Belarus and its Flight from Democracy: Political Discourse and the People's Choice at the 1994 Presidential Elections

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Abstract

The article seeks to answer to the question: what defined people's choice when they voted for the first time, in 1994, Aleksandr Lukashenko into office. While agreeing that there is a significant amount of research on this topic, the author aims to illuminate what exactly helped the electorate to navigate and choose between the nearly identical promises of social justice and well-being, which were made by all six candidates for the presidency in 1994. Correspondingly, the article explores key-texts created in the first years of the country's independence (between 1991 and 1994) by the Belarusian Popular Front and its leader Zianon Paz'niak and by (and on behalf of) Aleksand Lukashenko, to date the only Belarusian President. As a result, an explanation that relies on the decoding of the voices represented by the candidates' texts is offered. These voices were part of an ideology brought out by a new political discourse.

Key Words: Belarusian opposition, presidential elections of 1994, political communication, analysis of discourse

Introduction

The authoritarian turn that happened in Belarus in 1996, as traditionally understood, directs scholars' attention to its obvious culprit. Current Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko in 1996 initiated a constitutional referendum and with the support of 70% of voters dissolved the Constitutional Court and the legitimately elected Supreme Soviet, and established a new National Assembly with members appointed by him alone. In 2014, Lukashenko is still in power. His actions over the last seventeen years, violent and destructive to the very idea of rule of law, still hold the world's attention.

Meanwhile, Lukashenko's swift rise to power was preceded by the period lasting from December 1991, when a trilateral – Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian – agreement dissolved the USSR, until July 1994, when Lukashenko was voted into office for the first time. The brevity of this period stands in stark contrast to the significant role it played in the modern history of Belarus. Reflecting on that time, Vitali Silitski pointed out that Lukashenko's success "was made possible by the fair degree of political openness that had followed the demise of communism."[1] But it was "pluralism by default," remarks Lucan

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[1] Vitali Silitski, "Contagion Deterred: Preemptive Authoritarianism in the Former Soviet Uni-

Way, caused by "the inability of incumbents to enforce authoritarian rule" and by the lack of "a robust civil society, strong democratic institutions or democratic leadership."[2] These assessments underscore another feature of the period: at this time, the dramatic and unexpected changes in political, social, and economic life – and above all, in the status of Belarus as an independent state – gave birth to a new discourse. It emerged from the dialogue with the Soviet Communist past, expectations of a democratic, Western-style future, and the claims of a "third way" for Slavic civilization. Among its complex tasks was one of unprecedented complexity: to make people accept an evolving, radically new social reality. The discourse manifested itself, first of all, in the process of communication initiated by new political elites and consisted of texts produced within new political parties and groups. Its pick time surrounded the presidential campaign of 1994.

This article seeks to rationalize the choice Belarusians made in the 1994 presidential elections. For this purpose, two groups of texts have been analyzed. One of them consists of texts created within the most influential party – the Belarusian Popular Front "Adradzhen'ne" – and on behalf of its leader Zianon Paz'niak. This selection includes the party's core political document, the program, upon which Paz'niak's pre-election platform and leaflets were based. On the opposing side, Lukashenko and his campaign team produced their program and published it in a newspaper. The article will starts by unfolding the existing scholarly and popular explanations for the people's choice in 1994. Then, it will proceed to a review of the political landscape in the early years of Belarusian independence, and an analysis of texts published in 1994 on behalf of Zianon Paz'niak, and Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The Incompleteness of Explanations for the 1994 Election Results

Aleksandr Lukashenko won the 1994 election with the support of over 80% of those who voted in the second round (57% of the Belarusian electorate overall). His rival, then-Prime-Minister, Viacheslav Kebich, received 14.17% of the votes. The phenomenon of this victory drew wide attention both within and beyond Belarus. President Lukashenko and those who voted for him have been subjected to the closest consideration by researchers, public intellectuals, and

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on (the case of Belarus)," *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World,* eds. V. Bunce, M. McFault, and K. Stoner-Weiss (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 281.

[2] Lucan Way, *Pluralism by Default: Challenges of Authoritarian State-Building in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine* (Glasgow: Center for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde 2003), p. 4.

journalists. The explanations that emerged range from the most obvious to those hidden deep in the history of the nation's development. The following review, however, is dictated by a goal beyond mere classification. The purpose is to put these explanations into a broader informational and discursive context in order to reconstruct the environment within which the choice was made in 1994.

Exploring factors that facilitated Lukashenko's election, Pavel Sheremet and Svetlana Kalinkina, Belarusian journalists and co-authors of the book *Sluchainii President* [*An Accidental President*, 2003] claim that the reason was simple: Lukashenko could speak with people in a language they understood. Indeed, like many Belarusians he speaks "Trasianka," or Russian vocabulary with a Belarusian accent. However, in the social environment of contemporary Belarus, "Trasianka" is not so much a way of pronunciation as it is an unmistakable marker of a lower social status, signaling a lack of culture and education. Despite tremendous changes in Lukashenko's appearance and speaking manner since that time, he could not completely overcome this pronunciation, which continues to be an audible reminder of his origin. Another explanation, which exists in the same framework, was brought out by Aleksandr Feduta, a Belarusian researcher, public intellectual, and journalist who was one of the key members of Lukashenko's campaign team in 1994. In his book *Aleksandr Lukashenko: Politicheskaia Biografiia* [*Aleksandr Lukashenko: Political Biography*, 2005], Feduta refers to Lukashenko's "anti-corruption speech." As the head of the parliamentary anti-corruption committee, Lukashenko delivered a speech at the end of 1993, and according to a commonly accepted opinion, this speech turned a rank-and-file MP into a real political figure. "Lukashenko caught the essence of the Soviet mentality," Feduta writes, "that is, if somebody lives in better conditions than we can afford, then this person is our enemy."[3] Feduta also recollects that the campaign team's efforts were focused on engaging underclass voters. "The only feature that could distinguish our electorate was its extreme lumpenization,"[4] he writes. The same author cites Petr Kravchenko, a former high level Communist Party official who at the time of the interview was a prominent member of the opposition:

"As a politician he [Lukashenko] was born not on the podium of the parliament. As a politician he was born in a bathhouse in the town of Shklov [near the place of Lukashenko's birth], where naked, with a bath basin in hand he listened to half-drunk villagers. They were "cutting" (резали) the truth and he was gaining information about people's lives and what bothers them."[5]

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[3] Aleksandr Feduta, *Lukashenko: Politicheskaia biografiia* (M.: "Referendum," 2005), p. 103.

[4] Ibidem, p. 124.

[5] Ibidem, p. 363.

Rationalizing Lukashenko's triumph by pointing to the low social and cultural status of his voters is part of the mainstream perspective on the issue of choice in the 1994 election. In this regard, the response to American critics of ordinary Americans, offered by the authors of the book *The New American Democracy* seems relevant. They write: "Many people fall short of the ideal, but it is the ideal that is unjustified."[6] The comparison reveals the difference between political cultures of two countries. In Belarus, despite an articulated commitment to democratic values, the tendency to ignore people as a meaningful political force was a significant factor in the period that preceded the 1994 elections. After the elections the trend became even stronger and more evident.

In opposition to this trend, another approach has crystallized, though it has never been as popular as the first. It is presented most consistently in the writings of Elena Gapova, who insists on turning a critical look to the Belarusian liberal intelligentsia – the core of the Belarusian opposition to Lukashenko. She argues that by supporting individualistic values of liberal democracy, intellectuals and opposition politicians have been promoting the interests of their "class," which were (and are) not always congruent with what many people in Belarus regard as the common good. Responding to the prominent Belarusian philosopher Valiantin Akudovich, who once noticed that there was no practical sense from freedom of speech and association for those in Belarus, who make their living by hard work on the land because they have different lifestyle, Gapova writes that having read this acknowledgement, she expected that Akudovich was just about to say that unless "we" [the intellectuals] do something that would make sense for those who live off their hands "our project" will achieve neither moral right nor legitimate perspective; but he did not do this. On the contrary, Gapova writes, he expressed regrets by saying that, evidently, intellectuals and common folks had very different scopes of responsibility. That is why "he wished there would be more of 'us' (intellectuals) to remove 'the social province' to where it belongs and should be, for then the province would worry about the issues that are appropriate for them, and we would take care of those belong to us."[7]

In many the researchers further elaborates on the idea of class division, with language and style of speech indicating social positions associated with income inequality: this process developed rapidly in Belarus between 1991 and 1994, but was interrupted when Lukashenko came to power. The same logic informs

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6 Morris Fiorina [et al.], *The New American Democracy*, Alternative 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 137.

7 Elena Gapova, "Anxious Intellectuals: Framing the Nation as a Class in Belarus," *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia* ed. C. Bradatan and S. Oushakine (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 212.

the argument of Grigory Ioffe, who emphasizes the disparity separating social groups in Belarus since the collapse of the USSR:

> "…most of his [Stanislau Shushkevich, head of the first independent Belarusian Supreme Soviet] fellow countrymen were ill prepared for independence. While a few Minsk-based intellectuals were able to convert the newly emerging freedom into some sort of social capital that materialized in contacts with West, and in its financial support, most Belarusians saw their lifelong savings evaporate and their quality of life plummet.[8]"

A newspaper article entitled "Portret intelligentsii na fone ruin" ["A Portrait of Intelligentsia against a Backdrop of Ruins") published in *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, the largest Russian-language state-run newspaper, converts this seemingly speculative conclusion into a plot from real life. The journalist recounts his discussion with one of a prominent member of the National Academy of Sciences, who in the course of the discussion, noted that his most resourceful colleagues had left for the West, to wait out the times of hardship.[9]

When the result of the latest presidential elections in December 2010 was announced, the contentious dispute between adherers of the two explanations was resumed with renewed rigor, but now it takes place mostly in online social networks.

An article by Coit Blacker and Condoleezza Rice, "Belarus and the Flight from Sovereignty," offers yet another explanation. The researchers discuss Lukashenko's tripartite pre-election pledge "to provide strong, no-nonsense leadership, to restore social discipline, and to seek the closest possible ties with Russia."[10] They pay special attention to the third point and remark that in promising to resume a close relationship with the Russian Federation, Aleksandr Lukashenko met the expectations of the majority of Belarusians "to return to familiar ways"[11] – invoking the Soviet era. Moreover, the results of a survey called European Barometer seem to confirm this explanation. Belarusians participated in the survey in 1992 and 1993. Indeed, in many cases when the questions tested an attitude toward the USSR, the answers revealed positive associations. In 1992, for example, Belarusian respondents rated the Socialist economic system 76 on a scale ranging from –100 to +100, and this number rose to 78 the following

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[8] Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), p. 110.

[9] V. Efanov, "Portret intelligentsia na fone ruin," *Sovetskaia Belorusiia*, 1993, 9 Ianvaria.

[10] Grigory Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), p. 110.

[11] C. Blacker & C. Rice, "Belarus and the Flight from Sovereignty," *Problematic Sovereignty,* ed. S. D. Krasne (New York: Columbia University Press), 2006, p. 24.

year.[12] The former Communist regime was rated 60 and 64 in the corresponding years.[13]

Other facts contest this explanation, however. The same survey, conducted in 1993, found a relatively small number – 34% of Belarusian respondents – who desired the restoration of the former Communist regime.[14] The unpopularity of this course was also confirmed by the first-round results of the presidential elections. The Communist candidate received only 5% of the vote, the worst result of any of the six candidates for the presidency. At the same time, it is widely known that in the March 1991 Soviet referendum, nearly 83% of eligible voters in Belarus supported the idea of living in the renewed federation of equal and sovereign republics. Yet, less than a year later, on the question of the dissolution of the USSR and creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, 69% of respondents in Belarus welcomed the decision.

The suggestion of Lukashenko's promise to restore the relationship with Russia as a decisive factor of his victory may also be questioned. After all, his rival in the second round of the elections, Prime-Minister Viacheslav Kebich, employed a similar slogan: "In my life, I have two interwoven goals: the well-being of the Belarusian people and unity with Russia." What is more, on the eve of the second round, *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* published a number of articles praising the successful restoration of ties with Russia and emphasized that the success was possible because of Kebich's efforts. In one of such texts, the organization "Popular Movement of Belarus" called on its members to vote for Kebich and declared that the results of the first round of elections showed that "people had chosen unity with Russia, bilingual state's policy, social protection, and stability." From the organization's point of view, the only politician who could guarantee all of these was Kebich (*Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, July 30, 1994). It should be noticed here, that with it circulation as one of the biggest, *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* had the means to influence people, especially outside the capital city. This particular issue which we cited here was published in 422.169 copies. Other politicians competing for the presidency, too, made similar to Kebich's promises in their pre-election programs. Even Zianon Paz'niak, of the Belarusian Popular Front, fearful that his lack of emphasis on unity with Russia might hurt his chance of victory, published a special leaflet, in Russian, entitled *Chto Zenon ne budet delat'*

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[12] R. Rose, *Diverging Paths of Post-Communist Countries: New Europe Barometer Trends since 1991* (Survey Measures of Democracy; Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 2006), p. 32.

[13] Ibidem, p. 22.

[14] R. Rose & Christian Haerpfer, *Trends in Democracies and Markets: New Democracies Barometer, 1991-1998* (Studies in Public Policy, no. 308; Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1998), p. 33.

[*What Zenon* (Russian spelling of the name Zianon) *Will Not Do*]. One of its six promises was that he would not sever the economic ties with Russia.

What the hesitations in people's attitude could have indicated, is the high degree of uncertainness that the Belarusians experienced during this period. Compared to political leaders and party members, the populace did not hold firmly fixed views. Their actions and decisions, rather, were defined by common sense. In a similar situation, Morris P. Fiorina noticed that American attitudes are … multidimensional, and therefore "most Americans cannot reasonably be called left-right ideologues … < … > I do not consider this a fault of the electorate," he contends, "on the contrary, the electorate does not oversimplify and distort a complex reality as political elites do."[15]

The allusion to people's nostalgic feelings is usually paired with explanations connecting Lukashenko's victory with the Belarusians' dearth of national consciousness, as well as their preparedness "to sacrifice independence if they could be assured of an improvement in their economic well-being."[16] He made this observation over the course of several visits to Belarus in 1992 and 1993. The researcher, too, points to a growth in the number of citizens who expressed nostalgia for Soviet times, and asks why have Belarusians sacrificed their language, and even "lost interest in their own history."[17]

These observations and explanations, however accurately reflecting the Belarusian reality in the first years of independence, have limited explanatory potential due to the underlying presumption that the outcome of the 1994 election was the people's fault. The famous Belarusian political commentator Liudmila Masliukova, caught the presumption and wrote in *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*: "Someone may complain that the people fall short of the ideal. They are, however, what they are, and there are no others. Their choice is a law for those who represent their interests."[18]

The stated purpose of reconstructing the environment within which the people's choice was made would remain incomplete, if not to draw attention to another factor. It is thr fact that the USSR did not collapse because the Soviet people struggled for Western democratic values. Moreover, a long history of ideological disputes in the Soviet press on the definition of "democracy"

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[15] Morris Fiorina & J.A. Samuel, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), p. 16.
[16] David Marples, *Belarus: From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 125.
[17] Ibidem, p. xviii.
[18] Liudmila Masliukova, "My, Narod Respubliki Belarus'…," *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, 1992, 8 Dekabria.

rendered the term meaning vague, while people grew immune to the line of reasoning itself. An article – "Chem izmeriat' demokratiiu?" ["How Should Democracy Be Measured?"] – in a 1977 issue of *Literaturnaia Gazeta* illustrates this point. Its author reproached the American Foundation for Peace, while speculating about the meaning of democracy, human rights, and freedom, on the basis of the foundation's conferral of the American Medal of Friendship to a German media owner.[19] Fifteen years later, *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* attempted a more balanced and scholarly approach to the topic in an article "Democratiia: kak ee ponimat'?" ["Democracy: How It Should be Understood?"]. Its author, a scholar, drew readers' attention to the fact that democracy as a form of political governance has different models.[20] Yet, this article presented a rare case that could not radically change people's attitudes. Moreover, the very appearance of such a text could have been an attempt to counteract the efforts of every each new party to appropriate the term "democracy" itself.

It was a competition in consumption – which the Soviet Union lost to the West – that heavily contributed to the collapse. In this regard, it is also necessary to note the perception that the Soviets held about the West. In his book *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, Alexei Yurchak applies the notion of the "Imaginary West."[21] He emphasizes that the vast majority of the Soviet population derived its understanding of Western life from the "debris" of consumer goods (jeans, plastic bags with eye-catching images, beer cans, labels of fashion houses, etc.), which were periodically available to people in the Soviet Union. This imagined Western lifestyle could not help but affect people's expectations of their own lives when the Soviet Union dissolved. Moreover, these expectations have been reinforced by the assurances of new political leaders. In April 1991, for example, when Minsk factories workers took to the streets demanding to improve the economic conditions of their life, a political flyer "K Belorusskomu narody" ["To the Belarusian People"] was prepared with the help of opposition MPs. Among other declarations, it states: "The market means prosperity and a decent wage; it means property allocated to each person." Finally, if people were more interested in consumer products than freedom, this resulted from the absence of the former between 1991 and 1994. According to European Barometer, in 1993 71% of Belarusian respondents indicated that they felt greater freedom of self-expression.[22] At the same time, 82% of respondents

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[19]   B. Svetov, "Chem izmeriat' demokratiiu?", *Literaturnaia Gazeta,* 1977, 4 Maia.

[20]   V. Rovdo, "Demokratiia: kak ee ponimat'?," *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, 1992, 6 Avgusta.

[21]   Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 158-206.

[22]   R. Rose, *Diverging Paths of Post-Communist Countries: New Europe Barometer Trends since 1991*

claimed that economic conditions in their households had been better in the past (Rose 2006, p. 39). These seemingly disparate facts are, actually, parts of the same factor – the legacy of the past that was an objective reality in Belarus during the early years of independence. Summing up the observation of the socio-political environment on the eve of the elections, it can be claimed that a significant part of the population while holding the expectations of prosperous life, found themselves in economic hardship, disoriented, and uncertain about their future.

The puzzle of the people's choice, however, remains. All of the 1994 presidential candidates offered similar, even identical things to the Belarusian people. Every candidate promised a socially-oriented economy and state-sponsored care for the poor, unemployed, retired, and physically and mentally handicapped, as well as for children and families with many children. They also promised to maintain free education and medical care. Paz'niak even promised to reimburse the money people had saved in bank accounts but were lost due to inflation and devaluation. The similarity of the candidates' promises meant that when making a final decision, most likely people were not responding to the promises themselves; rather, they were reacting to something hidden between the lines. The following analysis aims to unveil those implicit meanings hidden in the texts produced on the eve of the presidential elections on behalf of Zianon Paz'niak and Aleksandr Lukashenko.

The Latent Authoritarianism of the New Political Discourse

The long-forgotten diversity in public opinion was, among other factors, fertile ground for the rapid growth of competing political parties and socio-political movements. The first alternative to the Communist party was the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF). Although its statute was registered by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice only in July 1991, the movement emerged in June 1989, when its founding congress took place in neighboring Lithuania. By the spring of 1991, five parties had been formed. Following the 1994 presidential elections, *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* informed its readers about a gathering of the leaders of 26 parties and seven socio-political movements in the Supreme Soviet to discuss a possible electoral system for the coming parliamentary elections.[23]

The process of party building signaled the birth of new political elites, and was characterized by two main tendencies. First, there was the low number of those who chose to be a party member or, at least, support one of them as

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(Survey Measures of Democracy; Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 2006), p. 21.

[23] S. Ivanova, "Cherez mnogopartiinost' – k demokratii?", *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, 1994, 5 Noiabria 1994.

a "friend." According to a guidebook published by the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in 1992, the number of members and supporters of different parties varied by the end of 1991 from the 150 members in the Belarusian Christian Democrats, to the 1,000 people, who in some way or another belonged to the Belarusian Social-Democratic *Gromada*. The party with the highest membership, the Belarusian Popular Front, claimed about 15,000 people, according to the same source. The reason for this may have been the discrepancy between views held by the new elites and many Belarusians. This discrepancy coupled with the generally low level of political participation demonstrated the weakness of opposition and justified the emerging criticism. One particularly critical opinion was voiced by the political scientist Nikolai Kuznetsov, who in 1996 underlined that an impressive number of parties indicated neither the democratization of the country, nor the satisfaction of a variety of views in the society. "These parties did not address the problems of citizens and did not represent all social strata of the society," he wrote.[24]

Meanwhile, it can be argued that the weakness was, in fact, a consequence of the lack of support, rather than a cause of it. In this regard, Kirill Koktysh, a Russian political scientist, discusses the demonstration in Minsk, organized by the Belarusian Popular Front, in May 1991, on the fifth anniversary of Chernobyl tragedy.[25] The researcher indicates that the BPF did not usually enjoy wide support: the party won 25 seats, which could be considered as victory, in the Supreme Soviet in the 1990 elections, but did not have much influence on the legislative process or the executive branch. Its radical nationalism and the heavy emphasis on the "Belarusian language issue" impeded the faction's collaboration with other political forces. Nevertheless, the demonstration initiated by the BPF in May 1991 brought 100,000 Belarusians to the streets. Thus, when the party reflected Belarusians' actual concerns, concludes Koktysh, it received enormous social support.

The second significant feature of the party building process was the constant attempts of new leaders to create a "centrist" political force, and their repeated failures to do so. The primary reason for this was the disagreement between the parties regarding the toll that society can and should pay now for its prosperity in the future. In February 1992, the Belarusian Social Democrats, for example, initiated the creation of the "New Belarus" bloc in order to unite democratic

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[24] Nikolai Kuznetsov, *Politicheskie partii Belarusi: ot istorii k sovremennosti* (Minsk: NKF Ekoper-spektiva, 1995), p. 16.

[25] Kirill Koktysh, *Transformatsiia politicheskogo rezhima v Respublike Belarus': 1990 – 1999* (M.: Moskovskii obshchestvenno-nauchnyi fond: OOO "Izdatel'skii tsentr nauchnykh i uchebnykh programm," 2000), p. 31.

forces. The initiative, however, did not receive support from other parties, and especially the Belarusian Popular Front. The parties did not agree with the bloc's primary objective suggested by the Belarusian Social Democrats — to protect people from impoverishment. A journalist from the independent newspaper *Svaboda,* created in 1990, reported on the meeting, pointing at the participants' opinion of the impossibility of creating any bloc without the BPF, because it would result in disagreement between political parties. As for the BPF, it refused to join "a bloc which does not have any clear political agenda," as one of its leaders, Yury Khadiko, argued.[26] In the same year, the journalist and political analyst Anatolii Maisenia warned in *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* of the danger of the old regime's restoration, due to the absence of a new party or a coalition which could fill the gap between the left- and right-wing political poles.[27] On the eve of the 1994 elections, the sociologist and member of the National Academy of Sciences Evgenii Babosov repeated this warning, revealing in *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* a survey data showing that Lukashenko, with the support of 20.5% of workers interviewed, was far ahead of Prime-Minister Kebich, who gathered 8.4% of respondents' support, and BPF leader Paz'niak, who received only 5.1% support. Babosov stated that the lack of political unity, but above all the disregard for the working-class voters could cost candidates the presidency.[28]

The Belarusian Popular Front was the most powerful party nominating a candidate for the 1994 presidential elections. Its nominee was party leader Paz'niak, a historian and archeologist who had revealed a secret burial place – Kurapaty – of Soviet citizens executed by the KGB, and who in 1988 initiated the creation of the BPF. The front attracted the most prominent old national Belarusian-language intelligentsia, including Vasil' Bykau, Nil Gilevich, Adam Mal'dzis, and Rygor Baradulin. Overall, from the first days of BPF's existence, as the political scientist Olga Denisiuk writes, the party absorbed two main categories of politically-active Belarusian "dissidents": "nationalists," concerned with the "national issue," and "democrats," who adhered to general democratic values. Nationalists sought primarily to resolve national problems – namely, to revive the Belarusian language and culture, and subsequently, under control of nationally-conscious citizens, to implement democratic changes. Democrats, on the contrary, believed that the most important issue was to build democratic institutions guided by rule of law, for only afterward would it be possible to solve

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[26] P. Pankratovich, "Dva Belarusy – try partyi," *Svaboda*, 1992, no 1, Liuty.

[27] Anatolii Maisenia, "Kot Leopol'd i natsional'noe soglasie," *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, 1992, 6 Marta.

[28] Evgeny Babosov, "Popytka sotsiologicheskogo prognoza v preddverii budushchikh vyborov," *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, 1994, 2 Aprelia.

economic, social, and national problems of Belarusian society. "The nationalists won," concludes Denisiuk.[29]

Belarusians' attitude toward the BPF and its leader has never been simple. Discussing Paz'niak, among other candidates for the presidency, *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* immediately emphasizes how his name alone evokes an emotional response: some ardently support Paz'niak, while others completely reject him.[30] Another newspaper, *Svaboda,* while telling the story of the U.S. President Bill Clinton's visit to Belarus in 1994, noted that Paz'niak was not enthusiastic about the U.S. Ambassador's invitation to participate in a meeting between President Clinton and Belarusian democratic leaders. His opinion was that not all invited leaders were truly democratic. Finally, Paz'niak decided to join the group, but with the aim to explain to President Clinton the "real" situation with the democratic opposition in Belarus.[31] Paz'niak himself in his political leaflets, designed to inform the electorate about his candidacy, pointed out the following, most significant details of his biography: he was born in a Belarusian village; his father perished in World War II and his mother raised him alone; he always opposed to the Communist rule, and his critical attitude towards the Communist party damaged his career. In a leaflet prepared especially for the female electorate, Paz'niak claimed: "The Belarusian Popular Front has always said and will say the truth to the Belarusian people. So far all its predictions have come true. It means that they will be true this time, too: our children and grandchildren for sure will be happier and wealthier than we are."

Lukashenko, a political "outsider," as Vitali Silitski called him,[32] was another candidate whose name provoked strong emotional responses and ambivalent feelings in people. On the one hand, as Feduta points out, Lukashenko was ridiculed by fellow MPs and the media: journalists from *Svaboda*, as well as leading members of the BPF made fun of him in newspaper articles, and after his election *Svaboda* published a number of angry and offensive articles about Lukashenko and his supporters.[33] On the other hand, despite direct and indirect

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[29] Olga Denisiuk, *Neformanie ob'edineniia. Obshchestvenno-politicheskie dvizheniia, partii v SSSR: predposylki, stanovlenie, razvitie (1985 - 1991)* (Minsk: BGU, 2003), p. 143.

[30] *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, June 16, 1994.

[31] P. Pankratovich, "Klintan khocha sustretstsa z Paz'niakom dvoichy," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 2, Studzen'. P. Pankratovich, "Paz'niak pavazhae Ameryku I prezidenta," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 2, Studzen'.

[32] Vitali Silitski, "Contagion Deterred: Preemptive Authoritarianism in the Former Soviet Union (the case of Belarus)," *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World,* eds. V. Bunce, M. McFault, and K. Stoner-Weiss (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 280.

[33] A. Hlebus, "Chubchyk Lukashenki," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 14, Krasavik; M. Hryniavitski, "Tavarysh prezydent abiatsae usikh nakarmits': adnykh – kaubasoiu, druhikh - "balandoiu,""

pressure on the state-run newspapers (i.e. nearly all newspapers) to support Prime-Minister Kebich, many journalists, as well as some editors sympathized with Lukashenko, and particularly with his zeal to protect the common people. In this context, the fact that Lukashenko's program was the only one published twice in the oldest Soviet, Belarusian-language newspaper, *Zviazda*, seems suspicious. The newspaper explained that due to technical problems certain sentences disappeared from the program, when published for the first time, so a decision was made to re-publish it.[34] It is also intriguing how *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* presented Lukashenko. For example, an informational article published on the eve of the first round of elections mentioned Lukashenko's name 14 times. In the same issue, an article on Prime-Minister Viacheslav Kebich, though three times longer, contained only three mentions of Kebich's name. To present himself in a newspaper article, Lukashenko selected the following main facts from his biography: he was born in a Belarusian village; he grew up without a father; he has never been in power, meaning he "never lied to people."[35] Lukashenko also managed to attract young and talented Belarusian politicians and intellectuals to his campaign team, including Victor Gonchar, Valerii Tsepkalo, and Aleksandr Feduta.

As the candidates' self-presentations point out, certain facts were presumably important to the electorate and therefore these two candidates emphasized them. Ironically, the similarity in the self-presentations made the candidates, in a sense, similar to each other. A final significant detail related to this issue is Zianon Paz'niak's statement at a party rally after his defeat in the first round of the elections. As *Svaboda* reported from the rally, Paz'niak claimed that Lukashenko had appropriated the results of anti-communist and anti-government propaganda that had been practiced by the BPF for years.[36] This can mean that both candidates, in fact, tried to engage the same segment of the electorate. Thus, once again, the question emerges: what distinguished the two candidates from each other sufficiently enough to enable the election of Lukashenko?

Svaboda, 1994, no 27, Lipen'; S. Ivanouski, "Shto takoe liumpentstva," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 27, Lipen'; S. Maksimovich, "Dzhyn, neabachliva vypushchany z butel'ki," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 21, Cherven'; P. Pankratovich, "Narod vybrau novaha bats'ku. Tsikava, chym usio heta skonchytstsa?," *Svaboda*, 1994 (b), no 27, Lipen'; A. Shavanda, "Svoi u doshku muzhyk," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 26, Lipen'; A. Zaneuski, "Ne nuzhno iskat' u belorusskogo naroda nedostaiushchikh izvilin," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 27, Lipen'; A. Zaunerka, "Lukashenka: "Ia – nishchyi"," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 15, Krasavik.

34   *Zviazda*, June 11, 1994.

35   *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, June 16, 1994.

36   V. Chuiko, "Soim Narodnaga Frontu dyrashyu ne galasavats," *Svaboda,* 1994, no 26, Iiul'.

Five months after the elections, Liudmila Masliukova wrote in *Sovetskaia Belorussiia* that "the voice of Aleksandr Lukashenko was the voice of people themselves. Though sometimes hysterically, he stated in a full voice people's burning problems."[37] Her statement highlighted an important concept – the voice – that seems to have an explanatory potential for the purpose of this article. At the other extreme, summing up the first round of the elections, Paz'niak claimed that the Belarusian mass media was monopolized by the government, and therefore presented the BPF as a nationalistic and annihilating force.[38] While there is no doubt that the party had a negative image, it is unclear to what extent its own "collective voice," as embodied in its texts, as well as campaign materials created on behalf of Paz'niak, was responsible for this image, and influenced the opinion of the electorate.

The concept of "voice" belongs to a theoretical legacy of Mikhail Bakhtin who applied it for an analysis of heteroglossia, another Bakhtin's term, in the novel. Although the scholar has never developed the concept definition, its meaning can be derived from a line of synonyms in which the concept has been included. In "Discourse in the Novel," for example, Bakhtin combined in one line: "two voices, two world views, two languages."[39] Basically, he follows the diversity of voices up to socially prefigured language. Following Bakhtin's idea in relation to this article, it should be admitted that the candidates' voices were imbued with the social structure of society and "prefigured in language itself."[40] This article, however, by applying the concept "voice" puts emphasis on the problem of what makes a voice "sound" in a written text, or, which structural components of the text define how it sounds. Therefore, the next step of the analysis will be to delineate the "voices" of the two candidates.

As noted above, all of the candidates promised social justice, security, and prosperity. In other words, paying attention to *what* they said will not help to explain the people's choice. Rather, I will seek to clarify *to whom* these promises were addressed, or, putting it another way, how these candidates framed their electorate. In addition, it is also important to identify how candidates defined the "enemy" and who would be punished in case of the desired outcome of the elections. In order to shed light on this issue, the analysis will focus on the following materials: the BPF's second program, adopted in May 1993; Paz'niak's

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[37] Liudmila Masliukova, "Aleksandr Lukashenko kak vyrazitel' narodnogo chuvstva," *Sovetskaia Belorussiia*, 1994, 13 Dekabria.

[38] V. Chuiko, "Soim Narodnaga Frontu dyrashyu ne galasavats'," *Svaboda*, 1994, no 26, Iiul'.

[39] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 325.

[40] Ibidem, p. 326.

campaign leaflets and economic program, which was published in *Zviazda* on June 11, 1994; and Lukashenko's program, which also appeared in *Zviazda* on the same date.

Immediately noticeable in Lukashenko's program is the number of times the word "folk" was used. Indeed, in a text that occupies half of a newspaper's page of The New York Times format, this word alone appears 19 times. Overall, the circle of the electorate whose rights the candidate vowed to protect, is defined by such words as "people" ("людзі"), "the working man" ("рабочы чалавек"), and "the folk" ("народ"). Simultaneously, Lukashenko does not separate himself from "the folk," applying the pronoun "we" each time he warns about the unavoidable difficulties and the necessity to work hard to achieve a "stable life and progress."[41] However, it is noteworthy that Lukashenko did not specify to what precisely he proposed to lead people. The words "stable life" and "progress," despite their loose meanings, are the only ones that described some presumably ultimate goal. Nevertheless, this lack of certainty likely went unnoticed by the reader, perhaps due to the program's implicit engagement of the reader's imagination in the creation of a personal image of the country's future. For those whose living conditions plummeted, its statements promised to stop the rising cost of living, and the general the impoverishment of the population. At the same time, the text offered some hope for a new class of Belarusian entrepreneurs by indicating the reduction of internal government spending, as well as the state's support for the production of consumer goods and exports. Incentives to dream are offered even to those whose main goal was the creation of democratic society, when the text mentioned "the social democratic state with a rule of law."[42]

Another important feature was the absence of certain words in the text. The word "farm," for example, indicating a private agricultural unit, which had provoked heated debates, was absent, as was the word, "market," which alarmed many Belarusians. The ideas on how to improve the collapsing agricultural sector were presented in the following way: "The president will oppose the collapse of the system of collective farms, but will facilitate the processes of their natural transformation in structures that are more effective and profitable for those who work on the land."[43] The word "reform," likewise unpopular among the population, is used only once and in the context of the "structural improvement of consumer goods production." Finally, the idea of a strong state and state power is articulated very clearly: it is repeated throughout the text, and employed only in a positive context. The candidate discusses "the destiny of

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41 Aleksandr Lukashenka, "Advestsi narod ad bezdani," *Zviazda*, 1994, 11 Chervenia.

42 Ibidem.

43 Ibidem.

the state" and "security of the state," declaring that state control of the economy is an opposition to anarchy and lawlessness and should not be confused with the return to a command-administrative system. In general, the Lukashenko's program combines a Western-style structure, with strong logic proceeding from the description of a problem to definition of the goals and the means to achieve them, with the familiar ethos of a Soviet-style narrative, wherein problems of "science, culture, and education" always go together and behind the description of the economic policy. Thus, summing up the first question of *to whom* candidate Lukashenko addresses, it is fair to say that the circle seems very broad – possibly the whole population.

The Belarusian Popular Front was the only political force in Belarus that developed a solid and detailed economic program, and Paz'niak was the only candidate who presented the party's economic strategy to the public as one of his promotional materials. Published in a newspaper, the strategy included domestic economic policy, land reform, and agricultural and foreign policies. It originates from the party's second program, which begins with the declaration: "the Front inclines neither to the left nor to the right" and "it is not the party of a narrow, particular group but – rather – a movement that seeks to reflect and protect the interests of the Belarusian people."

The first subtitle of the economic strategy published in *Zviazda* asks, "What legacy will Z. Paz'niak receive from the Kebich Administration?"[44], what shifts the focus from a people to a leader and leadership, defining the ethos of the entire text. Although Paz'niak employs the phrase "our folk" once and several times refers to "the population of Belarus" and "our peasants," gestures intended to identify his audience and its all-encompassing breadth, his rhetoric hardly achieves the desired effect. The absence of direct forms of address along with other features of the text hinders the feeling that he was addressing the entire population of Belarus.

Paz'niak's attempts to define an audience which could identify with the text are, rather, indirect. In contrast to the Lukashenko's same-sized text, the word "reform" is repeated ten times in the strategy. Each time it appears in reference to radical changes in the economic, financial, political, and social status of the country and its citizens. Expounding his views on the agricultural policy, for example, the candidate declares that first, all factories processing agricultural products will be privatized and corporatized. Paz'niak's enthusiastic support for market reforms, however, outlined a perspective that could satisfy the interests and fit with the possibilities of only a limited number of Belarusians. There were

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[44] Zianon Paz'niak, "Ekanamichnaia Pragrama kandydata u prezidenty Zianona Paz'niaka," *Zviazda*, 1994, 11 Chervenia.

several other declarations that were problematic for many in the country, but at the same time, they pointed clearly to the specific groups which could have identified with those goals. By promising to "quickly make the transition to free purchase and sale of all goods and resources," and by proclaiming the absolute value of property and the protection of private property as a basic principle of the reform,[45] the candidate actually defined his electorate. In one of the leaflets, he listed the "life, freedom, and property" of citizens as three main values that the Belarusian state would protect. Yet the electorate outlined in this way was much narrower than the total population of Belarus. It should be added, however, that this tilt was realized and in his leaflets, Paz'niak made attempts to balance it: "Owners of luxurious palaces will pay taxes that will go to fund social welfare for retired people and children," he promised.

The tendency to regulate and provide detailed prescriptions for private life, along with the assertive tone of the texts, creates the feeling that the state under Paz'niak would have sought total control over people's lives. His strong concern for family, embodied in the declaration that women were responsible for the upbringing of children and only they were eligible to include years of raising children in total work experience numbers, gave credence to such fears. A similar feature was the possible state control over what kind of culture the population would be allowed to enjoy. "We should develop rich Belarusian culture … the primitive mass culture should not be allowed," the candidate says in one of his leaflets.

Thus, in his presentation of the future to the electorate, the candidate from the Belarusian Popular Front proceeded from the party's perception of a proper society. By unveiling his (and the party's) views on family and cultural consumption, Paz'niak showed evident attempts to regulate dreams, values, and wishes that people should have. This could not but add indicators of authoritarianism and coercion to "the collective party's voice" and, automatically, to the voice of Paz'niak himself.

The way that the Paz'niak's texts defined "enemies," or those who prevented people from creating a happy society of shared wealth, strengthened this impression. In his leaflets, the idea of the necessity to revive the Belarusian nation took the form of a compulsive use of the adjective "Belarusian." Paz'niak mentioned the Belarusian state, money, army, women and girls. Finally, he claimed that jobs should be available foremost for Belarusians. In one leaflet, he promised that Belarusian citizens will have priority in hiring decisions. Then, everything that related to the existing state was presented as negative

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[45] Ibidem.

and worthless: it was a place of corrupt bureaucrats who should and would be punished, as soon as the national Belarusian state replaced the old socialist state machine. Everything good and just was related to the new national state only. "The BELARUSIAN [*emphasis added*] state will create the conditions for a happy and calm life for the elderly generation," says one of the leaflets.

It cannot go unnoticed, too, that Paz'niak seemed to be the only candidate who called the enemy by name. In his leaflets, he obsessively pointed to Prime Minister Kebich and his administration as the cause of all failures. Although in Belarus in 1991-1994, few were satisfied with the politics of Kebich and his administration, such preciseness in defining the enemy was not something to which the people were accustomed. It cannot be known for sure how this affected the electorate, but it definitely added toughness to the "collective voice of the party" and Pazniak's own voice. The impression became even stronger with the vocabulary of punishment that was presented in abundance in the leaflets. Even though all threats were directed to corrupt officials in the state, army and police, the compulsive focus on "Belarusianness" along with described above aspects of Paz'niak's voice could have evoked fear that the party and its leader would protect citizens' interests and rights only as long as they shared views and ideology of the Belarusian Popular Front. That is why the promise to protect "interests of ALL [*emphasis added*] citizens of the Belarusian state regardless of their nationality, religion, or political views"[46] may not have rung true with the electorate.

Aleksandr Lukashenko's program also contained a vocabulary of threat. The following example in another context would be interpreted as a capitalist form of incentive, but in Belarus between 1991 and 1994 it was perceived as a threat. "The practice of correlation between the salary of directors and the commercial success of their factories will be introduced," (Lukashenko 1994) promised the candidate. He also threaten to introduce state control over the prices, punish directors of all organizations and companies, and appropriate their commercial profit if it resulted from an unjustified price rising. However, there is a critically important difference between his and Pazniak's voices. Since Lukashenko avoided the restrictive adjective "Belarusian," provided an ambiguous image of the nation's future, and narrowed the category of "enemies" to corrupt officials, and inefficient and irresponsible business leaders, the majority, consisting of "common" Belarusians, could not qualify themselves as those who would be punished. On the contrary, they were assured that the state would protect their rights, so long as they work faithfully and honestly.

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[46] Ibidem.

In short, having declared its adherence to values of democracy, the Belarusian Popular Front and its then-leader failed to follow them when communicating with people. The desire to impose their vision of a proper society on everyone in the country in a sense equated the BPF with the Communist party; like the latter the former had its own understanding of the common good and the only thing it needed from people was to follow the party, to march in the direction it selected for them. In comparison with Paz'niak, whose voice sounded authoritarian, Lukashenko's appeared populist and harmless to the majority of voters. As such, in choosing between nearly identical promises of well-being and social protection, in 1994 voters preferred the candidate whose voice, above all, addressed nearly all of them. Moreover, for the majority, there was no danger to vote for him as they did not identify themselves as enemies, facing potential punishment if he wins.

Conclusion

The period between 1991 and 1994 was in many ways the most intense, promising, romantic, and ambiguous in the modern history of Belarus. The most intriguing feature of the period, perhaps, as the 1994 elections approached, was the fact that all six candidates for presidency promised to create a state of prosperity, keeping all social benefits in effect. As has been pointed earlier, these basic similarities prompted the question of how the electorate made its choice. Since Lukashenko's victory in 1994, many explanations have been put forward by scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals within and beyond Belarus. Despite the diversity of opinions, nearly all explanations tended to blame the electorate. This, however, did not eliminate the question of how the electorate navigated the nearly identical candidates' promises. A close reading of Lukashenko's and Paz'niak's campaign texts appeared a productive mean in order to define the nuances that distinguished the voices of two candidates, and may ultimately have determined the outcome of the elections.

Taking the results of my analysis into account, it seems possible to say that the flight of Belarus from democracy happened before 1996. It dated back to the period of 1991 – 1994 when new political parties and their leaders, and first of all the Belarusian Popular Front, failed to change their attitude, inherited from the Soviet past, to people and their role in defining the country's future. They failed to negotiate with people in attempt to find a shared understanding of "common good." To what extend this reluctance to cooperate, negotiate, and take people seriously, instead of making fun of them, contributed to the way of how the events have developed immediately after the 1994 elections can be a goal for further research.

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