

Banned from Belarus

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 6 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

The climactic year 2010 would also be my last visit to Belarus for seven years, though I had no way of knowing at the time. I had received another SSHRC grant in 2009 for a study of the memorialization of the Second World War in the country. I anticipated at least three years of study, though I had visited many memorial sites over the recent years. In some ways it was a very obvious subject to pursue because the war is depicted everywhere in Belarus: every city, town, village, and recalled in some way, in memory or post-memory, by every resident. Thus, I returned to Minsk in the summer, following up earlier research trips of 2008 and 2009, when I had first become fascinated by the topic.

For my project I visited the Brest Hero Fortress and the Stalin Line Museum, both of which to some extent are based on historical myths. At the former, on the eastern side of the Bug River, the resistance to the German onslaught in late June and early July 1941 allegedly delayed the German advance. In reality the Nazis were already in Smolensk by the time the fortress fell. The Museum is elaborate and one begins at a tunnel under which one can hear the voice of Viacheslav Molotov, denouncing the invasion in a speech of June 22, 1941.

The Stalin Line Museum was sponsored by Afghan War veterans, with government approval, in 2005. At its entrance is a bust of Stalin, usually adorned with wreaths left by admirers. The Stalin Line, as depicted there, halted the German advance to Moscow, giving the Soviet Army time to amass forces from the east to repel the assault. In reality, it had been disbanded before the German attack, as a result of the Soviet westward expansion into eastern Poland following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. I was allowed to fire guns used by both sides, but declined the opportunity to drive a tank, given that the outside temperature was around 35° C.

I heard a story that Lukashenka brought the late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez to the Stalin Line, and the two of them watched an aerial battle between a Luftwaffe plane and a counterpart from the Red Air Force. There was some firing, and the Luftwaffe plane went into a dizzying tail spin followed by an explosion as it disappeared behind a hill. Chavez gaped, looked at Lukashenka and asked: "You killed that pilot just for me?"

The year 2010 was also an election year and one of the most interesting in the short history of independent Belarus. Ten independent candidates had been registered, some of which were fairly marginal, but a strong push had been mounted by Andrei Sannikau, the leader of European Belarus, and the poet Uladimizir Niakliaeu, former head of the Belarusian Writer's Union and now leading a group called Tell the Truth. The oppositionists had some external support from Poland and other EU countries, and Sannikau in particular was doing well in Internet polls. Lukashenka's share of the popular vote had declined to 31%, though that was well ahead of the rest of the field.

I was staying at the Hotel Minsk in the city center and spending most of my time in the National Library, in the far east of the city on the highway to the airport and to Moscow. During the visit, I met Alaksandar Milinkievič for the first time, along with his assistant Ales Lahviniec, who had already run for office more than once, though without success. In 2006, Milinkievič had been the unified opposition candidate in the presidential elections, though the Belarusian Social Democratic Party had also advanced its own candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, the former Rector of Belarusian State University. Milinkievič is a quiet-spoken academic from Hrodna, who would have been 63 years of age in 2010

Banned from Belarus

Written by David R. Marples

and leads the Movement for Freedom. In 2006, his campaign was often compared to that of Yushchenko in Ukraine two years earlier, but he never mustered the same popular support. In 2007, he received the Knight of Freedom Award from Poland, which is often given to national presidents. In 2010, Milinkievič had opted not to repeat his quest for the presidency given the obstacles placed before candidates by the government.

I recall sitting on a bench in Independence Square on my last day in Minsk as storm clouds gathered symbolically overhead chatting with Sasha Solodukhina, then an American student but today a film producer. It was to be my last memory of Minsk for some time. The elections of December 2010 ended in a short but extremely violent confrontation between government OMON troops and protesters who believed the election results would be falsified. They had gathered initially in October Square, but it had proved impossible to hold an effective protest there. They then moved to Independence Square where the windows of the government house were broken, the militia waded in, and over 700 were beaten and arrested, including seven of the ten presidential candidates. The EU promptly ended its ties with the government and sanctions followed.

Later, I asked Sannikau's campaign manager, Vlad Kobets, whom I met in Warsaw, why the protests had moved to Independence Square. His reply was very detailed, but worth repeating in full (the translation is mine):

Actually, there was no single approved plan for the evening of December 19. There were options for action, depending on whether the authorities would allow people to gather at all. After all, an ice-skating rink was flooded on October Square, which in general made it difficult to stand on it. There were fears that provocateurs could take advantage of the situation and direct people, for example, in the direction of the Presidential Administration – this is a very short route, but the most dangerous, based on the possible consequences. For a long stay on the square, people need to be provided with hot drinks, access to toilets, as well as the opportunity to warm up. In those days, there were severe frosts and the activists of the headquarters purchased thermal underwear to stand in the cold for a long time. In 2001, *Zubr*[1] activists occupied the Palace of Trade Unions on the same square, but that was at the beginning of September 2006, when activists who supported Aliaksandar Milinkievič set up a tent camp. In December 2010, there was no talk about tents on the ice. One of the options was considered the Palace of the Republic, but this was not clearly foreseen by the plan.

Independence Avenue is an ideal place to express a mass protest. The space from October Square to Independence Square, which eventually was completely filled with protesters, in length and width showed the true number of demonstrations – not 5,000 and not 10,000, but from 50,000 to 80,000 people. In addition, it is known from the experience of holding protests in Belarus that many join the demonstration only after being convinced that the march begins peacefully. The column usually grows at times. That's how it was in 2010.

Various options were offered about where to send the column. One proposal was made to go to the railway station to ensure the arrival of protesters from other cities. However, due to the fact that the new station building is a huge glass display case, and in the event of provocation, glass could cause numerous injuries and victims, this option was rejected. Decisions were made in the process displaying the candidates and their immediate environment – on the steps of the Palace of Trade Unions and further – the process of movement of the column.

The opposition did not plan any “power” scenarios; on the contrary, the main problem was considered the probability of provocations organized by the authorities in order to provoke a forceful crackdown. If there were conditions for holding a rally on October Square, then everything would probably have ended there. However, in addition to the skating rink and Christmas tree, authorities played loud music through the loudspeakers to create such conditions that it was extremely difficult to carry equipment to the Palace of Trade Unions.

The equipment of the “Tell the Truth” campaign was detained by the authorities along with the column that was attacked, and Niakliaeu himself was severely beaten. Right on the steps of the Palace of Trade Unions, a plan for a peaceful march towards Independence Square was agreed as the most logical and safest route – to lead people away from the rink, and not allow provocateurs to turn the convoy towards the Presidential Administration, and Independence Square is capable of accommodating a larger number of demonstrators and there are many exits from it.

Banned from Belarus

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The government house was chosen on the basis of the logic that Aliaksandr Lukashenka is not a legitimately elected head of state; moreover, after the election fraud he remains a usurper. Thus, the government was invited to begin negotiations.

The signs for a freer election than in the past had been promising, and even Russia seemed to be withholding its traditional support for Lukashenka – the Sannikau team even went to Moscow seeking support. But December 2010 marked a turning point, with seven candidates in prison cells on election night. The militia and KGB effectively destroyed the opposition, not only in the central square but during the following year when protesters could even be arrested for clapping, as a sign of dissent. Sannikau, like Pazniak and Sharetski before him, fled the country after his eventual release and now resides in the United Kingdom.

I opted not to try to return to Belarus during the election period or in 2011, which was a year of mass arrests, but applied for a visa the following spring (2012) and was turned down. I had applied through the Belarusian Embassy in Ottawa, which is a very small office, and I asked the official why I had been rejected. His email response was succinct:

“You will not be allowed to visit Belarus this summer. Best wishes, Igor.” Later I learned that the authorities had compiled a blacklist of undesirables and I was on it. I didn’t think for a moment that it was a result of my books, which could be found in the National Library, but rather as a result of shorter pieces I had penned, most often for the *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, published by the Jamestown Foundation in Washington, DC. I had written dozens of short pieces for this journal, usually of around 1,000 words, especially during election periods.

In 2012, I applied once again, this time through the Belarusian Embassy in the United States, but after a lengthy delay received another fancy stamp nearing the word *ADMOVLENO* (REJECTED) in my Canadian passport. It became a talking point among those on the blacklist, which included the German scholar Astrid Sahm among others. The following year, after a third rejection, once again from Ottawa, but now resorting to my British passport, I was close to giving up entering the country.

Thanks to previous visits, I had accumulated enough material, I thought, for my next book, and began the writing process in 2012 with the assistance of some of my graduate and honors students: Eduard Baidaus, Ernest Gyidel, and Antony Kalashnikov; as well as the Belarusian PhD candidate Veranika Laputka, who ensured that my transliteration met Belarusian standards. In terms of newspaper coverage of the memorialization of the war I was somewhat limited to those for which I could acquire a complete set online, since access to the National Library was now impossible.

In early 2013, the Jamestown Foundation organized a visit to Minsk, taking along some of its leading writers, and led by its president, Glen Howard. Though contributing as its main author on Belarus for the previous decade, I was neither invited nor informed. Thus, given my already precarious chances of re-entering the country, I was shocked to learn that the group had met with Belarusian leaders and handed over to Lukashenka a batch of published articles, including 21 of mine, approximately 50% of the publication that was later published the same month under the title *Straddling Russia and Europe: A Compendium of Recent Jamestown Analysis on Belarus*. Many of them were quite critical of the government and I thought may have influenced my subsequent visa rejections.

The group expressed the view that it was necessary for the West to begin a dialogue with the Belarusian regime rather than adopt the attitude of the EU Partnership Program of demanding that the authorities fulfil certain conditions – recognizing human rights, free elections, etc., ostensibly perceiving the republic as a potential bulwark against Russia. It was true that Russia and Belarus were having some differences though there was little possibility of the latter breaking ranks from Russian-led organizations as later events were to demonstrate. Most of all, I was very surprised that I had never been consulted, though in fairness the copyright on the articles belonged to the organization. I did not write for them again.

I published *‘Our Glorious Past’: Lukashenka’s Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* in 2014, with Ibidem Verlag, a German publisher based in Stuttgart. In some ways it might have been a companion to *Heroes and Villains*, and

Banned from Belarus

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reflected my preoccupation with historical memory and current politics. In the same year, I was serving as a judge in a journalism contest for the association Belarus in Focus, which held an award ceremony in Warsaw. The other judges were Danish journalist Michael Anderson and the late Belarusian analyst Pavel Sheremet, then based in Kyiv – he was killed by a car bomb in that city two years later. During the same week, I held a book launch at the headquarters of the Historical Association, close to the Hotel Bristol, and sponsored by the Embassy of Canada in Warsaw, members of which had also attended the awards ceremony. I was also interviewed on Belsat Television and local Warsaw radio stations.

Despite the travel ban, I felt largely satisfied with my studies on Belarus. I had been serving as President of the North American Association for Belarusian Studies, which had a strong social network presence despite the general paucity of numbers and in general I had found dealing with the Belarusian diaspora somewhat easier than its Ukrainian counterpart. I did learn, however, that divisions among them were just as common as for any other diaspora group. I spent some time supporting a youth group to encourage young Belarusians pursuing various career fields, which met in Vilnius in 2013. The GMF group headed by Demes also held a meeting in the same city that included former presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevich, with easily discernible KGB men from Belarus taking a close interest. One in particular would hang around the lobby of the Radisson Hotel every morning and evening. Like some in the opposition, Vilnius had become something of a refuge for me given the lack of access over the border.

One of my ports of call in Vilnius was European Humanities University (EHU), which had been struggling for some time with a search for a new Rector. I had been a regular speaker at EHU when it was based in Minsk in October Square before the authorities took control over the building and evicted them in 2004. In 2006, with aid from the EU and several other sources, it attained the status of university in Vilnius, and about 900 students were registered there, the vast majority from Belarus. I gave a public talk there with Stefan Eriksson, the former Swedish Ambassador to Belarus (2008-2012), and one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership Program of 2009. Eriksson spoke in fluent Belarusian to the delight of the attendees. In 2012, Lukashenka had expelled him from Belarus because of his political activity and support for pro-democracy groups.

Thus, I was not alone. Paul Acton, a friend from Sheffield and fellow Sheffield United supporter, commented during one of my visits: "I've been banned from a few pubs but never from an entire country."

Notes:

[1] Zubr (Bison) was a civic youth organization strongly opposed to the Lukashenka regime and prominent during the period of colour revolutions in the early 21st century. It received financial backing from the United States.

About the author:

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