

Brian Bennett on his Belarus Book, Sanctions and Talking to the Russians

Belarus Digest continues to interview former [ambassadors](#) to Belarus on their work in Belarus. Brian Bennett served as the ambassador to of the United Kingdom in 2003-2007. He recently published a book on the country "The Last Dictatorship in Europe: Belarus Under Lukashenko".

BD: What were the brightest memories of your stay in Belarus?

Without my family with me in Minsk I could be more flexible than usual about how I spent my time. I travelled a lot. The brightest memory of my stay was the Belarusians themselves. They are more socially-oriented than the British, with a strong sense of community. And they are friendly and easy to get on with.

I had some good friends in the opera. I am an amateur singer myself. I spent a lot of time with charities and particularly remember my visits to the Chernobyl area. Visits to Marc Chagall's house and museum in Vitebsk also stay in my mind.

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I tried to understand what made Belarusians tick. They had clearly been through hard times and the fact that they are still going through hard times is in many ways only what they are used to. It has made them a little passive I suppose. But passivity is a sensible approach when you have an aggressive regime controlling your country.

BD: When did you start writing your book?

The idea started before I went to Belarus. I wanted to read books on Belarusian history and found there were very few in English. Jan Zaprudnik's book stops in 1992. David Marples has written academic books covering various periods. I found one book which dealt with the economy and another which was a collection of essays. None of them provided a political history which explained why Belarus is where it is today. I decided to write such a book in my retirement and began in 2008. It was eventually published in December 2011.

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I think to understand Belarus you have to live there and I was privileged to spend four years in Minsk. In the back of my mind was the conviction that people cannot care about a place if they do not know about it, and very few people in the English-speaking world know about Belarus. I hope my book will help raise the country's profile and that people will start to care about what is going on there.

BD: What is the main message of your book?

The main aim was to put the facts before the reader, giving the reader an insight into the situation in Belarus today. There are ten chapters of history from independence to recent times, followed by one devoted to Lukashenka himself and a final chapter, which attempts to look forward. The main message is that there isn't much that we in the West can do to improve the situation in Belarus and very little that the people of Belarus themselves can do about it either. It is sad and wrong that Belarusians have the regime they have now but things are not going to change.

The good news is that the number of individuals oppressing the Belarusians is very small. In fact it is fundamentally one man. The administration is made up overwhelmingly of people who care about Belarus but keep their heads down, afraid of stepping out of line. Lukashenka has reinforced his 'vertikal'

structure dramatically since he came to power in 1994 and they cannot change it. He has established a dictatorship sustainable for life. But Belarus will throw off dictatorship when he goes.

The book describes how Lukashenka consolidated his power, first by bringing all power into the hands of the president and then by making sure the hands of the president would be his alone. That personal assumption of power was achieved through the 2004 referendum and ratified by the 2006 election.

Lukashenka will remain in power for as long as he likes

It is clear Lukashenka will remain in power for as long as he likes and I believe that in his case that means for life. Things will not change unless he decides to change them. And he is not going to change them because he knows that liberalisation of the political structure and of the economy would undermine his control. Besides, he believes in the command economy familiar from Soviet times. Moreover, his life may depend on staying in office because once he stepped down he would face criminal charges relating to the disappearances and other human rights abuses.

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I suggest in my book that the only sensible course of action for the West is to keep up external pressure on Lukashenka. If we can also keep in touch with the people of Belarus to show we care, that would be a bonus. But the main thing is to be more consistent. We should not reward Lukashenka for releasing political prisoners but punish him for putting them away in the first place. And we should make sure that none of our measures aimed at engaging with the people of Belarus has the inadvertent effect of supporting the regime.

BD: Why is the situation in Belarus different to that in other countries of the region?

Belarus is unique. Belarusians are not hot-blooded and prefer to proceed calmly and in accordance with the law, even though much of the law has been put in place to cow them. They have learned from their history that fighting brings death and heartache and must be avoided. And their dislike of communism and control from Moscow was not as keenly felt as it was in other parts of the Soviet empire.

My first diplomatic posting was to Prague five years after Dubcek had been replaced. The Czechs were clearly unhappy with their lot and unable to change it. They longed for freedom but knew it would only come after change in Moscow. When it came, however, there was no holding them back. The same thing happened in Belarus's neighbours Poland and the Baltic States.

That longing was absent in Belarus. The people in general terms tended not to regard the Russians as occupiers or invaders and were more inclined to see them as brothers. Where they suffered under communism (and the Tsar before that) they tended to share the sentiment with the Russians rather than blaming them for it.

Belarusians have a weak sense of national identity

As well as living alongside Russians, they have shared their history with the Poles and with large numbers of Jews confined by Moscow to the Western reaches of the Russian empire. That enriched their culture but led to a weak sense of national identity. When the Soviet Union collapsed they were not ready for independence and missed the opportunity so eagerly grasped by their Western neighbours to put down firm democratic roots.

Instead, there was a feeling in 1991 that things would improve gradually; there was no need to rush into revolutionary

change. As we know, they were caught unawares by someone who promised them firm leadership, close ties with Russia and reform, something many of them wanted to hear. That's how he won the first election. After that he set about getting control of the electoral system and accumulating more powers. It was some time before people realised he was not interested in reform. By then it was too late.

BD: Why did the British Authorities close down the British Council?

It was a financial decision. The British Council was forced to make savings and, although you and I think of Belarus as a priority, the British Council has a worldwide reach and in a complex balancing exercise decided that it was one of the places they could cut more easily. It was closed in 2000.

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It is a great pity. I would have argued against it. The British Council's activities are a form of engagement that shows we care. While I was in Minsk the Goethe Institute considered closing and I argued in favour of keeping it going. I am glad they did. When the going gets tough the tough gets going.

But once you close an institution like that it is virtually impossible to reopen it. It takes not only money but a lot of energy and perseverance, all of which the British Council no doubt continues to believe is better deployed elsewhere.

BD: Why doesn't the BBC have a Belarusian language service? They have Kyrgyz and Azeri services which serve much smaller countries.

I talked to the BBC in 2003 about a Belarusian service. I understood that, as with the British Council, it was a

financial matter. And the question of language was not the prime concern, it was rather a question of communication: how many people could be reached. The fact was that most people in Belarus could be reached through the medium of Russian because the overwhelming majority of Belarusians spoke Russian.

The relative costs of setting up a Belarusian service and then of translating into and broadcasting in Belarusian rather than in Russian therefore rise steeply. Deutsche Welle was strongly criticised by the Belarusian opposition when it started broadcasting in Russian. But it was not a political decision – it made practical sense for the broadcaster to operate in Russian rather than Belarusian.

Belarusian is not as fit for purpose as Russian in the narrow context of broadcasting

I know the opposition does not like to hear that Belarusian is not as fit for purpose as Russian (in the narrow context of broadcasting) but it just happens to be true.

BD: What can Britain do to help Belarusian civil society and help the country move in the direction of democracy, greater respect for human rights and the rule of law? Can you think of any specific projects which could be supported?

I met a lot of people in Belarus who thought the West should do something to bring about change in Belarus. As a democrat I believe the solution to the problems of Belarus has to come from the Belarusians themselves. Outsiders can provide encouragement and to some extent assistance but cannot impose their own solutions.

This concept of "having to do something" is dangerous

I also met people in Brussels who believed the EU had to do something. This concept of "having to do something" is dangerous because it leads people to rush into action without

due consideration and sometimes gives succour to the regime. EU policy has thus staggered from stick to carrot, sanctions to dialogue, and back again when the previous policy was considered not to have been successful.

The interests of Russia, the West and, above all, the Belarusians would be best served if Belarus moved in a liberal direction

Dialogue will never work because Lukashenka is not open to it, and sanctions cannot work either in the sense of bringing about change, though they might if carefully targeted increase pressure on Lukashenka himself. We need a clear, coherent policy which aims to put pressure on the regime in the hope that that will help the Belarusians themselves to bring about change.

And we should not be sidetracked by the myth, encouraged by Lukashenka, that the West and the Russians are engaged in a zero-sum struggle for political and economic influence in Belarus; it only leads to both parties giving unintended or reluctant support to a regime they dislike. The interests of Russia, the West and, above all, the Belarusians would be best served if Belarus moved in a liberal direction.

Civil society in Belarus is already strong

Civil society in Belarus is already strong – there are bonds of family, friendship and community which are in play. The West could do more perhaps to support self-help in Belarus but should not take a leading role.

BD: You suggest there should be no new projects or initiatives for Belarus?

It may surprise some people to learn that EU projects in Belarus have to be approved by the Belarusian government. The Belarusian regime therefore gets to choose and monitor the

projects it favours. Anything concerned with improving human rights is going to be rejected. So there is very little we can do.

There is no point in setting up projects like that; they do nothing to help Belarus

Some EU projects, such as help to bring transparency into the electoral process, are, however, accepted cynically. Accepting them gives the impression the country is moving towards reform, thereby improving the regime's image and bringing much-needed money into the country. Transparency in the electoral process, however, is something Lukashenka cannot afford to allow. There is no point in setting up projects like that; they do nothing to help Belarus.

BD: Are the Russian authorities interested in democracy in Belarus or Russia?

It does not appear so. They seem to be more interested in securing and controlling energy markets. Belarus does not produce gas or any meaningful quantities of oil and is not a significant market for them either, but it does have two major oil refineries and a major gas pipeline taking Russian gas to the West, though it has declined in strategic importance since the Russians set up a direct pipeline to Germany under the Baltic.

Belarus is also important to Russia for psychological reasons, a hangover from the Cold War when Belarus was seen as a Soviet buffer against the West. That Cold War mentality long ago lost any military and economic significance in the West but it seems very much alive in Moscow. I don't think we should give up. I am a diplomat and diplomacy consists of a long haul towards a desirable but distant goal. It will work eventually but we should not expect to see early evidence of success.

A pragmatic and principled approach by Moscow could tip the balance inside the country

I am not saying that talking to the Russians is the answer. The Belarusian regime takes money from all directions – China, Iran, and so on. But Russian support for Lukashenka, despite Putin's personal dislike for him, is crucial. A pragmatic and principled approach by Moscow could tip the balance inside the country. But we should not think that Lukashenka can be forced to reform. It is the status quo or nothing for him. External pressure, however, might just push him to the tipping point where the country shifts from one to the other.

BD: How is outside pressure compatible with your notion that it is up to the Belarusians to instigate change in their country?

Well, the people of Belarus are the only ones who could or should bring about change there. But pressure from outside, from token gestures like visa bans to tougher measures like targeted economic sanctions, might reduce financial flows to the regime, reinforce the message to the people that they are not alone, and make them aware that there are people outside Belarus concerned about their situation and supporting their efforts. That may make Belarusians more determined to demand change in Belarus.

Conditions in the country can therefore be expected to worsen.

It is in the nature of dictatorships that leaders worry about their position even as they become more secure, and they tighten their control ever further. Conditions in the country can therefore be expected to worsen. Lukashenka has closed the windows on Belarus and now he is trying to close the doors.

The last unrestricted human right – freedom of movement – is now beginning to be eroded as he refuses to allow members of

the opposition to leave the country. He is very much in control but he worries more and more that he is vulnerable and we know that stress sometimes overwhelms him. He will not leave office voluntarily but relentless pressure might push him to breaking point. His departure would be very good for Belarus; with a little friendly help the Belarusians have the ability and now the will to move the country forward to a liberal democracy.