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Who noticed? Belarus needs the 'evil' tag

Former Soviet state finds itself in dubious spotlight

Gosia Wozniacka

Everything failed that night. I was running with the radio microphone buried in my coat pocket and the camera dangling on my left shoulder. Helmet- clad Belarusian militiamen had already encircled the demonstration.

Photos by Gosia Wozniacka

I came to a halt just next to the "Belarus Lives" banner where the

riot police were pulling out their batons. And at the very second they launched themselves on the protesters, my microphone stopped working and the camera ran out of film. Empty handed, I faced KGB agents in long, black coats and heard the first skulls crack.

"Come closer," one agent beckoned, grinning, motioning to the melee. Beside me, two police officers had a young boy by his jacket -- one of the several thousand demonstrators disputing a rigged parliamentary election. They were kicking and beating him enthusiastically with nightsticks. The boy looked like a frail, flailing bird with outstretched wings. "Come snap a photo," the agent hissed.

Wait a minute, I told myself: The Soviet Union collapsed 14 years ago. My own country of birth, Poland, had already galloped toward full-fledged democracy, and neighboring Ukraine was just then boiling on the edge of revolution. So why did this poker-faced goon seem so confident? Didn't he know he looked like a bad Hollywood stand-in?

My fists and stomach clenched. Images of militiamen beating up Polish protesters, agents searching my family flat, and tanks rolling through Gdansk, Warsaw, Budapest and Prague flashed through my mind. My father had been interned for six months. We fled communism looking for a better life. But that was in another age, before the Iron Curtain crumbled and wildly celebrating East Germans dismantled the Berlin Wall stone by stone.

Why, I wondered, hadn't Belarus heard the news? This question was already on my mind when I first arrived in the capital, Minsk, to see the land that time forgot, the last petrified outpost of European communism.

Once part of a Soviet superpower that stretched from the Polish

border to the Bering Strait, in 1991 Belarus had suddenly been vacuum packed (along with a full range of communist memorabilia) into a tiny independent country the size of Kansas, its 10 million people landlocked and thrown into absolute obscurity. Ruled for hundreds of years by Russian czars, then Stalin and Hitler, and finally Gorbachev, the fledgling nation was democratically claimed in 1994 by its first and, to date, only president, Alexandr Lukashenka, who became increasingly autocratic.

To its citizens, Belarus does not exactly offer a resort existence.

Lukashenka still maintains an unreformed KGB security apparatus and has full control over the means of making anyone invisible. His agents intimidate disgruntled citizens, tail opposition activists in wild car chases, threaten students with expulsion from school for refusing to vote in elections that will be predictably rigged, spy on e-mail and listen in on telephone calls, pummel journalists and politicians until they are unconscious, and then jail them. Threats are backed with acts. Politicians, journalists and businessmen have disappeared and are believed dead.

Until recently, just about the only Americans acquainted with Belarus were Kennedy conspiracy buffs, who knew that Lee Harvey Oswald, after defecting to the USSR, had lived in Minsk and married a Belarusian before returning to the United States to shoot the president. When I brought up my destination, even my Polish grandmother smiled politely and said, "Why do you want to go to a place where there is only poverty and dirt?"

This is evidently about to change. KGB agents, collective farming, potato pancakes and farmer's cheese snack bars, Russian Orthodox believers and post- Soviet atheists may all soon become at least vaguely familiar to more Americans. Belarusian President Lukashenka has replaced Saddam Hussein as the newest dictator

on America's most wanted list.

In her Senate nomination testimony in January, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice listed the country among six "outposts of tyranny" that President Bush would focus on during his second term. Belarus had been recruited to join the ranks of those most notorious and "evil" hot spots Iran, Cuba, and North Korea. Yes, that's spelled B-e-l-a-r-u-s.

So I went.

In this land where giant buildings adorned with ubiquitous concrete Ionic columns still herald the late Soviet empire's greatness, I wanted to visit Lukashenka, the Belarusian Saddam, sit on the sofa in his drab yet grandiose presidential palace and ask him questions. But the European Castro, as he is widely known, rarely grants personal interviews to foreign journalists. As it happens, this was only a modest stumbling block, because the man freely gives interview after interview to his country's reporters.

Lukashenka is anything but invisible in his own land. The president takes up just about all the space. In bookstores, supermarkets, and shopping arcades, his portraits hang like those of the ayatollah. His shining bald head and bushy mustache are omnipresent on every Belarusian television channel, newspaper front page, and media web site. He's the most frequently quoted politician in Belarus, owing partly to his boundless verbal eccentricities, and partly to the fact that his government owns all major media outlets in the country. Yet in cult of personality terms, Lukashenka is neither Stalin nor Mao. Lacking nuclear weapons -- by 1996, Belarus had freely given all of them back to Russia -- the president's one-man fiefdom has little in common with the likes of Iran or North Korea.

So after a few weeks in his country, without ever having met

Lukashenka, I felt like I knew him intimately. Imagine our conversation. And please do read between the lines. (All words guaranteed to be his; they are drawn from interviews he did over the years.)

"Mr. President, does Belarus need democracy?"

Lukashenka: "We do not need democracy with hullabaloo. We do need the type of democracy where people get paid, even if not much but enough to buy bread, milk, sour cream, cottage cheese, and sometimes meat in order to feed their children. Well, as regards meat, let's not eat too much meat in the summer." He shifts in his favorite faux Victorian armchair and takes a sip of black tea. "The Belarusians will live poorly, but they won't live for long."

"Uhm. Do you consider yourself a dictator?"

Lukashenka: "Yes, an authoritarian ruling style is characteristic of me, and I have always admitted it. Why? We could spend hours talking about this. You need to control the country, and the main thing is not to ruin people's lives."

And what are your plans for the future of Belarus?"

Lukashenka: "I will not lead my nation toward the civilized world."

That much was already clear from my brief stay in his country -- though I found Lukashenka's evils to be far stranger and a good deal less threatening to anybody but Belarusians than Rice might have imagined. There are no suicide bombers in Belarus, no grenade blasts in its marketplaces, and no Belarusian terrorists plotting to threaten the West.

The newest pretender to the axis of evil is an outdated tyrant, the former manager of a collective farm who has somehow succeeded

in maneuvering his own people into a Stalinist heritage park, right down to the ubiquitous statues of Lenin and community snitches.

Despite his cryptic, often preposterous statements, two to three-hour speeches, and archaic ideas -- like jailing managers whose companies don't reach benchmarks -- the president's grip on his countrymen seems nearly hypnotic. In a land with neither polling companies, nor an open opposition, it's impossible to know how many Belarusians support him. Still, something more than fear has allowed Lukashenka to stay in power for over a decade.

"Most Belarusians were not ready for the breakdown of the Soviet Union," media researcher Ales Ancipienka told me. "Independence was perceived as a catastrophe. People became disoriented and aggressive. Lukashenka was a reply to this. He promised to restore the Soviet Union, to restore good jobs, and to lead us back to the paradise we lost."

The president, who nurses an ailing chain of collective farms and semi- defunct factories, likes to pose for photos in a white peasant blouse by any available haystack. He is recreating a lost world for those afraid of change. To this end, he even proposed a "union" between Belarus and Russia, to which the Russians readily agreed, and then declared Russian the country's official language. Today, few speak Belarusian in public.

Those who dare impede Lukashenka have in the past been quickly eliminated. But lately, these oppositionists, some of whom I had seen demonstrating in Minsk, have refused to disappear and are looking for a magic wand to make their own president evaporate.

"A plane crashes," goes a local joke. "The Russian and the Ukrainian presidents are on board. No one survives and the Belarusians declare national mourning -- Lukashenka wasn't on the plane."

If Lukashenka ignored me, the greatest proponent of Belarusian invisibility did agree to talk with me on a minuscule apartment balcony overlooking the center of Minsk.

Valancin Akudovic, Belarus' most prominent philosopher, is widely known in a country where philosophical broodings are as popular as gossip about celebrities in America. Barefoot, compulsively stroking a graying beard, a cigarette stuck in his mouth and a woolen cap pulled over his head, Akudovic blew coils of smoke into the freezing night air.

In a measured voice, he spoke of his fondest dream -- to write a book titled "The History of the Nonexistence of Belarus." If he were the country's ruler, he claims, he would make a black square the national emblem and base national ideology on the saying, "By creating we ruin."

Belarus is the motherland of nihilism, he tells me resolutely. Perhaps it's not coincidental, he points out, that Nietzsche's ancestors were Belarusian.

"Belarusians have lived here for thousands of years and yet the question of whether we are or we are not is still a pressing one," the philosopher says in his enigmatic way and lights another cigarette. "We don't exist in a geopolitical and existential sense. But nonexistence," he exhales, "is a cloak that allows us to survive. After all, leaving the shadow and coming into the light may result in us being seen and so disappearing."

"Because of Lukashenka?" I ask.

He nods solemnly. "He's trying to stomp us out. Nonexistence may be the best defense we've got."

On a recent visit to the biggest museum in Minsk, I tell the philosopher, I watched groups of schoolchildren, feet snuggled in

thin plastic slippers, huddle around display cases filled with the tattered uniforms of World War II Belarusian partisans. When the Germans occupied the country, these partisans hid in Belarus' forests, swooping down on supply convoys and trains in a successful campaign against the Nazi occupiers. Today, they remain the heroes of Belarusian fairy tales and rock songs.

What happens now that Rice has shined a veritable klieg light on the previously invisible Belarusians? What if, as the philosopher put it, leaving the shadow really does mean disappearing? What if Belarusians don't know how to transform their forest rebellions into civic acts in the public square?

On the other hand, thrusting Belarus into the company of "evil" states may prove to be a godsend. To help the country shed the cloak of invisibility, the rest of the world must first recognize and acknowledge it.

What better way to begin the process than by calling it an "outpost of tyranny" and entertaining the possibility of making war on its tyrant. After all, people learn geography when countries are in conflict. Perhaps the first step in Belarus' recovery program is simply for the world to learn its name.

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