



BELARUS AT THE CROSSROADS OF AN ERA **by Aleh Dziarnovich**

The years 1990-1991 were a crossroads of historical epochs for Belarus. During this historically very short period, Belarus experienced several cardinal changes — the collapse of the socialist economy, social and political awakening, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of an independent Belarus, and the start of profound socio-economic and political reforms.

A Conservative Approach to Perestroika and the Fallout from the Chernobyl Disaster



Schoolchildren from contaminated areas of the Chernobyl region at the Minsk-2 airport before flying to Italy on holiday, early 1990s

In the late 1980s, Belarus looked like one of the most conservative parts of the USSR on its European territory. This image was formed through the position of the BSSR authorities towards political and social problems in the country during the period of Perestroika. The authorities of the BSSR were the least inclined to reform the economy and social structure.



Dziady requiem rally, 30 October 1988, Minsk. From vytoki.net

On the one hand, such a conservative policy could for some time slow down the deterioration of the living conditions of the people of Belarus; on the other hand, it did not allow an adequate response to the challenges of the time. A bright example of such a situation was response to the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster on April 26, 1986. One third of the territory of Belarus was covered with radioactive substances, and nearly one fifth of the country's population - 2.2 million people - found themselves contaminated land. Over five years, Belarus saw a 22-fold increase in thyroid cancer among children. The Soviet leadership failed to react promptly to the events and to comprehend the scale of the tragedy. Many people who found themselves in the radioactively contaminated zone, but were not subject to mandatory evacuation, were abandoned to their fate. Depression, psychological and social, was one of the most striking phenomena among residents of such regions.

Many were forced to save their health and lives by choosing to leave their former places of residence. Thus, Chernobyl victims, including residents of affected areas, displaced persons, and those disabled by the disaster, formed a substantial portion of vulnerable groups during the Transit. Additionally, during this period, other at-risk groups emerged from various spheres: social and professional (engineers, tech

nical staff, and large enterprise workers, along with a significant rural population), gender and demographic (primarily women, youth, and retirees), and national and religious minorities.

Economic and Social Divide: The Struggles of Peasantry and Large Enterprise Workers

One of the most affected social groups as a result of the transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s was the peasantry. The previous system of management in the agrarian sphere centered on large collective farms, had fallen into disrepair. Low efficiency in the agrarian sector was recognised by the Soviet leadership, which used the name "Food Problem" for this purpose. But no clear perspective for the future was offered. Belarusian villagers found themselves in the middle of this economic and social divide, which further aggravated their situation. Although certain signs of a new era began to emerge in the countryside: the emergence and slow spread of larger scale farming.



April 1991, 320,000 workers marched in columns to the Government House in Minsk, from Mikalaj Pačkajeŭ

Another vulnerable group, whose situation has worsened considerably, are workers in large enterprises. This was due to the collapse of the former system of economic management and the sharp decline in production during 1991 and the following years (the country's GDP in 1995 was 65% of its 1990 level). But the scientific and creative intelligentsia also found themselves in a difficult position. The Soviet system of scientific and cultural organization had provided funding for large scientific and artistic projects from the state, and, in the context of a deepening economic crisis, there were fewer and fewer opportunities for such funding. Many musicians and artists were forced to look for opportunities to

work abroad as a means of survival. The same tendency was apparent among scientists and engineers, but many simply left to pursue other occupations which did not require such qualifications. The rise of "shuttle traders" — individuals importing goods for resale — became widespread. People from various professions, struggling to adapt to new economic realities, joined this growing trade.

On the other hand, the perception of human rights, which encompassed more than just social rights, began to take shape in the mass consciousness during the Perestroika period. The deterioration in citizens' economic situation went hand in hand with the emergence of ideas concerning national minorities and gender rights.

Unemployment and Inflation: Rising Protests and Asserting Rights in the Early 1990s

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of unemployment became prominent during this transition period. No able-bodied demographic or social group of workers escaped unemployment. But unemployment was most widespread among women, with women accounting for 80% of the unemployed in 1991.

Unusual for the inhabitants of Belarus was the great increase in prices. Besides, it occurred in the absence of social protection during the transition to a market economy. On the other hand, the degree of liberalisation of political relations achieved during the years of perestroika enabled different sections of society to assert their rights. On April 3-5, 1991, a number of large Belarusian enterprises stopped their work, about 320,000 workers marched in columns to the Government House in Minsk. Orsha workers took more radical steps - they staged a "sit-in" strike on the railway tracks, thus blocking the movement of trains. In total, according to official data, in 1990 and the first half of 1991, there were 247 protests in Belarus, which were attended by approximately half a million people. Initially the protests were spontaneous, but gradually the labour movement was joined by some political parties and public organisations, which gave the social protests a political dimension.

The short "Window of Freedom": Opportunities and Challenges during the Transition Period

However, when speaking about the increasing economic difficulties for many social and socio-cultural groups in Belarus during the Perestroika period, it should be noted that this was a time of social dynamics, relatively open discussions and the belief of many people that achieving a better life was possible. For the first time in recent decades independent public organisations and the beginnings of political parties began to arise. Believers were finally granted religious freedom.



The clothing market at the Dynamo stadium, 1996.
Photo by A. Tolochko, BelTA

In these difficult and contradictory conditions a modern Belarus was born, with its own achievements and failures. Transition created additional problems for vulnerable groups (Chernobyl victims, rural inhabitants and workers of large enterprises, scientific intellectuals, national minorities, etc.). The USSR's collapse significantly impacted the Belarusian population, disrupting their customary way of life. In macroeconomic terms, a notable shift occurred in 1991 when Belarus transitioned from a major exporter to an importer of commodity products. But, as many of these people admit, 1991 also brought new opportunities for them. From 1991 to 1994, a "window of freedom" emerged, enabling legal private economic and public political activity. This experience

of freedom held significant value for Belarusian society. After the 1994 presidential election and the onset of an authoritarian regime, the gained economic freedoms and civil experience allowed Belarusian society to function despite limited political rights.

TIMELINE

26.04.1986

The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, one of the biggest man-made disasters in the history of mankind, which had fundamental social and political consequences

19.10.1988

Creation of the Historical-Educational Society for the Remembrance of Victims of Stalinism "Martirologue Belarus" and the Organisational Committee of the Belarusian Popular Front for Perestroika "Revival" (BPF)

30.10.1988

Dispersal of the requiem rally "Dziady" (Day of Remembrance of the Ancestors)

26.01.1990

The Belarusian language was granted the status of the state language (adoption of the Law on Languages in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic)

04.03.1990

Elections to the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR, the only elections in Soviet Belarus that were held on an alternative basis

27.06.1990

Adoption by the Supreme Soviet of the Belarusian SSR of the Declaration on State Sovereignty of the Belarusian SSR

03-09.04.1991

Mass strikes and demonstrations in connection with price hikes

19-21.08.1991

"August putsch": an attempted coup d'etat in the USSR; the authorities of the BSSR actually supported the coup plotters (GKChP)

19.09.1991

The country received a new name, the Republic of Belarus, and new state symbols

08.12.1991

The signing of the Belovezhskaya Agreement, which put an end to the existence of the USSR

26.01.1994

Speaker of Parliament Stanislav Shushkevich is dismissed

23.06.1994, 10.07.1994

The first presidential elections in Belarus, bringing Alexander Lukashenko to power