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# The legacy of sovereignty: how the interwar years have shaped democratic transition in Lithuania and Belarus

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The study of democratic transition, or what makes some nations more conducive to the rise of democratic institutions than others, is vitally important in the modern world. Lithuania and Belarus are generally overlooked by literature on the subject of democratisation, but, due to their long historical ties and very different political paths since they established independence from the USSR, they provide an interesting case study into the historical reasons for the adoption of certain political systems. In brief, this article will deal with why since 1991 Lithuania has become democratic, whilst Belarus has become increasingly autocratic. To do this I compared the historical legacy of the interwar years in both states and focussed on the effects this period had on post-independence politics. This research revealed crucial differences, in that Lithuania's experience of independent statehood laid the foundations for the later transition to democracy, whilst the failure to establish a sovereign Belarusian state made continued authoritarian rule far more likely. Overall this showed the importance of historical legacies when attempting to establish democracy.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union massive changes have swept Central and Eastern Europe. Whilst all of the states in this area have been affected, there has been a great deal of disparity in how they have adapted to these new circumstances. This is especially true within the successor states of the USSR itself, where different situations have led to the emergence of very different

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political regimes. Over the course of this paper I shall compare how two of these nations, Lithuania and Belarus, have coped with these changes, and examine how the events of the twentieth century, and in particular the interwar period of 1918 to 1939, have shaped their different political development. Whilst these countries have a large amount of shared history, not just in their mid-twentieth century dominance by the Soviet Union, but also previously in the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Rus' and later in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Tsarist Russian Empire, they seem to have taken very divergent political paths since they gained independence in 1991. Whilst Lithuania has become oriented towards the "West", gaining membership of organisations such as the EU and NATO and attempting to portray itself as a model Central European democracy, Belarus has become something of a pariah state, described as "the last dictatorship in Europe"[1], and with far closer ties to the Russian Federation than any of its neighbours. In this paper I will look at how different the political outlooks of these two states really are, as well as how much the very different experiences of the twentieth century have affected this.

Perhaps the biggest political difference between Lithuania and Belarus is the fact that the former is considered a "democracy", and is thus admitted as an equal to a large number of international organisations, whilst the latter is not. However, before looking at the reasons for this, we must first define exactly what a democracy is, and to what extent the two nations adhere to this ideal. In his study of the "wave of democratisation" that occurred across the globe between 1974 and 1990, *The Third Wave*, Samuel Huntingdon provides a working description of democracy that will form the basis of my comparative judgements in this article. He claims that a state has achieved transition to a democratic system when

[1] David Marples, "Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship?", in *The EU and Belarus: Between Moscow & Brussels*, ed. Ann Lewis (London: Federal Trust for Education and Research, 2002), 31-49.

> *Its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote. So defined, democracy involves the two dimensions - contestation and participation - that Robert Dahl saw as critical to his realistic democracy or polyarchy. It also implies the existence of those civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organise that are necessary to political debate and the conduct of electoral campaigns.*[1]

This definition provides a number of benchmarks that can easily be compared between the two states, most notably the contestability and fairness of elections, but also the existence of the civil and political freedoms required for these to exist.

In their final election observation mission to Lithuania in 1996, the Organisation for Society and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) declared the parliamentary elections held in that year to have been "generally efficient" and conducted under "democratic spirit".[2] In 1997 the European Commission supported this view, declaring that "Lithuania demonstrates the characteristics of a democracy, with stable institutions guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities," and thus passed the political requirements for EU membership as laid out in the Copenhagen criteria.[3] In contrast, Belarus has failed to meet even the most basic democratic

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[1] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 7.

[2] OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, "Final Report on the Parliamentary Elections in Lithuania, 20 October and 10 November 1996", Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, http:// www.osce.org/odihr (accessed 10 June 2008), 2.

[3] European Commission, "Agenda 2000 – Commission Opinion on Lithuania's Application for Membership of the European Union", European Commission.

standards. In the most recent elections of 2006, when Belarus' authoritarian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, claimed to have received 82.6% of the votes cast, the OSCE criticised almost all aspects of the election campaign.[4] The election therefore had none of the elements of a democratic contest as described by Huntington. There was never really even a pretence of contestability, as opposition candidates were harassed, and even arrested, and the odds were stacked steeply in Lukashenko's favour. Meanwhile, the participation of the electorate was negated by the irregularities in the voting procedure that made it impossible to tell whether the votes had been counted in a legitimate fashion. Finally the "civil and political freedoms" that Huntington claimed were necessary in an electoral campaign, such as the freedoms to "speak, publish, assemble, and organise" were almost entirely absent, as the state clamped down on any overt sign of opposition. Whilst this election was perhaps the most blatantly biased to have occurred in Belarus, it is indicative of the lack of democracy that exists there at present, and is simply one more step down the authoritarian path that began with Lukashenko's election in 1994. This difference is supported by other literature, most notably Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* series, which describes Lithuania as a "Consolidated Democracy"[5], whilst Belarus is said to be a "Consolidated Authoritarian Regime", with exceptionally low ratings for both National Governance and Electoral Process, two of the most important aspects of democratisation[6].

Lukashenko gained the presidency unexpectedly in 1994, defeating both the nationalist and Communist candidates by a large margin thanks to public

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http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/pdf/dwn/opinions/lithuania/li-op_en.pdf (accessed 10 June 2008), 15.

[4] OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, "Republic of Belarus Presidential Elections, 19 March 2006:OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report", Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2006/06/19393_en.pdf (accessed 10 June 2008).

[5] Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2006 – Lithuania," Freedom House Europe, http://www.freedomhouse.hu/pdfdocs/lithuania2006.pdf (accessed 10 June 2008), 1.

[6] Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2006 – Belaurs," Freedom House Europe, http://www.freedomhouse.hu/pdfdocs/belarus2006.pdf (accessed 10 June 2008), 2.

dissatisfaction with the political elites, an unashamedly populist manifesto, and skilful manipulation of his role as the head of the parliamentary special anti-corruption committee, which gave him remarkable scope to attack his opponents. Following his election, he managed to secure an unassailable position in Belarusian politics, using the strong presidency, which had been created by the Communist-dominated legislature under the assumption that it would be Kebich, one of their own, who would be elected, to his advantage. Using populist rhetoric, as well as undoubted grievances amongst the Belarusian population, Lukashenko held a number of referenda which aimed to strengthen his position and weaken his opponents. These included polls concerning bringing back slightly modified versions of the Soviet flag and emblem, reinstating Russian as one of Belarus' official languages and for creating a union with the Russian Federation. The results of these referenda, all of which were convincing victories for the new president, effectively removed the opposition as a political force, revealing their lack of popularity amongst the electorate and reversing even the modest changes that they had brought about since the late 1980s. Lukashenko also used referenda to maintain his hold on the presidency in other ways, using them as a popular mandate to lengthen presidential terms and eventually to change the constitution to allow incumbent presidents to run for unlimited terms in office. Together with his complete control of the state bureaucracy and media as well as the lack of competitive elections in Belarus, this has allowed him to become an authoritarian ruler who has proved very resistant to any changes or attempts to replace him.

By contrast, Lithuania rapidly adapted to a democratic system, and one commentator wrote that

> *By the end of 1994, the mechanisms of democratic government had been reinstated and Lithuania did not seem to be heading towards the imposition of an authoritarian or nationalistic regime. Lithuania's government and legislature were elected by the process of free and fair elections; when necessary, her leaders*

*admitted defeat gracefully and campaigned ethically for re-election*.[7]

Complaints have been levelled about the stability of the party political system, as the simple left-right cleavage of the early 1990s, between the ex-communist Lithuanian Democratic Labour Party (LDLP) and the Homeland Union, a conservative party created from the Sajūdis independence movement, fell apart in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was due to the conservatives' increased fragmentation as well as the appearance of populist parties, such as the Labour Party, who capitalised on the increasing disillusionment of the electorate.[8] This was a common occurrence across Central Europe at this time, however, as the umbrella organisations who had been instrumental in pushing for independence, such as Sajūdis in Lithuania or *Solidarność* in Poland, lacked the ideological unity to survive as a single political force after Communism's collapse, whilst the hardships associated with transition drove many to seek answers from parties outside the traditional spectrum. One area where Lithuania can be seen as coping much better than Belarus is in how it deals with these charismatic, populist politicians. Whilst figures such as Rolandas Paksas, the surprise winner of the 2003 presidential election, or Viktor Uspaskich, the founder of the populist Labour Party which gained the highest number of seats of any political party in the 2004 parliamentary elections, may have had the potential to damage the democratic system in Lithuania in the same way the charismatic outsider Lukashenko did after his 1994 victory in Belarus, in both cases the system was strong enough to endure. In Paksas' case investigations into allegations of ties between him and a "controversial Russian-born businessman", Yuri Borisov, as well as to Russia's foreign intelligence service, led to his impeachment in 2004, making him the first European head of

[7] Alexandra Ashbourne, *Lithuania: The Rebirth of a Nation 1991-1994* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 1999), 167.

[8] Ainė Ramonaitė, "The Development of the Lithuanian Party System: From Stability t Perturbation", in *Post-Communist EU Member States: Party and Party Systems*, ed. Susanne Jungerstam-Mulders (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 69.

state to be removed from office in this way.[9] Uspaskich, meanwhile, left the Labour Party and subsequently fled the country in 2006, following a series of financial scandals that resulted in the authorities issuing a warrant for his arrest, should he return to Lithuania.[10] Whilst both cases reveal the flaws in Lithuania's democratic system, especially with regards to corruption, they at least show that people are prepared to investigate and challenge those in power, unlike in Belarus.

Overall, we can conclude that whilst Lithuania has made the transition to a relatively consolidated, if still somewhat flawed, democracy, Belarus has become ever more authoritarian since Lukashenko's rise to power in 1994. In this article I shall attempt to examine precisely why this has been the case, and, especially, what role the events of the twentieth century have had in shaping this divergent political development. I have chosen the twentieth century as a focus for my study as although both nations gained a degree of national consciousness in the nineteenth century, it was only after the defeat of the Russian Empire in the First World War that either had a chance to assert their national independence. Some crucial differences did exist though, most notably the fact that Lithuanian is a Baltic language and Belarusian a Slavonic one. This, coupled with the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania and the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus, meant that Belarusians were far more culturally and linguistically susceptible to Russification than their Baltic neighbours.

My study shall focus on the interwar years as perhaps the difference between Lithuania and Belarus that proved most critical for their later political developments was their experience of independence in the this period. In

[9] Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2005 – Lithuania," Freedom House Europe, http://www.freedomhouse.hu/pdfdocs/lithuania2005.pdf (accessed 10 June 2008), 388.
[10] BBC News Online, "Lithuania Seeks Minister's Arrest, 30 August 2006," British Broadcasting Corporation, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5299786.stm (accessed 10 June 2008).

Lithuania's case, the chaos caused by the First World War and the Russian Revolutions of 1917 allowed for the creation of a *Taryba*, or national council, which was initially formed in Petrograd in March, but quickly became disillusioned by the Russian provisional government's stance on Lithuanian independence. The centre of the Lithuanian nationalist movement subsequently shifted to German territory, both because Germany was moderately more sympathetic to the idea of independence and due to the pragmatic reason that at that point much of Lithuania was under German control at that time. The *Taryba* unanimously passed a Lithuanian Act of Independence on February 16, 1918, marking Lithuania's reappearance on the map of Europe.[11] In Belarusian territory corresponding organisations, a Rada and an All-Belorussian National Congress, were established in Russian-controlled Minsk, but were rapidly driven underground by the Bolsheviks following the October Revolution. The partitioning of Belarusian lands in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk allowed the Congress to re-emerge, however, as Minsk was transferred to German control, allowing for the declaration of independence of a Belorussian National Republic (BNR) on March 25, 1918.[12]

By the spring of 1918, therefore, Belarus (Belorussia) and Lithuania nominally existed as independent states within the German-controlled territories of Eastern Europe. However, both states were in a perilous position, as the international atmosphere into which they emerged was not conducive to the survival of small, independent states in their location. Whilst the Germans had grudgingly accepted both states' declarations of independence, they were not inclined to grant them complete independence, seeking instead a buffer between themselves and Bolshevik Russia, and reforms were very rapidly undertaken that would have led to both Lithuania and Belarus becoming little more than German vassal states, including the election of a German Prince as King Mindaugas II of Lithuania. In Russia both the Red and White forces in the ongoing Civil War represented threats to the states' nascent independence,

[11] Zigmantas Kiaupa, *The History of Lithuania* (Vilnius: Baltos Lankos, 2004), 235-239.
[12] Ivan S. Lubachko, *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule 1917-1957* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 12-24.

whether in terms of a resurgent Tsarist Russian Empire, keen to re-establish control of Russia's Western borders, or an expansionist Communist state. Meanwhile, to the West, the re-emergence of Poland created further dangers, as figures within the Polish government considered Belarusian and Lithuanian territories to be a part of a greater Poland, based on the Lublin Union of 1569. The Western powers of France, the UK and the USA were happy to appease Polish sentiments, as they sought to establish a strong Poland as a buffer to Bolshevik Russia and had no reason to support what they saw as Germany's client states in the East. For both nations the immediate situation was bleak, and eventually only Lithuania would survive as a sovereign state.

Shortly after Belarus' declaration of independence, Germany's defeat on the Western Front meant that all German forces had to be withdrawn from the former territories of the Russian Empire in Eastern Europe, an event that led the Soviet government to declare the Brest-Litovsk treaty null and void and to re-occupy the BNR. Lenin's government had pursued a relatively pragmatic line on the nationalities policy from early on in the Russian Revolution, seeking to use nationalism as a way to create alliances with other groups within both the Russian and German Empires, and to create client states that could ultimately be sovietised. However, many members of the BNR government chose to withdraw alongside the German troops, and after invading Belarusian territory the Soviets rapidly moulded the BNR into a Communist state. The Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (the BSSR) was created on February 5, 1919, only two months after Soviet troops had entered Minsk. Whilst the BSSR was nominally an independent state, with a constitution of its own that did not mention Russia and recognition from its large Eastern neighbour, the dominance of Russians within the Belorussian Communist Party meant that this sovereignty was very limited in real terms. Subsequent wars between Russia and Poland led to the Belarusian nation again being partitioned by the rival powers as a part of the Treaty of Riga on March 18, 1921. From then until the outbreak of World War Two in 1939, which again altered the borders in Eastern Europe, the Belarusian nation was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union, two powers which, for much of the period, were openly hostile to ideas of Belarusian nationalism. In Poland, the Western Belarusians suffered harsh repressions from 1924

onwards, under the increasingly nationalistic rule of the authoritarian Józef Piłsudski, and throughout the late 1920s and 1930s Belarusian political, cultural and religious organisations were suppressed. By 1939 the Belarusians were still "largely unpoliticised", making the creation of any mass nationalist movements very difficult, and calling into question the existence of a true Belarusian nation beyond the nationalist intelligentsia.[13]

Things proved even worse on the Eastern side of the partition. After participating in the creation of the USSR in 1922, Belarusian nationalism underwent a brief "golden age" under the relative liberalism of the New Economic Policy (NEP). An era of "Belarusification" occurred, as the growth of Belarusian language and culture occurred on all levels of society. Reconciliation even occurred with those members of the BNR who had fled with the German troops in 1918, who dissolved their government in exile and returned to their homeland. Despite its inauspicious beginnings, for a while in the 1920s it looked as though the BSSR could have evolved into a *de facto* nation state, albeit in a Soviet context. Aleksandr Tsvikevich, a former President of the BNR, captured the optimistic mood, saying "it looks as if all of us felt that there in the East, including Soviet Belorussia, together with tremendous destruction, in a fog of the bloody struggle, the real truth is shining through."[14] This was not to last long, however. Stalin's accession to power by 1928 led to a new phase of harsh repressions against Belarusian nationalists, many of whom also had the misfortune to be proponents of the NEP's economic liberalism. Those BNR members who had returned from exile were executed as Polish spies, whilst the Belarusian education system was decimated. By the end of 1929 the whole Belorussian nationalist leadership had been arrested,[15] and by 1934 Belarusian

[13] Norman Davies, God's Playground: A History of Poland. Volume II: 1795 to the Present (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 303.

[14] Ivan S. Lubachko, *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule 1917-1957* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 83.

[15] Nicholas Platonovich Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), 146.

nationalism had been effectively destroyed.[16] By annihilating virtually the entire intelligentsia in the BSSR, including almost all of the Belarusian nationalists, Stalin dealt a severe blow to the nationalist cause, from which it would prove very difficult to recover.

Events over the same period in Lithuania provided much more fertile grounds for the nationalist movement. Unlike Belarus, Lithuania managed to preserve her independence against the large number of threats ranged against her, including the Soviet Russians, German Bermondists seeking to re-establish a German *Reich* in the East, and, perhaps most dangerously of all, a Poland nostalgic for the days of the Commonwealth which wanted to reunite the states, by force if necessary. Although Lithuania did not survive with her territorial integrity intact, as Vilnius, her historic capital, and the areas around it were lost to the Polish troops of General Lucjan Żeligowski in 1920, at least a large rump section remained independent during the inter-war period. From 1926 onwards the increasingly authoritarian rule of Antanas Smetona alienated many Lithuanians, but did little to suppress Lithuanian culture and education. This led to the growth of patriotism throughout the nation, as a feeling of Lithuanian identity shifted from an elite to a far more popular level, away from the intelligentsia who had pushed for independence throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the general populace. There can be little doubt that the availability of Lithuanian language education, from primary to tertiary levels, was influential in this movement, as was the widespread availability of Lithuanian language literature, theatre and other examples of Lithuanian culture. As one commentator has said, "within a very short period – twenty years – Lithuania became Lithuanian", transforming into a genuine nation state.[17] Whilst the Soviet annexation of Lithuania in 1939-1940 brought this period to an end, it at least gave people something concrete with which they could compare life in the USSR, and a national myth they could hark back to.

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[16] Lubachko, *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule*, 118.

[17] Alfonsas Eidintas, Vytautas Žalys and Alfred Erich Senn, *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of the First Republic, 1918-1940* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan Press), 129.

On the eve of the Second World War Lithuania was a consolidated nation state, something Belarus was not.

These two very different experiences of nationhood in the interwar period led Lithuania and Belarus down very different paths after independence in the 1990s. As well as providing pro-independence groups, such as *Sajūdis*, with something definite to aim for in the years leading up to independence, the fact that a sovereign Lithuanian state had existed within living memory meant that the Lithuanian nationalists had a large group of supporters within the general population. Belarus, by contrast, had no historical memories of independence that could be drawn upon. Whilst a Belarusian state had never existed for any significant period of time outside the Russian, or latterly Soviet, sphere of influence, the Lithuanians had this to look back on, and although the democratic Lithuanian state had been relatively short-lived, it still gave them more experience of democratic systems than Belarusians. Past experiences also allowed Lithuania to learn from their mistakes, as although the Smetona dictatorship appeared benign when compared to the subsequent five decades of Soviet rule, the seizure of power that occurred in 1926 revealed the dangers of an overly-powerful presidency, whilst the rapid capitulation to Soviet threats in 1940 showed that authoritarian leadership did not always equate to strong leadership. Although it is difficult to judge the exact effects this had, the rise of Smetona in the 1920s may well have meant that the Lithuanians were less likely to sleepwalk into a dictatorship in the 1990s by handing over too much power to an executive figure. By contrast, the Belarusian people had only ever experienced the totalitarianism of the Tsarist and Soviet systems in the twentieth century, and were thus more accepting of a strong presidential system, a difference that can be seen throughout the post-communist world. The existence of an independent Lithuania also gave people something to compare the USSR against, which revealed that similar improvements could be achieved without the repression present in the Soviet system. This meant that Lithuanians had far less nostalgia for the Soviet past than the Belarusians, and were less likely to give up on reforms when they began to cause hardships.

The events of the interwar period also had very different effects on the nationalist movements in both states: whilst in Lithuania the nationalists went from strength to strength, in Belarus they were almost wiped out by the Stalinist purges. The return of the BNR leadership to the BSSR and their subsequent liquidation meant the end of a diaspora organisation that could have maintained a nationalist community outside Belarusian territory which could have provided assistance once independence was re-established. The gradual Soviet takeover of Lithuania, on the other hand, gave many nationalists the chance to escape to Germany and then travel on to other countries, especially Canada and the USA, forming a large and patriotic diaspora community which would provide Lithuania with valuable resources, both economic and human, once independence was reclaimed.

There can be little doubt that Belarus and Lithuania have taken very different political paths since they achieved independence in the early 1990s. Whilst Lithuania has become a functioning democracy, and has joined international organisations such as NATO and the EU, Belarus remains an international pariah, with strong links to the Russian Federation but almost nowhere else. Whilst this can partly be explained by cultural and religious differences, as Belarus is a Slavic Orthodox state, and thus has more in common with Russia than the primarily Catholic Lithuania, there can be little doubt that the experiences of both countries during the interwar period have played a crucial role in shaping post-independence politics. Later experiences, notably the partisan wars that occurred in both countries during and immediately after the Second World War and the rise of independence movements during the era of *perestroika* in the 1980s, would play a role in the countries' democratisation, or lack thereof, but the years from 1918 to 1939 would remain the foundation for these changes. Although the establishment of a democratic system in Lithuania was by no means inevitable, historical experiences during the interwar period meant that it was far more likely to occur than in Belarus.

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