

Dear colleagues,

Greetings . Belarus is off the boil, after the dramatic weekend events of 15/16 August, but is still very much in East-West contention. The tagged article here by reliable Indian commentator and ex-diplomat MK Bhadrakumar , in his esteemed blog ' Indian Punchline', tells those who are interested in the truth of what has really been happening behind the pretty faces peacefully demonstrating for democracy in the streets of Minsk. As always, regime change has many faces. It comes in smiling , and initially convinces many naive outside onlookers of its bona rides . But I remember how Maidan ended, and how Georgia ended, and how Syria nearly ended. As Bhadrakumar shows brilliantly, Putin is making sure it will not happen again in Russia's nearest neighbour and close ally, Belarus.

<https://indianpunchline.com/anatomy-of-coup-attempt-in-belarus/>

There follows as a complement to the Bhadrakumar piece an essay I wrote a week ago on the historical context in Belarus, a place about which few Australians know much (and why should we ?) . So far I have been unable to find a home for this piece. If anyone wants to use it or a shorter version of it, I am happy to discuss. We actually have an interest in Putin winning this one, the risks of East -West war if Belarus fell under NATO hegemony as a Polish client state would be very grave indeed.

Regards, Tony Kevin

WHY HISTORY MATTERS IN BELARUS - by Tony Kevin

For centuries, the land on which the contemporary sovereign state of Belarus sits has been a fiercely contested borderland between Poland and Russia. It has changed hands many times over the centuries. It has seen bloody wars, forced annexations , forced population movements and racist pogroms. My study of relevant Wikipedia files, themselves fiercely contested as to content and missing citations, and other sources, demonstrates that emotions on all sides still run very raw on Belarusian history.

Much of what I write below will inevitably be contested by somebody. I rely on my own credibility as a former Australian diplomat posted to Moscow and later as Ambassador to Poland, and author of ' Return to Moscow' (UWA Publishing, Perth, Australia 2017), an introduction to Russian history and culture aimed at unbiased general English-speaking readers. To understand what is going on in Belarus today one needs a similarly open mind .

This borderland has for centuries been fought over by Poland and Russia , each proudly defending their respective languages, religions and values . The native inhabitants have been Polonised and Russified so often that by now it is hard realistically to distinguish any meaningful indigenous Belarusian nationality. Most Belarusians today speak Russian as their native language or primary language of use. The Belarusian language is a minority rural dialect which is being revived as a sentimental nationalist statement. Belarusian and Russian are 80% mutually understandable.

A huge historical shadow hangs over Belarus: the broken and lost Jewish shtetl culture, and its language Yiddish , a German-derived language . Jews lived in very large numbers in what are now Lithuania,

Belarus and Ukraine: these areas were their homeland. Under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Kingdom), they flourished as an essential intermediate mercantile class between the proud Polish aristocracy and the local peasants. They were traders farmers craftsmen and clerks, with a high intellectual tradition.

When these areas became Russian by imperial expansion in C18, a process of urbanisation and Russification began. Jews were initially by law forced to remain in their traditional regions - the Pale of Settlement - but this broke down during C19, when urbanised and Russified Jews began to spread into heartland Russia.

As a result of the 1917 Russian revolution and ensuing wars, all of the Belarus territory was lost by Russia. Under Marshal Pilsudski in the 1919-21 Poland-Soviet War, Poland recovered by conquest most of the Polish Kingdom's former Belarusian borderlands. Poles began moving into the territory, especially in the west and northwest in the Grodno region. Former local populations largely remained in place in Belarus, until the huge disruptions of WW2.

In the early years of WW2, the border moved back and forth under successive Soviet and Nazi occupations.

Then in 1941, Hitler attacked Russia proper through Belarus. In the ensuing three years of occupation, the Jewish population and shtetl culture in Belarus was destroyed by the Nazis and local collaborators. Some urbanised Sovietised Jews had evacuated to Russia proper just in time, and some returned to Belarus after the war. A few remain.

There are nationalists in Poland who feel deep down that Belarus or large parts of it should rightfully be theirs, as it was for two hundred years under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: which even briefly occupied Moscow in the time of troubles, until it made the mistake of trying to impose Catholicism on Russia, which led to the successful patriotic revolt in 1612 led by Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Minin. The historical Russia-Poland enmity is dramatised in Moussorsky's opera 'Boris Godunov', based on the Pushkin epic poem of the same name.

The ghosts today in Belarus are not just Jewish ones. Huge amounts of Russian blood were shed across these lands, during the Nazi advance and then their retreat.

Under Stalin, Belarus was formally established or re-established as a separate Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR. The country was repopulated and rebuilt after the war. It prospered as a loyal socialist satellite state within the Soviet Union. Along with Ukraine, the Belarusian SSR had its own seat in the UN.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus under its strongman President Alexander Lukashenko (from 1994) retained stability and reasonable prosperity under a state socialist system, while Russia under Yeltsin fell into the chaos and privation of the turbulent 1990s. After Putin came to power in Russia in 2000, good relations between the two states were retained under the cautious long rule of Lukashenko. Belarus continued to prosper, developing a quite sophisticated IT industry especially in the capital Minsk.

The tragic paradox of the past six years since the regime change in Ukraine in 2013-14 is that Lukashenko's vanity and over-confidence betrayed his own early vision as President of Belarus who was able to hold onto some sort of socialist system, while the USSR fell apart and corrupt oligarchs squandered its resources and impoverished and demoralised its people. Lukashenko has in recent years been letting Western foxes into the henhouse that he had initially, as a strong socialist national leader, sheltered from the worst excesses of privatisation and corruption.

Many of the people now in charge in Poland, the nationalist party, hate Russia with a passion. Pro-Russian communist Poles, some of whom I met even in my time in Poland as Australia's ambassador from 1991-94, were pushed into early retirement through harsh lustration (political purging) policies. Even loyal patriotic Poles like former President Lech Walesa, who tried in his time in politics to maintain correct Polish working relations with Russia and Belarus, have been sidelined by the new nationalism. Poland's relations with Russia are now tense and there is no Polish disposition to improve them.

There have even in recent years, since the 2013-14 regime change in neighbouring Ukraine, been signs of some Polish irredentist interest in recovering the westernmost Brodno region (with a large ethnic Polish and Catholic minority population) from Belarus. A few voices in Belarus are in response arguing for reoccupation of the Suwalki Corridor, a strategic strip of land between Russia's Kaliningrad enclave province and Belarus: but this is in my view no more than a tactical debating point. Sensible people on both sides accept the inviolability of the post-1945 territorial borders of Belarus as they stand.

However, Belarus remains a tempting prize to nationalist-minded Poles as a small politically weak neighbouring state, that could in favourable geopolitical circumstances be prised away from Russia's and into Poland's sphere of influence. As a rich economic asset with its factories and 10 million strong, educated and highly urbanised population, the addition to Poland of Belarus as an adjacent dependent state would greatly strengthen Poland's strategic weight and voice in the EU and NATO. There is also the seductive possibility of moving the NATO frontier forward to the Russia-Belarus border near Smolensk. The old game continues in the minds of some Poles.

Obviously Russian strategists see these threatening possibilities too, and are working to oppose them, while respecting Belarus's sovereignty. There is a mostly clandestine struggle underway between Russia and Poland for the allegiances of the Belarusian people. This struggle still has a long way to play out. It is complicated by the vexed question of the future of Lukashenko, now both a unifying and a divisive figure.

Polish and Lithuanian nationalists would certainly be covertly involved in support of the current unrest in Belarus, and engaged in sophisticated IT-based information warfare, playing on the aspirations and naïveté of the educated urban class. They seek to encourage a colour revolution in the direction of liberal privatisation under the rule of a Westernising elite .

As in Ukraine in 2013-14 , Western media portray this as a prospective bright new dawn for the people of Belarus. The reality would be darker. Belarus is at risk, because in the Lukashenko political twilight there is confusion and fear: the people have lost their ideological moorings, and there is no coherent national vision as was recovered in Russia under Vladimir Putin starting in 2000. Belarusians hopefully are coming to see the danger they will be in , if they depose Lukashenko without knowing what comes after. There would be a leadership vacuum for strongmen oligarchs to move into and exploit.

The worst case scenario would be a Polish- dependent weak state dominated by an opportunistic, Western-oriented, new capitalist oligarchic class that would privatise state assets, close many factories and create mass unemployment and poverty among the working class. These are the kinds of foreign-linked oligarchs who, in league with Wall Street, ransacked Russia in the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, until Putin began to turn it around in 2000. Such people continue to bleed and destroy Ukraine's potential.

Is there a future for Belarus as an independent nation, or must it now choose between being absorbed by the Poland-Lithuania-NATO constellation of power , or by metropolitan Russia, which is the real cultural homeland for most of its people ? These are big geopolitical uncertainties for the Belarusian people.

Lukashenko is a tragic figure despite his errors of vanity. This is the classical definition of tragedy - a person of strength and virtue , brought down by his own moral errors and errors of judgement.

The Belarus story is far from over. No one knows how it will evolve, but we should hope it will in a way that protects the security and welfare of both the Belarusian and metropolitan Russian people , who are essentially in my view one people, sharing their common "Russian world".

Tony Kevin, author and former diplomat.

Canberra, Australia 2 September 2020