

A PERPETUAL BORDERLAND

*Andrew Savchenko (2009). Belarus – A Perpetual Borderland.
Leiden – Boston: Brill, X+239 pp.*

ONE CAN ONLY BE VERY PLEASED by a new monograph about Belarus published by a North American scholar. There are very few books in Belarusian studies available for students of East Central European economies and societies. This book was authored by Andrew Savchenko, a Belarusian whose academic career developed during the Soviet and post-Soviet eras both at home and abroad. Furthermore, it is very interesting to find out to what extent these factors influenced the research strategies and categories Savchenko used. The book under review is a good case in point.

Andrew Savchenko is a scholar affiliated with the University of Rhode Island, Kingston. He received his PhD in economics from Belarusian Academy of Sciences and later started his career in the US. Previously he studied comparative post-communist transformation of Poland, the Baltics, and Belarus. His areas of academic interest include economy and sociology; he focuses on a wide variety of topics such as the legacy of the sociologist Talcott Parsons, concepts of totalitarianism, etc.

Both Savchenko's areas of interest and his methodological preferences shaped his approaches to topics raised in his monograph "Belarus – a Perpetual Borderland" published by Dutch publishers Brill as part of a series with the title somewhat embarrassing for Belarusian readers: "History and Culture of Russia."

The very title of the book already suggests that the author views Belarus as a borderland of cultures and civilisations. These two civilisations, the Western and the Eastern one, are represented by Poland and Russia, respectively. Savchenko sees the processes of development of Belarusian nation and state in the context of struggle between the two civilisations in which one of them, Poland, was steadily losing ground to another, Russia, during the course of the nineteenth century. In this, he follows the ideas of the Polish sociologist Ryszard Radzik (Radzik, 2000) who elaborated on this approach in his books and articles.

From a wide variety of theories of civilizations, the author chose the concepts of Samuel Huntington and Vaclav Belohradky both of which view civilisations as inevitably separate from one another and mutually exclusive. Savchenko seems to utterly overlook the concept of Belarus as a borderland of civilisations developed by Elżbieta Smótkowa, a philologist and the first ambassador of Poland to Belarus, and Anna Engelking, an anthropologist (Smótkowa, Engelking, 2007). This concept emphasises the role of various religious denominations and civilisational peculiarities as mutually complementary rather than exclusive on the level of local communities. However, the scholar from Rhode Island is more interested in generalisations on the macro level, i. e., the level of civilisations.

From a methodological point of view, Savchenko's book conforms to Talcott Parsons's model of society that he combines with the three approaches to the study of borderland: the geographical one (the presence of a population belonging to one civilisation in the territory of another); the ability of various social groups to be able to adopt the patterns of behaviour and culture of a civilisation different from their own; the third approach emphasises the multilateral character of interaction between the local normative structures and the ones that were borrowed from another culture or civilisation.

According to Savchenko, these normative structures are embodied in the institutions of borderland society. Among the latter, he lists the state, ruling elite, political system and economy. The focus of his analysis is the evolution of these institutions. One should bear in mind that such an approach leaves open several important questions, e.g., which elements of a local borderland culture were primordial? To what extent were they "eastern" or "western" by their character before they started to interact with external influences during the process of change within the institutions of the borderland society?

Savchenko uses the concept of "cultural neighbourhood" to explain why Belarus lags behind Lithuania or Estonia in its integration into European political and cultural space (p.16). Unlike Belarus, both Lithuania and Estonia were the part of a rather favourable neighbourhood. He alleges that Lithuania saw itself as part of a Germanic-Scandinavian (!?) neighbourhood for its further integration into the EU and NATO whereas Estonia could rely on support from Finland. Nevertheless, as Savchenko insists, Belarus lacks a proper cultural neighbourhood to support its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

The author primarily relies on secondary literature and cites no archival sources or poll results with only one exception when he mentions interviews with some members of urban Belarusian intellectual community while discussing local economy (p. 181-182).

The book consists of three large chapters subdivided into several parts. The first chapter is titled "The Making of a Borderland." Here Savchenko in anticipation of a further argument makes a very interesting comparison of interwar Baltic independent republics with Belarus after 1991. The interwar experiment with parliamentarism and super democratic constitutions in the case of the Baltics eventually proved to be more successful in its long-term effects and more fruitful than the post-Soviet Belarusian one. In Belarus, in Savchenko's words, even if one accepts that an experiment with democracy indeed took place in the early years of independence, it proved to be rather limited, did not have long-term effects and subsequently led to the formation of an authoritarian regime.

The formation of authoritarian regimes in Lithuania under its president Antanas Smetona in 1926, in Latvia under Kārlis Ulmanis, and in Estonia under Konstantin Päts in 1934 notwithstanding, followed by the events of the 1990s, showed that the experience of interwar independence and democratic parliamentarism helped the Baltics on their path towards democracy and membership in Euro-Atlantic structures.

Savchenko begins his analysis of formation of borderland in the sixteenth century. According to him, a double transformation took place in Europe at that time, the formation of nations and modernisation. Thus, he altogether leaves the historical events and process taking place in Belarus before sixteenth century beyond the scope of his study. However, that in its turn renders the statement about perpetual nature of Belarus as a borderland vague.

Savchenko views the developments of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries within the framework of his methodology. After scrutinising the tendencies in political institutions and economy he comes to a conclusion that the weakness of Belarusian cities and burghers destined the upper class of land-owning magnates and middle and lower gentry to play a greater role in preservation and cultivation of Western institutions, cultural models and fashions in Belarus. The author in fact denies such a role to Belarusian peasantry, which formed the majority of the population at that time. The later development of the Grand

Duchy of Lithuania, the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the abolition of the Church Union by the Russian imperial authorities in the nineteenth century all meant an increase of the Russian influence in Belarus and a retreat of the Polish one.

The next chapter is titled "Ex Orient Lux: the Belarusian National State and the Soviet Union." It focuses on the Belarusian national project and the historical alternatives available to Belarusian national elites in the early twentieth century. The fact that Belarusian national statehood was realised in the Soviet form is not the most important point that Savchenko makes here, he rather stresses the failure of Belarusian national elites to monopolise, in Weberian terms, the legitimate use of violence in Belarusian territories. This actually determined the nature of subsequent relations between Belarusian nationalism and political power in the twentieth century (p. 71).

Savchenko clearly overestimates either pro- or anti-Polish character of Belarusian Christian Democracy. Its press and ideology were neither Polish-oriented nor Polonophile. One can term Christian Democrats' attitude towards Poland and Poles as pragmatic. They gave much importance to the experience of Poles during the nineteenth century's partition era. It was of much interest for Belarusian national intellectuals in many respects such as working out the strategy of Belarusian nation building, establishing national institutions and network organisations, creating favourable conditions for a national civil society.

Savchenko underlines a great role played by the Western factors in Belarusian nation building. Therefore, it is no wonder he extensively cites and makes use of concepts by Radzik and other Polish authors. However, his statement about the absence of rural sociological surveys in interwar Poland is incorrect. Specialist from as far afield as rural sociology, anthropology of culture and social change were actively conducting fieldwork in interwar Western Belarus (Chałasiński, 1938). There were also specific forms of "surveys" of loyalty and national identity among Belarusian population conducted at the request of Polish authorities and security services (Wysłouch, 1939; Zaremba, 1939).

One can only agree with the author when he states that "*Soviet modernity, based on ideas and technology borrowed from the West (and in some cases already discarded in their birthplace), came to Belarus in its Russian incarnation*" (p. 4). Again, Savchenko points to the resilience of Soviet institutions in the wake of WW II. According to him, the war brought

about favourable conditions for a national myth that had a profound impact on Belarusian perception of the Soviet social order. The post-war modernisation further strengthened the legitimacy of the Soviet rule in the eyes of Belarusians.

The third and the last chapter "Borderland Forever: Modern Belarus" focuses on the late Soviet period and the developments in Soviet Belarusian economy and society. During those years, according to Savchenko, the majority of Belarusians "saw no evil" in Soviet order as they largely benefited from the previous Soviet industrialisation and urbanisation.

It is important to note that the author's focus in this chapter shifts from the analysis of institutions to the ability of Belarusian society to produce its own middle class, a group of owners of businesses and professionals independent from the state. Savchenko points to the weakness of this group as a factor for consolidation and resilience of today's political regime in Belarus.

Bearing all these in mind, one can almost read between the lines of the book an aphorism attributed to the legacy of the historian and sociologist Barrington Moore, Jr.: "*No bourgeois party, no democracy*" (Moore, 1974). His approach to the study of social change is obviously very deterministic which many of his critics did not fail to notice. His model of transition to modernity is incompatible with the historical experience of many Western, Northern and East-Central European nations. Nevertheless, Moore's ideas are still very current and it is hardly a surprise. His analysis of the role of landlords and peasants in transition to modernity and the choice of political model of either democracy or dictatorship by various societies is still attractive today.

But the analysis based on Moore's model should avoid methodological reductionism. The scholar from Rhode Island does not attempt to rethink Moore's model (whose name and books he does not mention even once) and adapt it to the peculiarities of Belarusian economy and culture but analysed only one aspect of a rather complex problem: the elites. It is unlikely that it was Savchenko's original intention to reduce all those peculiarities to this component but his analysis makes just such an impression.

A large part of the third chapter covers a lengthy analysis of Belarusian inflation economy of the late 1990s and early 2000s. One cannot but notice that no matter how necessary and timely this analysis is, it

is an obstacle for a comprehensive study of the preconditions of formation of the middle classes in Belarus. The author provides no empirical data, tables or charts to support his theses. Savchenko just suffices it to say that the preventive policies of the regime are the main roadblock for the middle classes in Belarus to emerge. However, this does not seem to exhaust the list of other possible factors.

The part of the chapter three titled "Political Economy of Institutional Symbiosis: Belarus and Russia Building the Future Together" is indeed an interesting one. Here Savchenko stresses that thanks to the restoration of the old Soviet-era supply chains, increasing exports of Belarusian goods to Russia, cheap oil prices, the Belarusian economy started to grow again, some industries could afford to modernise themselves, and the levels of investment into them somewhat increased. Anyway, chances for a fundamental overhaul of the economy were missed. Thus, the "institutional symbiosis" between Belarus and Russia is undergoing and will further undergo adjustments and these adjustments are not in Belarus's favour, as Savchenko believes.

Savchenko sees the absence of other than Soviet political experience as one of the reasons of consolidation of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's political regime. Savchenko contradicts himself as in the previous chapter he describes the interwar history of Western Belarus where Belarusians gained voting rights to participate in parliamentary elections for the first time in their history. In that case, his thesis looks vague.

Questionable, too, is the author's statement that "*neither the first [Russia], nor the second [Poland] are interested in the preservation of the independence of their smaller neighbour.*" Savchenko overlooks the significant role played by the ideas of the editor-in-chief of the Paris-based quarterly "Kultura" Jerzy Giedrojc in shaping of the Polish foreign policy vis-a-vis its eastern neighbours including Belarus. Poland's foreign policy is based on the idea of support of an independent and sovereign Belarus as a part of the future united Europe (Snyder, 2003). Author's assessment of the post-war population exchange between Poland and Soviet Belarus as ethnic cleansing is incorrect. Latest studies of this problem do not allow making such a categorical assessment (Vialiki, 2005; Mironowicz, Tokc, Radzik, 2005).

Savchenko tries to estimate the likely scenarios of the future for Belarus pointing to various possible factors of change. These include such traditional institutions like the Roman Catholic Church or the

new ones like the internet. The growing influence of the Protestant denominations should be taken into consideration, too. However, it is hard to definitely assess their potential for a social change today.

Belarusian peasantry is almost absent from Savchenko's analysis. This can be partially explained by the post-Soviet emphasis on the elites in humanities and social sciences. The "masses" and peasants, too, became of secondary importance. The previous focus on the masses seemed a vestige of the Soviet era to most of Belarusian researchers, that is why the focus of the studies inevitably shifted to elites. The author missed an opportunity to use a more elaborate approach to study the preconditions for transition of societies from agrarian to capitalist and pluralist ones represented by Ernest Gellner. The peculiarities of East-Central European nations and their peasantries in their transition to a capitalist modernity has long been a subject of scholarly reflections (Gellner, 1989: 154-170).

The scholar from Rhode Island lays stress on just one, i. e. Western dimension of the nation-building process in Belarus, while in contemporary research quite a different view gains currency – the one that tends to emphasise the interaction between the various cultural factors and civilisational vectors rather than conflict between them. A good case in point is the interaction between West Russism and Belarusian national movement (Tereshkovich, 2004: 134-144).

Andrew Savchenko makes an interesting attempt to present his own version of history of Belarus as a borderland over five centuries based on contemporary literature and some available sources. He met only partial success but one also has to acknowledge his contribution to the analysis of the modern Belarusian economic model and his observations about some of the social tendencies in the country.

Both Savchenko's study and his methodology are interesting examples of researcher's uncertainty. He seeks to simplify his research and its subject matter by using highly disputable and dubious civilisation paradigm. At the same time, his study is an example of how such an uncertainty facilitates the popularisation of a theoretical approach formulated in a neighbouring country (by this I mean Radzik's concepts) among the international English-speaking community of scholars.

In Western academic culture, a study is not the result of the efforts by just one individual scholar, and Savchenko credits many of his colleagues for advice, support and help in reading the manuscript.

Considering all the peer reviews, responses and references, his book appears as a litmus test of how at least a section of Western academics view Belarus.

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