

*Uncaptive Minds*



## **Seminar Papers**

1989–91:  
Revolution, Evolution, or Devolution

The Case of Belarus

*by* Vincuk Viačorka

*Presented at the IDEE Seminar*

**25 Years After 1989:  
Time for Reflection on Unfinished Business  
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## IDEE Seminar Papers

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## The Author

Vincuk Viačorka is a longstanding leader in the Belarusian democracy and independence movement. Starting in 1979, he helped launch underground nonconformist youth groups, samizdat publications, and protest actions. In 1988, he co-founded the Belarusian Popular Front and was its chairman from 1999 to 2007, during which time he helped build the nation-wide coalition United Democratic Forces of Belarus. He has also co-founded and participated in numerous civil society organizations, including the Belarusian Language Association, the Belarus Humanities Lyceum, the Institute for Statehood and Democracy, and, in 1995, Centar Supolnasc, a member of the Centers for Pluralism network. He co-founded the Assembly of Pro-Democratic Non-Governmental Organizations, serving as its chairman in 1999–2000. As an early opponent of the Lukashenka dictatorship, he has been arrested numerous times, starting in 1996. Mr. Viačorka, known for his scholarship in defense of the Belarusian language and the humanities, is also editor of *Spadcyňa* (Heritage) magazine.

## **1989-91: Revolution, Evolution, or Devolution**

### **The Case of Belarus**

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The subject of our panel—Revolution, Evolution, and Devolution—is an inclusive one, since all three occurred in succession in the countries of the region. I would like, however, to refine the subject: revolution and devolution of what? Where? To answer these questions, we must take notice not only of changes in the political mechanics of regimes, but first of all the changes in values shared by respective societies.

The overall subject of our seminar, reflections on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1989, requires us to make generalizations. I will make some, but I will concentrate my discourse around Belarus, since the story of an un-successful transition may be more fruitful for our discussion's outcome. The similarities and differences among the various national experiences represented here may then help better formulate some generalizations. I also cannot omit the Ukrainian tragedy and opportunity of today—for it is both. This too, requires a look back at the end of the 1980s and the begin-ning of the 1990s.

In conversations with friends here from other countries—those, who, like me, participated in the events of that time—I sense that many feel they have lived through several epochs and now perceive the revolutions of 1989–91 as pre-history to their current situation. This is not the case of Belarus: too many changes we hoped for did not happen. Many people active from those times look at the events as being quite recent despite the generation-long distance in time.

There is another reason to focus on Belarus. From the outside, the situation today seems stable and quiet—the main focus of state propaganda is to convince the outside world that this is so. That external impression, however, might not reflect internal reality. As the revolutions twenty-five years ago showed and as the Ukrainian revolution demonstrates again, public aversion to dictatorship may erupt unexpectedly. A political turn towards democracy is possible even in difficult and seemingly hopeless cases.

### **The Preconditions of 1991**

There is a presumption that Belarus regained its independence and its opportunity for democracy in 1991 simply by inertia and that therefore the Belarusian people took it for granted and never appreciated these political values sufficiently enough to defend them. The same presumption exists about Ukraine: the people were not ready to build the

new democratic statehood at the beginning of the 1990s and so this historical debt is being paid today with blood. But these presumptions are false: there *were* internal conditions to prepare for democratic change and independence in the then-Soviet and communist countries.

In Belarus, as in Ukraine, groups committed to the ideals of independence, human rights, and democracy re-emerged in the dissident period of the '60s to '80s. But these groups exploded in number and breadth beginning in 1985 (before, not because of, *perestroika*). Small but motivated groups committed to real values can at the right moment shift a whole society. This is what happened when these many groups came together to form the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) movement in 1988.<sup>1</sup>

Grass-roots-level structures of BPF were quickly organized at the majority of enterprises, workplaces, universities, and other institutions. With such widespread organization, it was possible to channel the social demands of protesting workers in 1990–91 into a clear political agenda: first, the removal of Article 5 from the Constitution establishing the monopoly of Communist Party rule; second, the removal of Communist Party cells at workplaces; and third, significantly, full sovereignty (not just independence) of Belarus. On April 3, 1991, the second day of protests against price increases, crowds of workers on the streets of Minsk adopted these demands (prepared for them by me on a typewriter) and also adopted the white-red-white flag of independent Belarus.

In Soviet times, Belarus was regarded as one of the most “disciplined” of the so-called republics—as a zone of political and national stability having a relatively decent standard of living based on Soviet-style kolkhoz “welfare.” Still, even the ruling nomenklatura could not ignore the economic crisis. At the “last moment” before the collapse, the authorities introduced “self-financing” of enterprises and offered some opportunities for private initiative under control of the Komsomol. Nevertheless, everything contributing to the general crisis—the inefficient communist model; the inconsistency of reforms; the burden of the Afghanistan war; the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 (which affected one-third of Belarus ter-

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<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1988, a booklet for restricted use only was distributed to all local secretaries of the Communist Party of Belarus titled “Some Actual Problems of Ideological Work in Current Conditions.” In it, the authors, high-level ideologists and KGB officers, described the so-called “informal antisocial groups” in Belarus and stressed that, even if they were obviously “puppets” of Western powers, “it is impermissible to underestimate them based on the paucity of their ranks.” Indeed, within three months, these “informal groups” had united themselves in the Belarusian Popular Front capable of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people to the streets. — Author’s Note.

ritory); and the continuing giant reductions to the USSR budget with its military appetite—all of these factors were too great for small “economic improvements” to prevent the economic collapse.

Yet, beyond the economic preconditions, there was a flourishing cynicism towards the communist regime mostly due to all of its depredations of human dignity in Belarus as elsewhere—including the repression of national identity. And among Soviet “republics,” Belarus had the strongest policies aimed at marginalizing its national culture, language, and national heritage.

### **The Unfinished Revolution and the Reversibility of Changes**

The stage for achieving independence was set before 1991 with the first partly free parliamentary election in Belarus. That took place in March 1990. Several dozen MPs were elected who were not approved in advance by the Communist Party. The partly free elections were the result of two years of street actions and information initiatives organized by the BPF. Throughout the country, the active segment of society debated intensely on all the alternative visions for further political development. The debate over ideas of sovereignty and independence won over people’s hearts and minds. And the general atmosphere in the Soviet Union was full of the fresh air of change (an atmosphere that prevented the disoriented local nomenklatura from taking radical steps to counter it).<sup>2</sup>

Out of 360 members in the Supreme Soviet, there were just 37 members of the BPF faction. But at key moments, having the support of the people rallying in the Square and the workers organizing strikes, the BPF faction’s influence was decisive and received majority support in parliament. After the defeat of the Moscow putsch in August 1991, enough members of the panic-stricken Communist Party majority voted for two essential BPF legislative proposals: a constitutional legitimation of the Republic of Belarus’s independence and a law outlawing the Communist Party.

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<sup>2</sup> The Russian term *nomenklatura*, used in all communist countries, refers specifically to the list of positions at all levels of the party-state apparatus to which higher officials made appointments. Such appointments were based on membership and loyalty to the Communist Party and recommendations made within the hierarchy. More generally, the term *nomenklatura* refers to the political, economic, social, and security elite that ran the communist party-state and subsequently to the part of the former elite that came to dominate political and economic power in the post-communist period. For the term’s initial origins, see, for example, *The Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* by Mikhail Voslensky (1984, Doubleday: New York). — Editor’s Note.

The successful landing of Alexander Lukashenka in Belarusian politics in 1994 was possible because of several factors. These included the lack of vital reforms; society's susceptibility to paternalism after 70 years of Soviet rule; and the inability of the politically active part of society to maintain necessary actions over time. But the most important factor was that the pro-democratic, pro-independence opposition was not allowed to exercise power: after 1991, it remained in opposition as post-communist structures continued to exert political dominance.

One key fork in the road was 1992. The Square couldn't exercise pressure constantly. The Communist Party majority in parliament, still formed from the 1990 elections, reasserted itself to paralyze economic and social reforms and prevent institution building for an independent state. In this situation, the BPF initiated a referendum for early elections and changes in electoral legislation that could lead to the formation of a pro-democratic parliamentary majority. A half-million signatures were collected easily—twice the number needed under the existing constitution. But it was naïve to expect that the Supreme Soviet would follow the constitution. There was no mass campaign of street actions organized to back the demanded changes. The old nomenklatura took advantage of this quiet and the Supreme Soviet simply voted against holding a referendum and revoked the ban on the Communist Party.

It was in this simple and early manner that the devolution of 1988–91 began. The inconsistency of reforms led inevitably to a deeper economic crisis. Annual inflation in 1993 reached 2,000 percent. Although prices have risen 340 times under Lukashenka's rule, the annual rate has been lower than in "the dark nineties"—the term he uses to describe this period. His rule, according to his arguments, is thus the lesser evil.

The democratic opposition could mobilize pressure only for partial reforms. It could not stop the corrupt process of privatization that benefitted the nomenklatura, nor could it successfully introduce social benefits for common people in the economic transition. Such initiatives, had they passed, would have earned some concrete recognition for the values-based democratic political groups beyond their moral political platform.

Belarus also remained in the economic and information space of Russia and Russian media were full of stereotypes about so-called "democrats in power." Although the presence of democrats in Belarus was limited to the BPF's small parliamentary faction together with some groups in local councils and a few deputy mayors, nevertheless the Russian media and the Communist faction was successful in painting the canvas such that the "democrats" were responsible for all of the bad changes taking place and for causing all of society's new problems.

The democrats had another weakness as they faced Lukashenka's candidacy and then his presidency. As they maneuvered this unsteady political situation, the democratic parties found themselves unable to build and keep coalitions among themselves or with the emerging civic sector.

There was, thus, an open field for the pro-Soviet populist Alexander Lukashenka's political landing. Undoubtedly, he enjoyed financial and other support from Russia. It is also true, however, that the presidential elections he won in 1994 were almost free and fair—the first and last such elections. One may imagine that, as with other dictators, he enjoyed using democratic mechanisms to reach office in a situation where no mediating institutions existed to prevent his subsequent seizure of unlimited power.

### **The Most Soviet Nomenklatura**

The challenge that arose for democratic movements everywhere in the region was how to resolve the problem of the post-Soviet nomenklatura. After the failure of the Moscow putsch in August 1991, the nomenklatura in nearly all the post-Soviet countries recovered from its initial shock to regain sufficient influence and strength to transfer state property to its private hands, all the while repainting its political colors in civilized hues.

Unlike in Ukraine, however, where an oligarchic model of limited democracy was established, in Belarus there was not even a “reformist” or at the least a clearly pro-independence wing of the nomenklatura. Lukashenka himself belonged to the younger generation and lowest nomenklatura level and therefore possessed even greater resentments and thirst of revenge over the “democrats in power.” Indeed, the old communist nomenklatura, with its greater pragmatism, was at first not utilized in the building of the Lukashenka regime. It was only over time that Lukashenka also included older generation functionaries to strengthen his hand.

Lukashenka's underlying ideology and message was the restoration of Soviet-era “stability” and the preservation of a political space embracing Soviet “values.” Lukashenka did not even adopt the behaviors of such post-communist political leaders as President Algirdis Brazauskas in Lithuania or President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine, who at least pretended to strengthen independent statehood and maintain a dialogue with democrats. One benefit of this lack of pretense was that the large majority of Belarusian democrats had no illusions about Lukashenka's nature after 1994 and avoided the temptation of collaborating with this anti-democratic regime. This demarcation line held firm until 2007, after which a noticeable part of opposition parties unfortunately crossed the line to a more collaborative stance towards the dictatorship.

### **Cooperation with Neighbors: Mutual Inspiration**

The period of 1989–91 was an inspiring epoch for international solidarity among democratic movements of all the Soviet-bloc's captive nations. We remember with gratitude the support and understanding for Belarus's pro-independence movement from Lithuania's Sajūdis; in turn, the BPF was the main organizer of solidarity actions with Lithuania, Latvia, and Georgia in response to Moscow's open aggression against them. A lot of Belarusians participated in resistance actions in Vilnius when Gorbachev sent Soviet armed forces to attack Lithuania's parliament in January 1991.<sup>3</sup>

The common values and goals shared by people in the countries of our region—restoring independence, rebuilding national and European (Western) identity, getting rid of communism—were real political capital. Unfortunately, that capital was never effectively used in the period of state-building. In the early 1990s, there were several conferences and round tables convened in Minsk and Kyiv at the initiative of BPF around the so-called Baltic–Black Sea Oil Collector, or corridor, which offered the possibility of using common practical instruments of new states in a Baltic–Black Sea alliance. But the initiative failed. (A major promoter of the Collector idea was Mykhailo Boichyshyn, the secretary of Ukraine's pro-democracy independence movement, Rukh, who disappeared unexpectedly in January 1994 without a trace. His destiny remains unknown.)

After the first enthusiastic years of independence, countries in the region went along different paths. Regional cooperation among democratic forces, both those in power and those in opposition, steadily weakened. Democrats of one country had only a general idea about the situation in neighboring states. Particularism and relativism increased. An example of this is today the attitude adopted by the leaders of the Baltic States,

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<sup>3</sup> Lithuania had been the first of the Baltic States to reestablish independence in March 1990 by a formal act of the Supreme Council. After months of tension, on January 11, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev ordered Soviet troops to seize the Lithuanian Press and TV tower and the Lithuanian parliament in order to reverse the Act on the Reestablishment of Independence. Elite Soviet forces, led by the Alpha Group, seized the Press Tower, killing 14 protesters and wounding 1,000. But tens of thousands of civilians, including from other countries, went to defend the parliament building, whose members, led by Supreme Council chairman Vytautas Landsbergis, refused to leave. After two days of standoff, the Soviet command ordered a withdrawal of its forces. The successful defense of Lithuania's parliament building inspired independence movements in other republics to press for declarations of sovereignty and independence. Lithuania's independence was recognized by the Soviet Union in September 1991 following the failed coup d'état against Gorbachev. — Editor's Note.



Georgia, and even the new Ukrainian government towards Lukashenka as a newfound partner and defender of the value of independence. In the face of Vladimir Putin's aggression in Ukraine, this may be understandable on a tactical level, but it is both morally obtuse and strategically short-sighted.

### **The Role of Russia**

Russia's chance for democracy at the beginning of 1990 was fleeting. The opportunity was real, but it could only have succeeded through a decisive break with Russia's imperial past. That never happened.

The nations with long historical experience of subjugation under the Russian and Soviet empires looked at developments in Moscow with some, although not exaggerated hopes. But the coming to power of Vladimir Putin and his reassertion of KGB control returned Russia fully to its traditional anti-democratic and imperialist role. For Lukashenka, this turn of events destroyed his imagined chances to assume the Moscow throne in a revived Soviet commonwealth, a role he seriously hoped for during Yeltsin's last years having some support among Russian communists and Slavophiles. The predictable turn of the Kremlin back towards imperial aggression—first against Georgia and now against Ukraine—has been a shock for Lukashenka. He grounded his regime on his loyalty to Russia. Unexpectedly, he no longer owns a monopoly on Soviet nostalgia. No doubt he and Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, his colleague in the Eurasian Union, discuss the newfound threat felt to their rule from Moscow. Both, however, fear the revival of democratic society (itself the surest and most reliable guarantor of independence) more than Putin's canines.

Vladimir Putin continues to back Lukashenka's regime and its repressive actions, both in words and deeds, as part of an overall strategy to maintain the Russian Federation's control over as many former "republics" of the Soviet Union as possible. In this regard, Moscow exacts a higher and higher price for its continued support of Lukashenka's rule by increasing economic control over Belarusan enterprises—it is a further shortening of the leash that Putin holds the Belarusan ruler on.

### **The Role of the West**

I will never forget my first contacts with Westerners at the end of the 1980s. The first persons I met were Scandinavian political analysts and journalists and they told us: "Только не мешайте Горбачёву! Don't hinder Gorbachev." Don't be radical. Don't demand decommunization or—what a terrible word to them!—independence for Belarus. Fortunately, there were no Western instruments of influence on us in those times and we did not pay attention to such advice. We continued with our "radical" aims and were supported in this by the majority of people.

More disillusioning for us, however, was the “Chicken Kiev speech” that US President George H. W. Bush gave on August 1, 1991. Just months before a December referendum in which Ukrainians overwhelmingly voted to withdraw from the Soviet Union, Bush cautioned his Kyiv hosts against “suicidal nationalism.” He urged “stable, and above all peaceful, change” and the key to this, he believed, was “a politically strong Gorbachev and an effectively working central structure.” Bush’s speech revealed the étatist approach of US and Western policy and a fundamental lack of trust in the people of the region. Many Western decision-makers were ignorant or disoriented on the issue of independence and ignored the strength and importance of pro-independence and anti-Kremlin democratic movements in all the “Soviet republics” as the driving forces for the transformative changes taking place in the region. These Western leaders were afraid of the independence movements and still paid all the credit to Gorbachev and Moscow for “democratic developments.”

Thus, it was not surprising that after the dissolution of the USSR and the removal of all nuclear weapons to the Russian Federation from the former “republics,” the newly emerged or restored states of the region (with the exception of the Baltic States) almost disappeared from the range of vision of large Western powers. One can see the result now of this disparaging attitude and neglect by Western leaders of the countries that restored their independence. The so-called Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances signed in 1994, which guaranteed territorial sovereignty in exchange for the transfer of all nuclear weapons from Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, is worthless as Russia carries out its aggression against Ukraine. These (and other) countries are *still* regarded as “New Independent States”—unlike Russia.

It is true that during the last decade Western institutions turned some slight attention to non-Russian post-Soviet countries as the Kremlin’s revanchism, beginning with the Georgian war, seemed to grow. There were various ideas on securing a European future for some of these countries, but in vain. The Eastern Partnership serves as an example of how a good idea may be devalued after passing through Brussels’s corridors. The initial concept was grounded in the belief that there was a necessity for the European Union to strengthen ties with and among six post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). Realizing this idea, however, met many obstacles. There was an overestimation of the possibilities of cooperation with authoritarian states like Belarus and Azerbaijan; civil society’s role was marginalized by government-to-government relations; and the European Union adopted an approach of treating equally countries with highly differing levels of democracy.

And what of the West's support for civil society? Its importance, both symbolic and practical, is vital and cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, since the late 1990s, with the beginning of systematized assistance from foreign donors, a dangerous virus began to spread within the structures of the emerging civil sector. This virus combined foreign insistence on two contradictory and counterproductive strategies. One was commercializing civic activism having the goal of making the NGO sector "self-sufficient" (called BONGOization, or making NGOs "business-oriented"). The other was requiring simultaneously unconditional obedience by NGOs to the donors and their vision for "transition." This virus remains active in the veins of some Belarusian politicians (especially those who make a living in the civil sector).

What has this meant in practice? Today, a significant part of Western donors tie their financial assistance to the continued participation of the political and civic opposition in Lukashenka's "elections," which are simple spectacles that everyone knows are senseless. The result of such participation in these electoral stage performances has been to further compromise the opposition and, what is worse, weaken the resolve among the most pro-democratic parts of the society to resist.

### **Europeans Convince Lukashenka?**

Many European policy makers have tried to convince Belarusian democrats that they can re-orient Lukashenka—using imaginary pro-Western "pigeons" within his clique—and that Lukashenka is the best hope for defending Belarus's fragile independence against the neo-imperialism of the Russian Federation. Such wishful thinking flies in the face of nearly twenty years of Lukashenka's entrenched dictatorship. This appeasement policy is often dictated not by any sincere feelings for Belarusian independence, but rather by the financial interests of neighboring EU businessmen who deal with the regime's oligarchs.

As the recent experience of Ukraine shows, however, the geopolitical strategy of aligning Eastern European countries towards the European Union cannot be played with unreliable partners like Yanukovich—or Lukashenka. The latter has made clear that he will continue to sell Belarusian sovereignty, step by step, to Russia in exchange for an extension of his period of rule. Lukashenka cannot be considered a defender of independent statehood. Yanukovich's shameful destiny should be sufficient proof that Western policy makers are wrong to believe that politicians who do not share democratic values will somehow move their countries away from Russia's authoritarian reach and move towards democratic countries, Europe, and the Transatlantic Alliance.

There is another factor at work in the change of European policy, however. In Central and Eastern European countries, economic reform without effective lustration (restricting former communists from positions of political and economic power), allowed the nomenklatura to become economic elites with strong leverage to influence the politics of formally democratic countries. We in Belarus can see the effects by looking at the principal lobbyists for softening policies of the EU towards Minsk. They are often businessmen with old roots in the communist system. Indeed, the elites in Central and Eastern European countries now succumbing to Gazprom's pressure appear to be of similar origin. The large presence of the high nomenklatura in political decision-making bodies and economic structures can easily lead to a compromise of national security and independence.

### **Pillars of the Regime**

The Lukashenka regime's resources for maintaining power are similar to that of Azerbaijan. Ilham Aliyev's government uses social bribes by virtue of its oil and gas sales; for the Lukashenka regime, it is the price for transit of Russian oil and gas to Europe as well as the image Belarus retains as being Russia's last ally in the region.

The regime in Belarus is effectively founded on fear: fear of arrest; fear of losing one's job; fear for the future of one's children (who can be dismissed from the university because of political disloyalty); fear of imprisonment if you are a small entrepreneur who does not share income with the authorities' economic "inspectors"; fear of using one's native Belarusian language (a sign of disloyalty in the face of the official campaign of Soviet-Russian nostalgia).

Another of the regime's effective instruments is the destroying of people's dignity. Obligatory rituals of loyalty (such as communist-style electoral stage performances) are deeply hated by the people but have been dutifully performed until recently. Young people, however, are by nature more sensitive to humiliation and to falsehood and are rejecting these rituals more and more. The authorities try to neutralize the growing self-awareness of the younger generation through use of raw power: brutalizing the most prominent leaders, controlling the internet, limiting cultural activities, and generally suppressing political speech.

### **The Underdone Homework**

Belarusian society, just as the societies in Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, or Moldova, is ready for democracy.

In Belarus, foundations for electoral democracy exist in its older traditions and in its modern history. In its history, Belarusian politics, society and culture have many intellectual and democratic influences. There was

also a brief but tempestuous period of democratic statehood in 1918 that was snuffed out by Bolshevik Russia. The years of 1988–94 saw a democratic society and politics emerge out of decades of Soviet oppression. In 1994, Lukashenka used the mechanisms of democracy for coming to power before destroying all of them. Yet, even as Lukashenka imposed his dictatorship, the civil society built since 1985 continued to survive and foster the political values of democracy and independence. It is wrong to conclude that Belarusians have no democratic experience. Yet, the West now wrongly adopts the idea of introducing democracy to Belarus by the smallest doses over several generations, parceled out under Lukashenka and his successors.

It is true that the era of relative democracy in Belarus was brief and there was a weak foundation for civic behavior to take deep roots. After the “adoption” of Lukashenka’s “directed democracy,” wise parents advised their children to play according to the rules, to join the BRSM (Lukashenka’s Komsomol), and to abide by other rituals of loyalty. It was easy for them to draw upon the memory of their own behavior in communist times. Yet, there is also a social layer of those 35 years old and above who came of age during the period of freedom—a cohort of citizens who would have much more chance for self-realization in a democratic Belarus.

We in Belarus must find a key to open the slammed door. The Lukashenka regime seeks to avoid this by preventing any kind of social self-organization and especially any self-organization on the basis of values of freedom and independence. Our opponents realize the role of democratic values in mobilizing people for change.

Beyond any economic crisis, which inevitably worsens, there is a line of tolerance beyond which the humiliation of individual dignity will not go and ultimately leads to a desperate fight for freedom. Such values as human dignity can mobilize people for change even more strongly than economic problems. This was proven in December 2010, when tens of thousands came to the streets not for any protest of economic conditions, but to register their opposition to electoral fraud. The people’s rising up in Ukraine, it should be remembered, was called the “Revolution of Dignity.”

Today, I see in the eyes of many young people in Belarus—those of the generation of our children—the same light as we had twenty-five years ago. It is the light of trust in freedom, democracy, independence, and truth. One of the most important tasks now is not to miss the chance to convey that mission to them and to have a value-based majority among younger generations.