No Longer the Last Dictatorship in Europe

The Kremlin’s war in Ukraine and the rise of Russian authoritarianism have made it clear that Belarus is neither the only dictatorship in Europe, nor the worst of them.

While Lukashenka's authoritarianism causes problems primarily for Belarusians, Putin is now threatening all of Europe, if not the entire world. Putin's recent wars in Ukraine and Georgia have taken lives of thousands of people.

The human rights record in Russia is becoming similar to that of Belarus, as the number of political prisoners and violent attacks against political opponents rises.

The Kremlin, unlike Belarus, has more leverage on the EU and the United States due to its oil and gas exports as well as its nuclear arsenal. Russia's size ensures that will not become as isolated as its smaller Customs Union partner.

Lukashenka now has a chance to improve his image in the West. His neutral stance in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may contribute to a better understanding between the West and Belarus. Due to its dependence on authoritarian Russia, however, Belarus is unlikely to shed the dictatorship label any time soon.

Competitors in Human Rights Violations

Labelling Belarus as the last dictatorship of Europe remains popular not only among journalists. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice coined this phrase in 2005. Since then it has become a cliche. In 2012 alone, two books with titles including "last dictatorship" appeared in English – one by academic and think tank expert Andrew Wilson and the other by
former British ambassador in Minsk Brian Bennett.

Putin’s regime has for a long time had a better reputation than Lukashenka’s. However, the number of political prisoners in Russia suggests this was not due to greater respect for human rights. Today Belarusian Human Rights Centre ‘Viasna’ counts seven political prisoners in Belarus. The Russian organisation ‘Memorial’ states there are about 45 political prisoners in Russia. While this difference is partly explained by Russia's larger population, the number of political prisoners in Russia keeps growing at the time when in Belarus it is slowly decreasing due to the 2015 presidential election.

A number of Russian and Belarusian opposition politicians chose to emigrate. Garry Kasparov, Russian chess player and oppositionist, remains in exile, as well as Belarusian prominent public figures like Andrei Sannikau and Zianon Pazniak.

In Belarus, four Belarusian public figures mysteriously disappeared in 1999-2000. In Russia's Chechnya, scores of people have disappeared and were tortured, a phenomenon that continues even today, many years after the Chechen wars officially came to a close. In fact, the Russian law does not extend to the northern Caucasian republic; Chechnya is ruled by strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. According to the Human Rights Watch, the Chechen president's security agencies continue to punish the relatives and suspected supporters of alleged insurgents. Nothing of the sort can be found today in Belarus.

To be fair, non-governmental organisations in Russia enjoy better working conditions at the moment than their Belarusian counterparts. World renowned groups like the Amnesty International that openly work in Russia, cannot work in Belarus.

Russian organisations can officially receive money from the West, while in Belarus this is beyond the realm of
possibility. Most, if not all, Belarusian NGOs acquire their financing illegally as far as the Belarusian law is concerned. Moreover, the Belarusian authorities refuse to register many civil society organisations receiving funding from the West. Russia registers such organisations, even though it considers them to be "foreign agents".

In the Freedom House rankings, both Belarus and Russia are "not free". Russia, however, has a slightly higher rating than Belarus.

At the end of the day, however, while the Belarusian authoritarianism affects nearly exclusively Belarusians, Russia has threatened an entire region.

On 29 August, the United Nations reported that at least 2,593 people were killed in the East of Ukraine since April 2014. Hundreds of Georgians died during the Russian invasion in 2008. The Kremlin's anti-Western mass media hysteria made it easy to mobilise Russian public opinion against the neighbours who choose democracy and European integration over other alternatives. It is difficult to imagine Belarus waging a war against any country, while Russia has been annexing territories of the neighbouring states throughout history.

Economic Freedom: Not Much Better

Although Russia joined the World Trade Organisation in 2012, and Belarus has not, the levels of economic freedom in both countries are similar. According to a study by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, even as the two countries are slowly liberalising, their economies remain "mostly unfree".

Corruption levels are high in both countries, but Belarus is better off than Russia. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Belarus ranks 123rd while Russia ranks 127th.
Unpredictable authoritarian regimes in both countries deter many foreign investors. Some prime examples include the Kremlin illegally expropriated the Yukos oil company and the Belarusian authorities did something similar to the Kamunarka and Spartak confectioneries. Few people know what the Kremlin will do next.

A Normal Dictatorship?

Neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian war and the weakening of democracy in Russia has helped to improve Lukashenka’s reputation. When Russia becomes Europe's second dictatorship, the Belarusian model of repression may seem a more attractive alternative.

Belarus, it would seem, has never been Europe's lone dictatorship. It is arguably less authoritarian than Azerbaijan, which is a member in the Council of Europe. Azerbaijan has about 100 political prisoners of its own and a much more dire situation with the rule of law. And still, there are no international sanctions against the Azerbaijani authorities.

Despite its relatively cleaner human rights record, Lukashenka’s regime is unlikely to become less of an outcast than Russia. The fight against a small European dictator can help garner political profits for those politicians fighting for a good cause.

The imposition of sanctions against Putin’s regime will result in serious losses to the European economy. The West needs Russian markets, oil and gas and is scared of Russia's nuclear arsenal. The recent postponement of anti-Russian sanctions for its aggression in Ukraine clearly demonstrates their apprehension.

The Kremlin’s war against Ukraine may, however, contribute to a new level of understanding between the West and Belarus. To this day, Lukashenka remains but a reluctant vassal of Putin.
He has more interest in maintaining Belarus' neutrality and re-exporting western agricultural goods than in participating in the ongoing conflict or maintaining the full support of the Kremlin.

The war in Ukraine should become a wake up call for Western politicians who should do what they can to increase people-to-people contacts, liberalise the visa regime, and help Belarusians strengthen their national and civil identity.