De-Stalinisation and Insubordination in the Soviet Borderlands: Beria's Attempted National Reform in Soviet Belarus

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Abstract: This article examines the response of the regional elites in Soviet Belarus to the new nationalities policy introduced by Lavrentii Beria in his bid for power after Stalin's death in 1953. The scenario, which had successfully played out in Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia, failed to be imposed on Belarus, whose Russian First Secretary Nikolai Patolichev remained in post, despite Moscow's orders. A key role in this was played by the republic's regional secretaries. Their unwillingness to denounce their patron highlighted the emerging importance of regional networks and set an important precedent for the post-Stalin relationship between Moscow and the ethnic periphery.

Nineteen fifty-three was an anxious year in the Soviet Union. As the country braced for another wave of purges threatening to swell out of the trumped-up Doctors' Plot, Joseph Stalin, the adulated and feared dictator, whose tight grip on the country lasted nearly a quarter of a century, suddenly suffered a stroke and died on 5 March.[1] He had named no successor, and his death threw members of his inner circle into a furious power struggle, hidden behind the façade of collective leadership. For a few months, the most dangerous contender seemed to be Lavrentii Beria, the boss of the country's security apparatus. In his bid for power, Beria came out with bold policy initiatives, one of which, the so-called New Course, sought to give more national autonomy to the union republics and ethnic groups, encourage the use of the native languages in local administration and education, and replace ethnic Russian cadres with the locals, thus tapping into local nationalism as a way of gaining support (Knight 1993, pp. 183-94; Pikhoya 2007, pp. 226-52; Loader 2015, pp. 22-80; Simon 1991, pp. 228-30). This article is about the response to this initiative from the political elites in Belarus, a key borderland Soviet republic. It focuses on two dramatic plenums of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (*Tsentral'nyi komitet Kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii* – CC CPB), which framed the rapid policy shifts that followed Beria's political fortunes. The 4th Plenum of the CPB Central Committee opened on 25 June 1953 in

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[1] I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.

Minsk to launch Beria's new nationality policy in the republic and to remove the CPB's First Secretary Nikolai Patolichev. Yet, while the Minsk plenum was in session, in Moscow Beria was arrested by his Presidium comrades. His New Course became one of the 'crimes' he was charged with, and so the next, 5th Plenum of the CPB Central Committee in Minsk, summoned only a few weeks later on 24 July, obediently condemned both the policy and its author, who was denounced as the enemy of the people.

The basic contours of what happened in Belarus as a result of Beria's manoeuvring are relatively familiar: the Beria-authored resolution on the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was passed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (*Tsentral'nyi komitet Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soyuza* – CC CPSU) in Moscow on 12 June 1953; then a plenum in Minsk was held during 25-27 June, but First Secretary of the CPB Patolichev was not removed. The story is usually left at that. In English-language historiography it is mostly known from secondary sources and has rarely received more than a few lines of attention (Zaprudnik 1996, pp. 104-05; Ioffe 2003, pp. 1027-28; Smith 2011, p. 81; Fowkes 1997, p. 76; Knight 1993, p. 189), although excerpts of the two plenums' minutes appeared in the Belarusian press in the early 1990s (Lukashuk 1990, pp. 69-75 & 73-82; Nikolaichuk, 1993a; Nikolaichuk 1993b; Trubitsina-Patolicheva, 1993). However, an examination of the full minutes of the plenums in the archives shows that this episode deserves a more detailed discussion. The drama of the two plenums throws new light on the important question of reshaping the centre-periphery relationship in the wake of Stalin's demise. We already have a good sense of what happened between Moscow and Ukraine during the power struggles of 1953 and beyond; recently, historians' due attention has turned to the Baltic republics (Zubkova 2008; Tannberg 2008; Loader 2015; Loader 2016; Davoliūtė 2013; on Ukraine, see Knight 1993; Yekelchyk 2007). But the Belarusian republic has remained on the margins of this discussion. This omission is worth correcting for two reasons. Firstly, to the Kremlin leadership Belarus was an extremely important member of the Union. A western republic with a prominent security function, after the Second World War it included eastern regions of interwar Poland, annexed by the USSR in 1939 and re-conquered in 1944. Although pre-war local identities in these territories were complex and ambiguous, the Soviet annexation, war-time violence and post-war population exchanges did much to 'simplify' the ethnic map of the region, eliminating almost entirely its Jewish and Polish communities (see Ackermann 2016, pp. 409-36; Gross 1988), and making it easier for it to be officially constructed as ethnically Belarusian. In this newly homogenised region, the encouragement

of national autonomy could be expected to yield high political dividends, making Belarus one of Beria's key targets along with Ukraine and the Baltic republics.

Secondly and more importantly, Minsk's response to Moscow's initiative was neither fully compliant, nor predictable, and it sits at odds with what happened elsewhere. The scenario, which had successfully played out in Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia, failed to be imposed on the Belarusian republic, whose Party's First Secretary Patolichev remained in place, despite Moscow's explicit instructions. The aim of this article is to understand why. It has been suggested that by the time of the June plenum in Minsk Beria's star was already setting; his influence was waning, and his arrest on 26 June changed the course of the plenum (Pikhoya 2007, pp. 245-46; Fowkes 1997, p. 76; Zen'kovich 2000, pp. 302-21; Andrianov 2008, pp. 236-49; Alekseichik 2016, pp. 34-41 & 68-76). This article argues instead that a key role was played by the local political elites in Belarus, and especially its regional secretaries, who were not initially aware of the plot against Beria, and yet disobeyed Moscow's orders to remove their first secretary, demonstrating a more forceful position in negotiating the terms of the post-Stalin political arrangement with the centre than has been assumed. Although atypical, their response set a precedent and marked a new departure in Soviet domestic politics, whereby regional networks of party secretaries, and especially those in the ethnic borderlands, would become an increasingly vital instrument of governance for the centre and an influential political force.

The significance of regional networks in Soviet politics has long been underscored by scholars. In the 1970s and 1980s, Sovietologists studied the mechanisms of elite circulation to understand how the late Soviet political system of promotions (nomenklatura) worked at the regional and Union levels. These studies have told us that the system of nomenklatura appointments did not operate in a centralised, top-down fashion, but rather the mechanisms of recruitment and upward mobility had a lot to do with regional interests, patronage networks and career trajectories of party functionaries at the provincial level (Clark 1989; Willlerton 1987; Rigby 1978; Urban 1989a & 1989b). More recently, historians have added another dimension to our understanding of Soviet regional networks (Khlevniuk 2007; Gorlizki 2010 & 2013). Notably, Yoram Gorlizki's extensive research into regional networks in the Russian republic has demonstrated how in the post-Stalin decades regional patronage networks could be as much a liability as a strength to those already in the top positions (Gorlizki 2013). But any systemic attempts to weaken such ties were too risky, as Khrushchev learnt to his detriment in 1964 (Khlevniuk, 2012). His successor Leonid Brezhnev turned patronage networks into a crucial instrument of the centre's control, and under

his slogan of 'Trust in Cadres' the relationship between the centre and the regions was often shaped not by administrative measures, but through informal understandings forged through established personal relationships (Gorlizki 2010, pp. 678-79 & 699; Willerton 1987). Brezhnev himself was the cultivator of patron-client relations par excellence: he personally interviewed all new candidates for the post of first regional secretary and invested time in maintaining good relationships after their appointment (Gorlizki 2010, pp. 699-700). Yet, as this article aims to show, the potential usefulness of regional networks manifested itself well before Brezhnev gained power and even before Khrushchev properly became the top dog in the Presidium, and what is more, it happened in an ethnic republic, where the stakes were arguably higher. The Moscow leadership's favourable response to the Belarusian elite's mild insubordination in summer 1953 shows that the centre was taking a new approach to the ethnic periphery at a time of great political uncertainty, setting an important precedent for the future. Khrushchev himself had to call on his network of regional supporters to stay in power in 1957, and we know of at least two cases in the Brezhnev era, when similar concessions were granted by the centre, and there were possibly more.[2]

As a result of this more liberal attitude, the position of the regional secretaries in Belarus was strengthened, and this is especially evident from the debates of the next, July 1953 plenum in Minsk, which took place after Beria's arrest. Its minutes offer a glimpse of the start of de-Stalinisation on the republican level and of the challenge that this process would pose to the top republican leadership, as regional secretaries used Beria's downfall to confront them about their role in Stalin-era abuses against the party. Thus, the July plenum in Belarus offered a taste of the risks that de-Stalinisation could pose to the cohesiveness of the party and its control over its own members at the Union level.

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In 1953, Belarus was one of several republics where Beria launched his new nationalities policy. In the spring of that year, in Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus local officials and Beria's deputies were tasked with gathering information on the ethnic composition of the party and state organs, the use of

[2] In Belarus in 1965 and in Lithuania in 1974. For the case study of Lithuania's elites successfully petitioning Moscow about the appointment of the first secretary of Lithuania in 1974, see Grybkauskas (2013). Grybkauskas also mentions the appointment of Petr Masherau in Belarus. For Khrushchev, see, for example, Lovell (2010, p. 191).

native languages, schools, and especially about underground nationalist groups and continuing resistance to Soviet power. This information was then used to produce highly critical reports on these republics for the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee. The Presidium then issued decrees on Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia (Knight 1993, pp. 183-89; Pikhoya 2007, pp. 241-245; Zubkova 2008, p. 321; Anušauskas 2015, pp. 354-56). In order to understand just how unusual the Belarusian response was to its decree, we need to recount briefly what happened in the other republics.

The decree on Ukraine was passed on 26 May 1953. It criticised the local authorities for the low living standards of the republic's collective farmers, for the small number of ethnic Ukrainians holding party and state positions, for the 'Russification' of education, and for the heavy-handed tactics of dealing with western Ukraine, which, the decree warned, was harmful to the struggle against the nationalists. The decree criticised the Ukrainian party leadership and called for the dismissal of its First Secretary Leonid Mel'nikov, a native Russian (Pikhoya 2007, pp. 241-43; Yekelchyk 2007, p. 154). A plenum of the Ukrainian Central Committee during 2-4 June 1953 duly replaced Mel'nikov with an ethnic Ukrainian, A. I. Kirichenko. The plenum went according to plan, and no serious objections or reservations were voiced by the republic's political elites. As prescribed by the decree, regional party plenums followed to discuss and implement the new policy, and according to new First Secretary Kirichenko's note to Khrushchev two weeks later, on 16 June 1953, the majority of the participants expressed their strong support for it (Knight 1993, p. 189).

On 26 May, the Presidium of the CC CPSU also adopted a decree on Lithuania, entitled 'The Questions of the Lithuanian USSR', which broadly echoed the Ukrainian decree's criticisms. The document revealed that nearly 10% of the population had been subjected to repression, which was grist to the mill of Lithuanian anti-Soviet propaganda. Lithuania's First Secretary A. Iu. Sniečkus was criticised for his inability to overcome the underground movement and for repressions (Pikhoya 2007, pp. 243-45). Sniečkus was not removed – he was, after all, a Lithuanian – but the policy of removing Russians from other important posts proceeded as ordered. In fact, it had started even before the resolution on Lithuania was adopted: on 10 April, Russian chief of the Lithuanian Internal Affairs Ministry (*Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del* - MVD) Petr Kondakov was replaced with a Lithuanian, Jonas Vildžiūnas, and two native Lithuanians were appointed as Vildžiūnas's deputies (Anušauskas 2015, p. 354). In the summer, the expulsion of Russian senior state and party officials from Lithuania continued apace, and it was not reversed by Beria's downfall in late June; by November 1953, 3,000 ethnic Russians had left the republic.

Despite local complaints, the Kremlin tacitly supported Sniečkus in his policy of ethnic replacements (Anušauskas 2015, pp. 358-59). Notably, as the Lithuanian party plenum on 13-14 July denounced Beria for attempting to sow national discord, Sniečkus reminded the gathering that the decree of 26 May was not being withdrawn (Anušauskas 2015, pp. 357-58).

In Estonia, preparations for a similar memorandum for the Estonian Party were led by Khrushchev, who had his own investigation set up in parallel to that carried out by the Estonian MVD (Tannberg 2008, pp. 84-85 & 110-111). A draft memorandum was submitted to Khrushchev on 20 June, but it never became a decree because the events were already moving in a new direction, with the plot against Beria underway. According to historian Tynu Tannberg, this probably saved Estonia's First Secretary I. Kebin, a Russian Estonian, from removal. While Kebin weathered the storm, elsewhere ethnicity-based replacements were made: the republic's minister of justice, the minister of internal affairs, the minister for local industry, and a few other major figures in industry lost their posts for being ethnic Russians.[3] Although Moscow never issued a formal decree on Estonia, the Estonian Party's Central Committee held a plenum in June to discuss the Lithuanian resolution (Zubkova 2008, p. 333).

The decree on Latvia was adopted on the same day as the Belarusian one, 12 June, and the Latvian CC Plenum followed on 22-23 June. Within days, thousands of non-Latvian officials were removed from top and mid-level positions, including the Central Committee. The Latvian MVD was purged of non-Latvians, with nearly all senior officers replaced within days of the plenum: 16 out of the 17 heads of departments, and 51 of the 56 city and district chiefs. At the June plenum, the Russian second secretary was replaced with a Latvian (the first secretary was already a native). In fact, in all three Baltic republics the posts of second secretary were given to native cadres in violation of an established practice whereby this important post was held by a Russian (Loader 2015, pp. 36-39; on the institution of the second secretary as Moscow's watchdog in the Soviet republics, see Grybkauskas 2014).

In all four republics, the appointments of native cadres were not reversed after Beria's fall: indeed, the replacements of ethnic Russians in key posts continued (Tannberg 2008, p. 325; Yekelchyk 2007, p. 154; Loader 2015, p. 59) In Ukraine, for example, during the late 1950s and 1960s ethnic Ukrainians held three quarters of ranking party and state posts (Yekelchyk 2007, pp. 155-56). All of this

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[3] See 'Sekretnoe pis'mo sekretarya TsK KPE I. Kebina v TsK KPSS po povodu yakoby imevshego mesto uvol'neniia russkikh na predpriyatiyakh Tallina, 29.08.1953', cited in Tannberg (2008, p. 325).

makes it even more extraordinary that in Belarus the policy of removing non-native cadres from party and state positions stumbled at the most important of those replacements: the first secretary of the republican party organisation.

This was not for lack of trying. By mid-June First Secretary of the CPB Patolichev had already been side-lined from the process of organising the upcoming plenum of the CPB. He still chaired the CC Bureau (*Byuro TsK*) meeting on 9 June, whose minutes herald the approaching storm by noting that mistakes had been made in nationalities policy and in the treatment of Belarusians in the western regions. During the meeting, the Bureau resolved to convene a plenum on 20 June, where Patolichev would deliver a report on the forthcoming CC CPSU Decree 'On the Belarusian SSR'.[4] But a week later, and only days after the anticipated decree was passed in Moscow on 12 June, another meeting of the Belarusian Bureau took place, to which Patolichev was not invited. In fact, he was not even informed: he was in Moscow when he was told of the meeting (Patolichev 1995, p. 202). But Patolichev already knew that the clouds were gathering: he had received a tip-off from his friends in state security about his imminent dismissal and had been making trips to Moscow to clarify the situation (Patolichev 1995, pp. 199-203).

While Patolichev knocked on doors in the Kremlin, the Belarusian Bureau held two meetings in Minsk on 16 and 17 June and decided to move the plenum to 25 June and broaden its membership, inviting not only the first regional and district secretaries in addition to the Belarusian CC apparatus and republican ministers, but also representatives of the cultural elite. Patolichev was no longer entrusted to chair the plenum – the main report would be delivered by Mikhail Zimianin, a native Belarusian and the CPB second secretary until a few months ago, when he was transferred to work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministerstvo inostrannykh del*) in Moscow.[5] In the Party's unofficial 'etiquette', this meant that Zimianin was to take charge of the Belarusian Party as Patolichev's replacement. The initiative for his appointment came directly from Beria.[6]

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[4] Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Belarus' (hereafter NARB), fond 4p, opis 81a, delo 85, listy 149-50.

[5] NARB f. 4p, op. 81a, d. 85, ll. 149-57.

[6] See 'Dokladnaia zapiska chlena KPSS M. V. Zimianina sekretaryu TsK KPSS N. S. Khrushchevu 15 iyulya 1953 g. o svoikh svyazyakh s L. P. Beria' cited in Zen'kovich (2000, pp. 318-20).

The plenum in Minsk took place during 25-27 June 1953. Zimianin opened the proceedings and delivered his report on the evening of the first day, speaking for two hours in Belarusian.[7] The report was a damning catalogue of failures of the CPB leadership to promote native Belarusian personnel in party and state organisations, to encourage the use of Belarusian in schools and in public life, to support Belarusian culture, and to alleviate the poverty of Belarusian collective farmers.[8] Zimianin declared that things were 'especially bad' with recruiting native Belarusians for party posts in the republic's western regions, which he described as 'a crude distortion of Soviet nationalities policy.' Among the 1,175 party workers in the western regions only 121 were local. In the Baranovichi regional and city committees (*obkom* and *gorkom*), in the Brest and Grodno city committees, and in the Volkovyssk district committee (*raikom*) of the Party not a single member was Belarusian. The problem persisted at the lower levels of the party hierarchy: 'only' 69% of all district secretaries (170 out of 256) in the western regions were Belarusians, and just 15 of those were local. Over half of all secretaries of the territorial or collective farm primary cells (*pervichnye partiinye organizatsii*) were outsiders. Local youth made up only 34.4% of all Komsomol officials in the western regions.[9]

Matters were no better in the local government and the police. There were only 114 local Belarusians among the 1,408 members of the regional soviet executive committees (*oblastnye ispolkomy*) in the western parts of the republic, and only 25 among the 231 city soviet officials. The entire Polotsk regional and city soviet committees consisted of outsiders to the region. The picture looked bleak also with the ethnic composition of the security and police forces. The number of ethnic Belarusians in the republican and regional apparatus of the Belarusian MVD was in single digits, and among the 840 rank-and-file personnel in the western regions only 17 were local. Worse still, only one of the 150 militia bosses in western Belarus came from the region.[10]

The report also criticised the fact that all soviet and party organs used Russian in their work, while the Belarusian language was neglected in administration and education. Zimianin described as

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[7] For convenience, I am using a Russian translation of the stenographic report here: NARB, f. 4, op. 20, d. 295. The Belarusian original is in NARB, f. 4, op. 20, d. 296.

[8] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 6-47.

[9] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 8-9.

[10] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 9.

'abnormal' the fact that the majority of subjects at universities and colleges were not taught in Belarusian, while in some institutes it was entirely absent as a language of instruction. Belarusian was also disappearing from schools: in Minsk, for example, over half of school-aged children were Belarusian, yet only nine out of 48 schools were Belarusian. Zimianin warned that neglecting national culture and especially the language was 'unacceptable' because it was grit to the mill of 'the bourgeois-nationalist elements' operating underground organisations in western Belarus. Such grave errors by the Belarusian Party leadership allowed 'enemies' to 'present the Soviet authorities as "occupiers" in the western regions who strove to "Russify" them'. Why, Zimianin demanded, was the CPB Central Committee unable to spot these abuses of Soviet nationalities policy, and instead made them worse, so that the CC CPSU had to intervene?[11]

These grave mistakes had to be corrected. Ethnic Belarusians needed to be promoted, especially in the western regions. This did not mean, Zimianin noted, that all non-Belarusian cadres had to be replaced. The Belarusian Communist Party was grateful to comrades of Russian, Ukrainian and other nationalities who had been sent to Belarus by the Party to help the republic develop its economy and culture. After years working there, many of those comrades had learnt the local language and customs. But those who had not mastered Belarusian had to do so now, warned Zimianin.[12] Belarusian was to become the republic's official language of state administration: all state and party organs, from the Central Committee and down to local soviets, had to use it in their work. The plenum had to make this into a formal decision, Zimianin said, because 'we must speak to the people in its native language'. Belarusian was also to be reinstated as the main language of instruction in schools, colleges and other educational institutions, while the standard of teaching Belarusian in Russian schools had to be improved.[13]

Last but not least, Zimianin's report accused the republican leadership of presiding over destitution, neglect and abuses of its collective farmers. With rare honesty, the report painted a picture of abject poverty in the Belarusian countryside. In 1952, an average collective farmer in eastern Belarus

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[11] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 11-14.

[12] Rather controversially, Zimianin reassured his audience that learning Belarusian would not be difficult, for it was 'extremely close to the language of its big brother – the great Russian people'. NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 14-16.

[13] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 14-17.

received 37 kopeikas in wages, 1 kg of grain and 1.4 kg of potatoes for a full day of work. In western Belarus, farmers received even less: 27 kopeikas, 1.3 kg of grain, but only 0.5 kg of potatoes. Payments could be severely delayed. 'There can be no excuse,' Zimianin declared, 'for the fact that the collective farmers of Belarus do not receive enough bread, potatoes, and vegetables, or that they receive no dairy or meat products at all. Nor can the payment of 30-40 kopeikas, which is handed out in most collective farms per day of work, be considered a real wage.' Over 1,400 peasant families still lived in earth dugouts or someone else's homes; many of them were widows and orphans. 'How much longer are they to wait for our help?' – demanded Zimianin. He put the blame squarely at the feet of the Belarusian leadership because, he said, the Moscow government had offered plenty of assistance to eliminate the dugouts.[14] Zimianin's report accused the republican bosses of indifference to the plight of the peasants. It also pointed out that collective farmers often suffered abuse at the hands of the local authorities, which the Belarusian Party's leadership ignored. In the western regions especially, instances of incorrect taxation, illegal raising of agricultural norms (*zadaniya po zagotovkam*), and forcible extractions of overdue payments and fines grew to 'mass proportions that were politically dangerous'.[15]

The report was a direct attack on the republican leadership, and by the end of his speech Zimianin informed the plenum that the CPSU Central Committee had released Patolichev of his duties as First Secretary of the CPB.[16] No deliberations followed that evening; the delegates had the night to gather their thoughts.

The next morning, members of the Belarusian political and cultural elite duly took turns to climb the podium and respond to Zimianin's report. Without fail, the speakers accepted the criticism on the questions of personnel, culture and language, and keenly added their own (self)-criticism and damning regional statistics to Zimianin's report – all as expected. The overwhelming majority of the speakers, too, gave their reports in Belarusian. But despite an occasional critical nod towards the CPB Central Committee, the republican elite baulked when it came to denouncing their leader and an ethnic Russian, First Secretary Patolichev.

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[14] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 20-29.

[15] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 20-42.

[16] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 39.

Twenty-seven delegates took part in the deliberations that lasted over two days. For much of the first day, few even mentioned Patolichev directly in their speeches. The first eight speakers did not do so at all, and they judiciously avoided supporting the motion for Patolichev's removal. Instead, they emphasised self-criticism. For instance, the first speaker, First Secretary of the southeastern region of Poless'e Vladimir Lobanok, focussed on the neglected state of the Belarusian language and culture but avoided even mentioning Patolichev by name.[17] Another regional secretary, Tikhon Kiselev, who was in charge of the Brest region, one of those anxiety-causing western provinces, was more vocal in criticising the republican elites but did not single out the first secretary. Kiselev mixed criticism with self-criticism, sharing the blame between the Belarusian Central Committee and its Bureau as well as the party secretaries, which, of course, included himself. He also blamed the personal attitudes and behaviour of the political leadership for the low status of Belarusian in schools, noting that 'if the Central Committee [and] the Council of Ministers conducted their business in Belarusian, then the regional, district and city committees would have done the same', and 'if the Minister for Education addressed the teachers in Belarusian, then the teachers would have addressed the population in Belarusian'. In other words, he implicated the whole political establishment in prejudices against the native language. Yet, like the previous speaker, Kiselev carefully avoided singling out Patolichev and ignored the motion to remove him.[18]

Members of the Belarusian cultural elite were also invited to the plenum in the expectation that they would keenly support the new policy with its encouragement of native culture and language. Therefore, the maître of Belarusian literature and President of the Academy of Sciences Yakub Kolas was given an early opportunity to speak at the plenum. Kolas was an undisputed public authority, but whatever hopes the plenum organisers might have had for his speech to help facilitate Patolichev's downfall, they were misplaced. An astute survivor of the Stalin years, Kolas was an extremely careful public operator. He completely avoided criticising the party, focusing instead on the public and cultural spheres, and while he ended his speech by stating that there was 'still a lot of work to be done in the field of nationalities policy

[17] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 47-56.

[18] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 57-63.

of our Party', his final line was emphatically reconciliatory: 'We will correct all mistakes and shortcomings by working together as friends.'[19]

By the time the plenum went into its first break of the day, no direct criticism of Patolichev, or explicit support for his removal, was voiced. After the break, the trend looked set to continue. Education Minister I. M. Il'yushin talked about the Belarusian language in schools, but said nothing on Patolichev and mostly avoided criticising the Belarusian CC.[20] The next speaker, First Secretary of the Pinsk region R. N. Machul'skii, concluded his report with an implicit defence of Patolichev, saying: 'However, it would be completely unfair if behind these errors [committed] by the republican organisations one did not see one's own mistakes and shortcomings.'[21] Patolichev's name was not mentioned once during the first half of the proceedings that day. When the ninth speaker, Patolichev himself, took the floor and delivered a carefully worded defence of his work record in Belarus, the audience responded with tumulus applause – the first such reaction to any speaker up to that point.[22]

This was clearly not going to plan. It seems the Belarusian Bureau were slightly unnerved by the deliberations going off track regarding Patolichev, and at this point they might have decided to force the issue. After the applause for Patolichev died down, they called for another break. Following the break, the second person to take the floor was Isaak L'vovich Chernyi, the Chairman of the Belarusian State Planning Committee (*Gosplan*). Chernyi became the first speaker after Zimianin to direct his criticisms personally at Patolichev. He deviated from his prepared report in order to criticise Patolichev's response to the CC CPSU decree and his attempts to defend himself, and he took offense at the First Secretary's suggestion that the Belarusian Party 'lacked in collegiality'.[23] It is clear from the minutes that this part of Chernyi's speech was improvised, which makes it likely that he was asked by the Bureau to respond impromptu after Patolichev's successful self-defence. Chernyi then proceeded to criticise the Belarusian CC for problems in agriculture and their unwillingness to discuss these problems at meetings. This caused

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[19] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 77. In his memoirs, Patolichev (1995, p. 210) writes that Kolas even walked up to him and shook his hand, but this is not recorded in the stenographic report.

[20] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 90-101.

[21] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 107-08.

[22] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 116.

[23] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 125.

an angry response from the audience who interrupted with shouts of 'Wrong!' (*Nepravil'no*) and 'Why haven't you said something before!' (*Gde vy ran'she byli!*) The chairman of the plenum had to call for order. Chernyi continued attacking Patolichev, echoing directly Zimianin's report.

The effect of his speech was the opposite from the one intended. Instead of following Chernyi's lead, the audience grew impatient, and there were shouts of 'Enough! Time's up!', so that he had to stop. The accusations against Patolichev were not picked up, and instead Chernyi found himself the target of the plenum. The next speaker, First Secretary of the Minsk region Kirill Mazurov, expressed surprise at some of Chernyi's criticisms, adding: 'Who is he complaining about? This concerns him, too.' (*Na kogo on zhaluetsya? Eto zhe kasaetsya i ego.*)[24]

Mazurov's speech was important in setting the tone for the rest of the plenum. After his speech, the plenum broke for a long dinner break, which gave the participants a chance to consider their responses and consult each other. When the plenum reconvened at 8 pm, speaker after speaker criticised Chernyi for his attack. Mogilev regional secretary S. I. Sikorskii accused Chernyi of duplicity and of smearing Patolichev's reputation in order to promote his own political career.[25] Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Council of Ministers P. A. Abrasimov mildly criticised Patolichev but also noted: 'In his wish for the dramatic effect, Comrade Chernyi pinned on Com[rade] Patolichev the sins he did not commit.'[26] Grodno regional secretary N. E. Avkhimovich praised Patolichev for his work in Belarus and said Chernyi 'got everything into a jumble' (*pereputal vse v odnu kuchu*), hinting also at his duplicity.[27]

Although the speakers supported the new policy by continuing to express self-criticism and even some criticism of the republican leadership on the themes set by Zimianin's report, Chernyi's speech gave them an opportunity to voice their disagreement with Moscow's decision on Patolichev in a safe way, by attacking a local colleague instead of the Kremlin. But to anyone versed in the euphemistic language of Stalin-era politics, the message of these objections by proxy was clear. Moscow had a spot of rebellion on its hands.

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[24] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 137.

[25] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 163.

[26] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 182.

[27] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 195.

When the plenum reconvened the next day at noon, attacks on Chernyi became increasingly biting, while the delegates' defence of Patolichev grew more confident. For example, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the BSSR (*Verkhovnyi sovet BSSR*) V. I. Kozlov called Chernyi's remarks demagogic and insulting for Patolichev, who did not deserve them.[28] District secretary D. M. Lemeshonok really laid into Chernyi and called him a 'first-class toady' (*podkhalim pervoi marki*), throwing in puns on his name (*chernyi/chorny* means 'black' in Russian and Belarusian) and declaring: 'It is time to finish with such "blacks" already' (*s takimi chernymi nuzhno pokonchit', pora uzhe*).[29] Such comments drew approving laughter and applause from the audience. The last speaker in the deliberations, CC CPB secretary T. S. Gorbunov, launched a spirited defense of Patolichev, to the approving noises from the audience, and at the same time attacked Chernyi in words that did not sit well with the spirit of the new nationalities policy: 'We must be vigilant and look forward, rather than backwards, not allowing any re-emergence of nationalism.'[30] Things began to look especially gloomy for Chernyi, when Gorbunov effectively put the blame for the mistakes exposed by the CC CPSU decree on him instead of Patolichev, to the shouts from the audience: 'That's right! Let's expel Chernyi from the CC!'[31]

Even Ziminain in his closing remarks to the plenum on the evening of 27 June turned on Chernyi, singling out his speech as the only incorrect one and the mark of a 'spineless' attitude.[32] Unlike Patolichev, who remained First Secretary of the Belarusian Party until 1956, Chernyi's reputation never recovered, and in August 1953 he was relieved of his post of *Gosplan* Chairman and spent the rest of his career heading a construction research institute in Minsk.[33]

By the end of the plenum, the situation had changed dramatically. In his closing speech, Zimianin put forward a motion to ask Moscow to reconsider their order to remove Patolichev. His motion was

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[28] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 228.

[29] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 247.

[30] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 270-72, 280.

[31] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 280.

[32] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, l. 382.

[33] *Chairmen of Gosplan and Ministers of Economy*, available at: http://www.economy.gov.by/ru/rukov-old-ru/, accessed 19 May 2019.

enthusiastically supported by the audience, and Patolichev was restored to his usual role of chairman to the stormy applause from the participants.[34]

Naturally, such a drastic turn-about was impossible without the Kremlin's approval. The question is when and how such an approval was granted. In his motion to reinstate Patolichev, Zimianin referred to a phone conversation with Khrushchev and Malenkov, who had given their consent to such a proposal while the plenum was in session. Phone conversations are difficult for historians to verify, but the following can be pieced together from various sources. In his memoirs, Patolichev reports having two phone conversations during the plenum, and in both cases he said he was summoned to the phone. His wording in the memoirs suggests that both conversations took place on the same day.[35] During the first conversation he was informed confidentially by Khrushchev and Malenkov that Beria had been arrested; in the second, he was told that the leadership knew that the plenum participants seemed to be supporting him (Patolichev) and if the plenum requested it, the decision to recall him could be dropped. Patolichev then asked Abrasimov, who chaired the plenum that day, to call for a break to inform the Bureau about his conversations with Moscow. Patolichev's memoirs obviously need to be treated with caution, but if these events took place on the day Abrasimov was the plenum's chair, then it was 27 June, the second and final day of the deliberations. Indeed, the stenographic report from that day contains Zimianin's closing remarks, which mention the conversation with Khrushchev and Malenkov, and Patolichev's restoration to the chair, following a 20-minute break before the evening session.[36] Years later Zimianin recalled that he was summoned to the Kremlin line on the second day of the plenum (by which he apparently means the second day of the deliberations), and spoke to Malenkov. Malenkov enquired about the plenum and asked whether it was necessary to replace Patolichev. Zimianin reportedly said he was not sure (Lukashuk 1990, p. 81; Ulitsenak 2009, p. 276).[37]

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[34] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 283-84.

[35] He refers to the second conversation occurring 'some time later' rather than the next day (Patolichev 1995, p. 210).

[36] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 282-83.

[37] In his interview with Ulitsenak, Zimianin gets the date of the conversation wrong, suggesting it was 26 June and that he immediately went back to the plenum and reported it to the participants; however, according to the stenographic report, this happened on 27 June.

But other sources claim that the initiative actually came from Minsk. Grodno regional secretary Avkhimovich later recalled to a colleague that several members of the Belarusian Bureau, including Patolichev, Zimianin and himself, went to telephone Moscow. They spoke to Khrushchev, who evidently took a few minutes to consult the others. The Belarusians asked Khrushchev to leave Patolichev in post. Khrushchev replied that the CC would 'consider' their request but did not agree on the spot to revoke the removal. At that point, the Bureau members returned to the plenum and put the motion forward, which was accepted (as confirmed by the stenographic report). Then they went back to Patolichev's office and telephoned the Kremlin again with the results. Khrushchev accepted their decision, ordered Zimianin to return to Moscow, and also informed them that Beria had been arrested.[38]

Whose version is correct? It is tempting to assume that it was Beria's arrest that changed the course of the plenum, and after their coup Khrushchev and others telephoned Minsk and permitted Patolichev to stay if the Belarusians wanted him. It does not help that two of the participants, Zimianin and Avkhimovich, point to 26 June as the date of these conversations. However, matching their memoirs with the stenographic report of the plenum strongly suggests that these phone calls took place on 27 June, because this is when the conversation with Moscow is mentioned for the first time, and acted on, in the plenum's stenographic report, and all parties claim that the outcomes of the conversations were *immediately* reported to the plenum. All parties refer to a conversation with Khrushchev and Malenkov, as does the stenographic report.[39] It is possible that Patolichev learnt about Beria's arrest sooner if his first conversation with Khrushchev and Malenkov took place on 26 June, although it is highly unlikely that it was a priority for the Kremlin leadership to telephone Minsk the moment they had successfully pulled off their dangerous gambit with Beria. But even if we allow that Patolichev became aware of Beria's arrest by the evening of 26 June *and* disobeyed Malenkov and Khrushchev's request to keep it confidential, by this

[38] Avkhimovich recounted these conversations to Lukashuk (1990, p. 81). For a roughly similar sequence of events, also suggesting the Belarusian initiative, see memoirs of Vasilii Sharapov, another participant of the plenum (2016, pp. 150-52). Zimianin claimed later that he learnt about Beria's arrest from Patolichev *after* the plenum (Ulitsenak 2009, p. 276).

[39] Zimianin mentions talking only to Malenkov, and this might account for his ignorance about Beria's arrest – Malenkov evidently chose not to tell him. (Ulitsenak 2009, p. 276)

point the Belarusian regional secretaries had already begun to make their objections to his removal clear, as evident from the stenographic report.[40]

Even more significant is the fact that Moscow was willing to present this publicly as a Belarusian initiative and, effectively, insubordination. This is seen in the minutes of the July Plenum of the CC CPSU in Moscow, which followed Beria's arrest. During the first day of the plenum, on 2 July 1953, Viacheslav Molotov, in his response to the main report by Georgii Malenkov on Beria's 'criminal' and 'anti-party' activities, admitted that the central leadership had made a mistake accepting Beria's proposal to remove Patolichev. Patolichev had warned them that the Belarusian plenum would support him, and he was right, Molotov said. 'Indeed, the plenum unanimously (*s bol'shim edinodushiem*) decided to keep Patolichev in his post as [first] secretary' (Naumov & Sigachev 1999, p. 107). Here, Molotov implied, the centre stood corrected by their colleagues on the periphery. Furthermore, this is how the episode entered the official history of the CPB, which stated that 'the expanded plenum of the CC CPB *requested* the CC CPSU to keep N. S. Patolichev in his post.'[41]

Speaking at the 'anti-Beria' plenum of the CC CPB in Minsk later that month, Patolichev also noted that during the June plenum its delegates did not yet know that Beria 'had been unmasked'.[42] There was a certain tone of pride and self-congratulation about this, as seen in several speeches at this plenum.[43]

Although Beria's arrest is certainly not unimportant, it is worth remembering that by mid-June the new nationalities policy no longer depended on his political position: it had been adopted by the entire collective leadership (Knight 1993, pp. 189-94). Khrushchev had become actively involved in the process

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[40] Beria was arrested just as the first set of deliberations started in Minsk. The earliest opportunity to inform Minsk of this development would be the first two breaks of the plenum in the afternoon, before and right after Patolichev's defensive speech. But by this point, the regional secretaries were already refusing to cooperate on Patolichev's removal. Furthermore, it looks unlikely that Beria's downfall became widely known even at that point because the first and only explicit attack on Patolichev from the Belarusian party came *after* these first two breaks, when Chernyi made his speech (NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 295, ll. 89, 90, 116-17, 123-29).

[41] *Ocherki istorii Kommunisticheskoi partii Belorussii. Chast' 1 (1921-1966)* (Minsk, 1967), pp. 459-460. My emphasis.

[42] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, l. 13.

[43] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 22 (Mazurov) and 84 (Kozlov).

of preparing the memoranda on Latvia and Estonia and made important corrections to the Lithuanian decree (Loader 2016; Zubkova 2008, pp. 323-33; Tannberg 2008). It had been Khrushchev, not Beria, who had summoned Latvia's leadership to Moscow and ordered them to hold a plenum and appoint a more Latvian leadership (Swain 2016, p. 62). In the end it was not Beria's nationalities policy that had alarmed his Presidium colleagues but his means of implementing it, bypassing and undermining the Party and especially infringing on the Presidium's prerogative to make personnel changes (Pikhoya 2007, pp. 246-49; Loader 2015, pp. 57-59; Swain 2016, p. 62). After Beria's downfall, his New Course was not reversed but repackaged and continued as Khrushchev's own nationalities policy (Loader 2015, pp. 71-75).

In this context, the position of the Belarusian republican elites might seem odd. By digging their heels in on Patolichev, they were throwing a spanner into a policy aimed to strengthen their position as ethnic Belarusians. Most of them spoke the language, at least well enough to deliver their reports in Belarusian. Nor was resistance a safe option. In Latvia, when the new second secretary expressed reservations about the New Course during the republican plenum, he was told by Mikhail Polekhin, the Moscow emissary overseeing the proceedings: 'Those words will cost you dearly' (Loader 2015, p. 50). Even without such warnings, anyone who had lived through the Stalin era knew that going against the chief of the country's security apparatus was not a healthy choice. In Belarus, the MVD had been especially brutal under the leadership of Beria's crony Lavrentii Tsanava, and when his replacement Mikhail Baskakov proved to be less responsive to Beria's orders and more loyal to his fellow Russian Patolichev, he lost his post (Patolichev 1995, pp. 199-202). So why take a risk?

I would argue that the answer lies in the strength of the Belarusian regional network and the weakness of the Belarusian national identity among the party elites. It did not matter that Patolichev was Russian and Zimianin Belarusian – for the Belarusian regional secretaries the question of ethnicity mattered less. Partly, this attitude was the outcome of abortive indigenisation policies, the pre-war terror, the shifting borders, and the war itself. Even at the height of the 1920s indigenisation drive, the Belarusian Party's functionaries had shown themselves highly resistant to the Belarusisation campaign (Markava 2016, pp. 198-204). Partly, this was because ethnic Belarusians often constituted a minority among the party elites: during the mid-1920s, Russian and Jewish members predominated in the regional and city party committees (Markava 2016, pp. 201-202). But even among the ethnically Belarusian party functionaries, many did not feel a strong affinity with the Belarusian language and culture and were wary

of the indigenisation drives (Markava 2016, pp. 203-04 & 230; Vyaliki 2001, 64-65). They were soon vindicated by the terror against 'nationalists', which started in Belarus in 1929 and gained particular force in the early 1930s, and which not only depleted the ethnic Belarusian stock in the party's top ranks, but also made pro-Belarusisation attitudes dangerous and prompted the surviving leadership to abandon it (Martin 2001, pp. 260-269; Rudling 2014, pp. 290-301). After the war, there was even more emphasis on the danger of 'Belarusian bourgeois nationalism', especially apropos the republic's new western regions, and further arrests of 'nationalists' followed. Although a few Belarusian communists with loyal pedigrees received rapid promotions, many Belarusian specialists were removed from the republic and replaced with Russians, who filled the overwhelming majority of posts in regional and district administration (Zaprudnik 1996, p. 118; Mazets 2003, pp. 234-35; Urban 1989a, pp. 13-14). Russian communists were also sent to the republic after the war to replace the Belarusian party leadership (Zaprudnik 1996, p. 118). Given such a history, what mattered more than ethnicity for the regional and district secretaries was that Patolichev was someone they knew well and worked with for three difficult and stressful post-war years, when patronage relations had time to develop and consolidate. Patolichev might not have been a Belarusian, but he had become 'svoi' (i.e., their own), a local. Although Zimianin had also worked in Belarus until shortly before the plenum, Patolichev had clearly been more successful in building a network of supporters. A difference in personalities might have played a part: Patolichev had a reputation of being calm, tactful and unfailingly polite, while Zimianin apparently could be charming but also sharp-tongued and hot-tempered (Ioffe 2008, p. 121; Sharapov 2016, p. 129; Sazonkin 1992, p. 8; Simurov 1999, p. 9; Bubleev 210, p. 169). But more importantly, Patolichev offered a measure of security. He helped shield several Belarusian colleagues, including regional secretaries S. O. Pritytskii and I. F. Klimov, from the Belarusian chief of the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerstvo gosbezopasnosti* – MGB) Lavrentii Tsanava, who had terrorized the Party since his appointment in 1938 (Ioffe 2018, pp. 161-64, 215-16 & 228-30). In contrast, Zimianin had been implicated in Tsanava's campaign against Prityskii (Ioffe 2018, pp. 195-216).[44] Furthermore, shortly after Patolichev's arrival Tsanava was transferred to Moscow (and Patolichev took credit for it), whereas Patolichev's predecessor Nikolai Gusarov himself fell victim to Tsanava's

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[44] Later Zimianin claimed that he had saved Pritytskii (Ulitsenak 2009, p. 282). Whatever the truth, what mattered was the contemporary perception that he abetted Tsanava, whereas Patolichev saved the Grodno secretary.

denunciation and was recalled from Belarus. All this signaled to the republican secretaries that Patolichev was more effective in defending their interests. These considerations evidently prevailed over ethnic loyalties.

Interestingly, Patolichev had some confidence in his network and banked on their support. When he was told of his removal, he defiantly told Khrushchev: 'The plenum will back me' (Patolichev 1995, p. 202; Naumov & Sigachev 1999, p. 107). During the plenum, he placed particular importance on the speech by Mogilev regional secretary Sikorskii, a war veteran who enjoyed the respect of the others. Patolichev hoped that Sikorskii would remember how Patolichev had supported him at a difficult moment and would now come to his aid, which Sikorskii did, as we have seen, launching a vocal attack on Chernyi (Patolichev 1995, pp. 208-09).

Paradoxically, in resisting the Kremlin line on replacing Patolichev with an ethnic Belarusian, the republican secretaries were exercising the very autonomy the new policy was supposed to give them. While Khrushchev's real motivations in allowing Patolichev to stay are unclear, the way this decision was presented – as a concession to the Belarusians' request to revoke an order from Moscow – recognised and sanctioned the limited autonomy of the republican elite, and especially its regional first secretaries. This set an important precedent for the post-Stalin era of centre-periphery relations and very likely confirmed for Khrushchev just how effective and important such patronage networks could be. As the power struggles in the Kremlin gained force, regional party secretaries became Khrushchev's most important power base. Once he reached the top, on at least two further occasions provincial secretaries played a decisive role in his political fortunes as first secretary: in 1957, when their support saved him from defeat in the 'Anti-Party Group' affair, and in 1964, when their withdrawal of support helped bring his downfall (Khlevniuk 2012; Clark 2013, pp. 280-81; Lovell 2010, p. 191; Smith 2011, p. 82).

In Belarus, the fact that Patolichev stayed in post meant that the consequences of Beria's attempted reforms were different from the other republics. While in Latvia, for example, the New Course survived Beria and left a tangible mark, sanctioning vocal support for Latvian nationalism among the republic's political elites and the wider population and emboldening the national-minded local leadership to introduce some pro-Latvian policies during the 1950s (Loader 2015, pp. 77-80), in Belarus no confident nationalist rhetoric or support for the national language, culture, or cadres followed. Unlike the Baltic republics, there was no major purge of Russians from the top party and state positions; those ethnic Russians in the MVD, who had been removed under Beria, were returned to their posts, including

Minister of Internal Affairs Baskakov, whose reinstatement came at the expense of his Belarusian successor M. I. Dechko, who was swiftly demoted to deputy minister.[45]

The draft resolution of the June plenum of the CPB on the new nationalities policy was not published but shelved as soon as the plenum's leaders learnt of Beria's arrest.[46] The July plenum adopted a raft of changes to this resolution, removing all dangerous passages on national cadres and language. This included removing the 'conclusion' about abuses of Soviet nationalities policy in Belarus and the statement about the CPB's failure to conduct the correct policy in Belarus's western regions. The criticisms of the neglect of Belarusian in administration and education were also dropped, as was the proposal to nominate mainly ethnic candidates in the upcoming city and district party committee elections.[47] In sum, all evidence of the new nationalities policy was carefully censored from this public document. Patolichev told the July plenum delegates that it was important to eliminate 'decisively all the consequences of Beria's harmful (*vreditel'skie*) activities in the field of national relations in Belarus'.[48] By this time, many meetings with the party's rank-and-file, as well as workers and farmers, had already been held to explain Beria's arrest. For example, in the Minsk region alone the entire party *aktiv* and nearly all of the region's labour force had attended meetings held to explain the decisions of the July CC CPSU plenum in Moscow. In just three or four days, there were 3,500 meetings in the region with 330,000 attendees, involving nearly 93% of the region's workers, peasants and office employees.[49]

With the potential fallout from Beria's nationalities policy thus contained, members of the CPB Central Committee had no particular difficulties in rowing back on their earlier self-criticism. Minsk regional secretary Mazurov told the delegates that during the previous plenum he and others were forced to recant the errors they did not commit. He had particularly resented having to admit to mistakes in

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[45] In Belarus, Beria's replacements had focused mainly on the MVD, an organisation directly under his control, where he removed nine heads of regional MVD departments plus Baskakov because they were ethnic Russians (NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, l. 84). On Dechko, see NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 12 & 157.

[46] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, l. 14.

[47] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, l. 154.

[48] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 14-15.

[49] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, l. 40.

nationality policy, when in his regional party organisations 70% of all cadres were ethnic Belarusians. Moreover, he did not wish to overlook members of other nationalities, whom the Party sent to the republic to help, and especially, Russians: 'The Belarusian people know full well how much they owe to their older brother – the Great Russian people.'[50] Despite Patolichev's fleeting acknowledgement of shortcomings in policies towards the Belarusian national culture,[51] the July plenum signalled a clear return to the dominance of 'the Great Russian people'. This was not just a rhetorical device: the Belarusian Communist Party would continue to be led by an ethnic Russian until 1956, when Patolichev was finally replaced by Mazurov, an ethnic Belarusian.

This did not mean, however, that by supporting Patolichev the Belarusian regional party bosses shot themselves in the (collective) foot. Although Beria's attempt to use nationalism to empower the republican elites failed, the Belarusian elites emerged from it feeling empowered nonetheless. When Mazurov recalled these events to a journalist in 1988, he again emphasised the strength of the Belarusian Party and its success in standing its ground: '[We] managed to defend (*otstoyali*) Patolichev, [and] showed that the opinion of the organisation [i.e. Belarusian Party] had to be taken into account (*s mneniem organizatsii nado schitat'sya*).'[52]

This confidence can be seen in the minutes of the July plenum in Minsk. Rather than become a forum for regrets over the previous plenum, it turned into an opportunity for regional and district secretaries to attack members of the Belarusian party bureau. The attack focused on a group that was especially close to former chief of the Belarusian MGB Tsanava, who held the post from 1938 to 1951. Beria's long-time associate and relative, Tsanava's despotic dominance over the Belarusian Party represented for the regional elites the worst of Stalinist excesses, primarily because he terrorised them personally.[53] This was especially exemplified by the case of Grodno regional secretary Pritytskii, which was discussed at the plenum, but there were other victims. Tsanava had been recalled to Moscow and later arrested in 1953 (in July 1953 he was awaiting trial), but now regional secretaries confronted his former

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[50] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 21-22.

[51] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 13-14.

[52] NARB, f. 1374, op. 1, d. 27, l. 3.

[53] On Tsanava, see 'Spravka po delu Tsanava Lavernitiya Fomicha…' cited in Khaustov (2012, pp. 626-41).

supporters in the Belarusian Bureau and threw at them accusations of complicity. The July plenum became a preview of the challenges and risks of de-Stalinisation that the CPSU was about to face on the Union level, whereby its leadership had to admit to the use of terror against its own members, while at the same time preserving party unity and a sense of ideological purpose.

Patolichev set the agenda in his opening speech to the July plenum, when he quickly moved from the topic of nationalities policy to calls for tighter party control over appointments and an end to nepotism.[54] For a Party organisation still reeling from intimidation by the republican MGB, these words had a great resonance and were eagerly taken up. Patolichev's call opened the floodgates of grievances, with a number of regional secretaries demanding that certain members of the Bureau admit to abetting Tsanava in his mistreatment of the party. Grodno regional secretary R. E. Korolev told the plenum that Tsanava had intimidated the Bureau and the previous first secretary, Gusarov, and regularly intervened in personnel decisions and agricultural policies. The really important question now, Korolev insisted, was how all this was allowed to happen and why nobody in the Central Committee said anything to stop Tsanava. Korolev demanded especially that Bureau members Kozlov and Abrasimov, who were Tsanava's supporters, should account for their actions.[55] In his defence, Kozlov turned to I. D. Vetrov, the ex-Chief Prosecutor under Tsanava, and asked: 'Where were you, when they put heaps of people in jail, 27,000 persons at a time?'[56] Such were the first awkward questions of de-Stalinisation.

As it happened, regional secretaries were more interested in the injuries done to them, rather than the full range of terror victims. They lined up to criticise the Bureau. Second Secretary of the Vitebsk region Nikita Korotkin said there had been many complaints about Tsanava 'terrorising communists', and all the district secretaries hated him. But the CC CPB secretaries, including Patolichev, did nothing because Tsanava was Beria's friend.[57] And fear was only part of the story: other speakers argued that the top republican bosses willingly abetted Tsanava. Secretary of the Baranovichi region Klimov accused three members of the Bureau – Kozlov, Abrasimov, and Zimianin – of hanging on to Tsanava's every

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[54] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 15-17.

[55] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, ll. 67-71.

[56] NARB f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, l. 92.

[57] NARB f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, l. 114.

word and emulating him, because, Klimov said, they 'lost all sense of propriety' (*skromnost' poteryali*).[58] Brest regional secretary Kiselev also demanded to know why the Bureau members tolerated Tsanava, while the lower ranking members of the CC disliked him. He, too, pointed the finger at Kozlov and Abrasimov.[59]

One of the most hard-hitting speeches was by Pritytskii, the deputy head of the CC CPB Department for Party, Trade Union and Komsomol Organs (*Otdel partiinykh, profsoyuznykh i komsomol'skikh organov*), who said it was not enough to vote for the CPSU Central Committee's resolution on Beria, but it was also necessary to analyse the mistakes made in the republic. Pritytskii was one of the first to attack Kozlov and Abrasimov directly for failing to own up to their share of responsibility. Pritytskii blamed the Bureau for failing to support Patolichev against the MGB boss and accused Kozlov, Zimianin, Abrasimov and another bureau member, Chairman of the Council of Ministers A. E. Kleshchev, of indulging Tsanava and becoming too friendly with him. It was this behaviour that allowed Tsanava to get away with the outrages he committed.[60]

Pritytskii had a major axe to grind with the former Tsanava supporters. In 1949, when he was First Secretary of the Grodno regional party committee, Pritytskii blocked the election of an ex-chief of the Grodno branch of the MGB named Frolov to the Central Committee. This brought on a campaign of harassment spurred on by the vengeful Tsanava, Frolov's boss, and supported by some of the Bureau members. Eventually, Pritytskii lost his post as regional secretary, although he was not persecuted further (reportedly, thanks to Patolichev's efforts in Moscow). Now Pritytskii had a chance to confront Kozlov and Abrasimov. He spoke emotionally because he felt vindicated: he was right all along, he said, and his party position had always been correct in that, unlike the CPB Central Committee, he did not allow Tsanava to boss about his regional committee (*sest' na sheiu*), and he had suffered for it.[61]

The atmosphere grew tenser when CC Secretary D. F. Filimonov, the deputy head of CC CPB Construction Department (*Otdel stroitel'stva i stroimaterialov TsK*), called Abrasimov a toady, who used to jump up to greet Tsanava whenever he entered a meeting and 'almost kissed him like a good husband

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[58] NARB f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 61-63. Zimianin was not present at this plenum.

[59] NARB f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 213 and 215.

[60] NARB f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 75-77.

[61] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 77-81.

kisses his wife'; there were also hints at bribes. It had been impossible, Filimonov said, to unmask Tsanava because the Bureau members were his friends. Filimonov concluded that such people were unworthy of their posts and should not remain in the Bureau.[62]

Regional secretaries also drew on the events of the previous June plenum and juxtaposed their own loyal defence of Patolichev with the betrayal of the Bureau. For example, secretary of the Bobruisk regional committee L. I. Lubennikov recalled that when the previous plenum applauded Patolichev's reinstatement, the Bureau members were unsupportive.[63] Chief of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the CC (*Otdel propagandy i agistatsii TsK*) V. Khalipov accused Zimianin, Kozlov, Kleschchev, and Abrasimov of following the lead of 'the enemy Beria' and plotting to depose Patolichev for their own gain. Khalipov said Zimianin 'got very active cobbling together a bloc', while the others got excited that the First Secretary would be a 'fellow Belarusian'. At the June plenum they readily heaped the blame on Patolichev. Being blind to such 'enemies' as Tsanava and Beria made them poor leaders out of step with 'the masses'.[64]

Even Patolichev did not escape criticism, when Secretary of the Pinsk city council F. Ia. Denisevich said:

> Many times I attended the plenums of the CC, and all members of the CC knew that Tsanava was [like] a feudal lord in Belarus. But no one ever said so openly. Perhaps, Comrade Patolichev, I am mistaken … but it seems to me you were all afraid of Tsanava, all members of the bureau, while he did whatever he pleased. … Why was it that everyone knew that he tormented the Belarusian people, abused our people, behaved despicably in Belarus, and yet nobody found the courage to tear his head off in time.[65]

Denisevich, too, questioned whether Kozlov, Mazurov, and Abrasimov could continue to be trusted with leadership.

Patolichev skilfully brought these sharp attacks to an end. In his closing remarks for the plenum, he carefully diverted the blame from himself, saying that the Belarusian Bureau had lacked unity already

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[62] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, ll. 146-47.

[63] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, l. 152.

[64] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 299, ll. 156-58.

[65] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 115

by the time he arrived to Belarus. Apparently, he had never experienced such a divided, disunited bureau, which weakened resistance to Tsanava. For this discord, he blamed Tsanava. For his part, Patolichev took the credit for removing Tsanava by arranging his transfer to Moscow, and he also told the plenum in detail how he saved Pritytskii from further persecution.[66]

Certainly, Patolichev berated Abrasimov and Kozlov for failing to unmask Tsanava and criticised them (and Zimianin). But he also suggested that they probably did not know that Tsanava was an enemy and simply made a big mistake. He merely advised them to 'draw serious conclusions' and let it be understood that he was not after blood.[67]

Both Abrasimov and Kozlov kept their jobs. But Kleshchev not only lost the chairmanship of the Belarusian Council of Ministers but also his place on the CC Bureau.[68] Zimianin returned to the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, and the July plenum removed him from the post of second secretary of the CPB and from the Bureau.[69] This created opportunities for rewarding loyal secretaries: First Secretary of the Baranovichi region Klimov was promoted to the Bureau membership[70] and appointed first deputy chairman of the republic's Council of Ministers in early August 1953.[71] Mazurov went from being First Secretary of the Minsk regional party committee to heading the Council of Ministers.[72] Avkhimovich, the Grodno secretary who telephoned the Kremlin during the June plenum, was promoted to the Central Committee membership.[73] On 8 August 1953, Patolichev and the CC CPB also asked Khrushchev to make Pritytskii First Secretary of the Baranovichi regional committee, noting that he had been a victim of Tsanava's smear campaign. His appointment amounted to public rehabilitation.[74]

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[66] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 142-46.

[67] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 146-47.

[68] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, ll. 140 & 156.

[69] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, l. 156.

[70] Loyal Baskakov was also restored to the Bureau because its membership was expanded from eight to nine members. NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, l. 157.

[71] NARB, f. 4p, op. 81, d. 751, l. 2.

[72] NARB, f. 4p, op. 20, d. 298, l. 158.

[73] NARB, f. 4p, op. 81, d. 751, l. 6.

[74] NARB, f. 4p, op. 81, d. 751, l. 3.

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In conclusion, the story of the June and July 1953 party plenums in Belarus reveals several important things about Moscow-periphery relations during early de-Stalinisation. While the Belarusian Party elites were caught up in the power struggles of Stalin's heirs in Moscow, they did not resign themselves to the role of pawns in the games of the centre. Nascent de-Stalinisation coupled with Beria's nationalities overture gave the local elites the courage, perhaps unprecedented, to wrangle with the centre over who should be Moscow's man in Minsk. Although it might seem illogical that the Belarusian elites, who were instructed to attack their Russian party boss, instead chose to defend him, their actions make more sense when understood as an exercise of local autonomy that was essentially an effort to protect the stability of the local patronage network. Although this was a risky gambit, and Belarus was unusual in its response to Moscow's nationalities policy at the time, the volatile political situation in the Kremlin turned out in their favour. Contrary to the existing misconception, the Belarusian regional secretaries did not initially know about, and certainly could not have predicted, the plot against Beria, but it came at precisely the right moment for their demands to be heeded by Khrushchev and his colleagues. The success of the regional secretaries in defending 'their' Patolichev emboldened them enough for the next plenum to see these same secretaries ganging up on the members of the Belarusian Bureau for their complicity in Tsanava's affairs. This was no doubt made possible by Beria's downfall, but Beria's own affair was almost immediately forgotten during the debates as soon as the formalities of denouncing him were gotten out of the way.

The role played by the local party secretaries in Patolichev's survival signalled the emergence of new political dynamics in the post-Stalin era. Even during Stalin's dictatorship, regional patronage networks had opportunities to emerge, although they were also kept in check by the centre (Lovell 2010, pp. 31-32 & 183-84). De-Stalinisation offered a more favourable climate for these networks to grow and solidify. Khrushchev himself understood their power, which served him well first during his rise to power and then even more pointedly during the unsuccessful coup against him in 1957, when he called on his network of regional supporters to weather the storm. But regional networks could also pose challenges to the centre, when they became too closely-knit and threatened to slip out of the centre's control. The 1959 purges of the republican leaders in Latvia and Azerbaijan were Moscow's response to what they saw as the regional leadership's nationalism going too far (Smith 2011, pp. 88-90). Yet, it was now also possible for the Union leadership to overstep the line in their relations with the regional networks: when

Khrushchev made attempts to weaken regional ties through cadres reshuffling in the early 1960s and thus put constraints on the job security of the regional party secretaries, the withdrawal of their support cost him his post. His successors only learnt the lesson too well, and as Gorlizki (2010), has pointed out, not only did the networks of trust become a central feature of late Soviet politics, but under Brezhnev the Soviet system came to suffer from 'too much trust'. Yet, the roots of this problem stretched beyond Brezhnev's tenure: the first indication of just how important these regional networks could be for their patrons – and how effectively they could function in the conditions of post-Stalin politics – came a full decade before Brezhnev's arrival as CPSU First Secretary and far away from Moscow, when in 1953 the Belarusian regional secretaries refused to hand over their patron to the centre. Furthermore, this was a case of an ethnic borderland negotiating with the centre successfully on a major personnel issue. This unprecedented case would not remain an isolated incident but became the first of at least several instances when local sensibilities were taken into account in making key republican appointments. And in just over a decade, the Belarusian regional secretaries would again have it their way in deciding who would be the first secretary of the Belarusian Communist Party. In 1965, politely but firmly rejecting Moscow's candidate, they would choose their own man: Petr Masherau, a former partisan and an ethnic Belarusian.

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