

A Place like Minsk

Von Sovieticus

Belarus' is certainly not a place ranking high on the travelling list – not for businessmen, not for politicians, and certainly not for tourists. It is, yes, at the heart of Europe. It was, and remains, part of the USSR. It has a president who has a tendency to think that he can build a prosperous community going it all alone, ignoring world-wide integration and globalization. Because he cannot be absolutely sure if most of his compatriots share his visions, he sometimes assists them in making the right decisions for their own best. He, Mr. Lukashenko, a sports aficionado and shaper of state and social affairs of sorts, knows what is best.

In a way, the president displays a split program. He certainly wants to remain president as there is no one to match him and his capabilities, neither in his regime nor in the fragmented opposition. At the same time, he makes moves toward Russia and blames her for not readily accepting his suggestions for creating a united state. This is certainly a contradiction, yet most of the few people observing Belorussian matters tend to ignore this.

To be frank, the current state of affairs – be it in terms of the economy, integration, and participation – is rather deplorable. To be frank again, it is hard to explain in Western countries why, given this morass, anyone in the rest of the world should care. Still, there is a reason.

First, some Western companies, like Siemens, bother to be present there and to invest. The local representative, educated for five years at Odessa State University in the 80s, explains that it is possible to make money – given one knows how to operate in this environment. He knows how. His problem seems to be related more to convincing his management in Germany – against all common stereotypes – that it does pay to be there, than it is to convince Minsk authorities to agree to bargaining terms for doing business. Also, there is a stratum of managers ready to understand and execute mechanisms like corporate governance.

A second reason is the young people. In their majority, they seem to be open-minded and well educated. They know what is happening in the world at large. They are interested in travelling, in being educated and in operating in a Europe with permeating borders. This cannot be ignored. In this context, the existence of the European Humanities University is an asset. The rector, Academician Prof. Mikhailov, tries to steer a difficult course in a terrain where roadmaps often are missing. His is the only non-state university in this country. There also is a French and a German center, the latter going through a difficult time after its first director, Michael Staack, left his post to become professor in Munich.

Another development relevant to (some of the) young people is related to the unclear future of the OSCE mission. After the departure of the retiring head of the mission, Hans-Georg Wieck, last December, the successor still hasn't received authorization from the Minsk *vlasti*. Insiders suggest that Lukashenko is determined to exploit this situation in order to get rid of the mission altogether ... finally. This may be true or not, in any case the issue at hand is a stumbling block to some important projects. One of them is the CETAS program, created by Mikhailov and Wieck some 18 months ago as a masters program for international relations. This program started about a year ago, with some 15 students.

I had the pleasure to give a course there recently. Rarely have I experienced students so motivated and open-minded as those Minsk kids. Most of them female, they were flexible, well prepared, active, and constructive. After spending many hours with them, I was convinced more than before that in some five to seven years, this country will be there – in an integrated Europe with lots of problems, but not isolated anymore.

Some of these kids will attend FUB's summer school this July/August (FUBIS). This is an important contribution of Free University – more of a value in perspective than some of the formal cooperation agreements with State Universities.

So with these young people, Minsk and other regions of Belarus' have a chance to become a place. And to offer Lukashenko retirement as a trainer for ... Mogilev's ice hockey team.

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