

Stanislau Shushkevich, chairman of Belarus's Supreme Soviet (1991-1994)

Anna Sous, RFE/RL

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(This interview was conducted in Russian.)

Sous: I would like to quote from your book, "My Life: The Collapse and Resurrection of the USSR": "By signing the Belavezha Accords in the Russian president's hand and ratifying them in the Russian parliament, Russia has for the first time since 1794 recognized the independence of its adjacent colony Belarus." That was 1991. Russia, as you wrote, had recognized Belarus's independence for the first time. Afterwards, there came the Belarusian-Russian Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union. How significant a risk to Belarusian independence does Russia pose today?

Shushkevich: For the sake of keeping a hold on his personal power, our current illegitimate – I repeat, illegitimate – president will sell off anything, including Belarus. Even though he claims to be a supporter of Belarusian independence and so on. But all of his actions contradict that. First of all, there's no need to tackle the issue of Russian military presence [in Belarus]. There's no need to violate the constitution and send Belarusian military personnel abroad, because according to the constitution they cannot take part in any military action [abroad]. So the threat [to independence] is huge, because the governing principle from top to bottom is the old Soviet adage, "I'm the boss, you're a fool."

Sous: Is the price of Belarusian independence higher in 2015 than in 1991?

Shushkevich: It's possible to get on the road to independence. Russia's recognition of [Belarus's] independence, as you quoted from my book, came in December [1991], after the agreement to create the Commonwealth of Independent States was signed and ratified by the [Russian] Duma and by Belarus's parliament. I'm an avid supporter of [Russia's then-leader Boris] Yeltsin. Whatever his downsides, he strictly abided by the principle of a right to national statehood. Genuinely, not hypocritically. And that was the path to stick to. But [Belarusian President Alyaksandr] Lukashenka's only way to entrench himself and get Russia's support was to declare everyone an enemy of Russia. The Belarusian Popular Front? Enemy of Russia. All sorts of political groupings? Enemies of Russia. And Lukashenka is the only friend. One night a border marker goes up, the next morning it gets dug out of the ground [by Lukashenka] together with [Viktor] Chernomyrdin, [Russia's then-prime minister]. Such hypocrisy! Such showboating! I used to think that a highly educated man like [Vladimir] Putin wouldn't bother with the sort of nonsense that occupies a little-educated man like Lukashenka. It turns out it gives them an advantage over there [in Russia]. Back when Medvedev was president he denounced Lukashenka, but then they all suddenly decided that there's a big political

advantage to having a little tsar over here, a viceroy, basically. So the threat to Belarus's independence is very great. Comparing this to 1991, I wouldn't say the situation was better then. Then we remained very dependent on Russia due to inertia in all sorts of ways. Those issues had to be resolved with dignity. But dignity flew out the window very early on because Lukashenka declared his full allegiance [to Russia], not only in word but in deed.

Sous: In your book you wrote that in Soviet times Belarusians were more Soviet even than Russians. The subtitle – "Collapse and Resurrection" – is very metaphorical. Can you say when exactly the U.S.S.R. was resurrected in Belarus? Was it earlier or later than in Russia?

Shushkevich: The most astounding thing, if we analyze the situation... I'm a physicist by training. There's a whole series of criteria – independence and so on and so on... The Soviet Union didn't die. The most frightening thing is that it didn't die for a minute. What was supposed to be the point of post-Soviet reform? It was necessary to show that people could be masters of their own fate, could have political rights and immutable human rights. But here everything continued as before: "I'm the boss, you're a fool." This is the governing principle from top to bottom here, and as long as that's the case, [Belarus] remains the Soviet Union.

Sous: Can it die?

Shushkevich: It must die. It must die, but that will not happen without an effort by the Belarusian state, without an effort by the government and the Belarusian parliament. And that effectively does not exist.

Sous: Let's return to the days when you were the leader of Belarus. Ukraine's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, is a co-signer of the Belavezha Accords and also a participant in our "Russia & Me" project. When I asked him about the best and worst days in relations with Russia during his presidency, he said: "The good days were when Ukraine unconditionally agreed with Russia's proposals, but as soon as Ukraine would take its own, fundamentally important position, then frictions with Russia would crop up." In terms of bad and good days in relations with Russia when you were the head of the Belarusian state, what would you identify as the best and the worst days?

Shushkevich: Among the best I would say 1991, December, when Russia recognized Belarus's independence. Among the best I would say June 12, 1991, when Yeltsin was elected president by popular vote. His competitors were basically pro-empire, although they included some very respectable people, like [Nikolai] Ryzhkov. But what played a significant role was that the true supporter of democracy was Yeltsin. He faced extraordinary difficulties, and when he faced them we faced them too. Because he was under pressure from the Communists, from the left-wingers; he was forced to form a left-wing government; he was forced to get rid of his closest allies, including [Gennady]

Burbulis. [Yegor] Gaidar also had to go, because [his] reforms were running into trouble. And the reforms ran into trouble because people didn't have time to fully grasp [them]. It's difficult to name particular times [as good or bad]. What's most important is to have a trend in the right direction, to have us moving toward independence. If Lukashenka starts feeling that he is losing power, he will give Russia everything, Belarus included.

Sous: Stanislau Stanislavavich, you were very close with Boris Yeltsin and have called yourself his avid supporter. What are some of the fundamental differences between Yeltsin and Putin, and what do they have in common in terms of relations with Belarus?

Shushkevich: I believe Yeltsin is a great Russian. He had genuinely Russian indigenous weaknesses, but his genuinely Russian indigenous [positive] qualities were also strong. He was not hypocritical. You understand? He was not hypocritical, and Putin is a professional spy. Yeltsin was a professional builder, a professional foreman, a leader of people and so on and so on. And here we have a professional find-outer of people's quintessence. And he finds it out in the way needed by the KGB. The KGB is a depraved organization, because all the torture and the gulags were tied to this organization. But Yeltsin was great in his truthfulness. If he said take as much freedom – national freedom, I mean – as you want, as you can, [then he meant it]. There were difficulties. Weighing them against each other is impossible.

Sous: Did they have anything in common, as Russian leaders, in terms of Belarus? The Union State, after all, began under Yeltsin.

Shushkevich: I think Yeltsin had every reason in the world to hope that Lukashenka had some truth in him. He thought... I'll tell you why that was. At the start of Lukashenka's presidency, I was very well acquainted with Yeltsin's staff, with his colleagues. I asked them: "How can you allow Lukashenka to say such bad things about Yeltsin – that he's old already and that he's not really all there even...?" Something like that. And they said: "We thought long and hard about what to do. We're not going to submit a [diplomatic] letter of protest [over this]. Yeltsin was told, 'Boris Nikolayevich, you are a tsar, the head of a great country, while this [Lukashenka] is the chief of a small, wild tribe of sorts, so he blathers on about whatever he likes.'" Unlike Yeltsin... Yeltsin never clamped down on journalists, after all; Yeltsin didn't annihilate opposition politicians. That wasn't the case here.

Sous: You have often said, in many interviews, that there were two opportunities you did not miss: to remove nuclear weapons from Belarusian territory and to declare de jure that the Soviet Union has ceased to exist. Now many in Ukraine are discussing whether the Budapest Memorandum should have been signed at all. It turned out that getting rid of nuclear weapons did not guarantee Ukraine territorial integrity; Russia violated [the terms of] the memorandum. Belarus removed its nuclear [weapons] without any conditions, and you agreed to this without any conditions. It was agreed based on principle. How do you regard this now? Leonid Kravchuk [Ukraine's then-

president] said in his interview that he would sign that memorandum again and the decision to get rid of nuclear weapons was the right one.

Shushkevich: On December 8, 1991, when we signed the Belavezha Accords, I said: "I believe Belarus must remove nuclear weapons from its territory and I undertake to convince the Supreme Soviet of this." On December 8. Without compensation, without any preconditions. I understood what nuclear weapons on Belarus's territory were. They were weapons lying on the surface. In order to destroy this staging ground capable of destroying all of Europe, it would also have to be hit by nuclear weapons. In other words, that would have liquidated both the nuclear weapons and Belarus as a nation and a state. I understood this and convinced the Supreme Soviet of it. The decision was made that we would remove nuclear weapons without compensation or preconditions. Ukraine was a different case. Ukraine had over a hundred [missile] silos, all of them deep in the ground, and no amount of bombing would have destroyed them. They would pose a danger. Ukraine had more reason to demand something more in return for these nuclear weapons. Kravchuk basically rebuked me with his behavior, tacitly maybe, for saying "we'll remove [them]." Many difficulties arose from that statement of mine, but I feel it was a move to save the Belarusian nation.

Sous: Allow me to refer back once again to Leonid Kravchuk's interview for the "Russia & Me" project. He said that "Putin turned Russia and Ukraine into Cain and Abel and Ukraine and Russia will now never be brothers." Various politicians often apply the rhetoric of "brotherly nations" to Russia and Belarus. Do you believe it's possible that one day Belarusians will say, like Ukrainians, "We will never be brothers"?

Shushkevich: No, [Belarusians] can't say that. We will be brothers, but we will not be slaves of those in power in Russia. "I'm a simple man, but I have honor." I think [Belarusian poet] Janka Kupala put it very well. We know what human dignity is, and it would be good to see the Russians learn a little from us about this.

Sous: Earlier you touched on Russian military bases in Belarus. What threats do they pose? And may there perhaps be some advantages for Belarus in these bases?

Shushkevich: When I was [head of Belarus] we treated Russia with the utmost propriety. I am a physicist by training and I understand a little something about the need for the two bases that have long been in Belarus. These are a base near Baranavichy, with a radar [station], and a base for underwater [naval] communications. To take the position that we are independent and don't want any Russian bases would have been unfair to a good neighbor. But there needed to be a plan and a timeline. Russia needed to implement a policy to get its bases off Belarusian territory. And that was the path we were on. And we spoke explicitly about this. But then there's another position [on the issue]: "Everything else I'm doing isn't working too well, so these former bastards, they wanted to shake off the Russian bases, but we say let our brotherly peoples fight NATO together. I'll be the standard-bearer for the fight against NATO." That's what

Lukashenka says. This means: "I want to be the Kremlin's slave; in return, let me do what I want at home." And that's what's happening.

Sous: Stanislau Stanislavavich, as part of this project I have interviewed many former heads of state. Most of them have their own offices; their countries – for example, Moldova and Armenia – have laws about former presidents. They have set pensions, nearly all of them have security details and aides. You and I are recording this interview in your apartment. Many Belarusians know about this, but in Russia and in Ukraine, perhaps people don't know why you have no office as a former head of state or why your [monthly] pension is less than a dollar.

Shushkevich: You see, our president by his very nature cannot be an intellectual. I abide by the lessons of [Russian scholar and humanist Dmitry] Likhachev, whereas he [Lukashenka] acts in the most unscrupulous, unintellectual way imaginable. I don't stoop so low as to ask anything of him. While I am healthy, I can support myself and have many offers of work. But not in Belarus. In Belarus I am forbidden to work. Yes, I have been deprived of all that. When I am healthy, I have no problems. But when problems with my health do arise, I start thinking that I should have something in Belarus. For now, I have nothing.