

Summing Up and Looking Forward

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This conference has of course been focusing on both Ukraine and Belarus, and I shall try in this concluding talk to have both countries in mind. I don't pretend to be trying to sum up in the sense of presenting conclusions with which everyone is meant to agree. And obviously a good deal of what I'm going to say was prepared beforehand. But it does also include my own reflections on what we have learned over the last couple of days. If I show a certain bias towards Ukraine, I hope I shall be forgiven. I have visited Belarus several times, and I have met President Lukashenko - though admittedly the meeting took place in Lisbon rather than in Minsk. But obviously my main experience is of Ukraine, where I served for several years.

What are we trying to do in Belarus and Ukraine? How can we do it better? Do we have an ultimate vision of the place the two countries in Europe and in the world? Is that vision one which we share with the peoples of the two countries, and if so, how can we help them to turn it into reality? And what role can churches and Christian organisations play in the process?

As Philip Walters brought out in his opening talk on Tuesday evening, Ukraine and Belarus have obvious similarities, but also significant differences. The casual observer is more struck by the similarities, because both countries were part of the Soviet Union, and both are now sandwiched between Russia and the European Union. But even at this level, the differences also need to be stressed. Ukraine is nearly four times the size of Belarus - at 233,000 square miles, it is the second-largest country in Europe after European Russia. Belarus is landlocked - I think it was Peter Pavlovic who told us that it is the largest landlocked country in Europe - while Ukraine has a long Black Sea coast. Ukraine's population is a little under 46 million, while that of Belarus is somewhat under 10 million. And what seems to me to be a rather telling indicator of difference today is that in Belarus the main official language is Russian, while in Ukraine, even though many people prefer to speak Russian, the only official language is Ukrainian. The present Ukrainian government wants to change that, but is in some evident confusion, to the extent that the deputy head of the presidential administration recently proposed that there should be two new official languages - Russian, and English!

Both countries, of course, had many similar terrible experiences during the twentieth century. Both were completely occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, whereas Russia was only partly occupied. During that occupation, both experienced the full impact of the holocaust, symbolised in Kiev by the ravine of Babi Yar, where during a few days in September 1941 nearly 34,000 Jews were massacred. You may know Yevtushenko's poem on the subject.

More recently, as John Leatherhead and John Gater so clearly brought out, both countries suffered terribly from the Chernobyl disaster. I may say that when I made my own first visit to Chernobyl, it was brought home to me graphically how close Chernobyl is to the Belarus border. I was attending a conference in Slavutich, the town built after the disaster to rehouse Chernobyl workers. The conference was followed by a visit to Chernobyl. Slavutich, like Chernobyl, is in Ukraine, but to get from one to the other you have to go through Belarus, and I did not even have my passport with me, let alone a Belarus visa. As a newly arrived ambassador, I thought I was about to create a diplomatic incident - though fortunately I got away with it.

Both countries, of course, are still very much coloured by their communist past. Of course that is also true of countries like Poland or the Czech Republic, but very much less so. In those countries, at the time of the collapse of communism in 1989, there were still people who could remember life before communism, and knew how to operate a market economy. The concept of the rule of law meant something. But in most of Ukraine and Belarus, there had been communism for much longer, and it was only the very oldest people who could remember life before 1917 - or perhaps I should say before 1914. Of course the westernmost parts of both countries did belong to Poland - or in the case of a small part of Ukraine to Czechoslovakia - before the Second World War, but the wholesale change of population in these areas after 1945 was such that not many historic memories can have been left. Almost all the current leaders of these countries grew up under communism as their parents had done before them, and the only system they knew was one in which almost all organised human activity was under the control, or the very strong influence, of the Communist Party. The idea of independent organisations of citizens, with a wide variety of different ideals and objectives and policy goals, competing to win support and to advance their various different causes, simply did not exist.

It was of course because they wanted to ensure that all areas of life and thought were dominated by the Communist Party that the Party leadership were opposed to the Churches. It was not simply that they thought that beliefs which they perceived to be superstitious were unhealthy for people - though no doubt they did think that. It was that Christian faith gave people an alternative source of authority. So almost throughout the communist period the authorities tried either to crush the Churches or to infiltrate and co-opt them. They had perhaps more success with the latter than with the former, but it is a remarkable fact that at the end of the communist period, the Churches were still there, weakened no doubt, and in many ways ill-equipped to cope with the challenges that faced them, but nevertheless still a major factor in their societies. Neville Kyrke-Smith told us something about how the Churches survived.

I want this morning to put three main points, namely:

- first, that in the long term, the right place for both countries is within the European Union;
- second, that this will never be accomplished without a complete transformation of society in both countries;

- third, that in that transformation, a wide variety of contacts with organisations and individuals in other countries is needed, and in particular that the Churches can play a crucial part.

Of course I am not suggesting that the work of Aid to the Church in Need, or of Chernobyl Children's Life Line or Chernobyl Children's Project, are primarily directed towards preparing Ukraine and Belarus for the EU. They have their own very clear and valuable tasks. And I accept entirely that contacts can be of two-way benefit. But I do think that these contacts and many others rather like them can and will help gradually to transform society.

First, then, the question of whether the European Union is or could be the right place for the two countries. Nathaniel Copsey spoke to use yesterday about EU Neighbourhood Policy towards the two, and obviously the fact that they are two of the EU's neighbours is an inescapable fact.

Officially, Belarus at present indicates no interest in ever pursuing the path of EU membership, although an opinion poll last year showed that 44.1 per cent of the population would vote 'Yes' if there were a referendum on the question. I wouldn't take that too seriously, but it's quite interesting. It can be argued that Belarus has more affinities with European Union member states than do some of the Balkan countries which are candidates for membership, and certainly, as Philip Walters' talk clearly brought out, the present-day border between Belarus on the one hand, and Poland and Lithuania on the other, would not historically have been regarded as marking the end of Europe, or a dividing line between Europe and Eurasia, or, for quite a lot of history, anything very much at all. But obviously the question of membership could not even begin to arise so long as President Lukashenko is in power. The European Union would not admit to membership a state with an authoritarian regime any more now than it would have considered admitting Spain while the country was ruled by General Franco. And President Lukashenko, of course, has no aspiration for European Union membership. On the contrary, Belarus has signed a series of treaties with Russia including a Treaty on Russia-Belarus Union. Neither party appears to be terribly serious about this at present, but the orientation of Belarus policy is clear.

Ukraine's position is quite different. The country has long had an officially proclaimed vision of itself as a country which aspires one day to become a member of the European Union. The new government which took office earlier this year continues to adhere to that vision, as was made very clear, for example, by the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Konstantyn Gryshchenko, when he spoke at Chatham House last month. In that respect, even though the new government has been widely perceived as much more friendly to Russia than its predecessor, the policy has not changed, whereas by contrast, the goal of NATO membership has been abandoned. What makes the policy more difficult to pursue is that the European Union has persistently refused to accept Ukraine's right to aspire to membership, even though Ukraine is unquestionably a European country - unlike Turkey - and has a basically democratic system of government, if with many shortcomings. Of course, all of us realise that even on the most optimistic assumptions, Ukrainian

membership of the European Union is many years away. For the moment, the task is to complete negotiation of the Association Agreement. But personally, I have always found it difficult to understand why the European Union should be so reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of eventual membership. Obviously such a step would risk upsetting Russia, but not in the same way that Ukraine's NATO aspirations did. The European Union has taken in the Baltic States without major damage to relations with Russia. Russia may well want to continue to present itself to Ukraine as an alternative pole of attraction. But that is not something which need affect European Union policy. Ukraine would obviously be a very difficult country for the European Union to absorb. But we are talking about a very long-term process. Turkey's right to eventual membership was recognised back in the 1960s, and it has not joined yet. An acceptance of Ukraine's right to eventual membership would send an important signal, and might help to give Ukraine a direction in which to steer.

It may be that one day Belarus will change. I hope that the day will come when the same signal about eventual membership can be sent to that country too. But for the moment that is clearly impossible. And obviously one of the important differences between the two countries is that the European Union does not have the same significance for Minsk as it does for Kiev.

At the same time, any Western European who knows anything about Ukraine must immediately be struck by the tremendous amount of progress that would have to be made before European Union membership could become anything like a realistic prospect. Political structures are seriously flawed, corruption remains rife, and the courts cannot be relied upon to administer justice without fear or favour. The Orange Revolution of 2004-5 looked for a time as if it might be the beginning of a serious attempt to tackle these problems. But although some progress was made, in the end the results were disappointing, largely because of quarrels between the two key figures in the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yushchenko and Yuliya Tymoshenko. President Yanukovich claims to be making another fresh start, but the signs so far have not been promising. The cynical means by which he obtained enough defections from the opposition to create a new coalition government did not suggest any great respect for the principles of democracy. The deal he struck with Moscow to obtain continued supplies of cheap gas in exchange for an extension of the lease of the Sevastopol base to the Russian Black Sea Fleet has won short-term popularity, and on the surface looks attractive. Ukraine will get a discount of some 30 per cent on its gas supplies, saving altogether, it is claimed, about \$40 billion over the ten-year period of the agreement.

But the very fact that a political deal linked two entirely separate issues, and that the price of gas was settled by inter-governmental agreement, is contrary to the way in which a market economy should operate. And in the long run what the deal will do is to postpone again some difficult choices which Ukraine needs to make, while at the same time helping to perpetuate the opaque and dubious structures which operate the Russia-Ukraine gas system. Ukraine inherited from the Soviet Union a great deal of heavy industrial plant which depended crucially on the availability of cheap energy to be economically

viable. By perpetuating the supply of cheap energy, it is continuing to subsidise that industry artificially. It is also making it likely that the country's current gross inefficiency in the use of energy will continue. If Ukraine is ever to be fully linked economically to the European Union, it has to learn to adapt to world market prices.

Ukraine also has other huge problems. For example, the pension system is close to collapse. Although pensions are not high in absolute terms, pensions are set at 40 per cent of the average wage, and the retirement age is low - 55 for women and 60 for men. Total pension expenditure makes up 18 per cent of GDP. There are nine pensioners for every ten working people paying into the pension fund, and since the population is ageing, the problem is going to grow worse. The World Bank said in a report last month that fiscal reform was the most urgent priority for Ukraine, and highlighted pension reform as one of the key elements. To quote: 'The unreformed pension system and Ukraine's ageing population threaten short-term fiscal stability and long-term sustainability.' Of course these problems are always politically very difficult to deal with, and they are not unique to Ukraine. But the European Union will certainly not take on a new member state which is struggling with them.

It is, I believe, in the long-term interests of both Ukraine and our own countries that the Ukrainian government should be encouraged to move in a different direction. There are plenty of instruments to hand through which this can be achieved. The Association Agreement with the European Union, including a comprehensive and deep Free Trade Area, can play an important part in encouraging desirable economic practices. So can the regular negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, on which Ukraine continues to rely heavily. For example, Ukraine's latest deal with the IMF includes a commitment gradually to raise the retirement age for women to 60, though there are indications that even this relatively modest change is being reviewed again.

There are fewer instruments of this sort which can be used with Belarus. As we have heard, the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement between Belarus and the EU which was signed in 1995 was suspended by the EU. So long as President Lukashenko is in power, there could be no question for either side of moving on to an Association Agreement. As for the International Monetary Fund, Belarus joined in 1992, and has had a series of stand-by arrangements. The IMF has had some success in encouraging more stable macro-economic policies, but very little in promoting internal structural reform.

But in the end, what is required in both countries is not just policy changes by government, but a transformation of the whole of society. Probably the most important reason why reforms are so difficult to introduce successfully in Ukraine is the very high level of corruption - and I believe there is also a high level of corruption in Belarus, although I cannot speak from my own experience. This is obviously a continuation of the corruption which was so rife in the late Soviet period, when there was a widespread collapse of moral standards. Doing business of any kind is very difficult in a country where you are not always sure whom you can trust, and where what appears to be a

watertight contract may not be upheld by the courts because the judge has been bribed. The present government plans new anti-corruption legislation. But trying to combat such problems by legislation is hard because the members of Parliament who pass the laws, and the police and courts who enforce them, are all widely, and often correctly, perceived as corrupt. The foundation for change has to be the strengthening of individual integrity.

It is also very important for Ukrainians, and I am sure also for Belarusians, to learn more about how western markets operate, what is the role of the voluntary sector in western societies, how things can be done differently. And it is important to spread experience of how democracies function. Ukraine has had some success as a democracy. It has several times replaced one president by another by democratic election. It is a pluralist society. But there are serious weaknesses. Only recently, Yuliya Timoshenko, who is in effect the leader of the opposition, complained that she was being harassed by the Ukrainian Security Service, the SBU, and in particular that she was being followed everywhere by an unmarked car. There are local elections due on 31 October, and in the run-up to them there have been arrests of political activists. One of the most depressing features is that so many political parties are not really parties at all in the sense we would understand, being vehicles for their leaders rather than groups of people committed to a particular political approach. Timoshenko's party is called 'Fatherland', and is part of an umbrella political organisation called the Yuliya Timoshenko block. Viktor Yushchenko's was called 'Our Ukraine'. Viktor Yanukovich's is called the 'Party of the Regions'. And these vacuous names are entirely appropriate for the rather vacuous entities which they describe. It is not surprising that changes of party allegiance are so frequent, particularly when money is on offer.

Looking at all the issues, it is clear that a vast process of education is needed. And of course it has already begun, and much has already been achieved - we have heard something about that over the last couple of days. But much more is still needed to assist Ukraine with the building of civil society. This is of profound importance for bringing about the kind of transformation of the country which is needed if it is ever to become a serious candidate for membership of the European Union.

All sorts of links between individuals and organisations in Ukraine and Belarus and other countries can help. It makes a big difference that so many Ukrainians now live abroad, and so many more have travelled abroad (in both cases, I believe that this is far less true of Belarusians, apart from the long-term diaspora).

But I think there is a very important contribution to be made by links with Ukrainian Churches - and again, I suspect that is also true of Belarus.

Neville Kyrke-Smith has shown us vividly how alive the Christian faith is in Ukraine, despite all the efforts which were made by the Soviet Union to destroy it. I want to recall a number of experiences which I had while in Ukraine which brought that home to me. Just up the road from the British

Embassy in Kiev is a striking symbol of what has happened - the Orthodox monastery of St Michael, originally founded in the twelfth century, and later rebuilt in a Baroque style, though with many older features. In the 1930s, with all the care for cultural heritage which was so characteristic of that era, this building was blown up to make way for a monumental complex of Stalinist palaces for the Ukrainian government. Mainly because of the Second World War, only one of the buildings in the complex was ever completed - the building which now houses the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry. The rest of the site remained empty. After Ukraine's independence, the monastery was rebuilt, and it is now once again a functioning monastery - during Lent one year, one of the monks gave a series of lectures on Orthodoxy to the British Church in Kiev. Of course faith is not primarily about buildings, and a lot of the money for the reconstruction came from the Ukrainian diaspora as gesture of solidarity with the newly independent state. All the same, St Michael's is a powerful reminder of what Stalin failed to achieve.

Kiev's greatest monastery, the Monastery of the Caves, is an even more impressive sign of the same thing. It was entirely secularised, and turned into a museum, for much of the Soviet period. But at the time of the commemoration of the 1000th anniversary of the Christianisation of Rus, in 1988, the lower part was given back to the Orthodox Church, and today it is the headquarters of the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. Much more important, the caves themselves are thronged with believers who have come on pilgrimage. Tourists can also visit part of the complex, but instinctively talk in whispers, and in places are reduced to silence, because they sense that for many of those around them this is a very holy place. You see people who must have spent most of their lives under communism kissing the relics with obvious deep reverence.

And of course it is not only monasteries which have been re-established. Churches have been rebuilt, and many new Orthodox churches have been constructed in areas of towns and cities which had been developed under communism (such as the left-bank part of Kiev) and therefore had no churches.

Let me turn to another example. In 2001, Pope John Paul II visited Ukraine. The visit was in some ways controversial, but not because of the sort of arguments which marked the recent visit of Pope Benedict to this country. As we have heard, Roman Catholics are a small minority in Ukraine, and even including Greek Catholics, who accept the authority of the Pope while following the Orthodox rite, you are still very much talking about a minority. But the opposition did not come from non-Catholics in general - it came specifically from the Moscow Patriarchate, on the grounds that the Pope was visiting its canonical territory, but not at its invitation. This was an interesting objection, since the Pope had in fact been invited by the President of Ukraine. However, this opposition did not damage the visit, which was a major success, with two open-air masses in Kiev and two in Lviv, in each case one in the Latin rite and one in the Eastern rite of the Greek Catholic Church - the first time that John Paul II had ever followed this rite. About 200,000 people attended in Kiev - I was one of them - and an estimated one and a half million

in Lviv. I remember commenting in a report to the Foreign Office at the time that the Pope had more divisions than Stalin imagined.

Nor is it only the Orthodox and Catholic churches which are active. There have long been Lutherans and Baptists in Ukraine, but since independence, many new Protestant churches have arrived on the scene; and although dismissively described as 'sects' by the Moscow Patriarchate, they have had a very considerable impact, both in attracting believers and in helping to alleviate social problems. Let me give an example from my own experience. Hope Now is a charity which operates in Ukraine and some other countries. Its brand of evangelical Christianity is very different from my own tradition, but I have become a regular supporter because of its obvious impact for good. Here is what it says about itself on its website.

Hope Now exists to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. A balance of direct evangelism with social action ensures the message of the gospel touches the hearts of young and old, poor and rich, healthy and infirm, free and imprisoned... In 2007 Hope Now divided its work in Ukraine into two quite distinct organisations. The caring ministries such as providing healthcare for children with birth abnormalities, the work in orphanages and internats and for street children and the evangelism are retained under the Hope Now banner. The encompassing ministries such as Kompass Park, the Cherkassy Centre for Biblical Studies, Church planting, cycle clubs, student ministries and pre-independence homes now come under the newly formed Kompass Park Education Trust.

To illustrate the work in a more immediate way, let me quote a story from a recent newsletter.

At twenty-two, I was condemned to twelve years' hard labour. I was sent to a prison camp in Cherkassy... Here, convicted believing brothers came to tell me that God is love and loves everyone... Soon I recognised a difference between the grey, lifeless, emotionless faces of the ordinary prisoners and those who called themselves 'brothers in Christ'... Months later I accepted Christ as my own Saviour, and in June 2006 I was baptised.

Similar things of course happen in prisons in other countries, including the UK, and indeed they were not unknown in Soviet times, as testified by Solzhenitsyn. The important point for our present purposes is to recognise that evangelical Christianity is having a social impact in today's Ukraine.

The impact of religion on political life can be seen in some surprising ways. Not long after I arrived in Kiev, I was invited to the launch of a book of sermons by Patriarch Filaret of Kiev - the head of the Orthodox Church of the Kiev Patriarchate. I was still at the stage of accepting every invitation I could in order to learn more about the country, so I went along. I was not surprised to see the Polish ambassador there - no doubt invitations had gone to all ambassadors, and he and I were the ones who accepted. But it was more of a surprise that among those who gathered for the occasion was the then

Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Boris Tarasyuk. I tried and failed to imagine the then British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, going along to the launch of a book of sermons by Archbishop George Carey.

Of course Boris Tarasyuk was not interested only in Filaret's exegesis of 1 Thessalonians. He wanted to mark his support for Filaret because Filaret's split with Moscow, and the establishment of a Ukrainian Patriarchate, were seen by many Ukrainians as flowing naturally from the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state. Equally, the continued insistence of the Moscow Patriarchate that Ukraine is part of its canonical territory has obvious political overtones. It is not surprising that support for both the Kiev Patriarchate and for the Greek Catholic Church is strongest in the west of Ukraine, which is also the area where the Ukrainian language and support for Ukrainian independence has always been strongest, whereas support for the Moscow Patriarchate is strongest in the Russian-speaking east of the country.

But the fact that there are these political overtones does not alter the fact that certainly in Ukraine, and arguably in Belarus as well, the churches are well-established independent actors supported by millions of people, and at least in the case of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches with very deep historical roots. This makes them quite unlike any other non-governmental organisations in those countries. The fact that in Ukraine there are so many different churches, with varying agendas, also contributes to making society more pluralist.

When I was working in Ukraine, I had the opportunity of seeing many of the non-governmental bodies which first the Know-How Fund and then the Department for International Development were supporting as part of their efforts to build up civil society. Some were tiny groups of people operating in just one place, and very dependent on foreign support, and not really equal to the hopes being placed in them. Others were larger, and some managed to operate across the country, such as the Committee of Ukrainian Voters, who worked hard for free and fair elections, and whose representatives, when we took them to Britain to see how we did it, were not slow to point out flaws in our electoral practices. It is very important that there should be more and more such groups. But they have an uphill task.

The Churches have the great advantage that they exist, have for the most part existed for a very long time, and are supported and to a great extent trusted. Of course it is also true that they are not necessarily bastions of western liberal values. We have heard how the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, in particular, views the West with considerable suspicion. There are also extraordinary superstitions to be found - many people will tell you, for example, about the satanic significance of the number 666. Nevertheless, the churches are for the most part filled with people of integrity. They teach their followers that it is wrong to cheat and lie and steal - very simple moral principles, which if practised by everyone in the country would enormously benefit the economy. Many of them are also involved in social work, which brings new perspectives and is quite different from what happened under communism. Moreover, they can bring together groups who

can then also become involved in the wider strengthening of civil society. This happened on a very wide scale in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, and it can happen, and is beginning to happen, in twenty-first century Ukraine, and I am sure in Belarus also. So I think the churches have a key role to play if Ukraine and Belarus are to develop in the direction which all of us want to see.

In many ways, history and geography dealt very poor hands to both Ukraine and Belarus. Ukraine had a glorious early history, at the time when, under Prince Vladimir, Kiev became Christian. Belarus, or rather the principalities of Polotsk and Turov, also enjoyed independence or semi-independence between the ninth and twelfth centuries. But subsequently, the peoples of both countries were ruled from elsewhere. Both had a moment of independence at the end of the First World War, but were then absorbed into the Soviet Union. Now, after the Soviet Union's collapse, they are internationally recognised independent entities. They have perhaps the best chance that they have ever had. If they can succeed in becoming stable and liberal European democracies, and as I hope eventually members of the European Union, that will be of enormous benefit to their peoples, and to Europe as a whole. This may sound too western a view, but it is certainly one which is shared by all the best Ukrainians I know. So let us hope that all the efforts about which we have been talking will indeed be crowned with success.

Roland Smith was the British Ambassador to Ukraine from 1999 to 2002.