

Andrzej S. Kamiński

Introduction. Reflections on Self-Government and Citizenship

in: *Revolt in the Name of Freedom: Forgotten Belarusian Gene?*, Piotr Rudkoŭski, Kaciaryna Kolb (eds.), Warsaw 2013, pp. 9–15

I would like to begin with a less than optimistic question: is it possible for Belarus to avoid the fate of Brittany? And what if — God help us — the battle over language is lost to the dominating imperial power, like the battle was lost in Ireland, and what if, in the battle for sovereignty and civic freedom, Belarus goes not in the direction of Brittany but of Ireland? Furthermore, can one assume that Belarus will not become a Russian Brittany? The present government, and in particular the president, feels much more attached to the language of its eastern neighbor than to its own, while its policy of isolating itself from Europe and cultivating close contacts with Russia suggests a less than optimistic response to the question posed at the beginning. Opponents of Lukašenka, including those on the left, right and in the democratic-liberal center, all in their own way are fighting to stop the process of “brittanization”. For some of them, the battle over language is an integral part of the struggle for sovereignty; for others language poses no problem whatsoever. However, a growing part of the opposition and Lukašenka’s current electorate are beginning to appreciate the long-term consequences of a closed door policy that cuts Minsk off from Europe.

Reflecting upon the fate of the Celts, i.e., the Irish and the Bretons, I cannot escape the impression that one has looking at a map of the changes that have taken place over the last thousand years. If one looks at Europe over the past two millennia on a map showing at 300–500 year intervals the changes occurring not only in country borders, but also in religions, languages and nationalities, one is bowled over by the lack of stability, the disappearance of age-old records and the appearance of completely new names. One is confounded by the languages of classic literature that have completely fallen out of use, such as Provençal or Old Belarussian, not to mention Latin, without which there would be no European civilization. One may well be startled by the disappearance for ages of ethnic names and then pleasantly surprised by their sudden „resurrection”. Indeed, nationalities that appeared to be sunk in a deep sleep for centuries suddenly sprang to their feet and took decisions into their own hands, vide Slovaks, Slovenians, Latvians or Estonians.

Similarly, in modern-day democratic countries there are national movements that continue to reach for ever greater autonomy and self-government such as the Basques or Scots or, to a lesser degree, the Welsh or the German autochthons of the Opole region in Poland.

Russia and China – multi-national empires that prefer arbitrary rule, are the masters of “taking care” of such business because they know full well that these issues are veritable bombs that usually explode precisely when great crises are sapping the strength of the state. Both these empires are experts in processes that unite, that integrate, that assimilate. They look for guidance to, on the one hand, the melting pot model of the United States, and on the other hand, the example of Brittany. However, neither Russia nor China will tolerate any constriction of domination or national control, hence limiting their adherence to the American model.

The Kremlin for centuries has pursued its battle for the subjugation of the lands and nations that once made up Kievan Rus. Its policy of military aggression always went hand in hand with war over symbols and history. Without going into great detail, it is worth recalling the legend of the White Kalpak (the story of the migration of the symbol of real faith from Rome to Byzantium and hence to Novgorod) or the strikingly similar theory of the Third Rome, in this instance located in Moscow. In as much as the notion of the Third Rome established the dominance of the Muscovite church over orthodoxy, the later concept of three loving sisters (Great Russia, Little Russia and White Russia) justified the integration and subjugation of the younger sisters to the caring protection of the elder sister, Moscow. After occupying the greater part of the territories of Rus by the end of the eighteenth century, official St. Petersburg consolidated its position as defender and protector of all Slavdom and all Orthodoxy. It comes as no surprise then, that the Lutheran-raised “Voltaire-inspired Semiramis of the North” so zealously persecuted Greek Catholics living on the lands occupied during the three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For political reasons, it has always been more convenient for the rulers of Russia, both now and in the past, when the majority of Slav nations adhered to Orthodoxy and acknowledged the superiority of the Russian Orthodox church. This policy of religious community and spiritual dependence is evident throughout history until this day.

Directly subordinated to the Russian authorities from the rule of Peter the Great, the Orthodox church served Russia as a protective shield warding off “foreign influences” and as a ready justification for expanding its sphere of influence to the west and south. It was firmly maintained that aggression to the south freed the Orthodox from Ottoman servitude; aggression to the west restored the genuine Orthodox faith to the Belarusians and numerous Ukrainians.

Russia's distinctiveness from the West, and in particular the Catholic West, was emphasized in religious and ethical terms. On the good side was the real faith of pure hearts; on the other side was the decadent, autocratic church sunk in moral decay. This distinction (and choice) of Russia or Europe was all too clear for the nations freed from the Soviet Empire in 1989 and 1991.

Ethnic Poland, which accepted Latin rite Christianity, was regarded as a Trojan horse in a Slavic sea, a European country that brought the "Russian enemy", i.e., Europeanism, to the Slavic lands of Belarusian and Ukrainian. Looking at a map of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century (with the exception of the North Caucasus), one can identify at least 20 nationalities that were sentenced by the rulers of several large countries to the same fate as Brittany. Yet by 1918 the majority of them had "broken through to independence." The rest followed in 1989-1991. We must not, however, forget that, what with the astute policies of the Kremlin and the centralist policies of Brussels, the threat of "re-brittanization" is still real, most evidently at the present time in Belarus and Ukraine.

Ukrainians have taken over Maidan independence square in self-defense and in hopes of preventing Russia from severing them from Europe and thereby making them entirely dependent on the Kremlin. There is no way of telling if they will succeed, but most assuredly we must and should admire them. The Maidan occupiers are insisting that they live in a European country and will not kneel before Putin. Yanukovich is, however, kneeling, while Ukraine's neighbors, especially Poland appear incapable (perhaps out of fear?) of making the gesture of support that the deceased Lech Kaczyński made towards Georgia. The careful observer notes that since the times of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, events in Ukraine have had strong repercussions in Belarus. Does this still hold true? I would like to think it does as every mass act of civil disobedience hinders the process of brittanization. It mobilizes the younger generations, stripping them of yet another layer of corrosive sovietization.

My Belarussian friends tell me that, according to statistical studies, today's school children no longer believe — as did their peers in 1993 — that the Empress Catherine known as the Great, Peter I and Suvorov were among the top five greatest heroes of Belarusian history. This is certainly good news and the effect of a concentrated effort by teachers and historians to present to their students their own history and not that of a foreign country. The question is whether the official version of events from World War II being sold by the media and authorized schoolbooks is any cause for optimism. How many young Belarusians are seriously engaged in

the struggle for their own citizenship and for the sovereignty of Belarus? It could prove instructive to look at this issue through the microcosm of Lazarski University in Warsaw.

The University has had a scholarly Belarusian Center for the past seven years and during that period the Center for Civic Space has organized annual international conferences that have brought together the leaders of the Belarusian opposition as well as Belarusian and foreign politicians, historians, sociologists and other experts. There are over 200 students from Belarus enrolled at the University. They are studying in Poland, but the language one hears in the corridors, elevators and student cafeteria is Russian, though there are in fact very few Russians at the University. These students, unfortunately, very rarely drop by the Belarussian Center or take part in the annual conferences, though there has been some improvement of late. Our observations during the conferences, though very limited, are sadly generally negative. Perhaps the most disturbing observation is the complete lack of interest in an alternative to the status quo. Even abroad, the young adults evince little need to seek out minds that think otherwise than their domestic autocrat. It is difficult to ascertain whether this stems from the small-mindedness and egoism of the youngsters or rather from their spiritual inability to identify with anything the opposition has to offer. One also wonders why less than 10% of the Belarusian students at Lazarski participates in the Belarusian Center's activities aimed at cultivating their native language and culture. They have no problem quickly mastering Polish and English, and after graduation many of them strike out to the West in pursuit of their careers. The choice of Poland for university indicates that if not the students themselves, then their parents decided to seek higher education in Europe, eschewing thereby their domestic brand of Lukašenka-laced education. If that is indeed the case, then how can one explain the students' utter passivity? Why do so few of them attend our conferences? Perhaps because they spend so much time studying? Could it be that Lukašenka's conflict with the diverse opposition is perceived as simply a struggle for power, as a changing of the ruling elite, rather than as a struggle to transfer power to autonomous citizens?

Belarusian sociologists who for years have studied and analyzed changing trends in opinions within the Belarusian population have provided various answers to these questions. Some of them can be found in the official press, but most of them have appeared in alternative, independent media channels. I would like to cite some of them here in order to highlight the consequences for civic space and civic activity when political parties are centrally controlled. A look at the various experiences of the Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian opposition can also shed light on these issues. Just before communism fell, groups of rival oppositionists in

Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary worked together in national citizen committees. When communism crumbled, the citizen committees were replaced by competing political parties that offered their electorate different political, social and cultural programs. The citizens had the right to exercise their freedom of vote, which they did in democratic elections. Thereafter, however, voter turnout in elections began to drop precipitously and now seldom is more than 60% of those eligible to vote. All the parties were absolutely convinced that their programs were the best and that they would fulfil all their promises, but did any of them actually promise to share power with their electorate? Are any of the parties actually capable of foregoing their own centralized governing powers? Were any of them able to introduce for any amount of time an internal, grass-roots systems for electing even their own party leaders? And finally, which of the more influential parties thought to introduce legal and institutional procedures to safeguard civic liberties from the executorial power of the authorities? Almost all of them did indeed promise to establish effective self-government bodies and genuine one-mandate elections to parliament. Yet Poland still has no one-mandate elections and in multi-mandate districts voters have to choose from lists of candidates selected by party leadership. People become members of parliament because their names were put on a list drawn up by Donald Tusk or Jarosław Kaczyński. The same is true for Leszek Miller's post-communist party. The situation is reminiscent of events towards the end of the first Commonwealth, when delegates were nominated "on the recommendation of and at the behest of our Lord Brothers" by the lords Radziwiłł, Potocki and Sapieha and thereupon elected to parliament. The difference was that at that time there were, in towns, in districts and counties, local self-governments fiercely fighting for their representative rights. Today, the self-government structures, where civic activism is forged and thrives, are still very limited. Central authority is still dominant, though for the average citizen the most important decisions influencing his/her life are made at the local level. The less society participates in the making of these decisions, the weaker its civic ethos and the greater the chances that the citizen becomes less a citizen and more of a subject or even a politically passive consumer.

The opposition parties in Belarus are, as we know, making an effort to connect with their compatriots and to be of help in resolving their daily problems. They do for a fact make a point of participating in self-government elections, though I am not certain to what degree they reach for models from their historical past. What I do know is that study of governance models from the past would make clear how very uneven the balance between local self-government and central authority is at present. It would be painfully evident how the morass of servitude has

stifled the historic civic space. Belarus is heir to a rich and beautiful tradition of urban and county civic life that dates back the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Its history is also full of the struggle for sovereignty or at the very least for the restoration of its national culture dating to the first thirty years of the twentieth century. It has a “forgotten” but dramatic history of the western Belarusian villages that strove to defend themselves and survive the onslaught first of Nazism marching to the east and then the onslaught of communism marching to the west. The Soviets destroyed the countryside of western Belarus. In 1991, the newly restored sovereign state did not pay much attention to the population of the collectivized countryside. Political elites generally assume that “for the good of the cause” they must take care of the “masses” and their problems without necessarily allowing them to participate in the decision-making process. It was precisely this logic that the population of the villages and post-Soviet collectives remained entirely unaware of the most important events of the democratic transformation of their country. In Poland, a similar approach (Balcerowicz) resulted in the rise of Lepper, while in Belarus the failure to install the Czech model eased the way for Lukašenka to take power.

For centuries first factions within the ruling elite and then later political parties were absolutely convinced that their program was the only valid one and they exhorted the voters to support them. Yet, we “normal folk” usually have great difficulty fitting our opinions and needs into the stiff framework of these party agendas. Ideally, however, one would like to divide one’s support, giving one party 65%, another say 25% and 10% somewhere else. Even in the United States, which for years has been “under the rule” of one of two parties, either “republican” or “democrat,” voters find it extremely difficult to lend 100% support exclusively to one party. What often happens is that people who generally vote Democrat will decide to choose a Republican for president.

We see these vacillations in both presidential and gubernatorial elections. In multi-party systems, the electorate are offered much more diverse and detailed party programs, but conversely this makes it that much more difficult to give 100% of one’s support to the proposed solutions to all the problems facing the country. Oftentimes, instead of voting for one party which they only partially support, voters decide not to vote at all. They thus forfeit their right to make their decisions. I dare say, however, on the basis of my experience in the United States, that people are less willing to forego their right to vote in elections for the mayor or the sheriff or, perhaps most importantly, for the head of the county or the local school board. Even if Lukašenka’s people win in the local elections (by one means or another), or people from the right or the left, these elections — if they take place — always lend some hope for the revival

of local self-rule. Self-government structures in Czech, Slovakia and Hungary, for example, need to assert themselves against every successive government for the expansion of their rights. They still wield much less power and genuine civic influence than their counterparts in Switzerland, England or the U.S. Nonetheless, they are the most important source of civic spirit and civic modus operandi. One must never forget that while citizens form parties and lead them, they also are most effective in the defence of their basic human rights and their right to decide the fate of their children, their homes, streets, neighborhoods, villages or towns. By keeping these basic principles in mind, perhaps we can shorten the distance between the democratic opposition of Belarus and the former kolkhozniks and the students at Lazarski University.