takes a back seat come from. Take present-day events. Interference in Belarus' internal affairs is a common occurrence. The Chernomyrdin-Stroyev-Seleznyov band visited our country in 1996. Now Gryzlov has come: he has allegedly

seen documents proving that the opposition was preparing falsification. I don't know any other country whose leadership is as much unscrupulous as that. Only Russia has such.

I want to say once again that my favorite writers are Russian. One can speak much about Russian composers, inventors... As for their government... They just have the bad luck to have such government. We also do, but I believe this ailment is coming from that country.

I have Russian habits, Russian-like absence of mind, I love Russians. I don't like their leaders because they are not intellectual. For me, an intellectual is a well-educated person who sticks to certain principles. What principles can Zhirinovskiy, Gryzlov or Rushailo have? None. In this view, Putin confirms that he has no principles either. I've studied in detail Putin's article titled 'Russia on Milleniums Border' published in late 1999. The article contained general phrases and was meant to please everyone: it included such terms like statehood and whatever you'd like to see. And statehood means imperial-style policies. It's a disgrace that a country like this survives only thanks to oil revenues.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

I see it as a traditional policy for Russia.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

To answer shortly, Moscow's policies conflict with the national interests of both Russia and Belarus.

Andrey Vardamatski

Russia pursues a shortsighted policy with regard to Belarus. It cooperates with official structures whose future is uncertain. Other segments of

society are aware of that and will take a cautious attitude to Russia when the situation changes.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

The full answer would take more than one paragraph. In brief, nothing has changed in its policies, or, to be more precise, its essence becomes clear again to those who expected changes. Chubais described Russia as 'a liberal empire'. An empire cannot be liberal – this is clear now to those who did not understand it before. Interestingly, Russians know little about Belarus and do not understand trends in our society. Decision-makers do not get beyond stereotypes. They consider an oil and gas tap an all-purpose tool. May be this is good?

Usevalad Yancheuski

Lukashenka and his policies are very popular in Russia. The Russian media says now little about Belarus – in fact, it has been keeping silence since Putin came to power. But people, the most reliable tool of distributing information, keep talking. Some have relatives here, others visit Belarus on business trips. They see how the Belarusians live and feel respect for Lukashenka.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin treats Lukashenka in a strange way. Its attitude is insincere and somewhat foolishly patronizing.

Some Russian politicians like to indicate that everything will immediately change in Belarus as soon as they lift a finger. But they can lift all fingers and also toes, nothing will change in Belarus. Many in Russia have already realized that but are still reluctant to acknowledge. They should do that, particularly after their defeat in Ukraine in 2004.

Russia is lucky to have Lukashenka elected as president of Belarus. Only thanks to Lukashenka's honesty, Russia has supporters in a westward direction.

7. What do you think of Russia's policies with regard to Belarus?

Belarus gave Russia everything it could. Russia should not press more demands because fulfilling them will run counter to Belarus' interests. We cannot give more.

Russia should not push off its sole supporter. Neither should it keep it in the lobby. Russia is not an empire any longer. Instead of naively playing an 'Energy Superpower' game, Moscow politicians should realize that energy and gas are Russia's demons if they do think about their country. The demons will kill the country as they killed the Soviet Union.

8. What do you think about the policies of other neighbors with regard to Belarus?

Volha Abramava

As for our neighbors, I will be very harsh. Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine adhere to a policy that conflicts with their long-term interests. But I do not believe that a majority of people there would vote for the current attitude to Belarus if the question were put on a national referendum and politics and ideology, as well as the ruling elite's aspirations, were put aside. I believe people would choose a different policy from that pursued by the authorities in the above-mentioned countries at present.

Svyatlana Aleksiyeovich

I cannot say much about politics because I am not interested in political affairs. I am more into history, culture, mentality and psychology. During a recent promotional event for *The Prayer of Chernobyl* in Moscow, three Russians said, 'We would like to have a president like Lukashenka'. These were losers of the Russian reform period. They regard Belarus as an islet of socialism. But I do not meet many people like them. It is more often that I hear, 'Hey Belarusians, why do you let them treat you like this. Where are your intellectuals and writers?' These remarks sound as if they were addressed to a child.

Psychology of a victim always crying for help is characteristic of our opposition. They waited for help from the West, afterward from Russia and now from neighbors. No one can deal with our problems except for ourselves. Our neighbors can only show us an example.

Yauhen Babosau

The incumbent right-wing government in Poland (not ordinary people, I have many friends among Poles) is hostile toward Belarus (although things were probably the same when Kwaśniewski was in power). And this sours relations between our people. It's not Poles, but their government that is to blame for this.

As for Lithuania, the situation is pretty much the same there. Its leadership looks at the West and does not look at the East much. I think this is a temporary phenomenon: they have no other choice but to live in peace with Belarus. And all these things concerning the disposal of nuke waste on the Belarusian border, all these military maneuvers – they are not going to yield any results. Belarus has a stronger economy than Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and is a bit behind Poland in this respect. So they won't do anything as far as it concerns economy. From the point of view of military confrontation, our servicemen are better-trained than the neighbors' armies (I know this because I chaired a military reform commission). So, they will get nothing in this sphere either! As for culture – we are not behind them either. So, they really have nothing to match against our strength, except some attempts that can do nothing good. That's why I think that 'Hitlers come and go and the German people stays' (although they do not cite Stalin now). Adamkuses and others come and go, and the Lithuanian people will stay and will have friendly ties with Belarusians – it simply has no other choice. No other choice! And Poles do not have other choice either.

As for Ukraine, the situation is more difficult. Yushchenko actively seeks accession to NATO, this aggravates the situation, as Belarus is not going to join NATO. Ukrainians are now worse off than we are in terms of wages and

other things. They are! That's why I think they have no other choice than to be in a union with Russia and Belarus. They have no other choice.

Maybe five years later, when Yushchenko leaves and someone new takes power... The countries of Eastern Slavs now tend to develop toward their stronger union. There are all preconditions for that. And there are few preconditions for their separation, with the exception of geopolitical aspirations by certain leaders that Yushchenko and Saakashvili obey.

Anzhalika Borys

The neighboring countries react to the aggressive policies of Belarus. I worry that Belarus pursues a policy toward self-isolation and is a potentially destabilizing factor for its neighbors.

Henadz Buraukin

I think our neighbors have some influence on Belarus, but it is not as strong and obvious as the influence of Russia. Oil, gas and manufacturing ties give Russia considerable leverage. It has a big cultural influence. Our children learn about Russian writers Pushkin³³ and Nekrasov³⁴ earlier than about Kupala, Kolas³⁵ and Bahdanovich. Our government officially supports and encourages that influence.

Our neighbors, I mean Ukraine and Poland in the first place, and also Lithuania, also have influence, but it is not so obvious and it is not supported by the government. The Belarusian public closely followed and discussed developments during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. It follows developments

³³ Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (Russian: Александр Сергеевич Пушкин; 1799–1837) is the greatest Russian poet and the founder of modern Russian literature.

³⁴ Nikolai Alekseevich Nekrasov (Russian: Николай Алексеевич Некрасов; 1821–1877) was a Russian poet and a long-standing publisher of *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary).

³⁵ Yakub Kolas, Jakub Kotas (Belarusian: Якуб Колас; 1882–1956), real name Kanstancin Mickievič (Канстанцін Міцкевіч) was a Belarusian writer.

in Poland. But the state propaganda machine, especially Belarusian Television, seeks to play down good news from these countries. Ukraine has hard times and Poland also faces difficulties. But bad news are widely publicized in our country, while good developments are ignored. Although Belarusian Television has taken the same approach to Russia lately. The Belarusians usually trust the authorities. Good things about Ukraine and Poland, which could be useful in Belarus, are played down or ignored. Therefore with radio, television and the Internet, news from neighboring countries have an impact on people. But the state seeks to monitor, select and control the news. It is in the Belarusians' nature to trust the authorities, unlike our neighbors who used to distrust the authorities. It is better to trust but be careful. It has taken the same approach to Russia lately. The Belarusians usually trust the authorities. If Belarusian Television reports about horrible life in Ukraine or Poland, our viewers trust it. This information reminds in their memories, and that's why this influence is a special one, but anyway, it exists.

Look what happens before elections. Russian politicians with dubious reputation come to Belarus. Luzhkov came. Did not he have things to do at home? He came to support one candidate. Ukraine and Poland do not act this way.

We accuse others of double standards. But look at who is coming from Ukraine – representatives of the opposition – Petro Symonenko [leader of the Communist Party] and brassbound Natalya Vitrenko. Official representatives of the Ukrainian authorities elected by the people are not coming.

The authorities deliberately seek confrontation with these nations for fear of their influence and, on the other hand, they encourage influence from Russia.

Although this is a very complicated matter because politics is always full of controversies. Belarus comes under permanent and unequivocal influence from Russia, but influence from the other neighbors is negligible.

Ales Byalyatski

Lithuania, Latvia and Poland have been conducting better policies with regard to Belarus after joining the EU. Earlier it seemed all politicians and political scientists in these countries concentrated on establishing ties with the EU and the United States, seeking to attain their main objective as soon as possible – to join NATO and the EU and meet all membership requirements. After they gained the objective, they relaxed and looked back at Belarus. They realized that the country needs attention because it can undermine stability in the region. The European community required them to pay attention. Like France is required to maintain good relations with Algeria, these countries must be aware of what is going on across the EU border in Belarus. It is good for us that these countries pay much more attention to Belarus. These countries are represented in all European organizations and share views on the situation in Belarus (democracy problems) with that country's internal pro-democratic opposition. Their current policies are much more effective. They show a real interest and take actions, not only speak good words.

As for Ukraine, it is good that the Belarusian regime has lost its ally – the Kuchma³⁶ regime. No doubt, these were two friendly regimes that supported each other in all international organizations – the OSCE, the CIS and the UN, in which Ukraine is a member of the Committee on Human Rights. Interestingly, Ukraine opposed a resolution on human rights violations in Belarus the year before last, and voted in favor of a similar resolution last year after the change of government. I would describe it as passive support for Belarus. Unfortunately, Ukraine has not offered Belarus any active support. The country that has just freed itself from the Kuchma regime and embarked on a democratic path, like a fire survivor, should have offered a helping hand to the one who is still in danger. Ukraine has an opportunity to help – it is not affected by a crisis, a war or some other problem. It stands firm on its feet, but does not help much.

³⁶ Leonid Danylovych Kuchma (Ukrainian: Леонід Данилович Кучма; born 1938) was the second president of Ukraine from July 19, 1994 to January 23, 2005.

Poland, Lithuania and Latvia acted the same way before, but have changed their attitude. We expect Ukraine to make more specific and resolute steps to help Belarus reestablish democracy. Both Ukraine and the EU maintain close economic ties with Belarus. While the EU strongly condemns human rights abuses in Belarus its trade with the country keeps on growing. They should be less concerned with economic interests. More or less consistent policies would have yielded economic benefits too.

Pavel Daneika

It is a difficult question for me. Lithuania seems to be taking some meaningful long-term steps to mold its policy toward Belarus. And it is fairly interesting.

As for Ukraine, I do not see it making any evident moves in this direction. The same is true of Poland. They express some general European positions and seek good neighborly ties – there is a shared border, so it is necessary to build relations. But I believe policy toward another country should aim to achieve long-term goals and have a vision of what will happen in 10 or 12 years. It seems that the Lithuanians only have such policy.

Andrey Dynko

Ukraine's policy toward Belarus has yet to take shape, as Ukraine was in a transitional state for a long period, fluctuating between the European and Eurasian communities and was busy solving its internal problems. Its political elite was busy building its wealth and did not set the country's long-term interests. It seems to me the policy will take its final shape in the years to come when Ukraine joins EU and NATO. But it is already obvious that ordinary Ukrainians and Kyiv's political elite have a great liking for Belarus as for a sister country. They believe that Belarus should be Ukraine's priority partner. In this context, it is important that Kyiv has refused to join the sanctions imposed on Minsk by the European Union and supported by many

countries, as it regards Ukraine as a channel through which the Belarusian government could maintain contacts with the world community. There is a lingering and unresolved problem of an undemarcated border in the Belarusian-Ukrainian relationship, but the countries are united through common history and a pretty large Ukrainian-speaking community in southern Belarus whose members are Belarusians citizens with a strong sense of national consciousness but who still feel kin to Ukraine and have blood relatives there. The presence of this community consisting of hundreds thousand people will always serve as an additional link between our countries.

Poland has proved itself as a country that views the strengthening of Belarus' independence, its civil society and democracy as its national task. And it is doing much to achieve this goal. In fact, Polish diplomats today implement the principles developed by Jerzy Giedroyc and his Paris-based *Kultura* with regard to Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus. Unlike in Ukraine or Russia, Polish scholars have engaged in in-depth Belarusian studies. Relations between Belarus and Poland are undergoing a rough period but, I guess, they will be on the mend in the years to come. The presence of a strong ethnic Polish community, a well-organized and the most active ethnic minority in Belarus, will contribute to this. On the other hand, there is a fairly large and active community of ethnic Belarusians in Poland.

By the way, the idea of the creation of a Rzeczpospolita extending between the Baltic and the Black Seas remains pretty popular within Belarusian political elites.

Belarusian civil society was impressed by Lithuania's active steps with regard to Belarus. Lithuanian diplomacy may even claim leadership as far as it concerns activities in the Belarusian direction. The Lithuanian embassy is one of the biggest diplomatic missions in Minsk. We have recently learned that Mr. Vaitekūnas, the Lithuanian ambassador to Belarus was offered the job of foreign minister, which testifies to the significance of his ambassadorial position. One also should note that it is rather Vilnius than Warsaw that has become a base for the Belarusian opposition. Belarus' civil society will probably never forget this. Certain Lithuanian intellectuals used to say 10 to

15 years ago that if Belarus lost its independence, it would be good because the country would not claim the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was an egoistic stance but many scholars and top officials adhered to it. Now we see the tradition of solidarity being revived and Lithuania dropping its claims for exclusive rights to the historical heritage.

Latvia appears to be less active as far as it concerns politics, but Belarusian-Latvian economic contacts are pretty strong.

Valery Fralou

I think that the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine have enough problems of their own. Plenty of them. Probably, they are concerned by their own problems above all. I believe that Belarus' problems concern them as much as they can affect them. We cannot have a great impact on them, so they are not very much interested in us. Belarus may be of interest to Lithuanians and Poles to a certain degree, not ordinary people but politicians. They are interested in Belarus because the United States and Western Europe are attempting to pursue their interests through these countries. This is of interest to certain politicians.

They may be also interested to have a predictable government in Belarus that would be guided by the same principles they are and would not pose a threat. Adamkus said that Belarus wants to attack Lithuania – this is a kind of American approach (he is American, frankly speaking)... So they want to have not the slightest fear that we could do some nasty tricks to them! They want to have a reasonable, transit country, with its own traditions and peculiarities here.

They want us to be reasonable and use the same principles that they do. Unfortunately, we have a bit different principles now.

They develop economic relations [with Belarus] because this brings benefits to them. This is probably a correct approach: if cooperation with someone is beneficial for you, combine your efforts to have mutual benefits!

Lithuania is closer to Belarus. I served there and also was in Latvia. There are still some bonds between us. After seceding from the USSR, Latvia and Estonia treated problems regarding ethnic Russians more harshly, while Lithuania had a softer attitude. Well, it was easier for Lithuania because 80 percent of its population are Lithuanians. Of course, both Latvia and Estonia where there are pretty many Russians and Russian-speaking people face the problem of preserving their national identity.

Svyatlana Kalinkina

The policies of these countries are not coordinated. For instance, until recently, Poland held the most conciliatory position on the Belarusian regime, explaining that neighborhood considerations were prompting to reason with it and maintain a constructive and tolerant dialogue. It was not until the end of last year that the Polish authorities started to implement a stiffer and more clear-cut policy.

These nations are, say, young democracies. I did not expect at all that they would determine Europe's policy regarding relations with Belarus.

Syarhey Kalyakin

These are the most concerned countries in Europe, because they have very serious interests in Belarus. I would not like to offend Spain or Portugal, but they are much less interested in Belarus. Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are the key players in the EU as far as Belarus is concerned. Their support is very important for Belarus' pro-democracy groups.

But one should not overestimate their ability to influence developments in the country. These countries help keep up international pressure on the Belarusian regime, therefore I would say they play a positive role.

Kasya Kamotskaya

The other neighbors also support the dictatorship. They buy oil from us and squeal with delight.

There is a solidarity mood in Poland. The Polish people like to display solidarity and love freedom, even not independence, but freedom.

Lithuania takes no action apart from statements. It is disappointed because it would like to take a lead in supporting Belarus. But it takes no real action. Lithuania shares two-thirds of its border with Belarus and benefits from trade with us.

Ukraine, I think it could do more, but it has too many problems now.

Therefore, only the Poles sincerely support Belarus, they are really concerned.

If they all stopped buying oil from Belarus, that would be a tough response. Empty statements make no waves. Our officials do not need to travel to Europe. They can relax on the River Dnieper, as Lukashenka put it. Sanctions would hit common people in the first place. This is natural. That would help them elect a better president. Nothing will change until the people get in trouble. What do they want? Sanctions should be effective – it is necessary to stop buying goods that generate most profit.

Syarhey Kastsyanyan

The Baltic nations understand that they cannot live the way they live now. These nations prospered when they were part of the Soviet Union, whereas now the so-called independent countries have turned into U.S. colonies. Their leaders are not national politicians. Adamkus³⁷ is a fascist who came from the United States. He will seek asylum in the United States again because the people of Lithuania will not forgive him for the chaos. They will hang

³⁷ Valdas Adamkus – the current president of Lithuania was born in Kaunas on November 3, 1926. He emigrated to the United States in 1949 and returned to Lithuania in 1997.

him. Viķe-Freiberga³⁸ also came from the United States and will flee to that country. They ruined their countries and economies. Young people go abroad because they cannot receive education for work or pleasure. The situation is a little bit different in Estonia under R  itel³⁹. Estonia, a country of 700,000, has always been a colony. This is why it is more peaceful.

Latvia, Lithuania and Poland do not have independent policies. These countries act according to instructions from Brussels and Washington.

Ukraine does not have any policy at all. The nation has yet to decide on its policy and its leader. Yushchenko's³⁹ days are numbered. He will not stray for a long time, as I can appreciate it following to the discord with Julia Tymoshenko. He does not have any base, he took power by force was not elected. He will not be in office for long.

Vyachaslau Kebich

It is hard to assess the situation in Ukraine. Even the greatest political analysts do not dare to forecast the country's future. When the cabinet is formed we will see what direction the country is taking.

Anatol Lyabedzka

EU neighbors spearhead a campaign for democratization of Belarus. Lithuania and Poland are the most active players. I respect such policies. Lithuania has many unresolved issues in relations with Belarus – border, readmission etc. – but it shows a strategic vision in its policies with respect to the country.

Warsaw also shows a big interest with all major political forces having a consensus on Belarus, with the exception of small parliamentary groups.

Ukraine is of big importance to Belarus and Belarus is of importance to Ukraine. At first, the recent events in Ukraine. Events in Yugoslavia, in

³⁸ Vaira Viķe-Freiberga – the current president of Latvia was educated and lived in Canada until 1998.

³⁹ Arnold R  itel – president of Estonia (September 21, 2001 – October 9, 2006).

Georgia passed, from our viewpoint, rather far away, so it did not concern us. And Ukraine – did. That's why Ukraine's success boosted the morale of European choice advocates in Belarus, its advocates of changes. Their problems reflect on us.

What is Ukraine? Ukraine has created an alternative in the post-Soviet space. It was widely believed before the Orange Revolution that the EU would not expand farther eastward; not to construct a Berlin wall, but to stay within the European Union. Ukraine broke down that stereotype that started yet its shaping. Georgia and Moldova are too small countries to create an alternative on the post-Soviet space. But Ukraine can do it. The pro-democratic coalition that they have formed opened up opportunities for other former Soviet republics to follow their example and choose a democratic path.

Vasil Lyavonau

This is a policy friendly to the Belarusian people but not to the ruling regime.

Aleh Manayeu

Speaking simply and shortly, their policies, unlike that of Russia, is more adequate. This especially concerns two Baltic neighbors, Lithuania and Latvia. This adequacy manifests itself in the fact that on the other hand, the leaders and elites of these countries have not broken off relations with the Belarusian leadership – an upward trend in trade and trans-border cooperation testifies to this – on the other hand, they maintain close ties with Belarusian counter-elites – pro-democratic forces, civil society, national and religious communities, and so on. This is what I call an adequate policy.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

I would note the unanimity of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, especially of the former two countries, in their assessments of the situation in Belarus. I consider these countries' solidarity with pro-democracy forces in Belarus of great importance. These countries help Belarusian pro-democracy forces to advance their interests in European organizations, support victims of repression and the independent media, and provide unbiased media coverage for developments in Belarus.

Ukraine is trying to act as a bridge between Europe and Minsk. But this is a dead-end strategy. We appreciate the support of the democratic part of Ukraine, which went through a similar ordeal.

Tatsyana Protska

Almost all our neighbors have joined the EU and adopted its system of values. Belarus is undecided. This is why neighbors take a cautious attitude to the country, alarmed by the Belarusian authorities' overt defiance of European values. This prevents Belarus from establishing closer ties with its neighbors, although economic relations have been quite good.

Belarus has a very interesting political role – it inspires nostalgia in former Soviet republics. When we recall our childhood, it seems everything was great and we do not remember bad things. People recall the Soviet past as a brilliant crystal. And here comes the Belarusian government with its pro-soviet ideology.

It is trying to sell its system of values. Ukraine looks at Belarus, other countries look at Belarus and it seems as if a strong government can make people happy.

Therefore, Belarus plays a twofold role in relations with other countries. On the one hand, it is associated with the past, while on the other they look at the country and think, 'Should we follow its example?'

Andrey Sannikau

I don't have a very positive opinion of it. We've seen both top Lithuanian and Polish officials saying that their predecessors prioritized a policy of cooperation with the Lukashenka regime. I know for sure that Poland, Lithuania and Latvia used our situation to promote their EU membership bids. It was obvious that Lukashenka created a favorable background. But it's not clear why this has continued after their accession to the EU. Why today, when there are massive arrests in our country, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Valionis says that sanctions against Belarus should not be introduced? And what should be done then? Let's take a look back into the recent history of Poland, if it were not for sanctions against Warsaw during Solidarity strikes, who knows what could have been now in Poland. As Solidarity members were thrown into jail, the world reacted very harshly. And put forward tough conditions in negotiations: if you do this, then we can talk about that. The same was in East Germany during a wave of repression. Willy Brandt conducted a good neighborhood policy but he maintained certain contacts with Honecker to help those who suffered from the regime. This does not happen to Belarus at present.

Poland had had a certain monopoly as an expert on Belarusian affairs until the EU enlargement. I don't think that was good. I wouldn't like to insult anyone in Poland but monopoly is always bad. After the EU expansion, more countries that have no borders with Belarus took interest in our country, and this is a positive result. But this so far has not developed into a serious, strategic approach to Belarus. We've achieved more with the help of campaign of solidarity with Belarus. The leadership of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia cannot but notice the people who demand freedom for Belarus, freedom for political prisoners on the 16th day of each month. I hope that we will manage to influence the policy of the European Union as a bloc and its member states through civil society and media outlets supporting us.

Ukraine is going through a rough period. Of course, we all admired their revolution, but we see problems today. Some of them are objective and some subjective. Ukraine so far has not developed a policy toward Belarus, it has yet to gain more confidence, but certain steps showing that Ukraine may play an important role have already been taken. Ukraine backed a resolution criticizing the Belarusian regime which was adopted by the UN Human Rights Commission in 2005. Ukraine did this for the first time ever! Then there were incomprehensible remarks that ‘we should build relations with this regime, much depends on trade and economic relations...’ I would like Ukraine to have a more principled stance on the Belarusian situation, as this could really be of much help. I wouldn’t say that it could equal influence from Russia, but if added to the European Union, it could create a certain balance.

Stanislau Shushkevich

You’re asking me a question that I want to answer the way Tolstoi did when asked to describe the content of *War and Peace* in short: ‘I can’t do it any shorter’.

We have no problems with Ukraine: we have the same troubles, Ukrainians may sing and whitewash their village cottages better than we do. We may be better farmers than they are. But they are happy to learn about our achievements and we about theirs. There are no problems here, as we both have suffered much.

Now concerning Poles. I sometimes work in Poland and is very grateful to this country and to what has happened there. But when I worked at Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 1974 and spoke about Belarus, they responded that the country was ‘kresy wschodnie’, their Eastern Borderlands that were taken away from them. That’s how they treated Belarus. And it took them much time to realize that they were mistaken. Today most of them realize this, mainly thanks to these 15–16 years of our independence. And it seems to me that after embarking on a democratic path of development Poland

developed a normal, democratic attitude toward us. They would like to have a democratic country here. That ignorance that not ordinary people, but professors at Jagiellonian University in Kraków had was caused by failure to realize that we had common history, a common federate state. They did not realize that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was originally a Belarusian state and only later became a common state of the two peoples. Soviet Era and Russian rule in Poland led them to forget about this. Today I view Poland as a country that knows what is happening in Belarus better than others and wants to help us, and is doing this within the realm of possibility, more than others.

We must improve our life on our own and borrow the best things that exist in Russia, Lithuania, Poland, Latvia and Ukraine. But we must have 95 percent of our own.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

Their policies are also traditional, but they have new forms that are more adequate and acceptable.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

The other neighbors' policies are adequate for the current situation in Belarus.

Andrey Vardamatski

These countries see the situation from a longer perspective than Russia.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

I view their policies basically in a positive light. Their policies, depending on how democratic they are, reflect the solidarity potential of their societies.

The EU policies toward Belarus changed, or *came into existence*, thank to new EU members, our neighbors. EU experts on Belarus affairs even compete with each other at present. Belarus' pro-democracy forces should not be a puppet of one neighbor or another. On the other hand, they should take easy attempts to guide them – all countries have their interests, fears and visions.

The neighboring EU countries' values sometimes conflict with their pragmatic interest in trade with Belarus. In addition, the former elite (the Communist Party, Komsomol and secret services) has turned into a business elite and remains influential in the post-Soviet space.

Ukraine has, to my mind, an unrealistic hope to act as a mediator between Lukashenka and Brussels. Kyiv seeks more sway over the Belarusian regime at Moscow's expense. But Ukraine is not the first and will not reach its target.

Usevalad Yancheuski

It is funny. Poland, Lithuania and Latvia are screaming, 'Beat Lukashenka! We want democracy!' But political sanctions and financial assistance to the opposition do not deal a real blow to Belarus.

Economic sanctions could deal a serious blow but not a fatal one. A funny thing is that Poland, Lithuania and Latvia will do their damndest to prevent such sanctions because they will lose much more than Belarus as a result. Actually, they are interested in economic relations with Belarus more than Russia. They will be the first to defend our government when these relations will be on stake.

I can say right the same thing about Europe. If you do not like the regime and want to change it, have a look at available resources first. If you cannot do that why do you try? If you have any spare money available why do you give it our opposition? You would better give it to Chernobyl victims or save it. Why do you need to be in a silly situation?

I also would like to say a few words about 'color revolutions'. Those who took to the streets in Kyiv would have voted for Lukashenka. People took to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction with corruption and low living standards, something what we do not have here in Belarus. It is strange to hear people saying that it was America that had mounted the revolution and that its money was involved. As a matter of fact, Americans just grabbed the moment. Allegations that the US played a key role in the color revolutions are all grist to the mill of its propaganda – such allegations imply that America is omnipotent. People who say so work for the myth of America's omnipotence. People took to Maidan not because of money but because they were fed up with their life and oligarch clans. They were deceived however.

What were Maidan protestors demanding? They were demanding that the corrupt authorities quit. What were Georgians demanding? They were demanding hot water, heat and light at their homes. It was poverty that had driven them into despair.

That is why it is wrong to say that Yushchenko and Saakashvili were swept to power as a result of some CIA plot. The policies of Kuchma and Shevardnadze (who were also pretty pro-American, by the way) brought them to power. They came to power as a result of market, pseudo-liberal or whatever you may call them reforms. Both Kuchma and Shevardnadze pursued policies that were TOTALLY DIFFERENT from those carried out by Lukashenka at present. As a result, they saw Maidans, whereas we live an untroubled and happy life.

That is why America's fuss produced a result in Kyiv and Tbilisi but ended in a failure here in Minsk.

9. What do you think of the European Union's policies with regard to Belarus?

Volha Abramava

The European Union does not understand what is going on in Belarus. It simply does not understand! The EU's policy regarding Belarus is molded here, not in the EU. It is shaped by those opposition groups that have long occupied a certain political niche and turned politics into business. Actually, these opposition groups are not interested to see democratic change and free market economy in Belarus, despite a hue and cry, loud words and political statements. Neither are they interested in an end to Belarus' isolation and the establishment of solid contacts between the country and the West. They are uninterested because they feel quite comfortable in the existing situation. I am not talking about all opposition groups but only about some of their leaders. I can cite another examples.

Belarus is a small country. We all know that in any profession, be it journalism or political analysis, there are craftsmen and apprentices. We also perfectly know what people here in Belarus live for. One can use most beautiful words to say about their love for the country and democratic values but be no patriot and democracy advocate and act to achieve their own ends only.

I will repeat once again. The European Union, as well as the United States that I respect both, hold us in contempt and do not want to take pains to

offer a viable form of cooperation. I repeatedly told our European partners in public: 'People, why do you behave in an odd way when attacking Belarus? If you want a donkey to go you should dangle a carrot in front of him instead of giving him a stick. Let us try differently. Offer us something concrete, pragmatic and weighty. I above all mean something material. The Belarusians are a very pragmatic nation. They will think and probably accept something what will not be a sop... I understand that it is impossible today, but then you should ask economic experts how much Belarus' transition to market economy will cost. You can still offer installments! You can bring us in the European community in this way'.

I have a strong suspicion that even the Belarusian authorities will not turn down an offer that will be about something substantial. They share basic values with all of us – they are also pragmatic and think about profit. Do it like that! Attacks do not produce results but prompt the opponents to stand firmly their ground, grow stale, regard the entire world as an enemy and unite people around this belief. It does not have prospects any longer to follow this 'vicious' path. I have always been saying that sanctions against Belarus are counterproductive and have a negative effect in terms of politics.

Yauhen Babosau

If we speak about Russia's two-sided policy toward Belarus, the European Union has a one-sided policy of Belarus' non-recognition. But this is not about economy, this is pure politics. Its negative attitude toward the Belarusian leadership spreads to the Belarusian people, unfortunately. This is done not by the entire EU, but only by those EU leaders that are members of the OSCE, etc. As for the European Union, the European Parliament, opposition figures are invited there, let them do it. This is their business.

I think that it is he who is elected by the people who has prospects. And it is the people's business whom to elect: number one, number two or number 15 – this does not matter. I repeat once again that remaining what we are is

what matters most. And only when we stay true to ourselves, we will stay in Europe. As soon as we start obeying someone, grovel to somebody, we will be simply trampled underfoot.

Anzhalika Borys

The EU's policies with regard to Belarus lack consistency, although awareness of the problem deepened and became more sincere through efforts of Poland and other new members.

Henadz Buraukin

I am not sure that the EU pursues any policy with regard to Belarus. It may pursue some policy, but it is not serious. I have an impression that the EU does not understand what is happening in Belarus. It takes its standards and applies them to Belarusian realities. Attempts by high-level European officials to promote standards of democracy and free elections seem ridiculous to me. Their ideas are good, but the officials do not understand that they cannot be implemented in Belarus. The top-level EU leadership does not seem to be aware of and understand the real situation in Belarus. On the one hand, the EU is willing to support the democratic process in Belarus, but on the other it fails to take concrete action. Sometimes its steps come too late; sometimes it is inconsistent or pretends as if nothing is happening.

The travel ban on officials and other similar steps cannot drastically change the situation in Belarus. These are moral actions, not organizational or political.

Ales Byalyatski

The EU's policies and strategy determine to a considerable degree the policies of neighbors with regard to Belarus. The EU finally has begun to treat Belarus as a neighbor it has to deal with.

EU policies are improving. Although the policies are not 100 percent perfect, considerable changes for the better have been observed in the last two years. It is our duty to make the EU aware of problems in Belarus. It should be aware that Belarus could join the EU when these problems are sorted out. It is like residents of the same village team up to repair a decrepit house. The EU should view Belarus as part of the European space and European community. We have very much in common with the European community. We do not even realize how much we have in common. Take, for instance, a thousand-year old female jewelry. Norwegian women wore jewelry that was 80 percent identical to pieces found in the Vitebsk region, which means that trade was very intensive and merchants accompanied by wives were shuttling between these ancient countries. Nobody thought at the time that the ties could be disrupted. I would like us to be as close as before.

Pavel Daneika

I think there is no real policy. The European Union is in total confusion because Belarus contrasts sharply with everything it has along its border. The EU absolutely does not understand what to do with this. And it does not understand Belarus' role in the region. It does not understand what an ideological impact the Belarusian situation has and how developments in the country may affect the entire distribution of forces. To it, Belarus simply does not exist! It believes that developments there do not affect the region.

Certainly, everybody studied geography in school and can show Belarus on the map. But the Germans seem to perceive Belarus as part of Russia. I do not blame them – I am talking about values.

Andrey Dynko

Post-election protests this past March landed me in jail for some time. This jail had been built with funding from the TACIS program. This is a very comfortable jail and I offer cordial gratitude to the TACIS program and the European Union for building it. I would even ask them to build more such jails in Belarus. This was probably the best investment of the TACIS program that could be ever imagined.

The EU policy appears to be contradictory. Europeans simply did not know Belarus for a long time, did not understand it as the country did not fit into the stereotypes. They attempted to maintain contacts with it through the same schemes applied to other countries. It turned out that completely different schemes should have been used.

I can speak about my sphere, the media. Since taking over as chief editor of *Nasha Niva*, I have heard assurances from the EU that independent media outlets will be supported in Belarus. And I have not seen any real support over these years. And the projects that they do carry out are largely aimed at supporting EU media rather than Belarusian outlets. The EU has the right to do it and I accept this. But on the other hand, in the Belarusian situation one should follow a principle used in medicine: if a doctor cannot cure a disease, he should do his utmost not to aggravate it.

What is most important for Belarus in the long-term future is to have its economic, cultural, political and simply interpersonal ties with the European Union expanded. I guess various sanctions that could damage these contacts would prove harmful. Belarus needs not isolation but the opposite. Isolation can be applied only to a small group of people who violate European rules in a cynical and impudent manner, people implicated in crimes.

But the expansion of economic contacts would help open up Belarus. If not today, then tomorrow. Broader political relations with Belarus' civil society would lead to this either. Broader cultural cooperation supports free speech in Belarus and changes the atmosphere in the country. The best thing that could happen is the removal of borders. I understand that it is

yet idealistic to dream of this but any steps to ease visa formalities open Europe for Belarusians. Latvia's decision to abolish visa fees is great! This step will pay its way.

Valery Fralou

Let me give an example. Once the British ambassador invited me to a meeting with a diplomat who came from the European Union. The latter was very happy to tell me that they had adopted a resolution of sorts. I understand that this official who visits this European Parliament often follows his principles. I understand western people: they seek to solve all problems through democratic methods. We want them to help us so that we use similar methods. But this is a pretty challenging task because they have their own laws and observe them. And these laws do not provide for the possibility of threatening someone, cleaning somebody's clock...

I guess they've got pretty much headache by thinking what should be done with us. I guess they are starting to realize that shaking a finger at 'bad boys' won't help. It all is good for nothing unless these 'bad boys' are sent to stand in a corner or get a whipping. I don't see a tough, consistent policy that would help. There's much talk about television, radio broadcasts... I think much will depend on specific people who will be guided by their own interests. Belarus is not high on their agenda. Well, if Belarusians themselves cannot develop a clear stance and demonstrate that they are ready and want to live in a different country... And they live haphazard! So, why should they come to those who don't know how they want to live?

I'm not speaking about such politicians like Alyaksandr Milinkevich. A small group of people do have a vision of this. But there is no common line, that's why western politicians don't know whom to help here, what to do and whether their efforts will not prove futile.

Apart from this, there is strong influence from Russia. The European Union may have a wish to influence Belarus somehow, but Russia does this on the other side. And political games begin then. This looks like a tug of

war competition – winners get a boost to their ego, a feeling that ‘we are a powerful country’. And globally, they are not very much interested in Belarus. Well, there is such a country, there are some people there, most of whom do not know where to go. What for should one go there? Unlike Iran, we have already given up the possession of nuclear weapons and are not pursuing any controversial programs, we have no mineral resources. Well, the gas pipeline may be of some interest. And they want us to be predictable. And even if there's some unpredictability, we'll get a blow to our head: many countries have already joined NATO. And Russia also will be on the alert. It is strong enough!

We have found ourselves on the rift between Russia and the West – and both influence us. I would not like Belarus to choose between: ‘We go to Russia and couldn't care less about the West’ and ‘We join the West and don't care about Russia’. We should have a broader outlook. And they say: ‘let's join Europe, period’. But they are not waiting for us there. Who needs us?

Life is a pretty rough thing. Our country and each of its citizens need to learn how to live without being held by the hand, guided and provided instructions on everything.

This is just like in a zoo: the cages are freshly painted, the roads are sanded, meat is brought to your cage and you are safe from other animals locked in their cages. Everything is OK! This is how we're used to live. You walk in your cage, then lie down for a while. But humans, just like any other beings, should live in natural environment! And we're still staying in the zoo...

Svyatlana Kalinkina

Only the United States has always pursued an unambiguous policy regarding Belarus unlike Europe.

Europe is actually the main partner of Belarus and Lukashenka, as he rules the country. Earlier we said that Belarus mainly traded with Russia, but now it turns out that we mainly trade with Europe. The European Union is

our largest trading partner. This is a very complicated problem. The position of Europe, Western nations, is quite understandable, as there are too many problems in the modern world. In this sense, Belarus, in which there are no interethnic conflicts and bloodshed, and the Orthodox Christians are in peace with the Catholics, is not a hot spot to take any drastic measures.

But there is another danger here. In my opinion, Europe is beginning to realize that Belarus is turning into a nest of revanchism for all Europe, supporting and encouraging retrogressive forces in both former Yugoslavia and Ukraine and Russia and the Baltic states. That is why it is very dangerous to have a center that helps such forces.

Until now, the European Union's policy has been inconsistent. Moreover, it cannot be viewed as a common policy of the European Union. For instance, France and Britain held one stance and Germany, Italy and Austria preferred quite a different stance. This is what we could see until recently.

But something has changed now. The European policy is now more definite, more clear-cut and more specific. But I think that Europe still hopes that the Belarus issues may be somehow settled with the help of Russia. That is why Europe still choose to confine itself to half-measures in relations with Belarus. It is fine if it is really possible to change the situation in Belarus with the assistance of Russia and Russia helps our country return to a democratic path of development. But Belarus may bring much of its own into Russia, not the reverse.

Syarhey Kalyakin

The EU wants to see Belarus a member of the common European family, but the country does not meet standards accepted in Europe. The EU wants to see transformation in Belarus. It used various legal political tools to influence the situation. Human rights abuses are not an internal matter. When the OSCE or the Council of Europe condemns human rights violations in Belarus it uses absolutely legal tools recognized elsewhere in the world.

To my regret, the EU lacks effective tools to change the situation in Belarus. It keeps its attention focused on Belarus, but does not have effective tools of influence.

The EU has a big bureaucracy. Any decision requires approval of all 25 countries. Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic and other countries give priority to matters concerning Belarus, while the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain have other priorities. Therefore, these countries do not consider it necessary to speed up decision-making on issues concerning Belarus. It is difficult for many people in Europe, even top politicians, to find Belarus on the map. We think our country is in the center of attention with every nation seeking to conquer and enslave it. The problem is that Belarus is not a top priority in European politics. The issues of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, Iraq and Iran take precedence at present. If Belarus were a top priority, problems would be sorted out much faster. But for the EU and most of its members Belarus is not a top priority, while some countries view it only as an instrument for cooperation with Russia.

I and my associates in the pro-democratic coalition have been working to raise Belarus' profile. We have succeeded in a way and we are very grateful to our neighbors for keeping the EU concerned about our country.

Kasya Kamotskaya

EU institutions are weak and undecided. They are holding discussions and debates on Belarus, but their statements do not differ one from another. The Belarusian situation requires a different approach from the EU – a tough, constructive and uncompromising stance. They do not seem to consider the country part of Europe thinking it is somewhere far away.

Syarhey Kastsyanyan

The EU is not homogenous. The EU is guided by directions from Washington. It does not have independent policies, but it has independent poli-

ticians advocating cooperation with Belarus. For instance, a delegation of German businesspeople visited Belarus earlier this week. New agreements have been signed with Slovakia and Slovenia. It is important that economic cooperation continues.

Vyachaslau Kebich

From the political point of view, the EU (which includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) seeks to bring Belarus under its fold.

The Baltic countries still can pursue policies independent of Brussels, while Poland cannot. The Belarusians and Poles have never been on friendly terms. Poland still regards Belarus as its former territory.

Anatol Lyabedzka

The EU does not have a strategy, if one does not consider the lack of strategy to be a sort of strategy. The recent presidential election inspired hopes that the EU will change its approach. Vilnius Conference 2006 was also encouraging. Earlier, Belarusian politicians at similar forums used to ask their European counterparts to say a few words about Belarus, whereas now nearly all speakers were talking about our country on their own initiative. This is a sign of political attention to Belarus. The 30 thousand people who joined our Maidan, a square that we call now Kalinouski Square, to protest Lukashenka's reelection also prompted Brussels to take a fresh look at Belarus and its future. The young people braved pressure and intimidation and their courage proves that there are advocates of European values, people who consider freedom a great value in Belarus. A change of attitude is also a result of long-term efforts of politicians.

However, the EU's attention should be converted into a strategy and later into an action plan. When this has been done, we would be able to say that Europe has a systematic policy with regard to Belarus.

We should take a pragmatic approach to international cooperation and should not be afraid to offend someone in Europe. We have our interests. If we want the EU help us overcome the regime in Belarus we should clearly express our positions. For instance, we should say 'No' to ineffective international assistance.

Projects have been discussed for years to break through the information blockade of Belarus. However, it is foreigners who make decisions without consulting experts in Belarus. How can one decide on a media project for Belarus without discussing it with media professionals in Belarus? European media projects for Belarus are not efficient, and this must be changed.

Various projects have been discussed for a long time to break through the information blockade of Belarus. However, it is foreigners who make decisions without consulting experts in Belarus. How can one decide on a media project for Belarus without discussing it with media professionals from Belarus? This means that European media projects for Belarus are ineffective, and this must be changed. It is necessary to state clearly our position on the issue. But it turns out that one part of our civil society seeks more favor from the international community than the other. This is a wrong position. There must be a consolidated position in relations with the international community.

The EU should not channel its support to a party, an NGO or a leader; it should target Belarusian people. This would be a strong argument in response to state-controlled media allegations that foreign assistance is aimed to do people harm. During the presidential election I had meetings in 17 locations each attended by 100 to 500 people. I asked the same question everywhere: 'You have three television channels that broadcast the same information. If, for instance, the EU provides funds for a satellite channel and you will be able to receive a different view on the same events and a different analysis. Who would reject such assistance raise your hands!' Two, three or four people would raise hands.

That means that the public in general is positive about assistance from which it can benefit. The efficiency is important!

Vasil Lyavonau

There have been many good statements, but there has been too much hypocrisy in the policies of a number of European states over the entire history of Belarus. This is a reality and we should not hope that Europe will do something instead of us and will give us something. Russia will also soon cease to give cheap natural gas.

Aleh Manayeu

If we compare the policy of the European Union with that of the United States, then, in my opinion, the USA's policy is far and away more adequate. But in recent years, the policy of the European Unions has become much more adequate than before, although it is still far from the level that many EuroBelarusians, and me personally, would like to see. Many institutions of the European Union still display caution and even indetermination with regard to both the present political regime in Belarus and civil society. I mean an whole system of specific activities. Let us take, for instance, the formal political level, i.e. the stance of the EU Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission. In recent years, they have adopted a great deal of good and just resolutions and statements that condemn human rights violations and crackdowns on democracy in Belarus. But at another, pragmatic level, i.e. at the level of specific programs and support – I mean not only financial support but also political, technical, and information support – this support leaves much to be desired. Each resolution and each political statement should be followed by practical moves, specific projects and actions.

A striking illustration in this regard is their stance on Russia. Until now, in the opinion of the pro-democratic forces, one of the most important components of the European Union's strategy regarding Belarus should be placing the Belarus issue on the agenda of the EU's dialogue with Russia. This envisages quite specific proposals put forward to Russia with respect

to its relations with the Belarusian leadership, not some vague talks and hints. EU officials generally agree with this but when it is about making practical moves, they are not made. However, the situation seems to have started changing for the better in the last year. If so, to what degree? Let us see the consequences of the inclusion of the Belarus issue, although not as a major item, in the agenda of the G8 summit in St. Petersburg.

In 2005, the European Union launched several information projects for Belarus. These included 'Belarusian Chronicles' on Deutsche Welle, a special weekly show on the Israeli-American television channel RTVi, and extensive coverage of Belarus news by EuroNews. In a survey that we conducted in late April 2006, we asked the interviewed which televisions they watched. The Russian version of EuroNews was watched by 20 to 25 percent, and the special show of RTVi by 10 to 15 percent. Of course, someone may say that those who watch these programs will not necessarily become advocates of democracy. But we also asked the question, 'If you watched EuroNews, did you see the piece about the common candidate of pro-democratic forces, Milinkevich?' Thirty-nine percent answered that they had seen several times and 31 percent said that they had seen it at least once. This means that 70 percent of those watching EuroNews saw the Milinkevich report. Moreover, answers to another question showed that many of those who had seen it had begun to think of him better. This means that these projects are starting to work. Radio stations broadcasting to Belarus are listened to about 15 percent of all voters, or about a million people. Listeners to these programs discuss them with their friends, associates and members and gradually adopt European values and views. Members of the Belarusian opposition and skeptics in Europe question the influence of such information sources, but the Belarusians authorities respond quite promptly and resolutely, taking harsh measures to block them. So, the process is on. And the European Union is taking an increasingly active part in it. This participation raises hopes as well.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

The EU has elaborated a consolidated policy toward the dictatorial regime in Belarus for the first time in many years. It is important that the main European institutions have consistently not recognized referenda and elections conducted by the Belarusian authorities in violation of generally accepted democratic standards. But I must admit that Europe has not yet worked out a systematic approach to 'the Belarusian issue'. Before the presidential election, some national governments flirted with the Belarusian regime hoping that it will change its behavior. Time and events have proved that this regime cannot be reformed. Neither sticks nor carrots can help. On our part, we have always maintained that Europe should readopt the so-called 'two-fold approach' to Belarus with emphasis on cooperation with pro-democracy forces.

Anatol Mikhailau

To make policies more effective it is necessary to clearly define their substance. For the time being the policies are too abstract.

Tatsyana Protska

The EU does not seem to have a strategy with regard to Belarus. It is a very complicated situation in the world today with some countries reaping oil profits and other paying a high price for oil.

The EU has a hard time now that prices of oil and gas are high. Its policies with regard to Belarus will change as soon as the situation stabilizes. At present, the EU can turn a blind eye to human rights violations and a lack of democracy in Belarus. It does turn a blind eye because Belarus is a transit country.

There was a similar crisis in the 1970s. The West came out of the crisis by introducing new technologies, whereas the Soviet Union wasted the

money it earned and collapsed. Russia may end up in the same situation but its government is working to prevent it. Belarus will face a deep political crisis if it fails to use its oil revenues for modernization. So far, it has not been investing profits in the economy.

Real inflation is very high in our country, for instance real estate prices have risen dramatically. A square meter of housing floor space costs over \$1,000 in Minsk. Such a price seemed impossible before, but now it seems natural. This is because people have a lot of money and the government used revenues to raise wages, not for modernization.

I think many problems lie ahead. The EU's attitude to Belarus will change in a few years' time. Belarus is at a crossroads and the EU policies are adequate. It sympathizes with the peaceful, tolerant and hospital Belarusians. On the other hand, if the Belarusian government represents a threat, ignores laws, democracy and human rights, the EU can allow Russia to incorporate Belarus.

The EU takes a cautious approach, but it is waiting for Belarus to hold out its hand. It is like on Michelangelo's Creation of Adam, God offers his hand, but Adam's hand is so weak. Belarus' situation is the same as on this fresco painting.

Andrey Sannikau

Now more attention is devoted to Belarus, more concerns are voiced. But, however, this has not resulted in any specific steps. Their talk about the expansion of the travel ban list... If that's all that the EU is capable of, this points not only to its weakness but also to the reluctance to have a serious attitude toward our situation, as far as I see. Because the EU has other tools available, it could use them. Take trade and economic relations: certain EU member states have raised trade with Belarus threefold, fourfold, fivefold. There are tools! I'm not speaking about methods of using them – embargoes, sanctions, license terminations for certain government-controlled companies. There are legal tools: one thing is to impose a travel ban on officials, and

opening criminal proceedings in connection with Belarus' disappearances is quite different. There are such precedents and this can be done. Those plans for a media project have not been materialized... It's only a waste of time and money, frankly speaking. I guess the project may involve talented people from our country but it yields no results: no one knows anything, hears anything or sees anything. Some of my acquaintances saw a program aired by RTVi - it was horrible: there was no one from Belarus and they all cited one story published by the 'Guardian' as if there are no other articles.

We have no such atmosphere that existed in Poland in the Soviet era. Almost all people tuned in to SW radio stations at that time. Today is the era of FM stations and SW stations cannot rival them. That's why they need to support what is here.

Stanislau Shushkevich

The European Union has found itself in a trap. It was once designed as a union of countries that share political principles: some had these traditions deeply rooted and some at least knew where they should be headed. Their common laws, which have been reflected in an EU constitution which so far has not been adopted, suited the interests of these countries. However, certain problems emerged after 10 new members representing Central Europe joined. The EU members simply did not have time to review their laws. They still draw up the bloc's budget on old principles. And they find it hard to apply these principles to the new members, as everything should be in line with national laws first. And the situation has become even more confusing after such countries like Belarus were admitted to the OSCE. These organizations have in fact stopped to play any unification role. I would call it a transitional period in the European Union. The bloc had failed to fine-tune its laws prior to the enlargement. We in fact did experience that – but on a smaller scale: we knew what the Soviet Union and Article 6 of the constitution were. We abolished the article and started rectifying our constitution, but it was impossible to do this, and we finally

adopted a democratic constitution, which, however, had to be fine-tuned. And the EU currently also has no laws, no legal basis to provide real assistance to such country like Belarus. It does not! They can help only through governments, as it was meant to be a union of conscientious democratic governments elected in a democratic manner. They can change, there can be such controversy like the one in Austria when nationalist forces won elections, or something that may happen in Italy. And I believe it will take pretty much time to finalize these laws.

Moral support from European countries is great. But if we speak about some real support, this can only be done through individual member states like, for instance, Slovakia did. As for the EU in general, I'm really not sure... I have never visited Brussels, and don't know what to speak about with the EU administration. I know what laws they are guided by and think that nothing efficient can be done on the basis of these laws.

We can criticize EU bureaucracy (and I do sometimes), but this a legal bureaucracy that works according to laws. And the European bureaucrat is not allowed to bypass these laws. And they in fact have no such laws that would make it possible to solve such problems like the Belarusian one. And this is what matters most for them. Mind you, 10 new countries joined the bloc and they now have to settle related problems. The overall budget deficit that the new member states have amounts to something like €12 billion. And they don't have these billions and have nowhere to take them from. And they must find them in accordance with their laws, because this is what must work tomorrow. And Belarus will wait...

Uladzimir Ulakhovich

It is a minimalist policy, a list of intentions. The new European Neighborhood policy heralds 'cohabitation' in the context of one more emerging partition line. On the one hand, the European Union has declared an intention to become closer to Belarus after its expansion. On the other hand, it is introducing strict visa formalities, also for entry to regions that Belarus

never in its history had borders with – Latvia, Lithuania and even Poland, travel to which always was more or less easy. Moreover, the procedure of obtaining a visa is becoming increasingly more complicated and humiliating. It is clear that it has nothing to do with general European values that the EU is ideologically committed to. The argument that there is a need to increase fight against illegal migration does not work. You will not see a group of Belarusian migrants conspicuous for crimes or social disturbances in a single European country. But you will surely see Ukrainian, Moldovan, Russian, Albanian, Chinese or Vietnamese communities with an unfriendly attitude to the law almost in every big European city. Belarusians are very cautious and particular about moving to another country. By the way, it is also a unique feature of the national character.

According to Brussels, Europe has moved closer to us after May 2004, but actually it has moved away. This is a bright example of Europe's policy.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich

In general, the EU policies are adequate.

Andrey Vardamatski

The EU is very slow. It takes long to make a decision. For instance, the EU's media projects for Belarus are absolutely ineffective, not only in terms of readership or listeners, but also as far as the general approach is concerned. Instead of news from Belarus, people are offered a description of the benefits of the EU. The offered subjects are inconsistent with the demand for independent information in the country. Talk on media projects for Belarus is bigger than the coverage of the new stations.

Vintsuk Vyachorka

The EU had no policy with regard to Belarus until recently. It just reacted to developments in the country in an unsystematic and symbolical way. Belarus is a very small geopolitical factor for the EU compared to the Middle East, the Balkans, Maghreb for France, Ukraine with its population of 50 million, or Russia.

The EU, which has difficulty making common decisions, needed to have a group of nations concerned about Belarus. After the enlargement it started making attempts to systemize its approach to the country. The so-called two-fold approach can be effective on condition it is applied consistently.

Its first element is punitive isolation of the regime and its leaders. The EU's strong-worded resolutions, which were ignored by the Lukashenka regime, were followed by really effective steps such as the travel ban on targeted officials suspected of involvement in high-profile disappearances, election fraud and persecution of opposition supporters. The EU also ordered the freezing of assets of the blacklisted officials (a less effective move because they are unlikely to keep their assets in the EU). The authorities' reaction proves that the blacklist should be expanded and publicized in Belarus.

The EU does not support economic sanctions. So don't I.

The second element is to make Europe as open as possible to representatives of civic society and pro-democracy groups. The policy does not boil down to declarations. It implies specific steps backed by financial resources. There is a lot to be done in this direction. It is also necessary to rectify the EU's previous mistakes. It took us quite long to persuade the European Commission that the TACIS (Technical Assistance for the CIS) program was absolutely ineffective in terms of support for civic society, because the program rules require the Belarusian authorities' approval for all expenses. Could you imagine Lukashenka government approving

a project for support of one of the human rights organizations, which it closes one after another?

The opposition can influence policies of the European neighbors and other countries. When opposition forces united, put forward a common credible leader and broke through the electoral ghetto, the level of support, both verbal and practical, considerably increased. As long as the opposition is strong, de-facto European, here in Belarus, the EU will have no option but to support and recognize it. If the United Pro-Democratic Forces remain a key political player, Russia will see that we are able to build and defend our independent Belarusian state.

Usevalad Yancheuski

Honestly, I do not see any policy. The European Union does not understand Belarus and does not seem to be willing to do so.

Europe looks down on us. It has a consumer's attitude to us. It often slips up because arrogance does not suit the mighty as well. We are not big and it is hard to see us from the Brussels and Washington peaks. That is why they do not understand us. That is why they look silly when they think that Belarusian officials will be very much disappointed over their travel restrictions.

Europe misses great opportunities for cooperation with Belarus. Our stability is our plus, and it is a big plus for Europeans. If they tried to make a use of it they could have a considerable economic gain.

Belarus tackles a number of problems for Europe. Above all, it blocks the traffic of illegal migrants and drugs. Europe occasionally gives us lazy kicks for that. Such attitude does not encourage us to protect Europe more efficiently from stuff travelling from Asia. It is not a sound policy.

And finally Europe is simply wasting time. Europeans believe for some reason that we will follow the lead of Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic. But we are not Poland, nor are we Hungary and the Czech Republic. For some

reason, they naively think that Lukashenka remains in power by accident. Over the 12 years, they have failed to understand that he is in for the long haul.

I would like to say once again that Europeans do not carry out any policy toward us. I have the impression that Europe's policy regarding Belarus is nothing but a series of some statements that have been stored in one folder on a computer since 1996 and that have only dates and occasions changed in them.

Americans and Europeans often call to my mind Soviet bureaucrats, particularly when they say something. Their language is similar to that of the Soviet TASS news agency. Their words are absolutely standard and predictable. It is well possible to forecast what the US Department of State or some European commissioner will say in five years. In this regard, they look a bit funny.

An interesting thing is that Belarus asks almost nothing of Europe. Europeans are lamenting over our restrictions on foreign assistance. They should not. Our president helps European taxpayers save their money that will anyway be stolen and that is now being stolen. All European assistance programs are absolutely inefficient. As a rule, money that is channeled into post-Soviet states in various grants is blatantly stolen.

European politicians cannot put up with the fact that Belarus' policies are shaped in strict accordance with the desires of a majority, which happens rarely. It happened that Lukashenka appeared in Belarus. It happened that Lukashenka managed to realize the political expectations of many people thanks to his unique personality. Neither Russia, nor Ukraine managed to do so – the countries had been ruled by a minority government, a group of self-appointed Communist leaders, before 1991, and were ruled by a minority government after 1991.

An interesting thing happened in Belarus. Its course has been shaped around the needs of a majority. A majority had nostalgia for the Soviet era and this was reflected in political programs. A majority wanted to live in a socially oriented state as many like to say now (or in a paternalistic state as political observers like to say, or to have state support to put it plain) and

this was reflected in political programs as well. A majority did not want to see any shocking social disparities and no privatization reform was carried out here. And government officials are rather modest in Belarus because the authorities force them to be such.

It just happened that most Belarusians do not want to become part of a general European context for the moment being. That is a fact. It is not a 'malicious or malevolent fact'. What could be more absurd than to come up with a book entitled *Accidental President?*⁴⁰ Fyaduta⁴¹ was correct when he wrote in his book that Lukashenka was far from being accidental.

He is not accidental for two reasons. Firstly, such a person is doomed to become a great leader, an important historic personality because of his personal features, such as charisma, an ingenious political intuition and a unique ability to feel the breath and light steps of history. Perhaps, Lukashenka is the only politician in the post-Soviet region who possesses this mysterious gift.

Secondly, people could not vest him with such wide powers by accident. The mentality and values of an overwhelming majority of our people differ from those in a European democratic state. Our people sought neither political freedoms, nor parliament. It is wrong to say that they were stripped of the freedoms. There was no crackdown on the freedoms either. Nobody just needed them. And it was clearly seen between 1991 and 1994.

I would like to stress that people have obtained all freedoms that they wanted. People were seeking individual freedoms at the dawn of the Soviet Union. They wanted to have freedom of movement. Everybody in the Soviet Union wanted to travel freely around the world. If people are deprived of this freedom, they will take to the streets in any country. An overwhelming majority wished to be free from excessive state patronage, dictatorship, party meetings, political propaganda, brainwash and control over private life (over your relations with the spouse, for instance).

⁴⁰ *Accidental President* is a book about Alyaksandr Lukashenka by Belarusian journalists Pavel Sharamet and Svyatlana Kalinkina.

⁴¹ Alyaksandr Fyaduta is a Belarusian journalist known for Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Political Biography.

Actually, it was a minority in the Soviet Union that demanded political freedoms, whereas a majority demanded these fundamental, individual freedoms.

Belarus has, and I think will have, all freedoms that the society then wanted. People rejected the concept of political freedoms as defined by the West conscientiously and voluntarily. There was an absolutely definite choice in favor of, say, monocratic rule. I always object when our political regime is described as dictatorship. It is wrong, incorrect, absurd and even blasphemous. One should not shake hands with a person who says so. Real dictatorships killed hundreds, thousands, millions of people. There were prisons, tortures and executions there.

How could you compare them with Belarus where few dozen people are put in jail for 15 days for disturbing the public peace. When dictators rule, people are not put in jail for 15 days but for 15 years, or launched into eternity altogether. Opposition newspapers are not suspended under dictatorship, they simply do not exist. Opposition leaders also do not hold large-scale meetings. Why then do you talk about dictatorship? Why do you use this 'heavy and tragic word' so freely?

It is true that we have an authoritarian regime. The president himself acknowledges that. A majority have chosen this regime conscientiously. People did understand the key idea of the 1996 constitution. They did understand that they were giving power to Lukashenka.

I was a deputy to the Parliament between 2000 and 2004 and I have always acknowledged that our parliament does not have such extensive powers as the European Parliament. It is not surprising because a majority of our people have chosen a political system that is not based on the separation of powers but the rule of one person.

A majority of the Belarusian people want such system. And we understand that our choice is correct when looking at the present Ukraine.

Europe, EU should remember that France was going toward democracy for several centuries surviving more than one bloody revolution. Germans paid for their democracy with millions of their lives and the lives of other people.

We do not want to go toward democracy through turmoil and are not willing to pay for it with blood. Throughout the entire 20th century, our long-suffering Belarus was sacrificing everything for a bright Communist future. Communist bosses used to say, 'We need to be a little bit patient today and everybody will be happier tomorrow'. Advocates of liberal market economy also used to say, 'We need to be a little bit patient today. Unemployment, anarchy and rampant crime are the cost of the transition period'.

That is a key difference between Lukashenka and his opponents. The latter once again want to make people suffer for the sake of a murky future, while Lukashenka knows that people want to live a normal life here and now, not tomorrow or in a couple of decades. And that is what his policies are about. That is where his truth and strength are in.

Our people do not have any more energy to start building another bright future, a democratic one this time. It would be nice if smart people in Europe realized the fact, which is not very much intricate.

Four corporations of Belarusian elite

Andrey Kazakevich

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andrey Kazakevich, born in 1980, graduated from the Law Faculty (the Department of Political Sciences) of Belarusian State University. He attended a Ph.D. candidate course between 2002 and 2005 and wrote a dissertation on ‘Theoretical Aspects of a Political Analysis of the Judiciary in Belarus’. He has been editor-in-chief of the *Palitychnaya Sfera* journal since 2002 and has headed the bachelors program ‘Political Sciences. European Studies’ at Vilnius-based European Humanities University since March 2006.

Biographical notes

Volha Abramava, born in 1953, politician. 1975: graduate of Belarusian State University; a Ph. D. from Belarusian State University in 1988. Her dissertation was entitled 'Humanism of the Violent Goal of the Socialist Revolution'. Abramava lectured at Belarusian Technological Institute and Minsk Radio-Technical Institute. She has been engaged in politics since the late 1980s, first as opponent of plans to declare Belarusian as the country's only official language. She was a member of the 13th Supreme Soviet and was twice elected to the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly.

Svyatlana Alekseyevich, born in 1948, a writer, earned a degree in journalism from the Belarusian State University. She is the author of five books written in Russian: 'The War's Unwomanly Face' (1985), 'Last Witnesses' (1985), 'Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices From The Afghanistan War' (1989), 'Enchanted By Death' (1993), 'Chernobyl Prayer: Chronicle Of The Future' (1997). Personal website: <http://alexievich.info>.

Yauhen Babosau, born in 1931, a Ph.D (1972) and a member of the Academy of Sciences. He graduated from Belarusian State University in 1955 and later, from 1959, taught philosophy at Belarusian State University and Minsk Medical University. He has served as deputy head

of the Department of Science and Education Establishments of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (1962–1977); director of the Philosophy and Law Institute of the BSRR Academy of Sciences (1977–1989); and from 1990, director of the Sociology Institute of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. He has headed a department at the Sociology Institute since 1998 and heads a chair at Belarusian State University (from 1994). Babosau was one of the founders of the National Party of Labor and Justice (1993) and the Socialist Party of Belarus (1994). He is the author of a monograph on state ideology of Belarus, edited twice.

Anzhalika Borys, born in 1973, is a leader of the Polish national minority in Belarus. Graduate of Padlipki (Hrodna district) secondary school, of pedagogic secondary school at Zamość (Lublin district in Poland), she received a degree in education and psychology from the Białystok subsidiary of Warsaw University and taught Polish in schools in the Hrodna district (village of Adelsk) and Hrodna. A member of the Union of Poles in Belarus since 1995, director of its education department from 1998, she was elected as chairwoman of the association in 2005. However, the Belarusian Ministry of Justice invalidated her election. In 2005, Special Services summoned her for interrogation on 56 occasions, according to the *Salidarnasts* weekly.

Iryna Buhrova, a political scientist, worked with the International Institute of Political Studies in Minsk before its closure by the authorities. She is an assistant professor in political science with Vilnius-based European Humanities University. Her subjects of interest include political psychology, political culture, conflictology, transitology and election campaign technologies.

Henadz Buraukin, born in 1936, a poet and prominent public figure, received a degree from Journalism Department of Belarusian State

University in 1959. Buraukin worked with newspapers and magazines and was appointed as head of the BSSR State Television and Radio Broadcasting Committee in 1978. He was named Belarus' permanent representative to the UN in 1990. Buraukin worked with the trade union newspaper *Belaruski Chas*, but resigned after it was taken over by the authorities. He is a member of Belarusian PEN.

Pavel Daneika, born in 1961, is an economist and politician. He earned a degree in economics from Belarusian State University in 1986 and later served with Economics Institute of the Academy of Sciences. Daneika managed FIKO, a finance and investment company, and a company called System Business Consulting. He was a member of the 13th Supreme Soviet. He has been a member of the United Civic Party since 1991. He is also the chairman of the supervisory board of Minsk-based Privatization and Management Institute. He is particularly interested in macro-, micro-economic and institutional aspects of transformation, political economy of transformation and stock exchange markets.

Andrey Dynko, born in 1974, is the editor-in-chief of the *Nasha Niva* weekly, translator and writer. He graduated from Minsk State Linguistic University in 1996 and worked at the university as lecturer between 1997 and 2000. Dynko was a vice president of Belarusian PEN from 2002 to 2004. In 2003, Václav Havel received the Hanno R. Ellenbogen award for his contribution to democracy in Central Europe and passed on the financial part of the award to Andrey Dynko (who became the first foreigner who received this Czech prize).

Valery Fralou, born in 1947, is a retired general and former presidential candidate. He was trained at the Kharkiv Higher Tank Command School (graduated in 1970), the Armored Forces Academy (1977), the General Staff Academy of the USSR Armed Forces (1991), and the Management Academy of the President (2000). Chief of staff in an army corps in the Belarusian Armed

Forces (1993–1994), and commander of the 28. Army Corps (1994–2000). When Fralou was a member of the House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly (2000–2004), he and other MPs formed an opposition group called Respublika. Fralou is currently a member of the Central Committee of the opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party ‘Hramada’. He ran for the presidency in 2006 but stepped aside in favor of Alyaksandr Kazulin, whom he supported.

Svyatlana Kalinkina, born in 1970, journalist. She served as deputy editor of *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* (1996–2002) and took over as editor-in-chief of *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* in 2002, editor-in-chief of *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*. *For professional use*. Editor of Belarus’ largest opposition newspaper *Narodnaya Volya*. Together with Pavel Sharamet, she wrote and published a book entitled *Sluchainyi Prezident [Accidental President]* about Lukashenka. She received the Gerd Bucerius Encouragement Award – the Young Press of Eastern Europe.

Syarhey Kalyakin, born in 1952, is a politician and leader of the opposition Belarusian Party of Communists. He graduated from Minsk Radio-Technical Institute in 1977 and earned a degree in political science from Belarusian State University in 1992. He was a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since 1977. He served as second and first secretary of Sovetsky District Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) (from 1983 to 1991), secretary (1993) and first secretary (1994) of the CPB Central Committee. He led a Communist faction in the 13th Supreme Soviet and managed Alyaksandr Milinkevich campaign during the 2006 presidential election.

Kasya Kamotskaya, born in 1963, a rock singer and leader of the band *Novaya Neba*, is one of the symbols of Belarusian rock music. She was one of the major musicians in the emerging Belarusian alternative rock movement of the early 1990s.

Syarhey Kastsyan, born in 1941, is a historian and politician. He graduated from Minsk State Teachers' Training Institute. Kastsyan served as first secretary of the Mazyr District Committee of the Leninist Young Communist League of Belarus, deputy department head at the CPB Mazyr District Committee and head of a chair at Mazyr State Teachers' Training Institute. He holds a Ph.D. in political science. Kastsyan was a member of the 13th Supreme Soviet. He joined the House of Representatives of the National Assembly after President Lukashenka disbanded the Supreme Soviet in 1997. He was a member of the association 'For Union of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia', parliamentary groups Unity, Friends of Bulgaria and People's Deputy. Kastsyan is a secretary of the CPB Central Committee and head of the Belarusian Slavic Committee.

Vyachaslau Kebich, born in 1936, is a statesman and former prime minister of Belarus. He completed Belarusian Polytechnics Institute and Minsk Higher Communist Party School. He holds Ph.D. in economics. He has worked as deputy chief engineer at the Minsk Assembly Line Factory, director of the Minsk Machine-Tool Factory, and director general of the Kirov Broaching and Slitting Machine Factory. Kebich held leading positions in the Communist Party of Belarus and headed the BSSR State Planning Committee and the Belarusian Commerce and Finance Union. He was elected a member of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union Communist Party and a member of the USSR Supreme Soviet. He was four times elected to the BSSR Supreme Soviet. He was appointed as deputy chairman of Belarus' Council of Ministers in 1985 and served as chairman of the Council of Ministers from 1990 to 1994. He gained 17.33 percent of the vote in the first round of presidential elections in 1994 and with 14.1 percent in the runoff lost the poll to Alyaksandr Lukashenka. He was a member of the 1st House of Representatives of the Belarusian National Assembly and a member of parliamentary group 'Association for economic development', constant committee for industry, fuel and energy, transport, communication and economic initiative.

Anatol Lyabedzka, born in 1961, is a politician, leader of the United Civic Party. He received degrees from the History and French Language Faculty of Minsk Teachers' Training Institute in 1985 and the Law Faculty of Belarusian State University in 1996. Lyabedzka was elected to the 12th and 13th Supreme Soviet. He headed the Belarusian Association of Young Politicians from 1992 to 1999. Lyabedzka took over as chairman of the United Civic Party in April 2000.

Vasil Lyavonau, born in 1938, is a manager and a statesman. He graduated from Belarusian Agricultural Machinery Institute and held key positions in the Communist Party of Belarus. He was first secretary of the Mahilyou Regional Committee of the CPB he approved Lukashenka's appointment as director of the Haradzets state farm. Lyavonau backed Lukashenka during elections for the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1988. After the CPB was outlawed in 1991, he was appointed as Belarus' trade representative to Germany. He took over as agriculture minister in 1994, but in 1997 he was arrested in his office on corruption charges, what was transmitted by TV. On November 11, 1997, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, during his visit to the Rassvet state farm in the Kirausk district, Mahilyou region, publicly accused Vasil Lyavonau of complicity in the murder of Yauhen Mikalutski, head of the Mahilyou Regional Department of the State Control Committee. After completing his jail term, he established the Belarusian-Russian foundation 'For New Belarus'.

Zhanna Litsvina, born in 1954, is a journalist and public figure, head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists since 1995. She held editorial positions with the Belarusian State Radio Company and managed the *Belaruskaya Maladzyozhnaya* radio station. In 1994, she set up the *Radyo 101.2* radio station, which was closed down by the authorities in 1996. She headed the Minsk bureau of Radio Liberty from 1994 to 1995.

Aleh Manayeu, born in 1952, a sociologist, earned a degree from Belarusian State University in 1974. Manayeu holds a Ph. D in philosophy and in sociology. He served as professor with the Sociology Chair of Belarusian

State University from 1992 to 1999. Manayeu headed the Independent Institute of Social Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) closed down by the authorities in spring 2005. He registered the IISEPS in Vilnius. He co-founded the United Democratic Party of Belarus in 1990 (currently the United Civic Party) and headed the Belarusian Soros Foundation. He focuses on research into media and democracy issues, media efficiency and its influence on the public opinion.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, born in 1947, graduated from Physics and Mathematics Faculty of Hrodna State Teachers' Training University in 1969 and earned a Ph. D. from the Physics Institute of the Academy of Sciences. Milinkevich participated in exchange programs with University of Montpellier, France (1980), and University of California, United States (1998). He also received training at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, in 2000. He headed the Physics Department at the University of Sétif, Algeria (1980 to 1984) and served as assistance professor at the General and Theoretical Physics Department of Yanka Kupala Hrodna State University (1984–2000). Milinkevich was deputy chairman of the Hrodna City Executive Committee (1990–1996). Milinkevich coordinated programs of the Local Development Promotion Foundation. In 2001, elected chief of presidential election campaign of Syamyon Domash. He was elected as common opposition presidential candidate at the Congress of Pro-Democratic Forces of Belarus held in Minsk on October 1 and 2, 2005. Milinkevich gained six percent of the vote in the election held on March 19, 2006, according to officials results.

Anatol Mikhailau, born in 1939, philosopher, education specialist, a Ph. D. (1986), completed Belarusian State University in 1961. He worked at Belarusian State University (1966–1974 and from 1980). He was appointed as head of a chair in the university in 1987. Mikhailau served with the Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs in Vienna (1974–1980). He has been rector of European Humanities University (EHU) since 1992.

After the Belarusian authorities shut down EHU in 2004 it moved to Vilnius, Lithuania. He is a member of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences. Mikhailau specializes in history of philosophy, modern Western philosophy and methodology of humanities.

Ales Mikhalevich, born in 1975, is a deputy chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front, head of the party's Minsk regional chapter. He received a degree from the Law Faculty of Belarusian State University and headed the Association of Belarusian Students and the Youth Information Center, both closed down by the authorities. He is director general of TAA Arkadziya, a Belarusian-Polish company. Mikhalevich got elected to the Pukhavichy District Soviet in 2003.

Tatsyana Protska, born in 1951, is a human rights defender. She worked with the History Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, earned a doctoral candidate's degree in philosophy in 1983. Protska worked as senior editor at the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company (1992–1994) and edited the Nasha Minushchyna radio program. She heads the Belarusian Helsinki Committee since 1985.

Andrey Sannikau, born in 1954, is a politician. He received a degree from the Minsk Teachers' Training Institute of Foreign Languages in 1977 and completed a course at the Diplomatic Academy of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is the ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of the Republic of Belarus. He served as deputy foreign minister of Belarus in 1995 and 1996, but resigned shortly before the 1996 referendum. Sannikau is an international coordinator with the Khartiya-97 human rights group. He was presented with a Bruno Kreisky Human Rights Award in 2005.

Stanislau Shushkevich, born in 1934, is a scientist and politician. He completed the Physics and Mathematics Faculty of Belarusian State University (BGU) in 1956 and a post-graduate course at the Physics Institute

of the BSSR Academy of Sciences. Shushkevich headed the BGU's Nuclear Physics and Electronic Chair and served as BGU deputy rector for research. He was a people's deputy of the USSR and a member of an inter-regional parliamentary group (1989–1991), a member of the 12th BSSR Supreme Soviet (1990–1995), and the first deputy chairman of the Supreme Soviet (1990–1991). Shushkevich was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet on September 9, 1991. On December 7 and 8, 1991, in Belavezhskaya Pushcha together with the leaders of Russia and Ukraine he signed a declaration that the Soviet Union was dissolved and replaced by the CIS. He was dismissed as chairman of the Supreme Soviet on January 26, 1994. Shushkevich gained less than 10 percent in the first round of Belarus' first presidential election (1994). He has been the chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada since 1998.

Uladzimir Ulakhovich is the director of the International Studies Center of Belarusian State University (BSU). He holds a degree from the BSU, and completed a post-graduate course at the Moscow-based Social Sciences Academy. His scientific interests include the EU's relations with the neighbors, international organizations and Belarus' foreign policies.

Alyaksandr Vaitovich, born 1938, is a politician and scientist, holder of a Ph.D. in physics and mathematics, a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences. Vaitovich graduated from the Physics Faculty of Belarusian State University in 1960. He headed the National Academy of Sciences (1997–2000) and was elected chairman of the Council of the Republic of the Belarusian National Assembly in 2000. Alyaksandr Lukashenka dismissed him from the post in 2003. His web site is <http://voitovich.com/>.

Andrey Vardamatski, born in 1956, holds a Ph.D. in philosophy and sociology. Vardamatski graduated from Belarusian State University in 1978. He is the head of the private axiometric research laboratory Novak (stands

for Novaya Aksiometriya [New Axiometry]), which specializes in conducting opinion polls and has a nationwide network of interviewers. The laboratory was denied state accreditation in the run-up to the 2006 presidential election and was banned from conducting independent surveys.

Vintsuk Vyachorka, born in 1961, is an academic and politician, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). He graduated from the Philology Faculty of Belarusian State University in 1983. He was one of the BPF founders in 1998. Vyachorka worked as lecturer at Minsk State Teachers' Training Institute and Belarusian Humanities Lyceum. He is one of the authors of a textbook on modern Belarusian orthography. Authorities opened a criminal case against him in connection with his role in spring 1996 anti-government protests. The case file was closed in 1998. In 1999 he was elected chairman of the BPF. He acted as deputy campaign manager for presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich during the 2006 election in charge of international relations and a network of the candidate's authorized representatives.

Usevalad Yancheuski, born in 1976, is a politician and journalist. He was a member of Lukashenka's campaign team during the 1994 presidential election and a member of Shushkevich's team during the 1995 parliamentary elections. He was also a member of the Slavic Assembly Belaya Rus party. Yancheuski earned degrees from the Law Faculty (1998) and the International Relations Faculty (2000) of Belarusian State University. He headed the pro-government Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union for several years. In 2005 he was appointed as editor-in-chief of the *Planeta* magazine established by the Presidential Administration.

