



BELARUS:

A POST-SOVIET TYRANNY

JAKE INSELMAN



Political Notes No. 173

ISSN 0267-7059 ISBN 1 85637 512 9

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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**Libertarian
Alliance**

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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The fall from power of the once seemingly invincible President Milosevitch of Serbia should direct Western attention towards Belarus, another Slavic nation where a dictatorial regime presides over the wreck of an economy. Presidential elections are due this year; opposition parties are trying to unite behind a single candidate, and the regime is becoming nervous. Western attention in the next few months could help Belarus move towards a freer society.

(Names and other details in this article have been changed to protect sources.)

ONE-MAN RULE

Belarus? Where is that, exactly? I hear this question so often that it is perhaps best to begin with some geography and a little history. 'Bela, or Byela Rus' means 'White Russia'. Location: landlocked between Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine. Size: 80,000 square miles, or nearly twice as big as England. Physical features: largely flat farmland, chequered with forests, marshes, lakes and streams. Capital: Minsk. Population: 10 million — and falling.

The main reason Belarus is so little known is that, while its people have always had a distinct ethnic identity, language and culture, as a country, Belarus is only ten years old. For most of its history it was carved up and fought over, belonging variously and in part to surrounding duchies, principally Polish or Lithuanian. In the 18th century it was incorporated into the Russian Empire, and in 1919 became one of the puppet republics of the Soviet Union. A major battlefield in WWII, Belarus suffered horrendous damage and losses. Post-war, it did gain a seat in the United Nations, but its vote was decided in Moscow. Then, suddenly, in 1991, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, Belarussians woke up one morning to find themselves citizens of an independent nation.

With no history of self-government to guide it, Belarus was soon in trouble. Inflation wiped out savings, and the limited amount of privatisation led merely to the creation of a small new class of wealthy individuals closely associated with the old bureaucratic elites. Disillusionment spread, and Belarussians started to yearn for the old days of the USSR when, even if life was dismal, at least they were all equal in poverty.

A provincial member of the new parliament, one Alexander Lukashenko, was keenly watching events. A bold fellow, a former army officer and manager of a collective farm, he saw in the new political situation a compelling opportunity. When presidential elections came due, he threw his hat into the ring. As a country boy and a newcomer, with a less than sophisticated manner, he had a certain appeal to the less than sophisticated electorate. He was also astute enough to

say the things the more prominent democrats wanted to hear — increased privatisation, sound money, less regulation, lower taxation, clean up corruption, etc. To cut a long story short, in 1994 he won the election and became President.

It quickly became clear, however, that the true intentions of Luka, as he was soon contemptuously known, were the opposite of his election promises. He surrounded himself with cronies from his home area, the Mogdilyev Region in eastern Belarus, appointing them to senior positions in government and industry for which they had neither training nor experience. In less than two years, the presiding judge of the Constitutional Court had an indictment against President Lukashenko listing twenty breaches of the Belarus Constitution, the most glaring of which was illegal suspension of the elected parliament. Impeachment proceedings were begun.

In November 1996, however, Luka held a referendum for a new constitution which gave the President (himself) powers almost as sweeping as Stalin's. Unsurprisingly, with Luka's own officials counting the votes, the new constitution was adopted, and lo and behold, the impeachment charges were dropped.

The President's new powers were soon demonstrated. To create a complaisant legislature, Luka simply handpicked the deputies he liked from the previous parliament and booted out the rest. When peaceful demonstrations were held in protest, the riot police moved in. People were beaten up and arrested *en masse*, including prominent intellectuals and MPs. The parliament has since become a rubber stamp. But the stamp is hardly needed: the new constitution gives the President authority to govern by decree, so that is what he does.

Belarus has thus become Luka's personal fiefdom: 80% of the country's property is owned by the state; 95% of the official economy is controlled directly by the government; and the government is 100% controlled by Luka. Backing his decrees are 130,000 policemen; 85,000 soldiers; an unknown number of secret police (still called KGB); swarms of officious bureaucrats, and a judicial system redesigned for the sole purpose of enforcing one-man rule. The only organisation which might have raised its head in opposition with some moral authority, the Belarussian Orthodox Church, has been bought off with lucrative rights to trade in imported commodities such as alcohol, tobacco and cars. Needless to say, access to TV and radio is tightly controlled, and though an opposition press still functions, it is under constant threat.

STAGNATION

Visiting Minsk is a strange experience. Other former Communist cities, such as Budapest, Prague or St Petersburg, rapidly transformed themselves into vibrant imitations of London, Paris or New York — full of shops, bustle, gaiety and glamour. Minsk exists in a sort of time warp. Here and

there are reluctant nods towards a market economy, but mostly the city seems unchanged from the Soviet era.

One can smell the old USSR even before starting one's journey. Whereas admittance to Belarus is free for nationals of Communist or former Communist countries, Westerners must pay \$60 for a visa, and produce evidence of the reason for their visit.

The national airline, Belavia, is symbolic of Belarus's suspended animation. Its planes are Aeroflot cast-offs; ageing Tupolev jets with noisy engines, scruffy interiors, and plastic nose cones ready for conversion to bombers.

I flew to Minsk in an earlier Soviet masterpiece, an Antonov 20. "USE CRASH AXE HERE" said a sign in English near the door as we climbed aboard. A pretty stewardess in a red-trimmed blue uniform smiled nervously. No wonder, she must have been utterly ashamed of the interior; with its filthy upholstery, loose and dilapidated carpets, flimsy and uncomfortable seats, and washroom like something from the Dark Ages. Worst of all was the landing gear, visible through the discoloured and cracking windows: canvas was showing through badly worn tires.

In flight, the Antonov's cabin was filled with a monstrous roaring vibration, a two hundred decibel drone that bored into every bone in one's body. To speak to the stewardess, you had to shout directly into her ear. Thoughts of stifling fear with large vodkas faded when all I was offered to drink was half a plastic cup of cheap red wine.

Although Minsk has a smart new airport to serve the few foreign airlines that venture infrequently into Belarus, the Antonov landed, appropriately, at the old Soviet airport, Minsk One. It was raining, and the grey sky matched the grey mausoleum of a terminal building. Weeds sprouted from cracked tarmac.

I and the other passengers stumbled down the steps, our bodies shaking with post-Antonov stress syndrome, An-lag. Two officials with large umbrellas waited at the bottom. 'How kind' one thought; until they turned and marched off, leaving us to walk through the rain to the bus.

In the terminal, ten additional officials looked suspiciously over the seven wet passengers. A lady closely resembling Rosa Klebb (the KGB officer in the Bond movie *From Russia with Love*) examined our passports. Her cold, slightly protuberant eyes studied them line by line. She took copious notes. Her khaki uniform was neat and well pressed, her lipstick a bright cherry red.

Next, we had to fill out lengthy forms detailing what we were, or were not, bringing into Belarus, including foreign currency. The customs official paid no attention to our (sopping wet) suitcases, but demanded to know why we had so few dollars or marks. "We're guests here. Our hosts are paying our expenses." He scowled, grunted, and turned away.

Outside to a taxi, and off downtown. Minsk taxis are another symbol of Belarussian stagnation. They're all Volgas: basic, unappealing, Russian-built autos based on obsolete Western designs. It doesn't make much difference whether the one you choose is newer or older, Volga taxis are invariably unkempt, slow, noisy, smelly and badly sprung. Fuel is expensive, so the silent, gloomy drivers proceed slowly, coaxing gasping engines through whining gears; coasting where possible; and swooping round corners in high gear to maintain momentum and conserve fuel.

In the old days, when the USSR rouble was a (reasonably) stable currency, taxi rides cost just a few kopecs; even ordinary people were able to hire by the day to go for picnics in the country. Not so nowadays. A fifteen-minute ride costs about two thousand roubles and few can afford it. So taxis wait forlornly, shoals of them, like fish in drying pools, while the people walk and walk and walk. Folk are grimly fit in Belarus.

And so we bounced and swayed into Minsk, a big, flat, monotonous and oddly soulless city. Obliterated during WWII — 95% of it was bombed and shelled completely flat — it was rebuilt post-war in the approved Stalinesque manner, with a downtown core of grandiose state offices designed to impress the worker/peasants (the style is Victorian Museum crossed with Mussolini's New Rome) separated by broad avenues for triumphal marches.

Indeed, triumph in the Great Patriotic War still dominates the city; with a perpetual flame in Victory Square; an imposing Victory Monument (Cleopatra's Needle-style) and huge signs atop the largest buildings announcing that the people's struggle will never be forgotten. Nor should it be. Countless Belarussians — men, women and children — have died from war, oppression and starvation, whether Fascist or Communist instigated.

Tearing down Communist monuments and restoration of pre-Revolution names, common throughout the post-Communist world, has not happened much in Minsk. Luka prefers the good old days. So Soviet statues and symbols still loom darkly, and streets are named after Lenin, Marx, Engels, Rosa Luxembourg, and other such luminaries.

"CITY OF CONTRASTS"

Anna P, teacher and translator, a pretty young woman with weary eyes and a wry sense of humour, took me on a tour of downtown next day. Police in blue paramilitary fatigues are on every street. They sit idly in their cars, every once in a while jumping out to hassle a passing motorist. Their presence is plainly meant to intimidate. "I don't mind there being so many," said Anna; "I feel safe. Other places, I don't."

She pointed out two buildings of which tourists must take special note: the Presidential Palace, a huge brick box with a soldier at each corner; and the KGB Headquarters, a squat yellow edifice like a bank branch c. 1890. Taking pictures of either is forbidden. Unwitting transgressors will have the film torn from their cameras.

Nearby is the new Palace of the Republic, another great big box, this time in grey marble. In front, is October Square: vast, and completely empty — gatherings of more than a handful of people are forbidden. Underfoot were oil patches left by tanks parked during recent exercises. "It was just before Independence Day," said Anna; "they roared up and down for three days and nights. I couldn't sleep. I was terrified, wondering what was going to happen." Nothing did. It was just a show of force, the President's personal contribution to Belarus's Tenth Anniversary celebrations.

On one side of October Square stands the Palace of Labour, an imitation Parthenon adorned with statues of muscular workers. Like most organisations in Belarus, the unions have no money, so their ornate HQ is let out as a casino.

From the opposite corner, Engels Street leads down to Trade Street, another apt symbol of contemporary Belarus. At the top is a secret service building, its high walls adorned with

razor wire. Facing it is the old Czechoslovakian embassy. Thirty yards on down the paving gives out. Fifty yards further, the street peters out entirely in a wasteland of ruts, puddles, weeds, bushes, scattered junk and tumbledown buildings. The only sign of trade is a burned out truck. Yet not a hundred and fifty yards away is the new showplace of Minsk, the Palace of the Republic. "City of contrasts," said Anna dryly.

Traffic is light in the wide thoroughfares of Minsk; often they are empty. Fuel is expensive, and there is little money to repair broken down cars. Big trucks are banned from the city center, which contributes to the soulless atmosphere. The only commercial vehicles allowed are of 1950s design; small, slow, groaning things with dirty exhausts and bald tires.

Tourist buses are also remarkably absent; I saw two in six days, both Belarussian. Foreign cars, too, are rare. I remember seeing four; two Polish, two Lithuanian. For some reason, bicycles are not popular in Minsk. But there are masses of decrepit trolleys and buses, and a reasonably efficient metro system quarters the city underground. A ticket costs 40 roubles; nothing in the West, but a sum worth saving, by walking, in Minsk.

MADNESS WITH A PURPOSE

One need spend very little time in Belarus to discover that Luka's personal fiefdom is not a pleasant place to live. Wages are low, inflation rampant. Average salaries are about \$50 per month, but inflation, taxation, dues, etc, reduce that to \$35. This compares to \$150 in Russia and \$450 in Poland.

Jobs are also hard to find. Anna told me about her cousin, Olga C: "She graduated from university last summer. She was lucky. She did manage to get a job, in the office of a state mine. But guess what her salary is? \$15 a month. She can't possibly live on that. Luckily, we have relatives where she is. She lives with them. If they hadn't taken her in, she couldn't have taken the job."

Even relatively important cogs in the state machine are poorly paid. Provincial policemen make as little as \$40 a month. As a result, most people have to have two or more jobs to make ends meet. The Director of a major national institute in Minsk has three jobs: as Director; a second part-time in a private capacity; a third looking after grandchildren so that the family's son and daughter can go to their own second jobs.

Inadequate salaries are only part of the problem. In both public and private institutions funds are often unobtainable, whether the need is routine or pressing. Libraries have no money to buy books; universities cannot afford texts for students; hospices for the dying cannot find drugs to ease suffering, and in some hospitals patients have to take turns to lie in bed.

Inflation, with its incessant price rises, is a daily problem for everyone. The Belarussian rouble loses value so readily that it has been unofficially replaced by the US dollar for all practical purposes. Last year, the currency was indeed reformed — by lopping off three zeros — and the official rate dropped from 1,000,000 roubles to the dollar to 1,000. But with the regime printing money at will, the measure was little more than window dressing.

Further, although dollars are the *de facto* currency, citizens are forbidden to own them. All transactions must be in Be-

larussian roubles. People can be frisked on the street; any dollars found are confiscated. If they are caught exchanging them, they risk prison. Many people have been incarcerated for unauthorised money changing, and Belarussian prisons are places to avoid at all costs.

Management of the economy is quite mad, but it is madness with a purpose. Ilya R, an economist, told me: "Everything is arranged to favor the state and to exploit the private sector, small though that is. For example, in state industries — things like truck and tractor factories, flax mills, mines, fertiliser plants and collective farms — spending and budgetary controls are virtually unheard of. So the bosses just spend and borrow as they please. Then, at the beginning of the year, Luka routinely cancels their debts. They also get all the subsidies, tax-breaks and any other privileges they ask for.

"On the other hand, last time I counted, there were 50 state agencies imposing 110 different licences on the private sector. Each agency has dozens of reasons for revoking a licence. A friend of mine told me his company had 390 regulatory inspections in a single year. Can you imagine it? Of course, the real reason for revoking a license is criticising the regime. Want to stay in business in Belarus? Keep your mouth shut!"

He went on: "Keeping quiet may not help you, of course. You could get hit with Decree #2 from 1997. That says Luka can nationalise any company, and fine its owners heavily, for illegally obtaining property or capital. Since Luka decides what's legal, the assets of any private company can be seized, with zero compensation, at any time. Another danger comes up if you're at all successful. Luka has cooked up a scheme called the Golden Share. All he has to do is buy a single share in a business and, zap! He has complete control."

What happened to private notaries is typical of what can happen to anybody. Efficient and modestly prosperous, they were suddenly faced with retroactive licensing and presented with demands for license fees going back years. Instantly impoverished, many were forced to quit. Some were imprisoned. Persons needing legal documents, for example to sell a car, must now wait for hours in Soviet-style queues.

There are many other burdens for private companies. For instance, while inflation pushes up costs by 6% a month, businesses are forbidden to raise prices by more than 5%. If a company yet manages to remain solvent, taxation can be up to 80% of profits. Further, for every rouble paid in salaries, the private employer must pay 1.2 roubles to the state for social insurance. With compliance then demanded for over two thousand pages of complex and contradictory regulations, it is a wonder anybody stays in business at all. Necessity and simple survival are the only reasons. Without the stream of 'shuttles' — private traders in beat-up old cars and trucks bringing goods from Poland and Lithuania — life in Belarus would quickly become unupportable.

In these circumstances, three quarters of the foreign companies which invested in Belarus after independence have withdrawn; and, as if to put the seal of bankruptcy on a economy past redemption, even the World Bank and the IMF, normally the most accommodating supporters of dictatorial regimes, have minimised their representation in Minsk and refused to lend more money to the regime.

People keep working and economy keeps lumbering along after a fashion largely through fear. Any state employee



who takes part in activity critical of the regime is dismissed and refused further work. There is a blacklist of those dismissed, now numbering thousands, all of whom are thus denied the basic human right to earn a living.

These unfortunates can be high or low on the social scale. A trolley bus driver was fired for supporting an independent trade union. A medical student 'failed' his exams because he was active in an opposition party. The manager of an efficient collective farm, the chief executive of a large state company, and the ex-Minister of Agriculture, are all in prison; as is the ex-President of the National Bank who was kicked out to make way for a crony of Luka's — a Mr Prokovitch — who has no knowledge of economics and no experience of banking. It doesn't matter. Mr P's sole function is to sign into effect orders given by Luka.

Unemployment in Belarus is officially low, but in reality is about 20%. To improve the official figures, unemployed people are forced to perform menial tasks such as sweeping streets. Out-of-work professionals who refuse the work — university professors, teachers, or nurses — are struck off the unemployment register and are unable thereafter to obtain relief, regardless of entitlement.

Those struck off may, or may not, be better off than those still working. The profligacy and mismanagement of state enterprises (which control 80% of jobs) is such that salaries often go unpaid. They may also be better off than the 20% of all employed people who work on collective farms. Luka has reintroduced serfdom: farm workers in some regions are not allowed to move to another job or village without permission.

With so many licenses, regulations, taxes and prohibitions, corruption permeates all aspects of life in Belarus. The 'grey' economy is, of course, essential to survival. Ilya told me that it may amount to as much as 85% of GDP. But it is illegal. Thus gangsters, known as Mafia, are as pervasive, and as dangerous, as the KGB. And since so many officials are involved in corruption and/or the grey economy, it is virtually impossible to know where the state ends and the Mafia begins, or whether the two are not interchangeable.

The Mafia can be quite brutal, and are just as insanely efficient as the regime at destroying those off whom they parasite. A foreign businessman I met recounted: "I was in a quite a big city out in the provinces a while ago, and when I wanted a meal I was amazed to find there was no restaurant. The local police chief told me why. An entrepreneur had indeed started one, but once he was doing OK, the local Mafia turned up demanding cash. The entrepreneur refused. So the gangsters took a knife from his kitchen and, in front of his customers, slit his cheeks open from the corners of his mouth to his ears. The poor guy naturally closed the place down, and no one else dares try."

THE LACK OF SHOPS

Despite the overall grimness of life in Minsk, the city nonetheless has some pleasant aspects: trees line the broad avenues; there are some well-maintained parks, and a widening of the Svslach River creates a long lake surrounded by vast, well-trimmed lawns. But the lawns are empty. Picnicking is forbidden.

Another pleasing aspect of Minsk is the number of good-looking young men and women. The features of many races have come together in Belarus to produce a remarkably handsome people. But the faces of passers-by are generally not happy. Most are expressionless, all have tight lines around the eyes. One soon becomes aware of an anxious wariness pervading the city.

A surprising thing to Western eyes is the lack of shops. In our cities, the streets are lined with colourful stores and places of business. Not so Minsk. There are scattered signs for food shops and restaurants, but one hardly ever sees a shop window displaying alluring wares.

The streets are rather dotted with little green huts made from tarpaulins stretched over hoops, where unsmiling traders sell single lines of goods: fruit, cleaning fluids, domestic items. Other goods — tobacco, beer, papers, magazines — are sold from more solidly constructed kiosks. One has to bend down to a little hatch at waist height and exchange notes for goods through an opening about a foot wide.

The few department stores (old state GUMs, still adorned with hammers and sickles), and the few open or covered markets, continue the kiosk concept; hundreds of small specialist traders occupy a few square metres each, cheek by jowl.

Elsewhere, are other types of trader. In an informal (illegal) market in a park, I saw matrioshka dolls, bric-a-brac, old military medals, paintings and antiques laid out optimistically on rugs, trestle tables, or park benches. On street corners and sidewalks, peasants and gypsies sell fresh produce, or roasted sunflower seeds — the national snack — in little twists of newspaper. On one corner an old woman proffered a single bunch of parsley. Beside her was a neatly turned out fellow who might have been a university lecturer, waiting patiently beside a plastic bucketful of plums.

Here and there were beggars, some of them gypsies in long colourful dresses, their small children playing before stretching out their hands. I took pity on one shabby old man and gave him 5,000 roubles. But I mistook an old note for a new one and left him shaking his head sadly over one eighth of the price of a bus ticket. I tried to find him later to remedy my mistake, but he'd disappeared. Presumably not by bus.

I witnessed another small economic tragedy. A plastic bag had split and a thin, grizzled pensioner was picking up the shards of a half-litre bottle of vodka. My taxi driver let out a humorless snort. The bottle had cost maybe \$1.50, but that can be a tenth of someone's monthly income. I could see in every line of the man's bent body that his one small pleasure of the month was gone.

Hither and yon are signs of Western influence: a huge advertisement for Camel cigarettes covers the side of a building; dirty trolley buses have 'Macdonald's' painted all over them. And, of course, there is the downtown Macdonald's itself, the sidewalk outside a meeting place for young folk. It's too expensive for most, so they sit around and dream of hamburgers, fries and Coke. (Though there's word that Coca-Cola may pull out of Belarus, so maybe Macdonald's will too.)

There are several restaurants in Minsk which cater to more sophisticated (or expensive) tastes, and Belarussian cuisine can be excellent. But the owners must have the right connections — Mafia, state, or both — to stay in business.

I took Anna and some friends for a delicious, though fairly modest lunch at one of these. Two courses each, with beer to drink, was 46,000 roubles (\$46) for the four of us; a bargain in New York or London, but well over a month's salary for most Belarussians.

At another restaurant I tasted an imported Russian beer, Baltica. It was very good. Then Vladimir P, a friend of Anna's, told me that Minsk City Council had just voted to banish Baltica from the city. "That's how things work here," said Vladimir. "The local brewers make inferior beer from cheap ingredients, but they have much more pull than the brewers of Baltica, who are far away in St Petersburg."

The funny thing is, there is supposed to be a customs union between Russia and Belarus; there is no border between the two countries. But there is still an internal border around Minsk, guarded by militiamen with submachine guns: I saw them.

EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR

The broad avenues of Minsk — few streets have less than six lanes — continue out into former countryside in all directions, lined with that other great Soviet achievement, the pre-cast concrete apartment block; thousands of them, all the same.

The growth of the city has brought about one consequence of unintended charm. As Minsk advanced outwards, it enveloped, rather than swallowed the countryside. So here and there among the dismal concrete avenues one comes across complete villages, with old, peasant-style wooden houses; their gardens, vegetable patches and orchards enclosed by picket fences.

Rents in the grim residential blocks are low, but heavily subsidised. A one-bedroom apartment; with hall, living room, kitchenette, toilet and shower room; is 3,000 roubles, or \$3 a month. But subsidies mean there is no surplus for repairs, so the blocks are slowly crumbling. Fixing such things as rotten window frames is usually up to the tenant. Heating, which is provided by separate, centralised plants, is another problem. The Belarussian winter is bitter, but the heat is not turned on until well after the first frosts, to conserve fuel. The shivering tenants live and sleep in all their clothes and pray the pipes don't freeze.

I was invited to one of the grey apartment complexes to meet a university professor, Konrad T. He lives on the top floor, there is no lift. It was pitch black in the building's hallway; the light switch was broken. The air was sharp with the rancid odour of damp concrete; it was like entering an abandoned wartime bunker. I stumbled on the broken stairs. It grew lighter round the first bend. Rain splattered onto my face through a broken window. The dark doors of the apartments I passed each had two or more locks, and a spy hole.

Inside Konrad's apartment one entered a different world. It was tastefully decorated and well appointed, and Konrad was hospitality itself: it's a proud trait of all Belarussians to welcome a guest properly, even if it means begging yourself for weeks to come.

We spoke of the desperate need for information. "We were cut off from the West for so long," Konrad explained; "that all kinds of developments in all kinds of fields are hardly known to us. I have colleagues, professors of literature, who long to find out about such simple things as trends in criticism. They just don't know what has gone on for the last seventy years. Now they're at least allowed to find out, but they don't have any funds to buy Western academic journals. Others would like to study film theory for their drama courses, but they haven't the money to buy the books they need.

"I have other colleagues, economists, who are still Marxists or Keynesians, not necessarily out of laziness — though there's enough of that — but out of simple ignorance: they've never been able to study the refutations of Marx and Keynes which any undergraduate in the West can pick up easily in his university library or bookshop."

Later, I met some of Konrad's students. Bright, alert and eager young men and women, keen to practice often excellent English, and thirsty for knowledge. There was no deference between student and professor, only respect. They are very informal, Belarussians. I made the young people laugh with stories from the West; like buying second-hand cars from wowy-zowie salesmen in the US. I introduced them to the ideas of people they'd hardly heard of, or never read, such as Karl Popper or Ayn Rand; and late into the evening we discussed topics as far apart as the new Western disease of political correctness, or the merits of gold as money. It was a vivid occasion, the sort one can recall in every detail, months later.

The contrast between exterior and interior Belarus, of buildings and people alike, almost makes one weep. Behind their closed and anxious faces, most Belarussians are charming, well educated and cultured, desperate to take their rightful place in the modern world, but held enslaved by a crippling, criminal, parasitical regime. For Belarussians, the Iron Curtain has never come down, it is merely torn, tantalisingly: they can see out, but few can get through.

STATE CONTROLLED MEDIA AND RIGGED ELECTIONS

But they are not defeated. Opposition parties persevere in the face of constant harassment: the KGB has set up permanent posts outside the apartments of prominent critics of the regime. Opposition newspapers are still published, but have to be printed in Lithuania. Despite the threat of beatings and arrest, demonstrations are still held, although the lack of political change and worsening economic situation have

brought a sense of futility, and consequent apathy. At the third annual Freedom March on October 1, 2000, only about five thousand people turned out. A year before it had been thirty thousand.

Participation is dangerous. The head of one opposition party was fined the equivalent of a year's salary for taking part in a demonstration. Other demonstrators have received two-year prison sentences.

And, of course, when elections are held, Luka cheats. A recently-published report by independent election observers showed that during the vote for a new Chamber of Representatives in October 2000 there were literally thousands of breaches of electoral and constitutional rules. The opposition had called for a boycott, since under the Constitution the election is only valid if sufficient people vote. So the regime moved into high gear, arresting advocates of the boycott; threatening university students and employees of state industries with dire consequences if they didn't vote; scouring apartment buildings to force people to the polls, and recording ballot counts in pencil so they could be changed if not high enough. Electoral commissions were even armed with blank ballot papers to boost the count if necessary. The chairman of one commission was actually caught red-handed stuffing phoney papers into a ballot box.

Other tricks included doctoring voting lists — by such means as retaining the names of dead people; filling electoral commissions with regime appointees; heavy plugging of the regime's preferred candidates by the state-controlled media; preventing non-state candidates from registering, or denying them the means to campaign; refusing to register independent observers or, if registered, denying them access to poll stations, even, in some cases, having armed militiamen throw them out on polling day. The whole election was so blatantly rigged that neither the US State Department nor the European Union accepted the result; they continue to recognise only the Chamber elected before Luka came to power.

MURDER

It might be argued that Lukashenko, because of his antagonism to free markets and devotion to state ownership, is a 'savok'; a *homo sovieticus*, one of those die-hard Communist true believers who persist in defending Marxism despite its obviously catastrophic consequences. This argument is belied, however, by the fact that, like most dictators, Luka is busy enriching himself at the expense of his fellow citizens. There is evidence of overseas bank accounts, while at home he has established the President's Foundation, an enormously wealthy institution with secret accounts and funding. One indication of its wealth came recently when Luka took a fancy to ice hockey. All of a sudden seven new stadiums were erected, generously paid for by the President himself, or so he claimed.

Like other dictators too, Luka is intolerant of even minor criticism. An MP was thrown in jail for calling him a 'jerk.' Two sixteen-year-old boys were sentenced to 18 months for allegedly spraying defamatory graffiti.

Luka also takes his own security very seriously. Dimitri S, a systems analyst, told me: "In the morning, when Luka goes to work at his Palace, everything has to stop. The streets are closed to traffic ahead of his motorcade. Nobody is allowed to move until he has gone by. Of course, not everybody knows this. A group of children were in Minsk

for the day, you know, on a school visit to see the capital. Anyhow, they were walking along happily with their teachers and some took photographs of Luka's limousine driving by. Minutes later the poor kids were in a state of terror and shock after a group of armed police jumped on them and began roughing them up, yelling abuse and tearing the film out of their cameras. Great lesson in Belarussian civics."

With economic life in Belarus becoming more and more difficult, and opposition ideas even starting to reach members of the regime, Luka has become more vicious. Many are held in prison without trial, and two members of the opposition, Andrei Klimov and Vladimir Kudinov, have been sentenced to long prison sentences on trumped up charges.

In 1997, again following the example of all dictators, Luka began murdering his opponents. Anatoly Maisenya, Director of the East-West Centre, and Gennady Karpenko, an MP, were the first to die. Maisenya was killed in a staged road accident — a farm tractor suddenly drove in front of him on a bend in the middle of the night. Karpenko was poisoned in hospital by treatment for an illness he didn't have. Since both were traditional KGB techniques it was known instantly who had ordered the murders.

Luka therefore switched to less direct, 'South American' tactics. Three further opponents, Victor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, and Uri Zacharenko, were simply grabbed off the street, bundled into cars, and nothing has been heard of them since. Mafia gangsters may have been paid to perform the disappearances, though there is also word of a special KGB assassination squad which hides the bodies of its victims in cemeteries. Uri Zacharenko was the most prominent victim. A former Minister of the Interior, he had turned against Luka and obviously knew too much.

Luka's latest moves have been towards uniting Belarus with the Russian Federation. It seems that, having milked his country dry, he wants to pass the problems he has created on to Mother Russia. Russia has been lukewarm, it has enough troubles of its own, but a joint commission has been set up to examine the idea. So Luka may yet end up as Governor of a new Russian province, which could easily be his plan. What the majority of Belarussians truly think about the proposed union is neither known nor considered.

TEN MILLION YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE

The greatest obscenity in the horror story of Belarus is that foreign governments continue to treat the Lukashenko regime as legitimate. Take Great Britain, for example. One might have thought that embarrassing memories of Romania and Serbia would lead to some modification of the standard Foreign Office policy of kow-towing to anybody and everybody who manages to grab hold of power. British politicians and diplomats toadied to Ceausescu and Milosevitch for years despite massive evidence of their viciousness and multiple crimes. But despite all the evil known to have been done by Luka since 1994, his regime is still recognised by Britain.

When first elected the current Labour government loudly trumpeted its commitment to a 'moral' foreign policy. But by continuing to recognise Luka's illegitimate, inept, brutal, and increasingly bloody rule, Labour politicians, and the British diplomatic establishment, are demonstrating — once again — that they do not know what the word 'moral' means.

The only hope for long-suffering Belarussians is for the world's media to focus attention on the evil being done by the Lukashenko regime, just as they recently did on Milosevitch's. Alexander Lukashenko has no more right than Al Capone to be President of Belarus: his rule could not long survive the glare of an outraged world opinion. The Belarussians have the courage to get rid of him, but after eighty years of oppression, and consequent disillusionment and apathy, they badly need the moral support of the free world to help them do so.

The Belarussian naturalist, Igar Byshneu, writing of vanished species of wildlife in his beloved homeland, wrote in his book *The Song of the Wood Grouse* (1999): "It happens very often that we value only what we irrevocably lose."

Well, *freedom* has been such a rare species in Belarus that it has never really been allowed to flower. But if the free world will stand behind the Belarussian people — ten million souls yearning to breathe free — then personal liberty will become a value that Belarussians can irrevocably keep.

