

Playing Chess with Belarus Dictator

In his newest blog entry Pavol Demeš of the Central and Eastern Europe program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States compares the last European dictator with tough chess player who frequently uses forbidden moves to win. "Despite opposition movements, Russian punishments, EU and U.S. sanctions, and color revolutions around him, he remains comfortably ensconced at his palace while European commissioners, patriarchs, popes, and other presidents have come and gone," says Demeš. The author reveals the secrets of Lukashenka's self-made practices in international relations through prism of recent crackdown on Belarus' Polish minority and upcoming presidential elections.

Belarus' Aleksander Lukashenko, European Chess-master *GMF Blog*
Posted on March 4, 2010 BRATISLAVA, Slovakia – When Aleksander Lukashenko, the authoritarian president of Belarus, began a recent campaign to intimidate and punish members of the country's disobedient Polish community, he opened a new front not only with neighboring Poland, but also with the EU as a whole that must now meet that challenge head on.

Lukashenko knows how to play and is an effective self-made practitioner in international relations. Having ruled with an iron fist over his country of 10 million since 1994, he is one of the longest-serving presidents in Europe and knows very well how to use internal and external conflicts to maintain his rule. As Lukashenko sees it, Belarusians love and need him as the guarantor of nationhood and stability. Despite opposition movements, Russian punishments, EU and U.S. sanctions, and color revolutions around him, he remains comfortably ensconced at his palace while European commissioners, patriarchs, popes, and other presidents have come and gone. But early 2011 will see a presidential election

in Belarus and, in some ways, the campaign has already begun. Of course, it will be a campaign that is specific to Belarus and a select group of other countries of the former Soviet Union, where leaders are hesitant to retire anytime before they die. This type of election campaign is hardly recognizable to voters or politicians in democratic countries where ballots are actually counted.

The chessmaster Lukashenko understands that he is living in an interdependent and multi-polar world hit by an economic crisis, and he will use the time before next year's election to test new means of maintaining power that would allow his five-year-old son Kolya (who accompanies him regularly on his domestic and foreign trips) to continue learning from his powerful father until the time that he will be old enough to lead. Indeed, the 55-year-old Belarusian president, while shaping his peculiar autocratic regime, has learned a great deal about different mechanisms for controlling his own people and limiting the capacity of the outside world to influence his power games.

The recent attacks by the police on the Union of Poles, a group representing the Polish minority (there are about 400,000 Poles living in Belarus, some loyal to the regime, others not) and their ramifications seem to be part of Lukashenko's skilful pre-election political engineering. The timing of his Polish crackdown coincides with the pre-presidential elections in Poland and allows him to simultaneously demonstrate his overwhelming power both at home and abroad. Paradoxically, neighboring Poland earlier played a key role in the EU's recent welcoming overtures toward a Belarus that it argued was undertaking political reforms seriously. But the recent persecution of Belarus' Polish minority outraged Polish public opinion; now Poland is engaged in a bitter bilateral diplomatic war and is talking about new sanctions, conditionality, and visa bans.

Polish President Lech Kaczynski and two potential presidential

candidates – Bronisław Komorowski, marshal of the Polish Sejm, and Radosław Sikorski, the foreign minister, are all scrambling to find solutions. They have rightly called upon the institutions of the European Union for help. The EU, which is still working to define individual roles in the post-Lisbon period, reacted quickly. Jerzy Buzek, the new president of the European Parliament, who coincidentally happens to be from Poland, did his European best to answer Lukashenko's challenge by calling for a wider approach that doesn't look only at the issue of the Polish minority. Catherine Ashton, the EU's new high representative for foreign and security policy, said that Belarusian actions "undermined our efforts to strengthen relations between the European Union and Belarus." Lukashenko is at his chess game again – and winning. Top Western officials are writing him letters, negotiating, and asking him politely to do the things they would like him to do. Fact-finding missions are coming to Belarus to discover what they knew before. While Poland and the EU take the time to consider their next step, Lukashenko is already way ahead of them. Indeed, his plans likely include making a grand display of stopping the attacks and beginning a reconciliation process between Belarusians and Poles. But before he does that, he'll ask for further international financial assistance and other benefits from the very people and institutions who are now asking him to stop persecuting his country's minorities. And when that assistance arrives, he will use it to extend his control over domestic resistance and opposition before the new round of elections early next year. Lukashenko is a tough chess player who frequently uses forbidden moves (including removing pieces from the board) that throw his domestic and international opponents off-balance.

The new EU leaders should recognize that their peculiar neighbor will not respond to standard diplomatic warnings and pressure, does not care about EU membership, and is capable of creating the illusion of success for those who enter into negotiations with him. They must appreciate that he is fully

aware of the West's political and economic weaknesses and the increasingly process-driven mentality when it comes to democracy assistance and the protection of human rights. In short, the policy of engagement that replaced the strict isolation of Lukashenko's regime needs to be rethought and recalibrated. Instead of watching Lukashenko choose the strategy and create illusions, the attacks on the Polish minority in Belarus and Poland's consequent seeking of European solidarity should help us to rethink our values, commitments, and actions in respect to human rights and democracy, and to come up with real and effective cooperation strategies in this field. If we succeed in European Belarus, we will do much better in other parts of world. Pavol Demeš is the director of the Central and Eastern Europe program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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