

commentary

from other pens...

Europe's 'last dictator' seeks voter approval

By George Gedda

Associated Press Writer

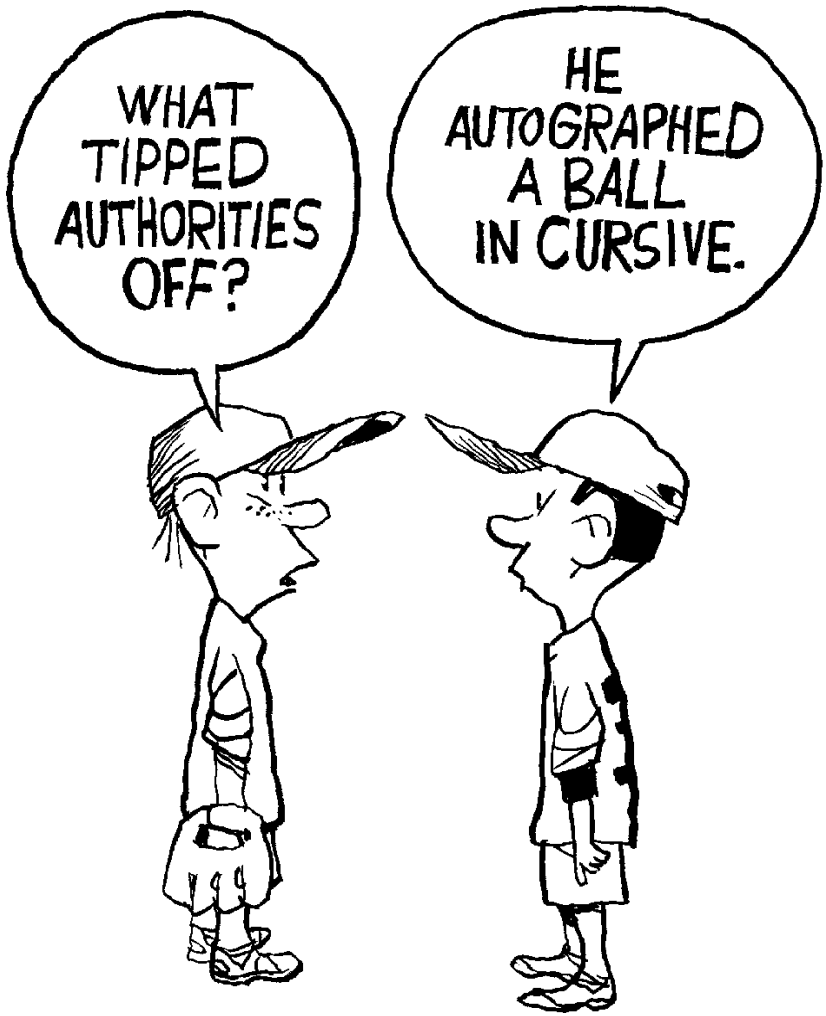
WASHINGTON — Most Americans are only vaguely aware of the European nation of Belarus and its leader, Alexander Lukashenko. The country is about the size of Kansas, has a population of 10 million and has borders with Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Belarus, a former Soviet republic, suffered terribly during World War II, losing 3 million people, about 30 percent of its population. The situation in Belarus today evokes memories of 12 months ago when then-Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic held elections and tried to manipulate the outcome in his favor. He was deposed in a popular uprising three weeks later, leaving but one authoritarian remaining in Europe: Lukashenko. This week, Lukashenko ostensibly is putting his seven-year rule on the line by convening presidential elections. But few believe the main opposition candidate, Vladimir Goncharik, a trade union leader, has much chance of winning.

Nonetheless, history demonstrates that when elections are held by authoritarians, there can be unexpected consequences regardless of whether the balloting is free and fair. An example is Milosevic. His election gamble having failed, Milosevic has been sent off to The Hague, Netherlands, and is awaiting trial on war crimes charges before a U.N. tribunal. The unraveling of the Soviet Union a decade ago was preceded by a partial democratic opening. And Philipines President Ferdinand Marcos fell victim to a "people's power" revolution when he tried to validate his strongman rule in the mid-1980s through the ballot box.

A year ago, the United States helped Milosevic's opposition with some success and is trying to do the same for Lukashenko's opponents. The administration is spending about \$9 million on get-out-the-vote activities and on support for non-governmental organizations, including labor unions, that are active in the run-up to the elections. The European Union, Belgium, Sweden, Britain and France are engaged. All refrain from activities which support a particular candidate. Lukashenko was elected in 1994 but declined to step down when his term expired in 1999. He ignored efforts by the constitutional court and the electoral commission to thwart his bid for a second term. The United States referred to him as "president" until 1999. Since then, he has been referred to as "Mr." because he remained in office beyond the five-year deadline.

The U.S. position against Lukashenko hardened in July when two former members of the Belarus secret police came to Washington and told U.S. officials about an alleged government-run death squad. The agents, both defectors, blamed the unit for the deaths of about 30 Belorussians, including four opposition leaders. The State Department says it takes seriously the allegations of the defectors. Election day in Belarus is Sunday but the rules allow for five days of "early voting" for those who have a compelling reason to cast ballots ahead of time. U.S. officials say there are no assurances these ballots won't be tampered with overnight. The early voting started Tuesday. The Bush administration says Lukashenko has stacked the electoral council with people loyal to him and that he "regularly obstructs and impedes" the electoral process. On two occasions last month, authorities confiscated special editions of opposition newspapers, drawing State Department criticism.

Belarus' foreign minister, Mikhail Khvostov, accused the United States of "crude and direct interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. "We have again confirmed our readiness to conduct open, fair, transparent and democratic elections," he said. If that happens, it would be a turnabout for the man regarded as Europe's last dictator. EDITOR'S NOTE — George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for The Associated Press since 1968.



STAHLER.
2001
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Man must eventually confront his past

"We rely upon the good will of our fellow man and the forbearance of reptiles."The notorious English Bob.

William Munny is a character in the movie "Unforgiven," a Clint Eastwood western. I consider him heroic for how he acknowledges his imperfections, how he changes, and sadly how he deals with the reemergence of his past.

How would our current society judge him today if he was alive?

In his world, everyone has a good, bad and ugly side. His world undoes forgiveness for a fistful of dollars, or a few dollars more.

He had two very different lives. In the first William Munny was a vicious, vile man, who made his money by stealing and senselessly killing men, women, children, and animals. He was quoted as saying, "I've killed just about everything that walked or crawled at one time or another."

He was addicted to the demon whiskey, which encouraged his despicable life. According to the icodefi in his first world, he actually was more unsuccessful when he was drunk. He was a killer and he was good at it because the alcohol deadened his nerves and his memory.

In his second life Munny was an inept Eastern Kansas pig farmer. He was a widower with two young children. Long-retired from his first life after marriage, his legendary, violent reputation relentlessly trailed him like a sheriff's posse tracking the outlaw Josie Wales.

In his past, whiskey drinking encouraged his gunplay, but through the taming influence of his wife Claudia, he gave up his wicked ways.



mitch hixson

- the soundgarden

Throughout his second life, he habitually said, "I ain't like that anymore." He admitted he had frequent nightmares about his old ways. Claudia and Munny were married for 11 years, before she died of pneumonia.

When an opportunity appears that would allow Munny to make some quick cash to save his farm, he battles the demons of his first life. He felt Claudia forgave him of his past, and judged him on his present. He felt she was looking down on him. If he opened the door to his first life, would the demons engulf and damn him again?

He decided the money was needed to take care of his most important responsibility, his kids. Munny had forgotten all his former skills as a killer. He hadn't fired a gun at a man or touched alcohol for over 10 years. But despite his efforts to remain true to his wife's wishes, Munny found it increasingly difficult to avoid being "like that" as events pushed the door to his first life open.

Munny even recruits his old partner Ned for his last mission. Along the way, Munny remorsefully obsessed over his violent past. He said, "Just cause we're goin' on this killing, that don't mean I'm gonna go back to bein' the way I was. I just need the money, get a new start for them youngsters..."

During this last mission, after being beaten almost to death, Munny admits he is scared of dying

and sometimes sees the angel of death around him. When Ned is killed, mutilated, and put on public display, this strikes the match that burns the door of Munny's old life completely down.

Nobody is 100 percent pure or 100 percent evil. Munny tries desperately to stay reformed, Can Munny be defined by just one of his lives?

Laws did not define Kansas in the 1880s. Survival did. It's only in the final confrontation of his last imissioni we get to see a glimpse of what William Munny of the first life, really might have been like. But now due to forgiveness of his wife, Will understands the preciousness of life. He is quoted as saying, "It's a hell of a thing, killin' a man. You take away all he's got an' all he's ever gonna have!..we all have it comin'."

The last mission ends with Munny using his old skills to another bad end. He follows his own code of payback, by avenging the death of his friend. He conforms to the toldi persona of William Munny the Feared and the unforgiven, not the inewi William Munny the forgiven Father. He does not forgive those who took the life of his friend.

William Munny's life is disturbing because it asks us: "Are we any better?" Though we never see her, Claudia forgave Will, and transformed his life. It seems impossible to lose one's past, whether it was good or bad. In that sense, we are all like William Munny, and all of us are unforgiven. We can't avoid being defined and judged by what we have already done.

Munny is noble because he doesn't run from his past. He knows all along he is guilty, and admits it again and again. I wonder if he found forgiveness again, or if he would today?

The new economy



red green

- north of forty

change that. You'll just have a very unhappy dog and a really big mess in the kitchen. So instead of picking a pet by its looks or the recommendations of friends, do an honest evaluation of yourself as a human being — your eating habits, your sleeping patterns, your various personality disorders — and then hand that description to the manager of your local pet store. He or she will have a pet suggestion that will save you a lot of time and aggravation. And whatever is suggested, try not to take it personally. Even if it's a plant. Even if it's a cactus.

STRONG ENOUGH TO SAY NO

As any experienced cardiologist will tell you, there are several opportunities for a show of strength in a man's life. You need to be aware of these and avoid them at all costs:

- Moving a hide-a-bed sofa up a flight of stairs.
- Pushing your own car out of somewhere that you put it.
- Lifting a size 20 bride over a size 12 threshold.
- Carrying a large mortgage with a small income.
- Lifting your head after your wife has realized that it's your fault.
- Carrying the conversation as your boss struggles to remember your name.
- Elevating the family name after everything you've done.

THE FREEDOM OF A LESS CONSUMING LOVE

When you've been married to the same person for a long time, there's a great liberation that can come only after years of passionate love. I'm talking about a level of satisfaction where the other person wants to be with you forever, but not all the time. I'm talking about "Yes, I love you, but let's give it a rest." That's what golf, fishing and poker are all about. They're no fun if guilt is involved. That's the beauty of a long marriage. It removes the guilt. Not only does your wife not mind your spending time on your own, she insists on it. She wants you to come home. But first you have to leave. It's the closest to heaven most of us will ever get.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "Smiling is never completely wrong." - Red Green
Red Green is the star of "The Red Green Show," a television series seen in the U.S. on PBS and in Canada on the CBC Network, and the author of "The Red Green Book" and "Red Green Talks Cars: A Love Story."

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The Goodland Daily News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

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Published daily except Saturday and Sunday and the day observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Daily News, 1205 Main St., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: daily@nwkansas.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: gdnadv@nwkansas.com

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$22; six months, \$38; 12 months, \$72. By mail in Kansas, Colorado: three months, \$ 28; six months, \$50; 12 months, \$95. (All tax included.) Out of area, weekly mailing of five issues: three months, \$25; six months, \$40; 12 months, \$75.

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