

# PREFACE

## TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

In the days after the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989, and the demise of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, the world – my world, and yours – was filled with hope. It looked as though the great stand-off between freedom and tyranny had resulted in a definitive conclusion. History itself was declared to be at an end. Freedom had won; tyranny – perhaps through fits and starts – was on its way out.

I wish with all my heart that the optimists had been vindicated. But that is not the story I have to tell in this book.

Fighting for freedom and justice is a cosmic, eternal, struggle. And yet, we live in the here and now. We have a duty, an obligation, to do what we can. And part of this is speaking truth to illegitimate power; defeating injustice, because it is, literally, vital to do so.

My story is both the story of me, my family, my friends, and my country, and also the story of how evil, often petty and banal, can invade and take over.

But before I tell the story of how I ran for president in 2010 and then ended up in a KGB prison, let me tell you a few things about Belarus, dubbed the last dictatorship in Europe.

Our independence in the modern era dates back to 1918 when the Belarusian People's Republic was proclaimed. It existed for several months and was crushed by the Bolsheviks. Belarus again became part of the Russian empire, this

time in the form of the Soviet Union. As a Soviet republic, Belarus suffered all the atrocities of communist rule, all totalitarian experiments aimed at destroying national identity and personality. The totalitarian USSR was quite effective and successful in Belarus, virtually destroying the national elite in the late 30s during Stalin's purges, and all but destroying the language and national culture too.

World War II took the lives of almost one third of Belarusians. Having fought bravely for their land they then found themselves under the same serfdom of the same ruthless dictator after the war. Belarus, that had contributed so much to the liberation of Europe, remained within the Soviet totalitarian system, under Stalin's tyranny.

The last blow from the USSR to fall on Belarus was inflicted with Chernobyl, the nuclear power plant disaster that left Belarus afflicted with radioactive contamination. To this day, few people know that 70% of the radioactive fallout after the 1986 explosion landed on the territory of Belarus.

The Kremlin tried to conceal the mere fact of the disaster and never admitted the scale of the damage. The current regime in Belarus followed the Kremlin's lead.

For me, it's quite logical that the formal demise of the Soviet Union happened on the territory of the country that suffered so much from its existence. There is another little known fact about my country – the USSR ceased to exist in Belarus, where in 1898 the foundations of the future totalitarian state were laid down. That year, the first congress was held of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, the predecessor of the communists. In December 1991, three leaders of Soviet republics – Belarus, Russia and Ukraine – signed the agreement dissolving the Soviet Union. It happened in

Viskuli, one of the residences of top Soviet apparatchiks, in the beautiful forest of Belovezha. In other words, the USSR ended where it was begun.

That year, we Belarusians regained our independence but, as it turned out, not our freedom.

We were the last among the former Soviet republics to introduce the post of president. It was done in 1994 when the constitution was changed, and thus Belarus changed from being a parliamentary to a presidential republic.

The first president of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenka, was elected in summer 1994 in more or less free and democratic elections. Soon after his election he publicly praised Adolf Hitler, another product of a popular vote. It was the last free and fair election in Belarus. Since 1994, all elections and referenda in Belarus have been rigged; their results not recognized by the international community.

In a fateful, landmark move, Lukashenka used a referendum in 1996 to change the constitution in order to destroy the division of power in Belarus. That year, on the eve of the referendum, I resigned from my position in the government – I was deputy foreign minister – and from the diplomatic service, and joined the opposition. Since then I have participated in all major political campaigns, including elections, supporting democratic candidates. In 2010, I decided to run myself. It was the fourth presidential election in Belarus.

By that time, it had become quite clear that Belarus needed radical change. The dictatorial regime of Lukashenka hadn't delivered on its promises of a better life, and was never going to. The economic model offered by the regime had failed. What was absurdly called by the servile state media, "the Belarusian economic miracle," was exposed after the crisis

of 2008 as an absolutely ineffective form of the quasi-Soviet command and administrative model. Its functioning was only ensured by its heavy dependence on cheap energy and subsidies from Russia, and, of course, by oppression.

Lukashenka's rule ceased to be taken as guarantor of stability by Belarusians, even by his officials. The dictator continued to cling to power by repressive methods, harassing and controlling the entire society.

Despite the unchanged nature and practices of the regime, the European Union decided to improve its relationship with it following the release of three political prisoners in 2008. Brussels yet again softened its policy towards Lukashenka, hoping to achieve some democratic changes in the country with the help of authorities that had long proven to be unreformable.

It has happened several times in Belarus: whenever the European Union has softened its policy towards the dictatorship or tried to enter into "a dialogue" with it, the democratic opposition and civil society were visited with yet worse repression and even the murder of political leaders. Despite fears that the period of fake liberalization in the run-up to the 2010 elections would end in harsher repression, the opposition decided to take an active part in the upcoming presidential election in an attempt to create the opportunity for change.

It was apparent that Lukashenka badly needed money and, more precisely, Western money since the Kremlin, at a time of crisis, wasn't being quite so forthcoming with its support as it once had been. The release of political prisoners in 2008 was part of the game of the regime to obtain financial support from the West by pretending to be less oppressive.

That was exactly what the opposition tried to use in its favor: the obvious economic difficulties of the regime under the pressure of which it would hold back somewhat. That could well have been what restrained open attacks on the opposition, at least during the presidential campaign.

Some observers still call this period, between 2008 and the end of 2010, a period of “liberalization.” I cannot agree with such a view, if only for one reason: my close friend and colleague Oleg Bebenin was murdered during this “liberalization” in early September 2010, by which time we had already begun the campaign.

Nevertheless, the presidential campaign of the opposition in Belarus did create a window of opportunity for change. It was visible that Lukashenka didn't have enough support to win any free and fair election. It was also clear that the people preferred alternative candidates pushing for a change for the better. People became more and more active as the campaign unfolded; getting more involved on the side of the alternative candidates.

It really did seem that change was possible. At the very least, we might be able to force the regime into serious discussions for the sake of the country. That was what we hoped.

One important factor was missing though. The European Union was counting too much and too naïvely on Lukashenka to reform his political system. Along with this, there was a lack of confidence in the potential of the opposition truly to be a force for change, and the popularity of the opposition was drastically underestimated.

The EU in Belarus made the same mistake as with oppressive regimes in North Africa and later in Ukraine – hoping to achieve reforms with the help of autocratic and dictato-

rial rulers by offering them economic and trade incentives, and entering into formal agreements with such countries' governments. It failed in Belarus and it failed elsewhere.

At our end, we tried hard to bring reforms to Belarus, to run an honest campaign. We succeeded in our efforts in the sense that we rode a wave of massive public support.

But it all ended, as the results of the election started to come through, with the violent crackdown of December 19, 2010. In our country's modern history, it is a date of glory for the human spirit for all those that stood for freedom, and a date of shame for all those who stood with the regime.

Lukashenka reacted in a state of fear. Power was slipping from his grasp. Only brutality could save him now.

It was well known among Soviet dissidents that the risk of being arrested grew significantly around Christmas time. It was a KGB "invention": the West was having its holiday season and didn't pay much attention to what was happening behind "the Iron Curtain."

In Belarus, where the Soviet past is still the country's present, the KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti – Committee for State Security) kept its name and its functions – those of surveillance of political opponents of the ruling regime.

The date for the presidential election in 2010 was chosen exactly in accordance with the old Soviet practice of scheduling a major operation against dissidents around Christmas time. While the rest of the world was preparing to welcome in the new year, in Belarus our thoughts were on the hope for a better future. Lukashenka's henchmen had other ideas.

Following the practice of the Soviet KGB, our own KGB prepared, well in advance, their operation aimed at the

complete destruction of the opposition, throwing the country even further back in time, and completely ruining the chances for change. They struck with full force on the eve of Christmas and the New Year.

I was thrown in jail, to the most notorious KGB prison: “Amerikanka.”

“My Story” begins with an encounter with one of my torturers – Col. Alexander Orlov, head of that KGB prison. I had just learned that my wife, who was arrested together with me on the central Square in Minsk that fateful night, was in the same prison.

There was even more shocking news to contend with. The authorities were threatening to abduct our three-year-old son Danik and put him in an orphanage where he would grow up without parents...