

KRISTIINA SILVAN, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Arkadiankatu 23 B, P. O. Box 425, FI-00101 Helsinki Finland. *Email:* kristiina.silvan@fii.fi¹

From *Komsomol* to the Republican Youth Union: Building a Pro-Presidential Mass Youth Organisation in Post-Soviet Belarus

KRISTIINA SILVAN

Abstract

Based on extensive and diverse primary material, this article provides a detailed analysis of the development of Belarusian government-affiliated youth organisations from the late 1980s until 2002. Using a historical institutionalist approach, it examines the transformation of the Belarusian *Komsomol* into an independent association and the emergence of new, proactive pro-government youth organisations. The article demonstrates that, contrary to common assumptions, building a mass membership pro-presidential youth organisation in Belarus was a complex project that took years to complete. When the Belarusian Republican Youth Union finally emerged in 2002, it was a result of an interplay of many structural and agency-related factors.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOVERNMENT-ORGANISED MASS MEMBERSHIP YOUTH organisations as showy mainstays of youth support for a non-democratic regime has been noted in existing literature on Belarus in particular (Karbalevich 2008; Nikolayenko 2015; Hall 2017), and authoritarian states in general.² In his analysis of the Uzbek youth organisation *Kamalot*, Eric McGlinchey (2009, p. 1139) accurately notes that ‘just as reformists see youth as vigorous and symbolically potent allies in the fight against moribund autocracy, so too do autocrats see

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² For Syria, see Hinnebusch (1980); for Russia see Mijnsen (2012), Krivonos (2015); for China see Unger (2009).

youth as a way to revitalise stalled authoritarianism'. The prevalence of mass youth movements in communist or post-communist authoritarian states is even more prominent given the legacy of Communist Youth League (*Komsomol*) structures. In fact, government-sponsored youth organisations operate on some level in all non-democratic countries of the former Soviet Union.³

Despite growing scholarly attention to pro-government youth movements in authoritarian states, there are few accounts of how such organisations come into being. Are they created from scratch by the state, are they former independent NGOs that have been co-opted to serve the government, or are they, in the case of the former USSR, legacy organisations of the Soviet-era *Komsomol*? What factors contribute to the development of these organisations? What function do they serve? The article addresses these research questions in the case of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (Belarusian: Belaruskii respublikanski sayuz moladzi, Russian: Belarusskii respublikanskii soyuz molodezhi, abbreviated BRYU), a present-day pro-government mass membership youth union established in 2002. Understanding the way pro-government youth organisations are established and maintained offers insights into how the authoritarian form of government is consolidated, what model of citizenship the state tries to instil in the young generation, and how complex and unpredictable the processes of post-Soviet institutional change really are.

Belarus is a fruitful case for analysing the emergence of pro-government mass youth organisations. Although the transformation from *Komsomol* to the BRYU tends to be narrated as a simple and straightforward process by political actors and researchers in Belarus and beyond,⁴ closer examination reveals that the recreation of a universal youth organisation was a complex task that took the government of Alyaksandr Lukashenko years to complete.⁵ The insight gained from the study thus challenges earlier representations of the 'making of' the

³ For example, in Turkmenistan, there is the Turkmen Youth Organisation named after Turkmenistan's national poet Makhtumkuli Pyragy; Uzbekistan has the newly reorganised Youth Union of Uzbekistan (2001–2017 *Kamolot*); the Kazakh and Azerbaijani parties in power both have youth wings, respectively, *Nur Otan* and *Yeni Azerbaijan*; and Tajikistan has not one but two pro-government youth movements, *Sozandagoni Vatan* and the *Avangard*, both mobilising young people to participate in anti-opposition protests. What unites all these organisations is their affiliation with and financial dependence on the government, their explicit and active support for the incumbent president, and their aim of promoting statist patriotism among youth.

⁴ See, for example, 'Istoriya VLKSM', Ministerstvo obrazovaniya Respubliki Belarus', available at: <https://edu.gov.by/sistema-obrazovaniya/glavnoe-upravlenie-vospitatelnoy-raboty-i-molodezhnoy-politiki/upr-molodezhi/100-letie-vlksm/istoriya-vlksm/>, accessed 9 March 2020; Laptinok 2004; Parker 2007, p. 95.

⁵ As most of the data analysed in the framework of the article is in Russian, Russian spelling of the names of people, places and organisations is used throughout.

BRYU and contributes to the understanding of authoritarian consolidation by identifying the interplay of the many factors that affected the resurrection of the youth organisation. For example, while Andrew Wilson is right to argue that the Belarusian *Komsomol* was revived as the “Lukamol”⁶ in 2002 (Wilson 2011, p. 202), his statement overlooks the complexity of the revival process. Timing, structural factors, and measures taken by different actors for and against the return to a Soviet-style state corporatist model of state–youth relations all contributed to when and how the BRYU emerged, and what kind of organisation it came to be. In reality, the transformation from *Komsomol* into ‘Lukamol’ reflected the gradual consolidation of Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule during his first term as president (1994–2001). In effect, the detailed analysis of this article contributes not only to the growing body of literature on how government-organised NGOs come into being but also to the theoretical literature on authoritarian consolidation (Göbel 2011; Ambrosio 2014). It highlights how the field of civil society becomes subject to government action that both restricts the work of independent NGOs and supports the development and operation of state-affiliated substitute organisations. Furthermore, it sheds light on the little-studied sphere of the destiny of *Komsomol* structures in the post-Soviet era, demonstrating that the collapse of the All-Union *Komsomol* did not automatically lead to the disappearance of the youth organisation at the regional and local levels. Quite the contrary: by the end of the 1990s, the Belarusian *Komsomol* had, against all expectations, undergone a rather remarkable reformation into an independent non-governmental organisation.

In practice, tracing the roots of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union would not have been possible without the triangulation of data. This article builds on three types of sources: previously unpublished material accessed in five Belarusian archives; contemporary press articles; and interviews conducted with former youth organisation activists in Belarus in 2016 and 2017. All material has been collected in original languages (Russian or Belarusian) and translated into English by the author. For ethical considerations, most interview respondents’ names have been anonymised.⁷ The time span of the analysis (1989–2002) covers the last years of the *perestroika* era, the first years of Belarusian independence, and Alyaksandr Lukashenko’s first two terms as president. The analysis concerns four government-affiliated youth organisations: the Belarusian *Komsomol* (LKSMB); its official legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union (BYU); the explicitly pro-Lukashenko Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union (BPYU); and the merger of BYU and BPYU, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU). Analysis of the *perestroika*-era *Komsomol* is crucial for understanding the 1990s developments of the BYU, while the unification of the BYU with the BPYU in 2002 marks a logical end point, as it symbolises the

⁶ ‘Lukashenko’s Komsomol’.

⁷ Three key activists consented to being referred to by name.

completed construction of the pro-presidential youth union.

In terms of theory, the article builds on the literature of historical institutionalism and authoritarian consolidation. Historical institutionalism, with its sensitivity to how both short and long temporal processes influence the transformation of institutions (Fioretos *et al.* 2016) and its focus on interaction between various causal variables, such as individuals, context and rules (Steinmo 2008), helps us make sense of the changes within the Belarusian *Komsomol* before and after Belarusian independence. The historical institutionalist approach is especially suitable for the study of youth organisations given that my goal is to explain how ‘political battles are fought inside institutions *and* over the design of future institutions’ (Steinmo 2001, p. 571, italics in the original). More specifically, the pivotal analytical concept employed in this article, critical juncture, is adopted from the historical institutionalist framework. In this analysis I use Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier’s definition of critical junctures as ‘a period of significant change ... which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies’ (Berins Collier & Collier 2002 [1991], p. 29). Building on subsequent work on critical junctures by Hillel Soifer (2012) and Giovanni Capoccia and R. David Kelemen (2007), this article demonstrates how counterfactual analysis (Capoccia & Kelemen 2007, pp. 355–357), reconstructing how key actors weighed different policy options, can be used to specify the productive conditions (Soifer 2012) that shaped the outcome at a critical juncture. The article identifies and investigates three critical junctures for Belarusian government-affiliated youth unions: the final years of *perestroika* (1989–1991), the establishment of an independent Belarus (1991–1992), and the consolidation of authoritarianism under Lukashenko (1996–1997).

The broad literature on authoritarian consolidation and durability, in particular, the state’s control over civil society, explains why and how Lukashenko and his affiliates pushed to revive a mass membership youth organisation from the mid-1990s onwards. However, I argue that it is the complex and, to a great extent, unpredictable interplay of various external and internal factors in specific points in time that paved the way for the construction of a new mass membership youth league in post-Soviet Belarus, first as the BPYU and then as the BRYU. This suggests that not only do authoritarian states respond differently to perceived risks but also that the coexistence of multiple intervening variables makes policy outcomes extremely unpredictable. In the case of post-Soviet Belarus, building a ‘new *Komsomol*’ was a complex process that took place over a period of years and did not go as originally planned by its architects.

Reform or perish—the perestroika era Komsomol (1986–1991)

In spring 1990, the days of the Belarusian *Komsomol* (the Leninist Communist Youth Union of Byelorussia; in Russian *Leninskii kommunisticheskii soyuz molodezhi Belorussii*—LKSMB) seemed to be over. The attempts to reform its presiding organisation, the All-Union *Komsomol*, had ended in the fragmentation and weakening of the youth league. As the central committee of the All-Union *Komsomol* was preparing for its liquidation, republic-level *Komsomol* organisations were left to their own devices. In neighbouring Lithuania, the *Komsomol* had transformed itself, in June 1989, into an independent association, the Communist Union of Lithuanian Youth, which, despite its nominal adherence to communism, sought to defend the sovereignty of Soviet Lithuania rather than endorse the communist socialisation of youth. In the south, the Ukrainian *Komsomol* had been attacked explicitly by independent (and often nationalist) youth associations (Pilkington 1994, p. 164). Although the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB) was still governing the republic, the emergence of the Belarusian National Front and dozens of informal youth organisations, coupled with a mass exodus from the *Komsomol*, suggested that the communist youth league should prepare for the worst.

The first critical juncture identified and examined in this article was created by Gorbachev's reforms. By 1990, the Belarusian *Komsomol* had become a shadow of its former self. Compared to the record levels of saturation in 1984, a quarter of members had left the youth union (Baranova 1992, p. 69). The organisational focus of the association had shifted from the communist socialisation of Belarusian youth to operating profitable commercial ventures, such as travel bureaus and 'scientific-technical creativity of youth' (NTTM, *nauchno-technicheskoe tvorchestvo molodezhi*) centres established within state-owned factories.⁸ On a daily basis, it was lambasted and ridiculed in the republican newspapers *Znamyia yunosti* and *Chirvonaya zmena* that it owned, which certainly would not have gone unpunished before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and launched *glasnost*'. Paralleling the situation within the party, the *apparatus* of *Komsomol* had split into conservative 'Marxists', who hoped to reassert the party's and *Komsomol*'s control over youth and roll back *perestroika*, and reformist 'democrats', who aimed to accelerate the pace of economic and political reforms. In such circumstances, the LKSMB was forced to rethink its social role and function.

By 1990, Belarus' *Komsomol* was not only forced by temporal and structural factors to rethink its role, but was also willing to do so. In view of the opportunities that had emerged outside *Komsomol* and their lack of faith in the organisation's future, experienced Belarusian *Komsomol* apparatchiks concluded that the LKSMB was no longer the best place for advancing one's career. They left *en masse* for employment in the booming

⁸ 'Protokol 1 respublikanskoi konferentsii LKSMB ot 19-20.3.1990.' Natsional'nyi Arkhiv Respubliki Belarus' (hereafter NARB), fond 63 p, opis' 7, delo 1108, list 41

commercial sector or wherever they deemed prospects to be better.⁹ Their positions were filled by newcomers who had internalised the message of *perestroika*. One was Vladimir Kudlash, a 33-year-old farmer's son from a small village in Western Belarus, who was appointed the first secretary of the LKSMB in 1989. (Pokutnik 2016).

The new cadres decided to solve the LKSMB's crisis by organising a republican *Komsomol* conference in spring 1990. However, two days of intensive debate only confirmed what was already known: that the situation within both the republic and the LKSMB was critical, and that there was no consensus regarding *Komsomol*'s future. Some wanted the *Komsomol* to stay true to its communist ideology and preserve its special relationship with the party, turning into a youth wing of the Communist Party, with more a marginal social presence. A second group of delegates felt that mass membership should be preserved and proposed the *Komsomol* be transformed into a non-political youth organisation to work for the interests of youth across all areas of life. Yet others pointed out that the *Komsomol*'s strength was in youth policy management and thus suggested the transformation of *Komsomol* into a state agency for youth affairs, which, they argued, *Komsomol* had *de facto* already become.¹⁰ Heated discussions about the new rules (*ustav*) of the Belarusian *Komsomol*, its association with the party, and its renaming reflected these three distinct positions. Addressing the sceptics of the reformed-to-be *Komsomol*, the resolution of the 1990 conference pointed out that 'transformation into a democratic and humane society is impossible in conditions of suspicion and distrust towards each other' and called for permanent dialogue between the authorities, the democratic movement and all political forces in the republic.¹¹

The conference was successful in bringing these different positions to public awareness but did little more than that. However, after new *Komsomol* rules had been approved at the Extraordinary Twenty-first Congress of *Komsomol* organisations across the USSR, held in April 1990, the LKSMB was called to update its rules as well (Pilkington 1994, p. 168; Solnick 1999, p. 122). This was to take place at the 29th Congress of the Belarus *Komsomol* in September 1990. With communist hardliners in the minority as a result of the reshuffling

⁹ Author's interviews with Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol*'s legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993; Vladimir, and Vasili, leaders of Belarusian *Komsomol* city and region committees 1989–1991; and Anatolii, a former *Komsomol* apparatchik and journalist for *Znamya yunosti*. All interviews conducted in Minsk, 5 May 2017, 3 May 2017, 23 May 2017, and 23 May 2017, respectively. See also Solnick (1999, pp. 118–21).

¹⁰ NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d. 1108; Resolution of the 1st Republican *Komsomol* Conference, printed in *Znamya Yunosti* 59 (11343), 28 March 1990, pp. 1–3.

¹¹ Resolution of the 1st Republican *Komsomol* Conference, printed in *Znamya Yunosti* 59 (11343), 28 March 1990, pp. 1–3.

of elites, the new rules adopted by the Congress reflected the preference of those who wanted *Komsomol* to preserve its prominent role in society. The aim of providing a communist upbringing was swapped to ‘representing youth interests, protecting the rights of young people, and promoting the self-realisation and complex development’¹² of young Belarusians. From now on *Komsomol* would reject ‘dogmatic thinking’ and ‘forcing its ideological standpoint on the entire young generation’.¹³ In terms of relations to the All-Union *Komsomol*, the LKSMB hoped to assume full autonomy within a federal structure.¹⁴ Unlike in the Baltic and Transcaucasian republics, the nationalist movement that confronted the party and the *Komsomol* was relatively weak in Belarus, which is why membership in Soviet federal organs was not contested. Yet Kudlash did not completely ignore the national question, stating that ‘the political stance of the Union will be based on sincere patriotism, deep understanding of our national uniqueness, respect and love for our homeland Belarus’.¹⁵

Moreover, new rules passed by the Belarus *Komsomol*’s 29th Congress’ reform-oriented majority officially cut the *Komsomol*’s ties with the Belarusian Communist Party and granted extensive rights to primary cells. The controversial question of renaming was postponed for the time being.¹⁶ Despite these notable changes, the 29th Congress can hardly be portrayed as a success. According to an opinion poll conducted on the eve of the Congress, every third *Komsomol* member doubted the ability of the Congress to radically change the state of affairs. Twenty-six percent stated that they believed that *Komsomol* could be reformed for the better, while the rest maintained that they could not predict the outcome of the Congress.¹⁷ For example, Aleksandr Preskovskii, one of the participants, lamenting the lack of communication between the leadership and the masses, declared he was so frustrated he was planning on leaving the *Komsomol*, and accused the Central Committee of its inability to reform. (Lipai 1990, p. 1)

One of the developments that muddied the waters of *Komsomol* reform was the restructuring of state structures regarding youth policy (Pilkington 1994, pp. 171–172). In the period 1989–1990, a network of committees for youth affairs had been established across the Soviet Union, and a government programme to provide financial support for youth initiatives was being drafted alongside a new law on state youth policy, ‘Law on the Fundamental Principles of State Youth Policy in the USSR’ (‘Ob obshchikh nachalakh gosudarstvennoi

¹² NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d.1110, l. 19.

¹³ NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d.1110, l. 19.

¹⁴ NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d.1110, ll. 15–16.

¹⁵ NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d.1110, l. 18.

¹⁶ NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d.1110, ll. 7–38.

¹⁷ *Znamya Yunosti* 209 (11483), 25 October 1990, p. 1.

molodezhnoi politiki v SSSR')¹⁸. Although the law was not passed until April 1991, its preparation fuelled vigorous debates on the role of the *Komsomol* in implementing state youth policy. (Pilkington 1994, p. 124). A Committee of Youth Affairs was established in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1989, after which youth affairs committees appeared at republican and regional levels in 1990–1991 (Merkulov 2014). In Belarus, these youth affairs committees were set up in regional parliaments and took on many of the *Komsomol*'s former functions (and functionaries) as the Youth League sought to embrace its newfound autonomy.¹⁹ As a result, *Komsomol* activists wanting to change the organisation radically were more likely to exit the union rather than try to push for reforms from within.

The first critical juncture examined in this article reached its peak only after the failed coup of August 1991. On 25 August 1991, the Belarusian Supreme Council passed a decree that brought the LKSMB under the threat of closure. The decree, 'On de-partyisation of state organs of the Republic of Belarus, state enterprises, institutions, and organisations and on the property of the Communist Party and the LKSMB', outlawed the *Komsomol*'s operation in state institutions and nationalised its property.²⁰ However, the *Komsomol* leadership managed to convince the nominal head of state, Stanislaw Shushkevich, that the *Komsomol* had abandoned communism and cut all ties with the Communist Party. Consequently the decree was edited and the LKSMB's right to operate and manage property were re-established in October.²¹

The next blow to the Belarusian *Komsomol* was the self-liquidation of the All-Union *Komsomol* that took place at its 22nd Congress in September 1991. In Belarus, those few who still believed *Komsomol* could have a future in the republic went on to prepare the 30th Congress of the LKSMB, which was held in Minsk on 6–7 December 1991. By then, political and socio-economic chaos had reached alarming levels (Feduta 2005, pp. 31–2; Zinchenko 2016, p. 7). Frustration over the situation in the republic as well as in the *Komsomol* characterised the last Congress of the LKSMB. In his opening remarks, First Secretary Aleksei Krivdenko lamented that 'primary *Komsomol* cells, the basis of LKSMB, are slowly dying. We have entered a phase of a grave crisis, and

¹⁸ Zakon SSSR, 'Ob obshchikh nachalakh gosudarstvennoi molodezhnoi politiki v SSSR' ot 16.04.1991 № 2114-1, available at: http://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/usr_18600.htm, accessed 11 March 2020.

¹⁹ Gosudarsvennyi arkhiv Minskoi oblasti (hereafter GAMn), f. 69, op. 1, d. 3, l. 3.

²⁰ Postanovlenie Verkhovnogo Soveta Respubliki Belarus' ot 25 avgusta 1991 №1014-XII 'O departizatsii organov gosudarstvennoi vlasti i upravleniya Respubliki Belarus', gosudarstvennykh predpriyatii, uchrezhdenii, organizatsii i sobstvennosti Kommunisticheskoi partii Belarusi'.

²¹ Author's interview with Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol*'s legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993, Minsk, 5 May 2017. See also Brel' (2012).

it is hard to say when this crisis will end'.²² Ivan Mamaiko, a student at the Brest University of Pedagogy, went on to call the event the 'congress of young kamikaze'.²³

After a series of gloomy speeches, the Congress voted in favour of dropping the first two letters from the acronym LKSMB, thus asserting that the *Komsomol* was no longer 'Leninist' or 'communist'.²⁴ This, the Congress's final statement stressed, did not mean a denial of the organisation's historical past but, rather, reflected the reality of the union's activities and its members' political views. The aim of the Youth Union of Belarus' (*Soyuz Molodezhi Belarusi*—YUB) would be to support all aspects of a young person's development.²⁵ However, times had already changed: the *Komsomol*'s re-branding as a non-political youth union did not convince its remaining members, and the mass exodus continued. A handful of 'orthodox' communist Congress delegates went on to create a new communist youth organisation, the Leninist Communist Youth Union of Belarus (Russian: *Leniniskii kommunisticheskii soyuz molodezhi Belorussii*), (Panchenko 2007) while the majority of staff members were made redundant. There seemed to be no future for the *Komsomol*.

Breaking ties with the party (at least formally) and rejecting the role of youth socialisation were major changes that stemmed from the new structural conditions framing the LKSMB's operation. In Soifer's dualist model of critical junctures, the permissive condition that enabled these changes was the introduction of new rules in the All-Union *Komsomol*, 'creating a context where change was possible' in the LKSMB (Soifer 2012, p. 1575). The productive condition that determined the outcome of the juncture was the reshuffling of cadres, which brought to the youth league's central committee individuals who were reform-oriented but who were not aiming for the full liquidation of the organisation. This insight confirms the basic premise of historical institutionalism: that when change-averse organisations actually do change, this is likely a reaction to significant external pressure. As the rest of the article demonstrates, the path chosen during the next critical juncture identified in this study (1991–1992), to transform into an independent association acting in the interests of youth, was not altered in the years that followed, despite notable incentives to do so. While counterfactual analysis of the sources suggests that the liquidation of the *Komsomol* was the most likely outcome during the critical juncture of 1991–1992, the presence of individuals determined to preserve the youth league at any cost as well as the lack of government interest in eradicating the union by force, led to an outcome whereby the *Komsomol*, in the guise of the Youth Union of

²² NARB f. 63p, op.7, d.1155, l. 8.

²³ NARB f. 63p, op.7, d.1155, l. 36.

²⁴ NARB f. 63p, op.7, d. 1155.

²⁵ *Znamya Yunosti*, 236 (11760), 10 December 1991, p. 2.

Belarus, continued to operate. The variation of outcomes for *Komsomol* across the Soviet successor states can therefore be explained by a different set of productive conditions, as the permissive conditions were to a great extent the same.

Youth Union of Belarus' in newly independent Belarus: the era of chaotic pluralism (1991–1996)

Practically all reports prepared by the Youth Union of Belarus' (YUB) committees in the early 1990s paint a stark contrast between the organisation's activity before and after August 1991. Leonid Klimenkov, first secretary of the Mogilev region committee of YUB, recalls in his 1993 report:

[After August 1991] a six-month long period of uncertainty began, during which LKSMB was hit by economic and organisational hardship. There were losses in the cadres and quantity of members. The Ministry of Education banned *Komsomol* and Pioneer organisations in schools, and so on.²⁶

According to Aleksandr Dinkevich, secretary of the Grodno region committee, people had expected *Komsomol* to dissolve together with the Communist Party in the aftermath of the August *putsch*: 'For them, *Komsomol* is in the past, and the YUB is nothing to be taken seriously.'²⁷

After regime change in the USSR and Central and Eastern Europe, communist parties were quickly banned by the new political elites. However, as the existing literature demonstrates, the party structures did not vanish but adapted to the new political conditions.²⁸ In Belarus, the anti-communist opposition was so weak that the regime change occurred by 'handing over the keys' (Beissinger & Kotkin 2014, p. 10) to former party members or affiliates rather than bringing in a new elite (Wilson 2011, pp. 150–56). Yet it was important to break with the party at least nominally, as the 'departyisation' decree demonstrated.

²⁶ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh organizatsii Mogilevskoi oblasti (hereafter GAOOMog), f. 69, op. 1, d. 3, l. 5.

²⁷ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh organizatsii Grodnenskoii oblasti (hereafter GAOOGr), f. 20, op. 41, d. 12, l. 8.

²⁸ For Central Eastern Europe, see Grzymala-Busse (2002); for the former Soviet Union see March (2006).

The August *putsch* and the attempt to liquidate the *Komsomol* had left the YUB in an extremely weak position. Enterprises operating under the auspices of *Komsomol* hastened to declare their independence from the youth union, which led to a sharp decrease in the union's funds.²⁹ Falling membership and inflation meant that the income from membership fees plummeted as well, driving many *Komsomol* primary cells to bankruptcy.³⁰ There were instances of *Komsomol* offices being looted (often by former staff members) and taken over by the local authorities.³¹ Having lost its monopoly as a youth organisation among youth, the YUB had to compete with other organisations for government support. Establishing good links with the Committees of Youth Affairs in the regional levels was perceived to be essential for organisational survival. However, YUB committees in the regions usually found cooperation with the regional committees of youth affairs troublesome because the YUB was perceived either as a competitor or as a discredited remnant of the past.³²

The establishment of an independent Belarus in 1991 marks the second critical juncture identified in this article. It started right after the previous one and, given the different set of permissive conditions (the disappearance of communist ideology, the diminished role of the Communist Party and the state, and the shift from planned economy to market economy, this juncture has to be analysed separately from that of the late *perestroika* era. Moreover, this critical juncture led to the emergence of new powerful actors in the field of Belarusian youth organisations: the Committee of Youth Affairs at the Council of Ministers and the *Rada* (the name symbolising a return to pre-Soviet administrative vocabulary), the autonomous umbrella association of new non-governmental youth organisations.

For the first few years after the collapse of communism, the YUB was fighting for its life. While its financial situation rapidly worsened, its staff were doing their best to preserve the full repertoire of events, including the traditional annual hockey and football tournaments, summer camps for children, and cooperation with Afghanistan war veterans' organisations.³³ At the same time, the YUB was seriously working on its image³⁴ and searching for new ways of working with young people. New elements to its repertoire, introduced gradually

²⁹ GAMn f. 69, op.1, d.3, l. 13–14, 17; GAOOMog f. 69, op. 1, d. 2, l. 47.

³⁰ GAOOMog f. 69, op. 1, d. 3, l. 14.

³¹ NARB, f. 63p, op. 7, d. 1180, l. 6; see also Solnick (1991, pp. 112–24).

³² Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh organizatsii Gomel'skoi oblasti (hereafter GAOOG), f. 90, op. 1, d.2, l. 13; author's interview with Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol's* legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993, Minsk, 5 May 2017.

³³ GAOOGr, f. 20, op. 41, d. 21, l. 10.

³⁴ GAOOGr, f. 20, op. 41, d. 21, l. 10.

over 1992, included workshops on business management, youth employment services, and paid services ranging from legal services to medical and 'video and photo' services.³⁵ Novel forms of youth work like entrepreneurship and leadership education were also promoted by the first government youth policy programme for 1993–1994, which envisioned the organisation of activities, research funding to youth organisations through the Committee for Youth Affairs. (Ekadumova & Kuznevtsova 2008, p. 60) These attempts by the YUB were most likely motivated by a mix of interests: a genuine desire to empower youth and alleviate its suffering in the new conditions of a market economy, nostalgic attachment to the Youth League, and the aspiration of YUB workers to keep their jobs.

Aleksandr Feduta, the first secretary of YUB from 1991 to 1993, recalls the first years as extremely difficult:

I think those two years when I was the head of the Youth Union were the most confused years in the organisation's history because nobody knew what to do. Not us in the central committee, nor the regional committees, nor the state authorities. The government was new and assumed that as the old system was collapsing, the youth organisation ought to collapse as well. Everyone was surprised by the fact that we continued to exist.³⁶

Establishing links with other youth organisations proved to be troublesome as well. Although the YUB was one of the founding members of the Belarusian National Youth Council, the *Rada*, established in November 1992 in order to promote consolidation and cooperation in the arena of youth organisations (Zinchenko 2016, p. 12), it never quite found a common language with the new democratic associations that sprang up as the party monopoly over civil society waned. For youth activists of the post-Soviet era, the YUB was a relic of the bygone days that should simply disband itself and hand over its *Komsomol*-inherited property to the plethora of new youth organisations.³⁷

³⁵ GAOOMog f. 69, op.1, d.8, l. 40; GAOOGr, f. 20, op. 41, d. 2, l. 84-

³⁶ Author's interview with Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol*'s legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993, Minsk, 5 May 2017.

³⁷ Author's interviews with Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol*'s legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993, Minsk, 5 May 2017, and Nataliya, one of the founders of *Rada*, Minsk, 18 April 2017.

Young people were not high on the agenda of the new political elite in the early 1990s. Yet, some actors in the youth organisation arena recall the years before Lukashenko's ascension to power as fruitful and exciting. Belarus was the first former Soviet republic to introduce a law on government youth policy in the post-Soviet period, and good cooperative links were established between the *Rada* and the state authorities. Representatives of the *Rada* were invited as experts and partners to participate in the decision-making processes that concerned youth, and collaboration with Western youth associations flourished (Matsevilov 2002; Zinchenko 2016, pp. 9–14).³⁸

Although the decision had already been made that YUB would become a non-governmental organisation, the actual change took time. In Mahoney and Thelen's historical institutionalist terms, the gradual change of an organisational repertoire can be described as 'layering', as new elements are added alongside existing ones (Mahoney & Thelen 2010, pp. 16–7). Although the YUB embraced its new non-governmental role, it had not quite let go of the instinct to manage youth policy. While regional departments of youth affairs, operating under the state committee of youth affairs, with potential to allocate funding to youth NGOs had emerged across Belarus, starting in 1991, the grants allocated by state organs were so small and the new departments so inexperienced that these organs had minimal impact (Matsevilov 2002, p. 3). Furthermore, youth activism at this stage was something of an elitist movement, mobilising only a handful of people across the country. The majority of Belarusians, young people included, were too busy trying to survive economic hardship to be interested in vague socio-political activity.

Despite their relative weakness, the official status of the regional youth affairs departments meant that they could cause trouble for the YUB. Mikhail Podgainyi, a former *Komsomol* leader, had been appointed head of the state Committee of Youth Affairs in July 1992.³⁹ Determined to play a leading role in the arena of youth affairs, the Committee set its eyes on the former *Komsomol* headquarters, now used by the YUB and *Komsomol* legacy businesses. According to Feduta, Podgainyi, 'despite his *Komsomol* background',⁴⁰ perceived the YUB as a competitor rather than a partner and sought to weaken the YUB. A good way of doing this was to nationalise the luxurious building of the *Komsomol* central committee, located in the very centre of Minsk, on 40 Karl Marx

³⁸ Author's interview with Nataliya, one of the founders of *Rada*, Minsk, 18 April 2017.

³⁹ Postanovlenie Soveta Ministrov Respubliki Belarus' ot 16.06.1992 №438 'O naznachanii M.V.Podgainogo Predsedatelem Komiteta po delam molodezhi pri Sovete Ministrov Respubliki Belarus'.

⁴⁰ Author's interview Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol*'s legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993, Minsk, 5 May 2017.

Street.⁴¹ When, by 1994, the YUB leadership realised how determined Podgainyi was to take over the building, they looked for a political patron. Feduta approached Alyaksandr Lukashenko, a young, charismatic *kolkhoz* manager whose electoral campaign was based on fighting corruption (Feduta 2005, pp. 14–6). This was not a random choice. Back in September 1991, Lukashenko had spoken at a *Komsomol* plenum, expressing his support for the youth union at those difficult times (Feduta 2005, p. 57).⁴² An understanding was reached, and Lukashenko’s campaign headquarters was set up in the YUB headquarters. This annoyed not only other members of the YUB’s leadership but also Prime Minister Viacheslav Kebich, who was running for president too (Feduta 2005, pp. 136–37). Kebich reacted by suggesting a deal, according to which he would refrain from signing the decree on nationalising the former *Komsomol* building in exchange for the removal of Lukashenko’s campaign HQ from the premises. Feduta agreed and the building remained YUB’s property. Notably, this compromise did not tarnish Lukashenko’s image and he went on to win the election (Feduta 2005, pp. 16, 225).

After Lukashenko was elected president in 1994, the activity of the YUB stabilised for a few years. In 1995, the association was re-named the Belarusian Youth Union (*Belarusskiy soyuz molodezhi*—BYU), due to new legislation that banned the use of the word ‘Belarus’ in NGO names.⁴³ The BYU’s financial situation evened out and its organisational repertoire was standardised to specific programmes. For example, in 1996 the Mogilev regional committee reported running ten thematic programmes. The organisational repertoire was a mix of old and new elements, representing the interests of young people and organisation activists, as well as those of the state. The programme structure enabled both the standardisation of the YUB’s activities across Belarus and successful fund-raising from donors with different interests.

Although the BYU’s membership did not rise quickly, it had stabilised at around 85,000 in 1995.⁴⁴ The BYU had also managed to preserve a decent countrywide coverage, consisting of six regional committees, 107 district and city committees, and 836 primary cells (Tel'tevskaya 1997). Furthermore, collaboration efforts with local youth affairs committees and other youth NGOs had started to bear fruit, with most BYU programmes receiving state funding. Open confrontations with other youth NGOs became a thing of the past.

⁴¹ Author’s interview with Aleksandr Feduta, first secretary of the *Komsomol*’s legacy organisation, the Belarusian Youth Union, from 1990 to 1993, Minsk, 5 May 2017.

⁴² NARB f. 63p, op. 7, d. 1156, l. 18.

⁴³ Zakon Respubliki Belarus, ‘Ob obshchestvennykh ob’edineniyakh’ ot 31.01.1995 № 3560-XII.

⁴⁴ ‘Belarusskii soyuz molodezhi nameren sozdat' v novom verkhovnom sovete “psevdofraktsiyu po voprosam molodezhnoi politiki”’, *Agentstvo BelaPAN*, 27 October 1995.

While systematic research into the transformation of *Komsomol* organisations across the former Soviet Union in the post-Soviet era is scarce, the studies conducted on *perestroika* and post-Soviet youth suggest that former communist party affiliated mass membership youth organisations that retained their hierarchical structure such as the BYU, became extremely unpopular among youth (Markowitz 2000, p. 180; Pilkington 1994, pp. 117-128; Diuk 2012, p. 27). Rather, young people were drawn to informal interest-based clubs that created platforms for spending time with their peers.

Yet the BYU continued to exist. In contrast to the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union and the present-day Belarusian Republican Youth Union, the allocation of public funding did not automatically impose the responsibility to deliver in the political sphere. The BYU genuinely transformed from a government-affiliated youth organisation into an independent non-governmental organisation (Velichko 2001). This confirms the basic historical institutional premise of organisational change that asserts that, despite a deep-rooted culture of operation that drives path dependency, organisations can change profoundly when they seek to adapt to new structural conditions. Yet, as the next section highlights, the BYU's adaptation drive was not great enough for it to be peacefully coopted by Lukashenko's authoritarian state in the making; instead, it stayed on the path chosen during the critical juncture of 1990–1991. This is why at the next critical juncture, a completely new pro-government youth organisation, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, was created.

Youth for the president: consolidation of Lukashenko's rule and the demise of government-affiliated pluralism

(1996–2002)

During his first presidential term from 1994 until 2000, Lukashenko successfully reorganised the state in his own interests: instead of supporting the development of a liberal democracy, of which the fragile foundations had been laid in the first half of the 1990s, he opted for the construction of an authoritarian state that has been labelled as 'neo-communist' (Shushkevich 2002), 'sultanist' (Eke & Kuzio 2000) or, bluntly, a full-on 'dictatorship' (Bennett 2011; Wilson 2011). Whatever the label used for the regime, most would agree that the cocktail of Lukashenko's authoritarianism lies in the mix of post-communist and universal ingredients. Along this line, the demise of pluralism in the sphere of youth organisation demonstrates both the longevity of Soviet approaches towards youth and the desire of an authoritarian ruler to extend his control over the sphere of civil society. While it is possible that Lukashenko was planning the resurrection of a unified mass membership youth union before he became president, the source material analysed in this section suggests that he only started to push actively for revival of

such an organisation once the idea was presented to him in the form of the pro-presidential movement Direct Action, founded by Vsevolod Yanchevskii in 1996.

Lukashenko began his efforts to consolidate control or, as he himself put it, 'end anarchy', as soon as he was elected (Way 2012, pp. 642–43). While Kebich had already begun to establish a system along the lines of a 'managed democracy' (Wilson 2011, pp. 154–56), permissive conditions that paved the way for a new critical juncture in the arena of youth organisations were generated by the two referenda that took place in 1995 and 1996. The four-point referendum of 1995 granted Russian the status of a state language, approved economic integration with Russia, authorised the president to dissolve the parliament, and introduced new Soviet inspired state symbols, while the seven-point referendum of 1996 enabled extensive constitutional reforms promoted by the president. Mass protests became commonplace in Belarusian cities before and after both referenda. (Bennett 2011, pp. 27–62) Although Lukashenko himself noted that youth NGOs did not deliberately mobilise young people in the protests, young people and youth groups were involved in the protests and the public discussion regarding the referendums. (Lukashenko 1996; Ekadumova 2006). The permissive conditions emergence of productive conditions in the form of Vsevolod Yanchevskii and Direct Action's explicit marked the third and final juncture analysed in this article.

Protests against the two referenda indicated that opposition groups was able to mobilise thousands of citizens to the streets to demonstrate against Lukashenko. In such a heated situation, the president sought to find allies against his opponents. To win over youth organisations, he organised a youth forum, titled 'Belarusian Youth For Progress and Stability', a month before the 1996 referendum. In his speech at the forum, Lukashenko criticised the 'destructive powers' that had contributed to the emergence of an 'anti-president bloc' and—referring to himself in the third person—called for his young listeners to support his reforms not only in words but in deeds: 'If you decide to stand by the President, then please do not retreat, do not hide in the bushes' (Lukashenko 1996).

The invitation to join forces with Lukashenko was declined by all youth activists except one: Vsevolod Yanchevskii, a 20-year old student in law. There are different accounts about how Yanchevskii came to the attention of Lukashenko. Born in Borisov in 1976, Yanchevskii studied law with Lukashenko's son Viktor at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. In 1994, Yanchevskii had volunteered in Lukashenko's election campaign and, according to some sources, became a confidant of the president-to-be (Vysotskii 2016, Slutskaya 2013). Others reject this view, stating that Yanchevskii became close with Lukashenko only after he had established Direct Action on the eve of the 1996 referendum, following the youth forum. (Gerashchenko 2012, Kur'yanovich 2015) Two people, interviewed in the framework of this research, note that he first approached the existing youth

groups and proposed to explicitly support Lukashenko at the ongoing protests under his leadership, but this suggestion was rejected.⁴⁵ As a result, Yanchevskii established a movement from scratch under the political party Slavic Council—White Rus' (*Slaviyanskiy Sobor—Belaya Rus'*). The ideology of the Slavic Council was based on the perceived eternal unity of the three Eastern Slavic nations, which is why it aligned with President Lukashenko, who at the time sought to create a union state between Belarus and Russia. (Linkevich 2009) Direct Action was granted the full financial and administrative support of the president's office after it had been registered at the Ministry of Justice in late 1996. (Gerashchenko 2012)

Historical institutionalism argues that, unlike during longer periods of stability, agency is pivotal during critical junctures. In Soifer's model, key agents are the ones who constitute the productive conditions that define the outcome of the juncture, in contrast to the structural factors that define permissive conditions. While Lukashenko's policies aimed at bringing the (youth) NGO sphere under control generated new permissive conditions that made the emergence of an explicitly pro-president youth movement possible in the first place, it was Yanchevskii's policy entrepreneurialism⁴⁶ that led to the development of pro-presidential youth activism in post-Soviet Belarus. In essence, it was Yanchevskii who brought the concept of pro-government youth organisation to life in the former Soviet Union.

Officially, the aim of Direct Action was to establish a direct link between the president and Belarusian youth. In much the same way as its Russian equivalents *Idushchie vmeste* and *Nashi* in the early 2000s, Direct Action was hostile towards both the pro-West opposition and the 'apparatus of corrupted bureaucrats', supporting only the president (Matsevilov 2002, p. 4). It mainly engaged in 'street politics', namely, pro-Lukashenko counter-demonstrations that often ended in mass brawls (Gerashchenko 2012). In a pre-referendum leaflet, the organisation described itself in the following way:

D.A. [Direct Action] doesn't talk, it acts. It acts cool. It sets a goal—and reaches it. If there's an obstacle—it is overcome. If opponents disturb us—they are destroyed. D.A. is not afraid of corrupt bureaucratic functionaries entrenched in state offices nor the idiotic opposition that feeds on Western

⁴⁵ Author's interviews with Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU, 2001–2002, Minsk, 23 May 2017; and Vadim, former Direct Action activist, Minsk, 18 April 2017.

⁴⁶ On policy entrepreneurialism, see Cairney (2012, pp. 271–72).

grants. D.A. fights with both ... Because in Direct Action there is order and discipline. This is the power of D.A. Here youth learns to give orders and to obey them.⁴⁷

While Lukashenko supported the movement by granting financial support and free office space, its radical statements and violent repertoire of action on the streets doomed it to marginalisation. However, the idea of a pro-president youth organisation appealed to the head of state. All that needed to be done was to reconstruct it so that it would be attractive to the majority of youth.

In January 1997, the President's Office and the Committee of Youth Affairs put forward a suggestion of a new union of Belarusian youth. The core of the organisation would consist of Direct Action and the BYU, but in the classic mode of co-optation, it was to be joined by all organisations that wanted to participate in state youth policy. While the Direct Action had directly demonstrated that it was proactive, the BYU had experienced personnel, a clear structure and a large membership base (Matsevilov 2002, pp. 4–5). Furthermore, it had expressed aspirations for closer collaboration with the state and was able to self-finance its operations, while its long *Komsomol* history provided an additional source of legitimacy. However, since the new union of Belarusian youth that the government was hoping to see established soon was to be headed by Yanchevskii, the representatives of youth associations, including the BYU, rejected the authorities' suggestion. This was because other youth activists strongly disliked Yanchevskii.⁴⁸ The BYU went as far as to urge its organisational partners to do the same (Yazykovich 1997a). The explicit refusal to work with Yanchevskii marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of the Belarusian Youth Union. At this critical juncture, it chose to remain an independent organisation, in line with the choice it had made back in 1990–1991, rather than undergo another transformation.

Despite the lack of support from other youth associations, in spring 1997, Direct Action was reconstructed as the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union (BPYU). The BPYU was a new pro-government organisation aiming for mass membership that, according to its rules (*ustav*), sought to

⁴⁷ Direct Action leaflet (1996). Personal collection of Vadim, former Direct Action activist.

⁴⁸ Author's interview with Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU, 2001–2002, Minsk, 23 May 2017.

unite patriotically minded boys and girls to protect the rights and legal interests of youth, to actively participate in the construction of a socially just and progressive society, and to form among youth a worldview based on Christian values.⁴⁹

For his part, Aleksandr Dolzhevskiy, the first secretary of Mogilev regional committee of the BPYU, formulated the core task of the organisation as ‘patriotic upbringing, formation of the sense of citizenship and patriotism among youth, and the education of those spiritual and moral values that are based on the traditions of the Belarusian nation’.⁵⁰ The patriotism rhetoric characterised by both these formulations was a response to Lukashenko’s call to teach young Belarusians to be patriotic, which in his understanding meant not only love and respect for one’s motherland but also staunch loyalty to the elected president. At the 1996 forum, Lukashenko had explicitly stated: ‘We will support organisations that deal with the patriotic upbringing of one’s peers’ (Lukashenko 1996). The introduction of such elements to the BYU’s repertoire (Table 1) was prompted by the very same statement.

All sources confirm that, in contrast with Direct Action, a grassroots organisation, the BPYU was a top-down creation (Matsevilov 2002, pp. 274–75; Laptinok 2004; Nikolayenko 2015).⁵¹ How this actually happened is examined below.

The organisational structure and, to some extent, the repertoire of the new patriotic youth union, were copied from the BYU. Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU in the early 2000s, recalls that in 1997 staff members of the BPYU approached all of BYU’s associates, such as the Belarusian Pioneer Organisation and the Russian Youth Union. According to her, the BPYU never tried to establish collaboration with the BYU—instead, it offered BYU with only two options: to submit or to be prepared for confrontation.⁵² Most BYU staff members opted for the latter. As a result, the organisation joined other independent youth organisations under the Rada umbrella (Matsevilov 2002). However, although the BYU asserted its unwillingness to cooperate with Yanchevskii,

⁴⁹ Ustav Belorusskogo patrioticheskogo soyuza molodezhi. 1997. ‘Osnovnye tseli, zadachi i metody deyatel’nosti BPSM’.

⁵⁰ GAOOMog f. 330, op. 1, d. 22, l. 8.

⁵¹ For period press, see, Korolevich (1997), Pivovarov (1997), Radkevich (1997); archive documents GAOOMog f. 330, op. 1, dd. 5, 8, 22; GAOOG r. 60, op. 1, dd. 5, 17, 18; GAMn f. 695, op. 1, dd. 1, 5, op. 2, d. 3; GAOOG f. 396, op. 2, d. 2.

⁵² Author’s interview with Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU, 2001–2002, Minsk, 23 May 2017.

it also openly declared its desire to continue co-operation with state actors in executing youth policy (Yazykovich 1997a).

The period following the critical juncture of 1996–1997 was one of relative equilibrium, lasting until 2002. It was marked by the coexistence and low level rivalry between the BPYU and the BYU. In 1997, Yanchevskii called the BYU the ‘fat commercial cats of the *Komsomol*’ (*zhirnye kommercheskie koty ot Komsomola*);⁵³ in response the BYU’s first secretary, Sergei Doronin, declared:

We believe that the role [of a leading youth union] belongs to us. We’re 80 years old. We have experience. We know every youth organisation. We know the interests of young people, we know how to fight and how to represent. We are able to co-ordinate the activity of a great number of youth organisations with different agendas and refer state support where it is really needed. I doubt whether Yanchevskii can do that—he is unexperienced and has not dealt with youth issues. (Doronin, quoted in Yazykovich 1997a)

The Belarusian government decided to channel its administrative and financial backing to the organisation it deemed to represent its interests best: the BPYU. In July 1997, President Lukashenko signed a presidential decree ‘On state support to the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union’ stating that ‘supporting the BPYU in all possible ways is one of the priorities of Belarusian youth policy’.⁵⁴ The decree commanded regional administrations to grant BPYU access to material and non-material support and gave the BPYU the right to engage in commercial activity and to participate in the ideological-educational work of schools and institutes of higher education.⁵⁵

In summer 1997 every Belarusian school and university received an official letter from the newly established regional BPYU committee ordering the administration to set up a BPYU cell there.⁵⁶ In schools, the job of creating a BPYU cell was typically delegated to one of the teachers, who would become the first secretary of the primary committee until a suitable pupil was found to take over. For example, according to the 1999 statistics, only 13 of the 32 BPYU committees in schools in the city of Grodno were officially led by pupils, while

⁵³ Author’s interview Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU, 2001–2002, Minsk, 23 May 2017.

⁵⁴ Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus ot 09.07.1997 №380 ‘On state support to the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union’.

⁵⁵ Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus ot 09.07.1997 №380 ‘On state support to the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union’.

⁵⁶ See, for example, GAOOMog, f. 330, op. 1, d. 5, ll. 1–5.

the rest had teachers as first secretaries.⁵⁷ For the first two years, the main task of regional committee staff members was to go around setting up primary cells and to report back to their superiors. Meeting targets for new members was of utmost importance. For example, Decree No.15, 'On the activation of the Grodno city committee', issued by the Grodno region committee, stated, 'A.A. Yaroshevich, the specialist in work with primary cells, is responsible for increasing the number of BPYU members by 100 new people in the primary cells of universities, colleges and vocational schools; by 100 new members in secondary schools; by 50 new members in businesses and institutes'.⁵⁸ Yaroshevich was also commanded to report the exact figures reflecting the growth of the organisation every Friday.⁵⁹

Maksim was one of the pupils who set up a BPYU cell in his local school. He recalls:

I was 14 years old. Some people came to my school, played on the guitar, talked about going to some events, concerts in Minsk ... for someone who lived in a village where there was nothing to do it sounded good, so of course I set up the cell and got many people to join in, of course I knew nothing about politics or why the organisation existed.⁶⁰

BPYU's takeover of the former *Komsomol* offices in schools, institutes and state enterprises marked a return to the centralised Soviet-era youth policy, characterised by a single government-organised mass membership youth union that channelled state ideology to young people. Lukashenko was interested in youth for a number of reasons. First and foremost, as the economic situation stabilised and the constitutional crisis was resolved in Lukashenko's favour, the government had had more space and resources to focus on the consolidation of its power. Secondly, Yanchevskii had successfully lobbied for the importance of the political socialisation of youth, which meant that youth affairs were now perceived as a policy issue that needed to be resolved. With the right kind of (patriotic) socialisation, young people would grow up to form the mainstay (*opora*) of a strong Belarusian state and Lukashenko's electoral support base. However, if youth were left to their own devices, it could present a two-fold threat to the government. First, the prevalence of drug and alcohol consumption among youth, combined with anti-social behaviour, was problematic from the perspective of socio-economic

⁵⁷ GAOOGr, f. 60, op. 1, d. 18, ll. 59–66.

⁵⁸ GAOOGr f. 60, op. 1, d. 5, l. 29.

⁵⁹ GAOOGr f. 60, op. 1, d. 5, l. 34.

⁶⁰ Author's interview with Maksim, former BPSM and Rada activist, Minsk, 1 May 2017.

development. Secondly, the government feared that naïve youth could be mobilised to opposition protests and thus contribute to the destabilisation of the political situation. Although ‘colour revolutions’ in the post-Soviet region were a phenomenon of the following decade, Lukashenko was already convinced by mid-1990s that he needed to take serious measures to guarantee youth support in years to come. An opinion poll in summer 1996 found that Lukashenko’s popularity was relatively low among 18–24 year-olds, of whom only 39.8 % stated that they supported the president (the average across all age groups was 45.1%), while 24.6 % said they would be ready to participate in street protests against the president (the average was 18.8%) (Dragokhrust 1996).

The BPYU gradually established its dominance in the field of youth affairs. Membership incentives included discounts at local shops. At the same time, it suffered from a number of scandals, well described in the press and independent analyses of the time. Its leadership was accused of corruption (Roskol'nikov 1998); of forcing young people to become members (for example, by the threat that it would be harder for non-members to enrol at university) (Yazykovich 1997b); of meddling in politics by actively supporting Lukashenko (Bebenin 1997); and of hypocrisy and despotic leadership style (Korlenyuk 1997). Overall, by employing both stick and carrot to increase its membership base, in 2001 the organisation had reached a membership of 250,000, which significantly exceeded that of any other youth organisation (Nikolayenko 2015).

The run-up to the presidential elections of 2001 marked the beginning of the end to the coexistence of the BYU and BPYU. Pressure had already begun in December 1999, when the State Committee of Youth Affairs, led by Aleksandr Poznyak, invited the representatives of the two organisations to discuss the practical aspects of merging of the two associations (Roskol'nikov 1999). To encourage the BYU to take up the offer, the Committee of Youth Affairs demanded that the BYU vacate its central office, which, according to the Committee, should have been returned to the state after the collapse of communism. As in 1994, the BYU refused, claiming that as the legal legacy organisation of the Belarusian *Komsomol*, it had full ownership rights to the property (Matrinovich 2000). After an initial victory in court in 2001, the case was eventually solved in favour of the Committee of Youth Affairs in May 2002. During the legal dispute, the BYU fell out of favour with the state authorities. Since the property was a significant source of revenue, losing the court case meant the end of the BYU’s independence (Drigaylo 2002a). In September 2002, the BYU and BPYU officially merged and a new centralised organisation, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (*Belarusskiy respublikanskiy soyuz molodezhi*—BRYU) was established.

Several former BYU members interviewed for this study recalled the pressure faced by the organisation leadership from authorities during the last years of its existence.⁶¹

The BPYU's effective annexation of the BYU reflects the gradual consolidation of Lukashenko's authoritarian rule in post-Soviet Belarus. Interestingly enough, not all youth NGOs felt the tightening of the screws. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the *Rada* was doing fairly well. There were no major disputes among member organisations and international cooperation was blossoming (Zinchenko 2016, pp. 120–21). Elena Kas'ko, one of *Rada*'s leaders, argues that this was because young people at the time were not taken seriously as a potential support base or perceived as a threat (quoted in Zinchenko 2016, p. 121). The *Rada* only came under attack by the government *after* the 2001 elections, because of its 'destructive position' towards the government, its unwillingness to be subordinated to the newly created Belarusian Republican Youth Union, and its attempt to take an active and independent stance towards the drafting of state youth policy.⁶² It was liquidated by a court decision in 2006. (Ekadumova 2006, p.12)

The period from 1996 until 2002 demonstrates the interplay of diverse actors and factors in the making of a new pro-presidential mass organisation. Firstly, Lukashenko was determined to consolidate authoritarian rule in a way that did not radically break with the Soviet past. (See, for example, Ioffe 2014) This motivation explains his policy preferences across sectors, including in the sphere of youth policy. Secondly, Vsevolod Yanchevskii emerged as an equally determined policy entrepreneur, initiating the establishment of a pro-presidential youth movement as a response to the mass protests that shook the country from 1995 onwards. Thirdly, the *Komsomol* successor organisation, counter-intuitively, refused to play the role assigned to it as the core of the new government-organised youth union, leading the government to establish a new mass membership youth union from scratch. Fourth, the government's generous administrative support to the BPYU enabled the organisation to spread across the country despite its shortcomings: the inability to develop economic self-sufficiency, the reliance on dubious methods of recruitment to increase the organisation's membership base, and the tarnished public image of its leadership. Finally, the strengthening of Lukashenko's authoritarian grip over the judiciary by 2002 led to a situation in which the Supreme Economic Court was pressured to resolve the *Komsomol* headquarters dispute in

⁶¹ Author's interviews with Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU, 2001–2002, Minsk, 23 May 2017; Aleksei, a staffed BYU member from Grodno region, Grodno, 10 May 2017; and Andrei, a staffed BYU member from Homiel' region, Homiel', 3 May 2017.

⁶² Author's interview with Svetlana Koroleva, the leader of *Rada* in the 1990s, Minsk, 18 April 2017; Velichko 2003; Drigailo & Aleksandrovich 2003; Ekadumova 2008, pp. 60–62.

favour of the state committee of youth affairs, eventually leading to the collapse of BYU opposition to the project of reviving a unitary mass membership youth union. As *Rada* leader Svetlana Koroleva had prophesied in autumn 1996:

In terms of youth policy, if the president wins [the 1996 referendum] the state will immediately exert strict control over youth organisations. Artificial *Komsomol*-like structures will be created and provided the right to speak on behalf of the entire young generation. (Koroleva, quoted in Plaks 1996, p. 5)

2002 onwards: Monopoly of the BRYU

As outlined in the previous section, in the end, pressure on the Belarusian Youth Union won out, and the BYU and BPYU were merged into a new association, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (*Belarusskii respublikanskii soyuz molodezhi*—BRYU), a pro-presidential unitary mass membership youth union. Speaking at the Unification Congress in September 2002, Lukashenko confessed that the merger of the two organisations for him was a ‘dream come true’. According to him, the union marked a new era for Belarusian youth, who had rejected the ‘calls to the barricades’ and, instead, chosen a peaceful path towards future flourishing of Belarus. Youth had promised to stand by the president, and the unification of the two organisations was the final fulfilment of the promise. The role of the new youth union was clear from the start: ‘You shall listen what the president wants and demands’ (Lukashenko, quoted in BRYU 2003, pp. 3-4).

In juridical terms, the emergence of the BRYU put an end to the history of the *Komsomol* (Drigaylo 2002b). The majority of BYU staff members refused to work for the BRYU, even though they were offered employment in the structures of the new organisation.⁶³ The BRYU remains a unified, mass membership, pro-presidential, pro-government youth organisation to this day. Its large membership base – half a million according to official statistics (BRSM 2015) – is sustained by a combination of carrot and stick. The positive incentives range from the usual non-monetary benefits of volunteering to summer jobs, shop discounts and free items or services, whereas the coercive aspect consists of the semi-automatic sign-up process, the difficulty of exiting the organisation, and the intimidation of those who either refuse to join or try to leave. (Matchanka 2014; Zaloznaya 2017, pp. 141–143) The BRYU’s primary cells operate in every school, university, and state enterprise. A strict *Komsomol*-style hierarchy based on a command-administrative organisational culture and democratic centralism

⁶³ Author’s interviews with Alla Danilova, first secretary of the BYU, 2001–2002, Minsk, 23 May 2017; and Aleksei, a staffed BYU member from Grodno region, Grodno, 10 May 2017.

is upheld. Although members pay monthly fees, operating the organisational apparatus is so costly that the organisation is fully dependent on state funding. In exchange for financial support, the BRYU's programme mirrors the interests of the government. This funding scheme, combined with a strict top-down hierarchy, means that the organisation's leadership is accountable to the Lukashenko government, not its rank and file members.

Although the activities of the BRYU demonstrate an overwhelmingly top-down character, within the organisation there is also pluralism of political opinions and some opportunities for bottom-up initiatives. The organisation's policy of mass membership means that the only common factor among its members is that they belong to the same age cohort. Young people, for the most part, join not because they support Lukashenko but because of its advantages, both for following their interests, whether organising events, hanging out with 'cool' people or finding a summer job, and for their future careers, which may be harmed by not joining. (Silvan 2019). Both the organisation's leadership and the president are aware of this. Lukashenko has repeatedly urged the BRYU to focus rather on quality than quantity in member recruitment. (Lukashenko 2011, quoted in BRSM 2012; Lukashenko 2018) In the annual general meeting of one university BRYU organisation, a representative of the higher BRYU committee asserted: 'BRYU is not a place to have fun. If you're not ready to work for the cause of the organisation, you shouldn't be here.'⁶⁴ However, BRYU's large size has its advantages: the income generated by membership fees, the legitimacy of a large membership base, and a large mobilisational resource at hand have contributed to the organisational leadership's unwillingness to downsize. Therefore, young people are still strongly encouraged to join as a class in ninth grade, at age 14–16 years. Meeting the target percentage of BRYU membership is typically the class teacher's responsibility, and there have been instances of pupils being signed up uninformed or against their will. (Spasyuk 2018; Zaloznaya 2017, pp. 141-142) Few young people make a conscious decision to leave the BRYU, staying out of inertia, and their membership becomes characterised by complex strategies of engagement and disengagement with the organisation (Silvan 2019). Although the BRYU does not publish information about the demographic composition of its members, commentators assume that membership is more common among pupils and students than youth in the labour market. (See, for example, Spasyuk 2018)

⁶⁴ Author's field notes, Minsk, 28 March 2017.

Conclusions: consolidating authoritarianism, consolidating the youth?

Based on a study of primary source material, this article has traced the emergence of today's Belarusian Republican Youth Union, a mass membership pro-government youth organisation. 'Reviving the *Komsomol*', as the process is sometimes referred to, was in fact a complex procedure that witnessed three critical junctures and took many years to complete. The counterfactual analysis highlighted the available options at critical junctures, pointing to the interplay of various factors that led to the end result—the establishment of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union on 6 September 2002. These factors are *Komsomol*'s initial choice to change rather than dissolve, Lukashenko's neo-communist approach to authoritarianism, Yanchevskii's policy entrepreneurialism, and the BYU's rejection of co-optation. The transformation of the Belarusian *Komsomol* in the early 1990s contributes to knowledge of how a Soviet structure could transform after the liquidation of the party-state, while the interplay between the two government-affiliated youth movements after Lukashenko's ascension to power demonstrates that building a sizeable government-organised youth organisation can be a demanding task despite generous administrative support and resolution of policy entrepreneurs and political leaders.

It should be noted that in Belarus, the government-organised youth organisation was not originally initiated by the state. As one of the interviewees pointed out, there was no explicit command from the higher up but rather an implicit political demand that was met with a supply from below.⁶⁵ Vsevolod Yanchevskii, the founder of Direct Action and the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, was able to offer the president what in 1996 Lukashenko did not even know he wanted: a mass membership youth association that would mobilise support for the president and take care of the patriotic upbringing of the new generation.

Furthermore, this article shows that it is worth distinguishing between government-organised NGOs ('GONGOs') (Cumming 2009) and organisations that are either pro-government or pro-president. While the Russian *Nashi* is a classic example of a government-organised youth movement, being essentially a project established by Vladislav Surkov in support of Putin, Yanchevskii's Direct Action was not initiated by a government insider, despite its pro-presidential agenda, and thus cannot be classified as a GONGO in the full meaning of the term. Conversely, given that the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union and the Belarusian Republican Youth Union were set up on a clear initiative from inside the government, they do meet the GONGO definition. Moreover, the fact that BRYU leaders are *de facto* appointed like government officials and that the organisation is funded by the state to deliver a specific service means that the BRYU is a long way from meeting the criteria

⁶⁵ Author's interview with Grigorii, analyst for the *EuroBelarus* consortium, Minsk, 2017.

of an independent NGO. Direct Action and the BYU, on the other hand, were independent associations despite their affiliation with Lukashenko's government.

As the struggle between the BYU and the BPYU and the difficulty of resurrecting a mass membership youth union demonstrate, in the 1990s Belarus was not yet a fully consolidated authoritarian state that could easily take control of youth organisations. Political determination to create a monopolistic youth union grew out of Yanchevskii's lobbying. Today's Belarusian Republican Youth Union, created in 2002, is a mirror of the consolidated authoritarian government that supports it. Despite its mass membership base, it is accountable to the president's office, not to its half a million members. It holds on to what it perceives as the best traditions of the Soviet *Komsomol*, such as summer labour brigades and the strict power vertical, but also reflects the interests of a contemporary authoritarian state as an instiller of 'patriotic' (pro-president and pro-regime) values in the younger generation and a mobiliser of staged support for the government. It is generally assumed that if the state stops supporting the BRYU, the organisation would disappear overnight because of the stigma of BRYU activism and the limits to grassroots agency. (Silvan 2019) However, as the historical institutionalist literature of organisational change and the remarkable survival story of the Belarusian *Komsomol* suggests, even structures that seem doomed when the political establishment supporting them is gone can prove surprisingly flexible and capable of fundamental transformation if need be.

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