

Why the West fails to make a difference in Belarus

Over two months have passed since the beginning of the largest peaceful protests in Belarusian history. The protesters show little willingness to give up and the authorities continue to rely on violence and intimidation, despite calls from the West to stop. Several people have been killed, thousands arrested or tortured in police detention. Many have left the country.

Belarusian state media continues to repeat that Western states direct and fund the protests. But in reality, the West has almost no influence on what is happening in Belarus.

European and American policy-makers are resorting to traditional instruments of pressure which on many occasions in the past proved ineffective. They express “deep concern” and repeatedly ask the authorities to stop the violence, but these calls fall on deaf ears. The sanctions that the West imposes do not bite, and much of the scarce funding allocated for Belarusian civil society stays in the West.

This is the first of [two](#) articles reassessing the traditional Western response to human rights violations in Belarus. This article will critically analyze the existing models of support, while the second article will propose changes to make it more effective.

Shaming the authorities will not work

Long before the 9 August presidential elections, the Belarusian authorities adopted a strategy to decapitate protests. Forcing leaders to leave the country became the

preferred method of disconnecting them from the protesters. The authorities reserved imprisonment for those who refused to leave. Leaders of traditional opposition groups such as Mikola Statkievich and Pavel Seviatynets found themselves in prison well before elections took place.

Some of the new leaders who emerged in 2020, such as would-be election candidate Viktor Babaryka and his campaign manager Maria Kolesnikova, did not want to leave and also ended up in prison. But most of the leaders of the 2020 presidential election campaign and post-election protests, including opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, prominent member of the opposition Co-Ordination Council Pavel Latushka, and scores of others, were forced to leave the country.

Surprisingly, the decapitation of the protests has failed to reduce the number of people coming out to the streets.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel (L) meeting with Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (R) at the Chancellery in Berlin

With so many leaders abroad it is only natural that they devote much of their attention to lobbying European politicians. Tsikhanouskaya regularly meets top European politicians, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emanuel Macron, and EU officials. Others engage in

similar activities trying to energize decision-makers and donors in the West.

Although these activities are important, many have a symbolic rather than practical meaning for the situation inside Belarus. European politicians have almost no leverage over Belarus. They remain interested in the situation in the country, yet are unwilling to allocate significant resources to tackle it. Instead, they stick to traditional instruments, which have been shown to be ineffective in the past.

Most of the time, however, European politicians simply express “deep concern”, shaming President Alexander Lukashenka, calling on him to resign or release political prisoners, and otherwise shaming the Belarusian authorities. However, while the crackdown against peaceful protestors looks shameful in the eyes of western observers, Lukashenka and his cronies consider it a demonstration of their strength. If shaming has no effect, what else can Western leaders do?

Sanctions – a cheap but weak instrument

In theory, sanctions can help punish the perpetrators of human rights violations, deter others from engaging in them, and send a signal of solidarity to the oppressed. Sanctions are also cheap to impose because they do not require any allocation of funds. All these factors have often made them a preferred instrument of pressure for the West.

However, despite the public attention which sanctions generate, they usually miss their targets. For example, the United Kingdom and Canada two weeks ago sanctioned several individuals, including Lukashenka himself. They prohibited them from traveling to the United Kingdom and Canada and from using banks in these countries. But those who understand how

the Belarusian political system works know that Lukashenka and his close associates are extremely unlikely to have bank accounts in these countries, let alone in their own names. Even if they had them, these accounts would have been closed a long time ago because of the likelihood of sanctions. They are equally unlikely to travel to the United Kingdom or Canada.

The United Kingdom and Canada demonstrated their solidarity with the protesters, two months after the protests started. But instead of punishing the targeted individuals, they may in fact have elevated them in the eyes of Lukashenka and made them even more loyal to the regime. Sanctions should remain a policy instrument, but their effect will remain largely symbolic.



Meeting of EU foreign affairs ministers at the European Council building in Brussels, Sept. 21, 2020 (Associated Press)

Moreover, states may waste a significant amount of energy introducing sanctions that have only symbolic meaning. For example, Cyprus, an EU member state, for many weeks blocked a sanctions package against Belarus, apparently for reasons that have nothing to do with Belarus.

Currently, the West is not even considering crippling economic sanctions against sectors of the Belarusian economy. This is apparently because of their indiscriminate effect on the

Belarusian people, those whom they are meant to protect. Moreover, Tsikhanouskaya and most in the opposition speak against such sanctions.

Overall, the West has no appetite for more serious sanctions. Today, the number of people sanctioned by the European Union is much lower ([45 individuals](#)) than it was in after the post-election crackdown in 2010 ([75 individuals](#)). This, despite the fact that in 2010, the crackdown against protests was weaker than in 2020 and the authorities did not kill any protesters. The [repressions-sanctions-rapprochement cycle](#) has become a familiar feature of EU-Belarus relations. It helps to send the message of disapproval and is cheap, but not really effective.

Supporting civil society – but how?

Supporting civil society seems like another obvious policy tool to support Belarusians. Despite their limited availability and scale, grants and joint projects with Western counterparts play an important role and constitute a vital lifeline for many NGOs.

However, such projects are usually short-term and the volume of support for civil society in Belarus remains minuscule. For example, in August 2020 the European Union [committed](#) to spending an additional EUR 53m to support the Belarusian people. However, of this amount, only EUR 2m was allocated to assist the victims of repression and 1m to support civil society and independent media. Most of the sum (EUR 50m) was allocated to the Belarusian state to help fight the coronavirus, which the Belarusian leadership does not regard as a serious problem.



New forms of self-organisation of Belarusians in microdistricts of Minsk

Much of the existing support will reach traditional civil society actors (NGOs, activists, media, political parties) who certainly need and deserve it. However, this support is very unlikely to reach previously apolitical people who joined the 2020 protests and in doing so have changed the situation in the country.

These people simply do not have the right connections and skills to access Western support, with its rigid application and reporting requirements. Even if they apply and succeed, they may have to wait for months before a decision is made to allocate a modest amount.

Moreover, much of Belarusian civil society support will stay outside of Belarus. The largest donor-funded organizations such as Polish-based Belsat TV channel and the Lithuania-based European Humanities University are outside Belarus. These organizations have a greater capacity to absorb the money and to report in accordance with Western expectations.

In addition, most support for Belarusian civil society remains short-term (often for one year or less) and even if a certain initiative or politician becomes successful, this usually does not last long. These initiatives remain financially unsustainable because of the lack of long-term programmes supporting them. On the other hand, some organisations

receiving long-term funding to little effect. For example, the European Humanities University for many years has been consuming significant amounts of Western support [with no meaningful impact on the situation](#) in Belarus.

To sum up, the conventional methods of pressure and support have failed to produce any meaningful change in Belarus in the past. The unprecedented situation in the country now requires new approaches, which may prove to be more effective. A new paradigm should focus primarily on strengthening the solidarity and self-reliance of Belarusians inside the country, rather than attempts to weaken the regime from the outside in the absence of real instruments to achieve it. Belarus Digest will discuss new approaches in [another article](#).

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Editorial: Why the EU Lifts Belarus Sanctions

On Saturday the suspension of most European Union targeted sanctions against Belarus came into effect.

The sanctions were suspended “in response to the release of all Belarusian political prisoners on 22 August and in the context of improving EU-Belarus relations”. Ironically, the move comes a few weeks after the facade presidential election in October 2015.

The move shows that the EU's expectations of Belarus have become much lower. In the late 1990s the West expected from

Belarus free and fair elections and greater respect for human rights. A regime change in Belarus looked realistic then. Twenty years later the main expectation of the European Union is not significant political changes but avoiding violence against political opponents and securing the release of political prisoners.

fundamentally, not much has changed inside Belarus over the last decade

Although the European Union is not for the first time changing its policy from one of sanctions to engagement, fundamentally little has changed inside Belarus over the last decade. Freedom House rankings of Belarus show almost the same scores for democracy, independent media and civil society in that period. The authorities conduct elections which are neither free nor fair, imprison and then release their political opponents and keep civil society under pressure.

The changes in the European Union's approach reflect not so much changes inside Belarus but changes in the regional context. In the late 1990s Russia looked like an emerging democracy moving in the right direction. Lukashenka was an abnormality who had to be ostracised. Belarus as a small and unimportant country was easy to sanction.

Now Vladimir Putin is rigging elections, staging wars in the region and conquering foreign territories. This makes Lukashenka look rather mild. He even appears as a guarantor of peace and Belarusian independence against the background of the Ukraine crisis.

the Belarusian statehood and independence today is more vulnerable than ever

But although Russia is busy with wars in Syria and Ukraine, Belarusian statehood and independence today is more vulnerable

than ever. In the post-Crimea world the tolerance for violence in the post-Soviet region has increased. Russia's appetite for influence in the region is growing. Instead of supplying Belarus with war planes, Russia wants to provide its pilots as well.

The minds of Belarusians are also under pressure from Russia. Most people in Belarus watch Russian television as their main source of news, exposing them to high doses of anti-Western propaganda. The Belarusian authorities would like to replace this with their their own propaganda but are [unable to do so without angering Russia](#). For the same reason, the Belarusian regime considers it foolish to make any significant moves towards the West, and instead prefers to stay in the shadow of Russia.

Lukashenka has made the country extremely vulnerable and dependent upon Russia. This does not mean, however, that Belarus should be punished for it and abandoned because of Europe's fatigue and preoccupation with other problems.

The European Union should not just lower its expectations but take more active steps to become more [visible and influential inside Belarus](#). This should include long-term programmes in the area of education, scholarly exchanges in the framework of the Bologna process, and strengthening the civil and national identity of Belarusians.

Finally, it is important to lower the visa barrier. Ironically, while hundreds of thousands of migrants cross the European border without any visas, Belarusians have to undergo long, expensive and often [humiliating procedures](#) to go to the West. It happens not because the government prevents them from leaving, as in the Soviet times. The main obstacle is that European Union states [prefer to issue short-term visas](#) and charge the full price.

Belarusian nationals face much stricter visa requirements than

citizens of Russia or Ukraine. The policy of the European Union towards Belarusians should remain favourable even when the government of Belarus does not want to liberalise or open up the country. It is in the long-term interest of both the people of Belarus and the European Union to do so.

EU Policy Towards Belarus After Crimea Revisited – Belarus Reality Check 2014

On 10 April the Belarus Reality Check took place, hosted by the European Endowment for Democracy in Brussels.

This is the third event of this series which involves a number of Western and Belarusian analysts and policy-makers. Previous events took place in [Vilnius](#) in 2012 and in [Warsaw](#) in 2013.

Participants discussed how to balance the EU's willingness to improve its ties with Belarus and its inability to do much inside the country until the release of all the nation's political prisoners.

Belarus Digest plans to publish a non-paper summarising the main points of the event next week.

Belarus Reality Check 2012

The *Reality Check* is a new initiative which aims to convene regularly a *Review Group* to contribute to the formulation of a more effective policy towards the EU's Eastern neighborhood countries.

The Review Group includes domestic and international analysts, practitioners, diplomats and policy makers.

The first informal meeting on Belarus was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, on November 20, 2012 hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania. The Belarus Review Group focused on three major issues: a) review of domestic (Belarusian) stakeholders; b) external (geopolitical) context review; c) potential recommendations for the Western policy.

The event was held in a closed format in order to encourage honest exchange (i.e. the reality check), while the group comprised of top Western and Belarusian analysts. A particular emphasis was placed on the independent character of the group in order to lead to a more evidence based and balanced type of policy-advice.

The summary of findings and recommendations are released – coincidentally on the 2nd anniversary of the last presidential elections in Belarus – in order to contribute to the public debate in and out of Belarus.

Policy Recommendations

demand for the release of all political prisoners – should remain the key line towards Minsk even though this means relations will remain in freeze

The current position of the European Union – its demand for the release of all political prisoners – should remain the key

line towards Minsk even though this means relations will remain in freeze. Communication of this position, however, should be upgraded.

Firstly, it needs to be explained that there are currently no "hardcore" economic sanctions in relations with Belarus. The EU applies restrictive measures against certain individuals and companies. Secondly, the EU should communicate better inside Belarus why it does not see political prisoners as criminals, putting its position in the context of Belarus' international obligations

The EU should not take upon itself a role that should be played by local actors. Any such attempt may be seen by Belarusian citizens, and not just by the government, as interference in their country's domestic affairs. At the same time it can afford to be more transparent than the Belarus government while acting as a bigger partner that possesses strategic patience.

The definition of the "regime" should be universally understood. Contacts with the government should be encouraged if the political prisoners are released. However, there was no agreement within the group whether these contacts should be at the technical or at the ministerial level.

If the EU wants to be serious about sanctions (not the current restrictive measures), a study on the effect of potential tougher economic sanctions should be commissioned. Its purpose would be to find out what impact they have and whether it is worth expanding, diminishing the current list or abandoning it. Such a study should be made public: the EU should not try to compete with Belarus when it comes to the lack of transparency.

The potential negative implications of the sanctions should also be kept in mind: the regime is capable of retaliation by escalating repressions at home, however the direct connection

between sanctions and repressions is questionable and was contested by several observers.

Everybody paying taxes could be “allied” with the regime

The list of private businesses under the current restrictive measures could be reviewed regularly. If the argument that businesses are “resources of the Lukashenka regime” is accepted, then the next logical step is to consider all private business to be Lukashenka's allies since they pay taxes.

The advantage is that such a move might harm the government coffers, but on the other hand, there is arguably no limit to such a list. Everybody paying taxes could be “allied” with the regime. Furthermore, restrictive measures do make Belarus more dependent on Russia and it will be harder and harder to withstand Russia's pressure for privatization of Belarusian companies.

Strategic patience could be considered as a more viable policy option: in practice, the EU has applied it towards Minsk already. However, strategic patience without a strategy was identified as one of the key problems of the current Western policy.

The EU policy of modernization should proceed with civil society and political parties. In addition, the EU should also consider an engagement within the Eastern Partnership with the state authorities. That could focus on issues of mutual interest such as environment, law approximation, energy security, food security, border management, visa facilitation, etc. Re-branding the dialogue to “Partnership for Modernization” could serve that purpose. At the same time, the EU could continue communicating to the society what modernization means and what citizens will gain through it.

The perceived - albeit neither written nor ever agreed on - expectation that the only success is the fall of the regime is unlikely to be fulfilled anytime soon.

The EU should not focus on uniting the opposition but rather on encouraging it to stop criticizing each other – gentlemen agreement instead of interpersonal fights. It should encourage them to reach out to the local population and raise the issues that matter to them such as economy and other subjects.

Expectations of success should be put into a realistic context, though. The perceived – albeit neither written nor ever agreed on – expectation that the only success is the fall of the regime is unlikely to be fulfilled anytime soon. Western donors' primary focus should be at the local level, i.e. support for grassroots projects. In these cases success should be measured in terms of day-to-day relevance, realistic policy proposals, focus on local issues.

instead of merely expecting the public to follow them, the opposition has to take into account what the population really wants

Political research has to be encouraged and supported; political parties should formulate their communication and outreach strategies (e.g. How should the oppositional political forces talk about privatization, elections, etc.) based on political, economic and social research findings. In this way, the pro-democratic political forces can get rid of their image as human rights fighters.

In other words, instead of merely expecting the public to follow them, the opposition has to take into account what the population really wants. High standard of scholarly and analytical work can be – and should be – maintained even in an isolated policy-expert community as the one in Belarus.

Summary of Findings

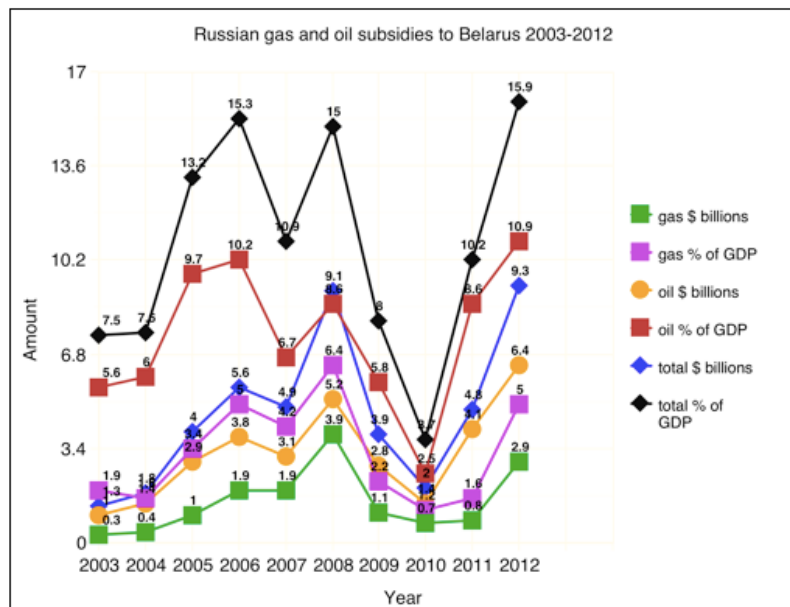
Domestic Stakeholders Review

Given the lack of trust between the West and Belarus and taking into account Minsk's own view of the current situation, there is very little the EU can do to improve the mutual relations without losing its face and backtracking on its previous demands. But the same could be said about Minsk's position, too, considering its own domestic and Russian audience (this latter is important in terms of extracting subsidies for Belarus).

the current restrictive measures don't really affect the regime

This situation has led to the sanctions vs. engagement debate, which is a logical yet counter-productive consequence for a number of reasons. First, the current restrictive measures don't really affect the regime – that is unlikely to happen without Russia's assistance. Second, the status quo is a rational choice for both sides of the political spectrum: while the regime has no incentives to change the status quo, the opposition lacks the capacity to do so. As a result, those who would like to see some kind of (actually undefined) change in Belarus (according to the polls a large part of the population would support such – again, undefined – change) have no representative institutions.

This surprising opposition-regime 'status quo consensus' has been an obstacle to change and is increasing the value of loyalty toward either of the two sides. Reacting to the demands of the opposition, the West has elevated the 'sanctions vs. engagement' debate from tactical to the strategy level.



Because the West has a limited ability to persuade opposition politicians to abandon this unproductive debate, it has also little hope of seriously influencing the official circles. These are, by any measure even less dependent on the Western engagement and more indifferent to it.

The EU policy does not appear to be strategic, be it in the short-term or long-term

The EU policy does not appear to be strategic, be it in the short-term or long-term. It is usually the case that either Belarus seems to be too small or irrelevant to current Western priorities, or Western policymakers look at Belarus through the prism of their country's relations with Russia.

Therefore, the current three-track EU policy (restrictive measures; support for civil society and opposition; policy for modernization) is mostly seen as a reaction to Belarus' image as the "last dictatorship in Europe", which is actively promoted at home by the regime and abroad by the opposition. But building an authoritarian state in Belarus required lower levels of repressions compared to other CIS countries. As a result, the long-term – unwritten and not agreed –

expectations of the “regime change” remain unfulfilled which has led to a growing sense of frustration among those engaged in or on Belarus.

political parties should finally focus on re-branding their ideas by taking into account the concerns of the population

Change will be accelerated by Belarusians and should be encouraged from within the country rather than from abroad. In order to accelerate a change from within, political parties should finally focus on re-branding their ideas by taking into account the concerns of the population.

Even the very understanding of the “opposition” would be useful to re-brand because currently the majority of the population opposes both President Lukashenka and what is labeled as the “opposition”. This is achievable as usually campaigns by political parties resonate much more in the public opinion polls than the parties themselves or their leaders.

After the dramatic events following the December 19, 2010 elections and the subsequent crackdown, Belarus remains under the President's control. But his inner circle is shrinking as the regime transforms from an inclusive authoritarian regime (anchored in public support) to an exclusive crony state (relying on support of certain clans/personalities).

At the same time, to retain power, Lukashenka has no other option than to use his same old tactic of divide and rule as it is in his and the current regime's interest not to allow any clan/personality to strengthen their grip on power. But this tactics may backfire as it limits the foundations of the exclusive crony state that is emerging: in the future, there might be less money and, therefore, less stability than previously. For the moment, however, the existing social filter – i.e. anyone can leave and people do leave, especially to Russia – so far works in favor of the regime's elite

consolidation.

Belarusian economy needs billions of dollars annually to guarantee the social contract between the regime and the population

The main question is how the current functioning of the system is financed. Depending on various GDP growth estimates as well as on the actual implementation of the promise to raise the average monthly salary up to \$500, Belarusian economy needs billions of dollars annually to guarantee the social contract between the regime and the population.

Minsk expects to "raise" most of these funds from Russia as it expects that the geopolitical situation is favorable thanks to the ongoing formal integration process towards the Eurasian Economic Union. External observers need to understand that what often looks like an erratic behavior either by the regime or the opposition is in fact backed by their partners: Russia in the case of the Minsk authorities and the West in the case of the political opposition.

When the Russian subsidies are drying off, the Belarus state attempts to siphon off the resources from the productive sectors

When the Russian subsidies are drying off, the Belarus state attempts to siphon off the resources from the productive sectors. The expropriation of the confectionary companies Spartak and Kommunarka, the president's recent infamous decree about the forced labor in the wood processing industry are pointing toward such direction.

There are signals sent to the construction and shoe and industry as well as a new law what would allow to send state representatives into every company that was created through privatization, even if the direct stake of the state there is 0%. All these may herald the return to a similar 2001 policy.

The Belarus bureaucracy creates mechanisms to keep businesses “fit” and stressed.

Geopolitical Review

Moscow may have the resources to overthrow the current regime but the possible unpredictability may come at a higher cost.

Minsk expects Russia to continue providing subsidies for Belarus since there is currently no alternative that would serve Russian interests better than Lukashenka. Moscow may have the resources to overthrow the current regime but the possible unpredictability may come at a higher cost. Therefore it is not really interested in (regime) change. Although there has been growing reluctance in Russia to meet Minsk's increasing demands for subsidies (some of) these are likely to be continued.

The bilateral conflicts and disputes are there because this is the way Belarus extracts concessions and makes Russia pay for its alliance; less extent because Russia enforces change. The question is, however, whether Belarus' growing financial requests to Moscow can simply be met without increasing Russia's expectations from the regime.

the West misses a “carrot” to exercise influence over Lukashenka

Today, the EU does not have resources to compete with Russia's support, which leads to the current impasse. Those who should be potentially interested in change (i.e. opposition) have no capacities to alter the status quo while those having the capacity to do so (i.e. the government), have no incentives as long as Russia is footing the bill. Given Belarus is not attracted to what the EU offers, the West misses a “carrot” to exercise influence over Lukashenka.

The experience of the EU's policy on modernization has shown

that a) the EU should not act as a local player; b) current opposition and civil society does not have the necessary capacity to assume the role of the only local player. At the same time, the EU's restrictive measures by the general population as a policy tool used to fulfill the demands of the political opposition. As a result, thanks also to the state propaganda machine, the EU is seen as a protector of the political opposition.

The Belarus Reality Check was organized with the support of and input from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany), Pact (U.S.) and the Eastern Europe Studies Center (Lithuania). This is a peer reviewed summary of the discussion and does not necessary reflect the opinion of the organizers.

Download pdf version of [Belarus Reality Check 2012](#).

Change.org Blocked in Belarus, New Civil Society Initiatives – Civil Society Digest

Two individuals arrested by the KGB in connection with the teddy bear stunt released in Belarus. Change.org – an international web site platform to sign petitions – blocked in Belarus. New initiatives for small small businesses, people with disabilities and human rights activists launched in Belarus.

[Two men accused of aiding teddy bear drop released by KGB](#). On August 17 KGB released journalist Anton Suriapin and real

estate broker Sergey Basharimov on the conditions of proper conduct and travel ban. The two men remain to be formally accused of aiding an illegal border crossing of Belarus, until KGB has “full clarity regarding the circumstances of the investigated crime”.

[Change.org is blocked for Belarusians](#). The Russian version of the international Change.org platform, where the petition for the release of Anton Suryapin and Sergei Basharimov (detained on criminal charge of illegal crossing of the border of Belarus during the Swedish Teddy bear affair) is conducted, has been blocked on the territory of Belarus. Dmitriy Savelov, the campaign coordinator for Eastern Europe and Asia, claims that this only shows the meaningfulness and effectiveness of such online petitions.

[Independent Journalists detained in Vitebsk](#) – On Thursday, August 9, two hosts of Polish tv-channel “Belsat” Volha Startsttsina and Dzyanis Mikhailav were detained during shooting a news piece in the streets of Vitebsk. The news piece was dedicated to the upcoming elections in Belarus and whether the people know their candidates. The reasons for the detention have not been announced.

[School students will be taught counter-propaganda about December 19th](#) – A new schoolbook on preliminary military training has been issued in Belarus. Among other topics, this book contains chapters on “Informational war”. The book offers its own version of the events of December 19, 2010, depicting them as “a failed attempt of a conspiracy to overthrow the legitimate Belarusian government”.

[Avangard vs BRSM over Internet TV project](#). The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) announced that it is launching its own internet-television A-TV. According to BRSM, which is the largest government-sponsored youth organization, the internet-TV is started on a voluntary basis, and will be

covering social programs, debates and other timely issues. Shortly after the announcement, [Avangard issued a statement refuting BRSM's claims](#) for ownership of A-TV. According to Avangard, A-TV project, including resources, production team and journalists is the property of Avangard. The only involvement of BRSM is that it allows Avangard to use its TV studio, in exchange for Avangard's assistance with production of TV content for BRSM's internal use.

Business

[Groundbreaking decisions announced by the government for small business](#) – The government has agreed to reduce the tax burden for small business and provided other opportunities for its development. This was announced at the August 8 meeting of the Council of Ministers. But the government should not stop on what has been achieved – the goals set by the authorities are too challenging to do so. Chairman of the Belarusian Union of Entrepreneurs, Alexander Kalinin, who spoke at the meeting, said in an interview with a Naviny.by reporter, that the Government's objective "is theoretically achievable."

[Head of Minsk Entrepreneurs Unions speaks against further sanctions from the EU](#) – head of Minsk entrepreneurs' union Vladimir Koryagin expresses to Sergei Glagolev from ej.byhis opinion on the possibility of Belarusian business suffering from possible sanctions from EU due to the recent diplomatic conflict with Sweden.

New Initiatives

[New project of the Disability Rights Office "Non-barrier environment monitoring"](#) has started. In July 2012, the office for protection of the rights of people with disabilities has started the implementation of its new project aimed at creation of the non-barrier environment monitoring tool and its pilot exercising.

[Belarus will host a rock festival for young people with](#)

[disabilities](#) Rock festival for young people with disabilities "Step nasustrach!", organized by the volunteer movement "Warm smiles of the childhood" (TUD), will be held on September 16. According to the Igor Yurchik, the leader of the movement, the purpose of the festival is to promote the integration of young people with disabilities into society.

[International festival of the new ethno culture «Volnae Pavetra – 2012»](#) – the fifth annual ethnic festival is going to take place on August 25th at the Shabli village in Minsk region. The guests of the festival are ethnic bands from a number of countries, but the festival is still dedicated to spreading the Belarusian ethnic culture.

[Informational meeting: European programmes for CSO's in Belarus](#). An enlightenment institution "Office for European expertise and communications" is organising an informational event dedicated to the opportunities for civic organizations from Belarus interested in cooperation in the fields of culture, education, science, youth exchange, tourism and reforms in the Eastern partnership countries. The meeting will be held on August 22 in Minsk.

[A contest to participate in the second international training course on human rights for young people](#) – has been announced by Viasna human rights center. The course will bring together young activists from Belarus and Ukraine. The Belarusian Human Rights School announces a call for participation in the Second International training course on human rights, organized and coordinated a number of human rights organizations – the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, PA "M'ART" (Ukraine), the Human Rights Center "Postup" (Ukraine) and Viasna human rights center (Belarus).

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories

already available in English-language media.

A Bad July for Lukashenka

July did not start very happily for Alexander Lukashenka. At the Independence Day speech on 4 July he praised the great political and economic situation of Belarus, but subsequent developments undermined both.

The teddy bear affair and rejection of his visa application to attend the London Olympic Games are among the issues likely to have made Lukashenka embarrassed and frustrated, and sparked a new wave of enemy-searching.

Financial troubles and the need to obtain more financial assistance from Moscow still remain the most burning problems. The recent diplomatic conflict with Sweden and, in consequence, tensions in relations with the EU, will isolate Belarus internationally even more and push it further into Moscow's arms.

(Un)diplomatic conflict with background teddy bear affair

The [drop of teddy bears](#) with pro-democracy slogans over Belarus was first met with denial that it had happened and then to a number of high-ranking officials being dismissed or reprimanded. The dismissed include air defence chief Major General Dmitry Pakhmelkin and Major-General Ihar Rachkouski, who was in charge of the border service.

The Belarusian authorities have now started searching for more enemies – both external and internal. On 3 August Minsk announced that Ambassador Eriksson's accreditation had been terminated. Stefan Eriksson was a diplomat whose ability to

speak the Belarusian language and knowledge of Belarusian history have long made Belarusian authorities suspicious.

A few days later, on 8 August, Sweden demanded that two Belarusian diplomats leave Stockholm. In response, the Belarusian authorities went even further and recalled all the employees of the Belarus Embassy in Sweden and asked the Swedes to close the embassy in Minsk.

Although Belarusian officials failed to prove any link between Eriksson's diplomatic and alleged anti-regime activity (for example, responsibility in the organisation of the teddy bear campaign), they suggested such conclusion quite openly. Moreover, other arguments that the authorities raise, related to Eriksson staying too long with the diplomatic mission in Belarus, appear not to be serious.

As a part of the conflict with Sweden, the authorities [arrested and continue to detain with the KGB](#) a journalist who was the first to take pictures of Swedish teddy bears in Belarus and a real estate agent who housed the Swedes when they came to visit the country just before the stunt.

The Olympic Embarrassment

The authorities wanted to demonstrate their tough approach in response to the teddy bear affair. However, the ease with which Minsk escalated tensions with Sweden could have been motivated by an additional factor: Lukashenka's humiliating visa rejection to go to the Olympics, where Belarus eventually got less medals than ever before in its sovereign history.

On 24 July, the British authorities officially refused to issue a visa to Alexander Lukashenka who has been on the EU travel ban list for years. Since he has been president of the Belarusian Olympic Committee since 1997, the whole situation surely seemed even more severe to him. In their official

announcement, the British officials treated him as equal to other dictators like Bashar Assad and Robert Mugabe who were not welcome at the Olympics either.

While from the very beginning the Belarusian authorities avoided making any comments on the decision, on another occasion, during the Slavianski Bazaar singing contest in Vitebsk, President Lukashenka described the Olympic Games as dirty, corrupt and politicised.

A Weak Reaction from the EU

On 10 August EU foreign ministers at an extraordinary meeting agreed to express their solidarity via a diplomatic note addressed to the Belarusian authorities. Widening the so-called "black list" of those who are not allowed to enter the EU territory is also under consideration in Brussels.

However, the EU politicians will make a concrete decision by 31 October, when Brussels is supposed to discuss it in the broader context of mutual relations and other issues, such as political prisoners and repression of civil society in Belarus. Such a concrete date indicates that Brussels aims at detailed observation of the September parliamentary elections and will also deal with their probable abuses.

Nevertheless, the recent reaction of the EU toward the conflict with Swedish diplomacy is by no means harsh, as some have actually expected it to be. A diplomatic note, which the EU member states decided to use this time, has just purely symbolic meaning. In fact, the Belarusian political leadership is already isolated and there is not much else Brussels can do without harming the population of Belarus.

A key challenge to Brussels might be to close the whole issue smoothly as soon as possible – a recent diplomatic conflict when all EU ambassadors were first recalled but then returned could have taught something to both Minsk and Belarus.

Moscow Support is Key

It is not only the Swedish teddy bear provocation and UK visa refusal that might have motivated such a tough reaction from Lukashenka. As a matter of fact, he needs financial assistance to sustain his regime. In an official letter back in June, the Belarusian authorities [requested from the Eurasian Economic Community](#), an organisation dominated by Russia, more financial aid. As Russia is trying to close down various [unauthorised oil trading schemes](#) of the Belarusian regime, its external debt is growing.

Moscow remains the only supporter of the Belarusian regime. Thus, Minsk does its best to portray itself to Russia as the only reliable and trustworthy partner which needs support in its struggle against Western pressure. The Belarusian official media portray the West as responsible for spy activities and provocation which helps them shift attention away from internal problems.

Brussels puts forward concrete conditions on any financial assistance, whereas Moscow simply generously donates to retain the status-quo in Belarus. But the truth is that Russia's support is also conditional not only upon its geopolitical anti-Western position but also upon [privatisation of state-owned companies](#) – the question which will inevitably appear on the agenda soon.

Twenty Years of Uneasy Belarus-Poland Relations

Although trade turnover between Poland and Belarus indicates positive trends, numerous problems remain unsolved. Treatment

of Polish minority in Belarus and wide spread human rights violations are just a few of them. Nevertheless, both Poland and Belarus have a few serious reasons to establish positive relations.

Warsaw is driven by prestige and even more so by the geopolitics of today's Europe. Belarus place in Europe makes it an important actor where Russian influences play an important role. Polish political elites with scepticism observe Moscow's increasing involvement in Minsk. Another argument is that Warsaw needs to have a stable and predictable neighbour with whom can pursue normal relations, based on the common interests, but also set of certain values. However, Poland's desire to increase mutual cooperation fails to generate mutual feelings in the official Minsk.

A few months ago, 2 March 2012, Belarus and Poland celebrated the 20th anniversary of establishment of their relations. However, the circumstances were not propitious to the celebration. The diplomatic war that began at the end of February, caused tensions on a line Minsk – Warsaw – Brussels. The EU decided to widen the visa sanctions and freeze assets of 21 people who are supportive to the Lukashenka's regime. As a result, Polish ambassador, Leszek Szerepka, and the EU representative were expelled from Minsk. Other diplomats from EU countries soon followed them. It was the most intensive crises in Belarus-EU relations but two months later, the Polish and other ambassadors returned to Belarus.

Brief History of Modern Belarus-Poland Relations

Establishment of Belarus – Poland relations is dated as 27th December 1991, when Warsaw recognised Belarus independence. In June 1992, two states signed the Treaty on Good – Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation, which became a legal foundation of their mutual relations. Poland and Belarus recognised the current borders and expressed no territorial

claims. At the beginning of the 1990s both were involved into their internal struggles over the new shape of political and economic realities. Poland, like the Baltic States, turned its efforts to integrate within the West.

Belarus also enjoyed the freedom during its initial years of independence. But since the election of Lukashenka in 1994, Belarus – Poland relations started to cool. Closer political and economic cooperation of Belarus and Russia, further concentration of power in Lukashenka's hand, gradually increased the distance between Minsk and Warsaw.

In the years 1998 – 1999, due to a diplomatic scandal (diplomats were asked to leave their houses in the Drozdy housing estate), Belarusian – Polish relations became particularly uneasy and the Polish ambassador (but also others) left Minsk. The West put visa sanctions against 130 Belarusian officials.

Poland, like Western countries, did not recognise the results of the December 2001 presidential elections and became on that time a serious critics of the internal developments in Belarus. However, when the European Union and United States decided to sharpen the sanctions on Belarus in 2002, Polish authorities disapproved it. Nonetheless, that decade to end up with the serious diplomatic crisis on a line Warsaw – Minsk.

The next presidential elections in December 2010 and subsequent violence against protesters in Minsk, who questioned the fairness of the electoral process and its results, brought about another set of tensions.

Despite political tensions, the mutual trade is growing. In 2010 trade exchange was over \$ 2 bln, and in one year it has increased up to over \$ 3 bln. A number of administrative obstacles effectively hinder the trade turnover. On the Polish side, it might be lack of effective supportive export programme.

On the Belarus side, administrative barriers kept by the Belarusian authorities which render access to the Belarusian market difficult. As a result, the analogous products cannot be imported and certain limitations on the state – owned enterprises' financial sources remain a serious problem. Nevertheless, trade turnover is again expected to increase in 2012.

The Card of the Pole

Another turmoil arose around the issue of introduction of the Card of the Pole in 2007, a document that approves affiliation to the Polish nation and gives various benefits in Poland such as the right to study or simplified visa procedures. Minsk perceives it as something which undermines its authority and strongly opposes it.

According to statistics, around 400 000 Poles live in Belarus. One of the largest Non-governmental organisations in Belarus is the Union of Poles in Belarus, founded in 1990. Polish activists maintain that the Belarusian authorities impose various restrictions on their activities and imprison activists. Warsaw considers it as discrimination and violation of rights of Polish minority in Belarus. Recent imprisonment of Andrzej Poczobut, a press correspondent of the Polish Gazeta Wyborcza, proves the ongoing conflict between Belarusian authorities and the activists of the Union.

However, the most serious crises took place in 2005. Democratically elected leader of the Union of Poles, Angelika Borys was not recognised by Minsk. Belarusian authorities presented their own candidate which eventually led to the emergence of serious tensions with Warsaw. Since then the Union became divided into two different units. One, unrecognised by the authorities and the other one, with the leader appointed by Minsk.

Poland's Support of Belarusian Activities

Since 2006, the Polish government has opened the Kalinowski Scholarship Fond in order to support the students expelled from the Belarusian universities. It is fully sponsored by the state budget. So far nearly 700 Belarusian students either participated and or are still are enrolled in the programme.

Like [Vilnius](#), Warsaw has become also a home to the opposition activists and some of their initiatives (as for example, the Belarusian House). Moreover, Polish public television company founded the Belsat TV, which transmits its programme to Belarus. Sociological surveys show that around half million adult Belarusians watch Belsat on a regular basis. This initiative is sponsored mainly by the Polish government is the main support of the project and donates over 16 mln Polish zloty (\$4.7mln). Poland hosts also two other radio stations broadcasting in Belarusian – Radio Racyja and the European Radio Belarus.

Poland is one of the main EU countries that are vitally interested in internal developments in Belarus. Its geopolitical location which could appear as a buffer zone for Russia, opportunities for increasing trade exchange, but first of all, stability and predictability of Belarusian political centre prove to be constantly key issues to Poland. Warsaw efforts aimed at keeping the issue of Belarus on the EU's agenda.

For the same reasons Belarus needs Warsaw. Nevertheless, Warsaw has certain difficulty in finding the way to speak with the current Belarusian political regime. Despite political disagreements between Poland and Belarusian authorities the truth is that there is much more that may unite these two countries rather than divide them.

Who Benefits From European Sanctions Against Belarus?

This month seven more European states joined the EU sanctions against Belarus. As a result of this year's new extension of restrictive measures target not only officials and politicians but also businessmen. It means that this politicised problem involves clear economic underpinning.

The history of relations between Belarus and the European Union demonstrates how important were economic interests in building political contacts. Relations with Western nations remained cold for over 15 years. Starting in 1996, when Belarus hold constitutional referendum extending the powers of her executive, all major political campaigns in the country have caused harsh criticism from the West.

Belarus Cannot Cut Gas for EU Anymore

Criticism followed attempts to influence Belarusian authorities – usually through targeted sanctions against state officials. Only the United States implemented economic measures of influence, but for this country Belarus is neither a neighbour nor a major partner. On the contrary, European nations until very recently did not seriously consider the option of economic sanctions. This March, however, European restrictive measures hit representatives of the Belarusian business.

Why it has happened just now? I would mention two changes which have had the most impact on the situation. First – the sale of Belarusian gas transport firm of Beltransgaz to Gazprom, second – the start of privatisation in Belarus.

The fact that in late 2011 Gazprom has completely purchased the Belarusian gas transport system, undoubtedly, influenced the position of European states on Belarusian issue. Earlier EU countries avoided the deterioration of relations with Minsk fearing the problems with gas transportation through Belarus. Now gas supplies for Europe depend only on Russia, and Europe has first of all to take its interests into consideration.

Sell to Survive

The second development is privatisation. The current economic situation in the country makes selling state-owned assets unavoidable. Today one can say that Belarus has recovered from the 2011 crisis. Through sale of 50% of the Beltransgaz shares, the government has refilled its gold and foreign currency reserves, and the discount for Russian energy resources supplies gained from Moscow positively affects the foreign trade balance.

It does not mean, however, that the systemic problems which have caused the crisis, have been successfully solved. The volume of gold and exchange currency reserves (USD 8.056 billion by 1 June) will suffice for approximately two and a half month of import. For a transition economy like Belarus, this is not enough. Moreover, over the next years the payments due to serve the external debt will reach their highest level. Minsk, most likely, will try to receive a new loan for re-structuring of its debt. And, quite probably, it will receive on condition of privatisation of some of its assets.

Privatisation as such is also a way to get money. Therefore, Belarus has to deal with it anyway in the foreseeable future – and sooner rather than later.

No Money from the West or China

In this context, the question is who will participate in Belarusian privatisation. Participation of the US and EU

companies as potential buyers of assets is impossible after 19 December 2010. European companies have interest in purchasing some property in Belarus. Yet, implementation of the EU sanctions against Belarusian companies makes their coming – and modern technologies – less probable.

As for prospects for arrival of investors from other parts of the world, they look gloomy. Chinese entrepreneurs invest real money only in natural resources. Therefore, they would be interested only in something like Belaruskali, yet it is better to refrain from privatising it in the foreseeable future. On other projects, Belarus can expect from China only tied loans which involve investing money mostly in Chinese goods, equipment and labour delivered to Belarus. The opportunities to attract investors from Arab states are also limited as they usually invest the capital in the real estate and hotel business and only extremely rarely – in other projects.

“Regime Purses” or National Business?

Thus, the sole real player to participate in Belarusian privatisation is Russian business. Only Belarusian companies could compete with it. Admittedly, they do not possess such powerful financial resources as Russians. But national business has that doubtless advantage of knowing local specificity, and that can become the additional factor of success.

When the EU compiled a list of “regime purses”, that is the enterprises to be sanctioned or under threat of being sanctioned – it became a hard blow on prospects of Belarusian business participation in privatisation. Among «regime purses» landed owners of such successful companies as "Santa-Impeks", «Amkodor» and «Savushkin Produkt».

These and some other "blacklisted" companies work in competitive markets, created strong new brands in post-

Soviet world and jobs in Belarus. They are not simply successfully in their business, but they also actively participate in privatisation. Putting them on the black list deprives them of the option to access cheap European loans and thus increases barriers on their way to participate in privatisation.

Introduction and possible expansion of the European sanctions on Belarusian business turns Russian companies in practically exclusive participants of privatisation in the country. I am not against Russian business, I am for competition. Privatisation in which only large Russian companies participate, actually means absence of competition.

That may result in some serious problems. First, the possibility of uncontested sale automatically reduces the cost of Belarusian assets. Secondly, without competition it is impossible to choose on competitive basis the most efficient investor which will bring not only money, but also new production and management know-hows.

Therefore, from the economic viewpoint the European economic sanctions contradict national interests of Belarus and its European future.

Pavel Daneika

Pavel Daneika is a Belarusian politician, businessman and analyst. He is administrative director of Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Centre. He served as president of the Institute for Privatisation and Management and as a member of Belarusian Parliament in 1990s.

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Paweł Kował: Treat Lukashenka with Respect

Among those surrounding Lukashenka there are people waiting for changes. They should get clear signals that their position will be rewarded and appreciated, because the fate of the revolution, evolution or other change that will inevitably come to Belarus at a crucial moment may depend upon them.

Getting sulky does not make sense, it is better to look for the weak links in the chain surrounding Alexander Lukashenka to establish communication channels with the regime. European tirades against the Belarusian president, at best, backfire as seen in what happened a few weeks ago with Guido Westerwelle and Radosław Sikorski, and in the worst case they fuel domestic propaganda that "Belarus is under attack." Under the very worst scenario an European reproach provokes retaliatory measures against the opposition. Despite Lukashenka's peculiar behaviour, his policy deserves a solid response: not just ambiguous ridicules, but a list of concrete conditions.

Determination was expressed by actions, but not by public quarrels or a growing number of public statements

Did the US Secretary of State George Shultz and President Ronald Reagan shout or mock Wojciech Jaruzelski in the 1980s? No. There were a few harsh man-to-man comments and a long silence afterwards. Determination was expressed by actions, but not by public quarrels or a growing number of public statements. Lukashenka has to be treated with all seriousness: since prisoners may be tortured in Belarus, a large group of opposition activists live there in danger.

Let Us Build a Coalition

This may sound surprising, but Poland can do much more to influence EU policy towards Ukraine than towards Belarus. With regard to Minsk, after 2007 Polish diplomacy became a victim of European illusions, whose repeated discussions is a waste of space and time.

The balance of the Polish and EU policy towards Belarus after 2007 and, especially, after the falsification of the election on December 2010, proved to be negative. The policy unwittingly contributed to a deeper split within the Belarusian opposition and enhanced the dictatorial power in the coming years. The Union of Poles – the biggest non-Lukashenka social organisation in Belarus- is weakened, and Angelika Borys is gone.

It is worth mentioning that there were no talks about any serious sanctions other than the visa bans, which served only a symbolic function. Western diplomats openly discussed the possibility to persuade Minsk to engage in negotiations with any representatives of the opposition in order to justify another change of the course by the European Union. But Lukashenka seemed either not to understand the situation, or did not care for better relations with the EU.

Poland must have partners to build an effective policy towards Belarus, It will not happen without good relations and trust with Lithuania. European short-circuit arrays to Minsk must begin with the agreement of Vilnius and Warsaw: Minister Andronius Ažubalis must feel like a participant in the policy, now he says he finds himself on the sidelines.

Otherwise, Lithuania will make Brussels accustomed with the fact that this country has its own separate agenda for relations with Minsk

Otherwise, Lithuania will make Brussels accustomed with the

fact that this country has its own separate agenda for relations with Minsk. In the context of Belarus it should be also applied the same manoeuvre as to Kyiv and further engage the head of Swedish diplomacy, Carl Bildt. Stockholm's policy is driven, similar to Polish policy, more by human rights than investments: this is why co-operation of Sikorski with Westerwelle (they had slightly different objectives) to Minsk was not as efficient as could be effective in tandem with Bildt.

In any case, Lukashenka must know that Poland has partners who firmly stick to the European standards of conduct in humanitarian issues. It must be clear to him that political discussions with anyone from the European Union will not be possible until Ales Bialiacki and other political prisoners will remain imprisoned.

Diplomacy in Different Ways

For pursuing a policy in Minsk, one has to create unofficial channels of communication also with the authorities

For pursuing a policy in Minsk, one has to create unofficial channels of communication also with the authorities. In the case of the destruction of official channels of communication, some kind of by-passes are needed – at this level Lukashenka is treating seriously his partners from the former USSR.

Contacts with the regime should be maintained by through the Georgian and Ukrainian diplomatic missions – even for those countries serious fulfilment of this mission would be a good "European exercise". Both in the Ukrainian government and parliament, and the top positions in Tbilisi there are people who have the opportunity to talk to Lukashenka personally, like Victor Yanukovich and Mikheil Saakashvili. Lukashenka himself recently indicated another channel – the Catholic Church.

the question remains, to what extent Belarus Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz would take a role as an intermediary

Even in times of the most cooled relations with Minsk a meeting with its representatives were nunciatures, like that led by the then Archbishop Joseph Kowalczyk in Warsaw. In this context the question remains, to what extent would Belarus Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz take a role as an intermediary, if he avoids politics in Minsk even more than he did in Moscow. If Lukashenka is not sending only confusing messages, but makes a serious offer, is he able to treat the Catholic community as a subject, as Wojciech Jaruzelski did thirty years ago in Poland?

Another problem is the relative weakness of the Belarusian Catholic Church and the lack of tradition with its political involvement: by the way, the predecessor of Kondrusiewicz, a very deserved Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek, avoided like the plague any nonreligious activities.

Allies on Both Sides

At an elegant French restaurant one of the members of the European Parliament tells a Belarusian anti-regime activist that the biggest problem in Belarus is the weakness of the opposition and divisions within it. We face a crucial question: what stance should adopt the European Union in relation to the opponents of Lukashenka?

Voicing constant accusations and reproaches that the opposition is divided is unproductive and annoying for opponents who are already cowed

Voicing constant accusations and reproaches that the opposition is divided is unproductive and annoying for opponents who are already cowed. It simply cannot be otherwise in the circumstances where the Belarusian opposition activists have to work. And the case is even more mysterious that since as some observers point out Brussels (and also Warsaw)

originally supported Alexander Milinkevich, whose name gathered activists associated from different groups . At some point, however, the competing candidates began to receive similar support, including the one having contacts with Moscow – a poet and the leader of the campaign "Speak the Truth!" Uladzimir Niaklyaeu.

today we have several pocket leaders divided over the question of whether democracy should be "a-la Brussel" or "a-la Moscow"

Projects of above-mentioned activists were simultaneously supported by Brussels, Warsaw and Moscow. Eventually, Russia became the most important donor for democratic movements in Belarus. The post-Soviet world often tested the potential consequences of such policies, like most recently the colour revolution in Kyrgyzstan. While it is somehow possible to understand complains that the opposition is not uniform, the process of its further splitting is extremely difficult to accept. Three years ago, Milinkevich slowly matured into the role of leader; today we have several pocket leaders divided over the question of whether democracy should be "a-la Brussels" or "a-la Moscow".

the ruling elite will always have someone who does not want to end their political life with the fall of the dictatorship

The truth is brutal: very few revolutions are made by revolutionaries themselves. Successive waves of transformation, especially so-called third waves including Poland, Hungary and Lithuania, but also the fourth – in Egypt and Tunisia show the sad truth. In Poland in 1989, Adam Michnik sought allies among the reformers in the Communist Party and the Kaczynski brothers. It is because the ruling elite will always have someone who does not want to end their political life with the fall of the dictatorship, and we need to "help" them. This policy has benefits but also costs.

In order for changes to start happening, in the last phase, co-optation of the current regime to the camp of the revolution takes place. It will be also like that in Belarus. Something similar will also happen in Belarus. Therefore, in addition to a revised approach to the opposition, the second important vector of the EU policy should be to work with the current ruling elite, and there are many different ways to do so.

Take a Deep Breath

Lukashenka will not conduct free elections (it is better for everyone to stop this wishful thinking), but one can push him to release prisoners and agree to some liberalisation of the media, abolition of censorship and the restoration of rights of national minorities.

Europe has to take a breath, stop being nervous and treat Belarus as a testing ground to implement the EU's foreign policy

Meanwhile, Europe has to take a breath, stop being nervous and treat Belarus as a testing ground to implement the EU's foreign policy. But they should do so without counting on quick profits, without procrastination, and without the conversion of freedom for hard currency.

Poland still has a chance to translate the Belarusian failure into a success – we are justified to exert far more of an impact on the European Union decisions than ever. It should be a consistent policy for years to come. And successes will come sooner than some people think.

Pawel Kowal

Pawel Kowal is a member of the European Parliament and a former deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland. He specialises in Eastern Europe. A longer version of this article appeared this month in [Nowa Europa Wschodnia](#) in

Polish.

Lukashenka: Russia Cannot Strangle Belarus

Putin is visiting Belarus today on his first trip abroad since his re-election as Russia's president. Alexandr Lukashenka is trying to capitalise on the worsening relations between Russia and the United States caused by the anti-missile defence issue.

It is unlikely that the Belarus government will manage to secure further expansion of Russia's economic support. However, the authorities receive additional guarantees of maintaining the economic support at the current level. At least this year, Russia will not revive sensitive issues in its relations with Belarus.

Lukashenka refrained from making critical statements in relation to the Russian leadership in his annual address earlier this month to avoid creating discontent in the Kremlin. He is trying to make the West believe that Belarusian – Russian relations have been developing in the best of all possible ways.

Addressees of the Annual Address

The people of Belarus were the last of all possible addressees of Lukashenka's annual address delivered on 8 May 2012. In 2011, when the prices rose more than twofold and the average salary shrank to the same extent, the electoral rating of Lukashenka, according to independent sociologists, dropped to

the 20% mark. However, even in 2011 Lukashenka was saying that he had been supported by more than 80% of voters during the presidential election held on December 19, 2010, and the following year, taking into account the "worsening of the socio-economic situation", he estimated his rating at 70%.

The parliament was also not among the primary addressees of the speech. During the entire history of its existence since the referendum held on November 24, 1996, the parliament has rejected only one draft law submitted by the Presidential Administration. When Lukashenka needed to speed things up, the parliament (*de facto*, a branch of the Presidential Administration) adopted laws, which were handed down from the Administration, within three days.

The main addressees of the annual address were the West and Russia

The main addressees of the annual address, which included the principal foundations of foreign and domestic policy for 2012, were the West and Russia, i.e. Belarus' main foreign partners. As happens rather often in today's Belarus, the postponement of the address was accompanied by an information leakage organised by the authorities.

The government tried to do its best so that those who study the development of situation in Belarus – analysts, diplomats, politicians – received information that Lukashenka had found the speechmakers-drafted theses related to privatisation to be too liberal. And he allegedly considered the thesis on relations with the West to be too confrontational.

The Cold War Costs and Benefits

The authorities have gotten another opportunity to continue the cold war with the West. It is important for Lukashenka that, after Andrej Sannikau and Zmicier Bandarenka, other personalities who position themselves as leaders, i.e. Mikalaj

Statkievich, Paval Sieviaryniec and Zmicier Dashkievich, write petitions for pardons. The government wants to be assured that no groups within the opposition are able to ruin its game plan with the West, which is possible in the not-so-near future, a game plan similar to the one which was played in the second half of 2010.

The authorities believe that the EU will never agree on expanding the economic sanctions

The continuation of repression does not mean that the authorities will burn bridges in their relations with the West. Lukashenka wants to persuade the West that the latter will not have other partners in Belarus and that cooperation has to be developed on his terms, without asking for major steps towards political liberalisation. The authorities believe that the EU will never agree on expanding the economic sanctions.

Currently, Western companies do not intend to participate in the privatisation of Belarusian state property. The privatisation of assets in 2012 for the amount of USD 2,500,000,000 was one of the terms of the agreement with the Anti-Crisis Fund of the Eurasian Economic Community (which is fully controlled by Russia). The sale of controlling shares of Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies is now the main issue of Russia's foreign policy towards Belarus.

The announcement that Lukashenka was not satisfied with theses on privatisation created suspense: what will be the final decision regarding privatisation of major enterprises in 2012? In other words, will the government make steps towards genuine integration, as it is understood by the Kremlin?

Belarus will not fulfill the requirements imposed by the Eurasian Anti-Crisis Fund

Yet again, Lukashenka noted that Belarus will not fulfill the

requirements imposed by the Eurasian Anti-crisis Fund for Belarus as far as the sales of enterprises is concerned. "We have rejected all lists of enterprises to be privatized. However, it was not done to humiliate the workers of enterprises. People react in a very painful way. They ask the question: "Don't you need us anymore?"

Talking about concrete enterprises, Vice-Premier Uladzimir Siamahka noted as follows: "Belarus will never ever sell the controlling stock of "Belaruskali" shares. According to him, it would be a crime against the state." Also, Semashko reiterated that Belarus would not sell the controlling share of Minsk Automobile Plant.

Lukashenka: Russia Cannot Strangle Belarus

This annual address of Lukashenka had to be made by the time of the presidential election in Russia. Lukashenka's address contains some signals to Russia and Putin, not only for 2012, but also for the long term as well. Lukashenka's statements on privatisation and relations with Russia and the West were intended for his new old partner Putin as he enters his next presidential term. And taking into account Putin's intentions and authoritarian trends in Russia, they regard not only his immediate presidential term.

Lukashenka's team considered it to be relevant to tell the newly elected Putin that they would not make concessions. Lukashenka's speechwriters included a number of rather clear signals in his speech that would not please Moscow anyway, and not to mention that the theses were delivered in Lukashenka's own folk-kolkhoz style. Therefore, the kinds of expressions would appear to be quite offensive to Putin.

Some malevolence was present in Lukashenka's statements about the Belarusian-Russian relations. "If somebody hopes that as soon as Putin comes back, they will start smothering us and try to strangle us with a noose around our necks, it is just a

matter of vain hopes”.

Putin would like to strangle Belarus but certainly not this year

Following Lukashenka's expressions, it appears that his team does not have new illusions regarding the targets of Putin's administration in respect to Belarus. In other words, Putin would like to strangle Belarus. However, Putin will not suppress Belarus this year, since it has restricted resources and opportunities.

Lukashenka's team has reason to believe that the main foreign policy issue for Putin's administration in 2012 will be relations with Ukraine. Russia will endeavour to prevent or, at least, complicate to the maximum possible extent Ukraine's movement (while quite a lengthy one) into the EU.

Regarding Belarusian-Russian relations, Lukashenka has good grounds for optimism this year and later on. He hopes that Putin will be bogged down in Ukraine and that the problem of deployment of anti-missile systems would remain at the top of Russia's agenda.

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.

passivity is a sensible approach when you have an aggressive regime controlling your country

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.

people cannot care about a place if they do not know about it

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.

the only sensible course of action for the West is to keep up external pressure on Lukashenka

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.

While I was in Minsk the Goethe Institute considered closing and I argued in favour of keeping it going

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.

What is the Belarusian Regime?

Last week, some opponents of the Belarusian regime called for a demonstration outside the Belarus National Theatre's performance in London. In fact, that theatre has nothing to do with political persecutions and actually represents a part of Belarusian culture disliked by many in the Belarusian regime. Should it be regarded as a part of the Belarusian regime nonetheless?

Labelling individuals and organisations as parts of the regime or as working with the dictatorship may backfire. For instance, do foreign investors who implement projects in Belarus support the regime of Lukashenka? After all, their investments can change the political economy of the authoritarian regime. Or do ordinary Belarusians, who pay their taxes to the current government; is that collaboration? Failing to do so may result in chaos but would hardly aid the building of an efficient state, free of Lukashenka.

No uniformity among the Belarusian bureaucracy

The Belarusian regime is very opportunistic. It has nothing to do with totalitarianism or a fixed ideology. Officials are simply bureaucrats who differ from each other. Even radical opposition politicians admit this. Speaking to European Radio for Belarus in 2010, then presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau said: "I would not call the [current cabinet members] 'ministers,' as they are in one or another way involved in the establishment and support of a dictatorship. I know, however, that below ministerial level work very qualified and professional people."

the Minister of Culture Pavel Latushka speaks Belarusian in

public already a deviation from a standard bureaucrat

But even ministers are different. For instance, the Minister of Culture Pavel Latushka speaks Belarusian in public – already a deviation from a standard bureaucrat – and is known for his professionalism. After taking the office he initiated the policy of supporting Belarusian culture, neglected since 1994 by the regime. One of his initiatives was a large state-funded program titled Belarusian Castles.

Prominent ideologue of the regime Leu Kryshchapovich criticised the program as "alien" to Belarusian history. In his opinion, the Belarusian nobility had nothing to do with national history. Alyaksandar Kavalenya, director of the History Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, responded harshly, and supported essentially the version of national history which generally corresponds with that of the pro-European part of the Belarusian society.

Moreover, minister Latushka got support from Pavel Yakubovich, another veteran of the regime and the chief editor of *Belarus Segodnya*, the most important media outlet of the regime. He published a commentary on what he saw as the Soviet-era views of national culture being espoused by his opponent, which would be welcome even in oppositional media.

Another example is the unusual public debate on economic issues last autumn which [showed](#) that many ministers hold reasonable views and that there is a collision of opinion at the very top of the government. Moreover, Prime Minister [Myasnikovich](#) seems to be a more independent figure than previous prime ministers. He worked in top positions in the the Belarusian government long before Lukashenka came to power.

different people with different views exist even in the Lukashenka's inner circle

These cases are too numerous to be dismissed as insignificant. One thing is clear: [different](#) people with different views exist even in Lukashenka's inner circle. The Belarusian regime is certainly not monolithic. It is actually more amorphous than even the Soviet Union in the final years of its existence.

Belarus after Lukashenka also needs police

Unfortunately, too often, the issue of what is collaboration with the regime and what is the regime itself remains unaddressed. Yet it has immense significance, putting everyone who is not engaged directly with the opposition into an easy category of collaborators with the regime. Most importantly, it alienates the numerous bureaucrats which will play a decisive part in transformation of the Belarusian regime.

Belarus has more developed infrastructure compared to Balkan nations or many Russian regions

The role of Belarusian bureaucrats is evident. Belarus does not look like a run-down failed state like some other former Soviet Union republics. It has a much more developed infrastructure compared to the Balkan nations or many Russian regions.

It costs money to maintain infrastructure, educational and a healthcare system. In heavily industrialised Belarus, revenues from state-owned industries play the most important role for the functioning of government. The EU sanctions against Belarusian firms will unavoidably punish not only the workers of these firms but also the country in general.

After all, Lukashenka uses the revenues not only to pay the KGB but also to more publicly beneficial aims. A May 2012 [study](#) by Julia Korosteleva on the Impact of Targeted Sanctions on Belarus, conducted under the auspices of the EU's Directorate-General for External Policies,

emphasised that a broader sanction approach to Belarus "may potentially cause greater economic damage for the economy as a whole, affecting vulnerable populations in the first instance, but be less efficient in facilitating a regime change".

Furthermore, the study admits that Belarus might, as a result, become more isolated internationally and be pushed towards Russia. In fact, the impact may be devastating – the results of decades-long efforts to come to Western markets would be destroyed.

To compare Belarusian prisons with Nazi concentration camps or Stalin massive political killings in 1937 helps no one but damages the image of opposition

Struggling against the dictatorship should not harm the future of the nation. Opponents of the regime should refrain from anarchistic anti-state propaganda which often appears in non-state media. Even the Belarusian police force catches not only oppositional activists but also criminals. And there are no reasons to demonise it.

After all, every state needs police and prisons. To compare Belarusian prisons with Nazi concentration camps or Stalin massive political killings in 1937 helps no one and only damages the image of the opposition among ordinary Belarusians.

Many agencies of the Belarusian government are even today responsive to organised protests and petitions. Of course, the authorities punish such public activity but also have to react to it. A recent example is a public protest against a huge Chinese investment project in Smalyavichy, a town to the south of Minsk.

Public opposition campaign Tell the Truth has aided the affected residents and although the actual protests have been limited, the government not only put the Tell the Truth

activists under administrative arrest but also sent a high-level official to speak with the protesters to reach some kind of understanding.

Nothing will help Lukashenka more than the stonewall of misunderstanding between the Belarusian bureaucracy and the opposition

The small core of die-hard regime insiders should be isolated from a majority of public servants who just do their work as best they can under current conditions and who are also willing to see an alternative to the current political regime. Nothing will help Lukashenka more than the stonewall of misunderstanding between the Belarusian bureaucracy and the opposition.

Belarus as a functioning state needs a government, and the government should be distinguished from repressive bodies set up only to support the dictatorship. Deciding on whether a given conduct is serving or collaborating the the regime, the opponents of the Belarusian regime should focus on the effects of those actions rather than just on the affiliation of those carrying them out.

Ambassador Kenneth Yalowitz: The Need for Strategic Patience

Ambassador Kenneth Yalowitz served as the US ambassador to Belarus between 1994 and 1997. He arrived in Belarus a few months after Alexander Lukashenka was elected president and

witnessed Belarus sliding from a relative democracy into authoritarianism. Ambassador Yalowitz agreed to share his thoughts about what was going with Belarus in 1990s and the current situation.

BD: You observed the transition of Belarus from democracy to authoritarian rule – how did it happen?

When we arrived in Belarus in 1994 there was still some hope. Lukashenka was elected on an anti-corruption platform. Western observers initially felt that he might be someone to work with.

He was an obscure member of the parliament but there was some optimism he might move in a progressive direction. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Over three years I saw the creation of a vertical parallel structure of political appointees from the regions up to the top responsibly directly to him. It reminded me of the Communist Party that exercised control through a parallel structure. Steps were taken against the independent press and independent newspapers. They were not completely choked off but they couldn't get newsprint or they had to publish outside of the country. One by one you saw the reduction in the free press and also control over the television and other media.

The Belarusian Constitutional Court buckled under the pressure, the old parliament was pushed off to the side and Lukashenka's status reinforced.

It took time but eventually the parliament, which had an opposition, was in effect thrown out and replaced. There was some hope that a Russian delegation headed by Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, which came to help resolve the constitutional crisis, might intervene on the side of democracy and good governance. But it turned out they didn't. The Belarusian

Constitutional Court buckled under the pressure, the old parliament was pushed off to the side, and Lukashenka's status reinforced. That was the most important signal of what was going on.

In the economy there was almost a complete stoppage of market reforms. Basically the old economic system did not change much and there was very little foreign investment.

Another tragic event was when the Belarusian army shot down an unarmed air balloon, which drifted into Belarusian air space. I believe two people were killed, an American and an Australian. What was even more inexplicable was the lack of an apology, expression of compassion for the lives lost or any compensation. For me and for a number of other people that was an unmistakable signal that Belarus moving in the wrong direction.

It was then we decided to pursue the policy of selective engagement which meant working mainly with the grass roots, NGOs, local officials, etc., and only selectively with the top government officials.

There was no turning back. For instance, they closed down the Soros Foundation, and made false allegations against US embassy officers. Not long afterwards, I was recalled to Washington for consultations because of the accumulation of these events. It was then we decided to pursue the policy of selective engagement which meant working mainly with the grass roots, NGOs, local officials, etc., and only selectively with the top government officials.

BD: Was it possible to prevent Belarus from sliding back to autocracy in 1990s?

It is a great question. I have thought about it a great deal and have come to the conclusion that there was not much that could have been done. The people of Belarus were generally

conservative and politically not well-informed. Lukashenka, very much a product of the Soviet system and who revered it, used his populist, demagogic, and anti-western approach with great success. There was not much the United States or Europe could have done.

BD: What are the brightest memories of Belarus for you?

When the Soviet Union broke up there were four states with nuclear weapons – Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. US policy was that there should be only one nuclear successor state to the USSR, Russia. Kazakhstan was the first to agree to send them back and that was a relatively easy case. It took much more time and bargaining for Ukraine to agree to the return of the weapons to Russia. Ukraine had many issues then with Russia including the disposition of the Black Sea Fleet and the Crimea.

That left Belarus and it took still longer. Belarus did not control those weapons but they were on Belarusian territory. Both we and the Russians had many discussions with the Belarusians but Lukashenka at times indicated he wanted to keep them. It was an uncertain period. After a great deal of negotiation and discussion, he finally agreed that the weapons should go back.

I remember being invited to a former Soviet rocket base in Belarus for the ceremony to return the rockets.

I remember being invited to a former Soviet rocket base in Belarus for the ceremony to return the rockets. I was there with the Belarusian defence minister and the Russian defence minister. I watched the missiles being loaded on a special train and stood next to the Russian minister when he gave the signal to the engineer to start the train to Russia. I remember well going back to the Embassy and calling the White House to give them the news.

On a personal level, my wife and I loved to drive around Belarus, walk in the woods, and walk along the rivers. There were many favourite places we would like to go to. We really got to love the Belarusian countryside, the unspoiled nature, its lakes, forests and rivers. We enjoyed talking to local people as we walked around.

BD: Have you been to Belarus since then?

I have not been to Belarus since then. One of the former presidential candidates whom I know, Andrei Sannikov, is now sitting in jail. Andrei is a patriot and an excellent representative of Belarus, who served as deputy Foreign Minister. I wrote to the presiding judge over his trial to attest to his character, patriotism, loyalty and how he had been an effective representative of Belarus. This was to no avail.

I saw him in New York several years ago after he had left the government. He asked me exactly the same question as you did. I said that as much as I would like to go back to Belarus, I would return only when there is a different approach to democracy and human rights.

BD: How did you see the role of Russia at that transitional period?

I once spoke to a high ranking Russian official in Belarus about that. I said Boris Yeltsin is pursuing democratic reforms in Russia, building a market economy and here Lukashenka is going the opposite way. And yet you support him. You support all these undemocratic measures, subsidise Belarus with cheap oil and in other ways. Why are you doing this, so contrary to the direction in which Russia is going?

Now Russia has probably the best situation - they control the Belarusian economy in many ways and Lukashenka has less room politically for manoeuvre.

And he responded: "He is an SOB, but ours." My conclusion was that for Russia it was easier to support this openly pro-Russian politician despite his authoritarian policies. Security was their main concern. Belarus is at a strategically important location, the invasion route to Russia. Napoleon came through Belarus, the Nazis came through Belarus and so on. I also heard that Yeltsin viewed Lukashenka as a kind of wayward son who needed guidance and mentoring until he matured.

I have concluded that Belarus will remain independent but closely linked to Russia. Now Russia has probably the best situation – they control the Belarusian economy in many ways and Lukashenka has less room politically for manoeuvring. And yet Belarus is still an independent country: they do not have to absorb the weaknesses of the Belarusian economy.

I have no doubt that if Russia decides to remove Lukashenka they will be able to do it. But they have no one deemed trustworthy to replace him. Lukashenka is a man very indebted to Russia (and I mean literally indebted).

BD: What is your stand on the current Western policy toward Belarus?

Sanctions will not likely change the situation but they do emphatically demonstrate dissatisfaction with the authoritarian policies of Belarus and penalise its leadership.

Sanctions will not likely change the situation but they do emphatically demonstrate dissatisfaction with the authoritarian policies of Belarus and penalise its leadership. Belarus will not be integrated into Europe if things remain the same.

But at the same time I am a strong believer in exchanges, in supporting higher education, supporting NGOs in Belarus.

It is important to understand that under current circumstances

this is going to take time. Many in Belarus would like to see things differently. At some point they will constitute a critical majority and say enough is enough.

When I think about Belarus I have a sense of disappointment. Things are much the same as when I left in 1997, and perhaps worse. When I think of the opportunities lost for Belarus compared to Poland or the Baltic states, it is very sad.

To me, the cultural element, the Belarusian language and literature should definitely be supported in Belarus along with efforts to promote democracy and respect for human rights.

I served in Georgia as the US ambassador after Belarus and that country is different, though facing problems common to all former Soviet states. There is a strong sense of nationalism, the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church and religion is very important, and there is a deep attachment to the Georgian language and culture.

For well known reasons, national identity is weaker in Belarus, as is the standing of the Belarusian language. To me, the cultural element, the Belarusian language and literature should definitely be supported in Belarus along with efforts to promote democracy and respect for human rights.

It is important to have patience because Belarus has been cut off for so long. People are starting to realise the economic and political costs of Lukashenka's tenure in office but as long as the Russians continue to subsidise Belarus it will be hard. We can see that many key national assets had been sold off to Russia and the economy is not doing well. Lukashenka still is in charge but my view is that change will inevitably come.

How Can Belarusian Authorities Retaliate Against the EU Sanctions?

Last month for the first time ever, the EU introduced sanctions against a number of companies, which supply oil refinery products to EU countries. It means that there is still a possibility of expansion of painful economic sanctions against Lukashenka's regime.

There is no dominating opinion in the assessment of the possible effects of the EU sanctions' expansion and possible retaliatory measures of Lukashenka's regime. A more common opinion is that the EU, by introducing, for the first time ever, the sanctions against quite a large number of Belarusian companies, reached a certain line in its pressure on Lukashenka's regime, which it will not cross. It will not cross it because it is afraid of pushing Lukashenka into Russia's arms. This step will be followed by a period of long diplomatic maneuvers and backroom talks on the terms of resuming the dialogue.

Some experts believe that actions of both the EU and Lukashenka's regime, starting from this point, can be described in terms of conflict resolution studies. Each party will make ever stronger confrontational steps to save face. In this case, Lukashenka's actions will resemble more and more to actions of a person who threw a noose around his neck hoping that someone will stop him and agree with him. The noose in this case is the degree of dependence from Russia.

Foreign Policy

The authorities will retaliate to the sanctions mainly in the foreign policy area, and less so in the domestic sphere. Lukashenka's regime will try and convince the West that in response to the expansion of sanctions it will intensify cooperation with Russia.

At the same time, the authorities will try and use the deterioration of relations with the West for persuading Moscow into stepping up its economic support.

In fact, the authorities will make no concessions to Russia. Together with Kazakhstan, they will block the initiatives of the Russian leaders to strengthen the centralization in the framework of the newly created Eurasian Union.

In 2012, the Russian leadership will hardly push for more concessions on the part of Lukashenka's regime. They will not demand to sell Belarusian enterprises to Russian companies and to establish a monetary union.

In 2012, the most pressing foreign policy issue for Putin's administration will be relations with Ukraine. Russia will put pressure on Ukraine in order to buy its gas transportation system. It will push Ukraine into the Customs Union.

Putin's administration will use cooperation with Belarus as an advertisement for Ukraine. However, Moscow will not satisfy Lukashenka's request to increase the volume of subsidies.

Domestic Policy

In the domestic policy sphere, Lukashenka's regime will exert pressure on the EU position by using the methods it uses now. It puts pressure on political prisoners, including using criminals. The authorities made it more difficult for opposition activists and NGO leaders included on its "black list" to go to EU countries.

Repression against opposition groups, which the authorities

believe to be involved in the attempt to storm the Government House on December 19, 2010, continues.

If the EU remains consistent and decisive and expands the economic sanctions, it will not lead to a change of power in Belarus: opposition is divided, it is represented by conflicting groups and does not have a leader or a program. In its current capacity, opposition is unable to form a well-functioning government.

However, acting in such fashion, one can force the authorities into implementing changes in Belarus. The first such step should be the release of the political prisoners.

No Good Solutions

If the EU backs down and agrees to Lukashenka's terms, it is most probable that the political prisoners who are now in jail will be released. But then, at the next turn of the cycle of relations between Lukashenka's regime and the EU (thaw – tension) their place in jail will be taken by others.

A certain advantage of Lukashenka's regime in its relations with the West is that for the West, the political decision-making and decision-implementing system in Belarus is a "black box". Until now, an opinion is widespread that Belarus is a de facto super-absolute monarchy. Everything is decided and controlled by one person, Lukashenka.

On Lukashenka's team, there are people who know well how the huge bureaucratic machine of the EU works. There is a great deal of open information about what is said and what is planned to be done in Brussels, as well as about what Brussels and the capitals of some EU countries, which are interested in Belarus, are afraid of. Now, Lukashenka's team will push these buttons, these vulnerable pins of the EU. They know that in the West they are afraid of:

1. Pushing Lukashenka towards Russia.

2. Provoking a broad wave of repression.
3. Causing negative attitude towards opposition from people who are not happy with consequences of the EU sanctions.
4. Provoking growth of anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments in Belarusian society.

Moreover, businesses in some EU countries, primarily in Lithuania and Latvia, will suffer as a result of sanctions against Belarusian companies. According to some Lithuanian experts, the annual losses of Lithuania as a result of introduction of large-scale EU economic sanctions would amount to about \$2bn. According to some Latvian experts, the annual losses of Latvia would amount to \$500m.

However, the Belarusian authorities are not going to foster anti-Western hysteria in society for several reasons. First, even in the present-day situation, they believe that the main threat is not generated by the West with all its demands to release political prisoners. They are pretty sure it comes from Russia who is interested in buying Belarusian enterprises and securely attaching Belarus to itself.

Opinion: Why the Eastern Partnership Fails to Reach Belarus

Although formally a member of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), unfortunately Belarus does not participate in any of its programmes. It is excluded from visa liberalisation, the EaP

flagship initiatives, and bilateral track programmes: for example, the Small and Medium-Size Enterprise Funding facility with a €15m budget, or the Eastern Partnership Pilot Regional Development Programmes with an allocation of €75m. It is worth mentioning that for 2010-2013, in total around €350m have been set for the Eastern Partnership programmes.

The Eastern Partnership programmes have been implemented since 2008, and during that time there has been a so-called period of liberalisation in Belarus. But civil society's expectations of an improved situation have not been fulfilled. Minsk ignored the EU's recommendations regarding democracy, the observance of human rights and an independent judiciary. Full cooperation with Belarus is impossible for Europe without political changes and the release of its political prisoners.

Because Belarus does not participate actively in any of the EaP initiatives, it does not receive any of the resources from the EU that are designated for the development of the Eastern Partnership. Belarus is losing great opportunities. As a result resources go to the other five partner-countries within the EaP. In other words, others benefit from the opportunities lost by Belarus.

The Diplomatic Conflict Is a Conflict of Values

The complex situation which Belarus is in has now been further complicated following the departure of European ambassadors from Minsk. The present conflict is a conflict of values which is difficult to resolve. It is the confrontation between the EU's commitment to a values-based approaches with regard changes in the country's, and the aspiration of the Belarusian authorities to retain absolute power and their wish to get different bonuses from their foreign partners.

The Belarusian authorities impudently wanted to threaten the EU and make it reverse its position on sanctions. However, the effect was the inverse: Europe has shown solidarity and was

not afraid to say “no”. The following conciliatory statements of the Belarusian authorities testify that they did not expect such conduct from Europe.

Belarus Faces a Geopolitical Imbalance

For the general public it is hard to be aware of the result of Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership. It has not brought any evident benefit that could be seen by the people. At the moment Russia “supports” Belarus. The question is what Belarus will do when its “support” ends. Receipt of Russian financial injections means technological backwardness, poor management, and the decline of entrepreneurship, and it needs to be stopped. People should live according to their own minds and their own work, and not receive free money for making declarations of geopolitical love.

The abolition of the visa regime with EU countries may be the most evident way to tackle such imbalance. That would enable Belarusians to actually experience Europe through something other than the lens of official propaganda. It would also entail better access to education: it would be easier to attract foreign specialists to the country. Though we cannot bring an extra sausage to every home in Belarus with the Eastern Partnership, we can pave the road to a better life in future.

EU Policy Needs Consistency

The question is whether the restrictive measures against Belarus are effective or not. Sanctions have done neither serious good nor serious harm. Everything has stayed as it was. But when the Western stream narrowed, the Eastern broadened. The necessary resources are coming from the East. Because of the sanctions, Belarus faces a geopolitical imbalance.

The most negative aspect of sanctions is the inconsistency of their implementation. That was the case with the 12 conditions

for engagement with Belarus demanded by the EU which were first presented in November 2006. In 2008 the number of those conditions was reduced to “democratic elections, the freedom of expression and of the media, and the freedom of assembly and political association” and periodically had been disappearing from the agenda only to “emerge” from time to time. It is high time that the EU developed a coherent approach to Belarus and stuck to it.

There is no doubt that the best proof of the Belarusian authorities’ intentions to come to the negotiating table regarding cooperation would be the release of political prisoners. This would be a clear signal for everybody. In Belarus such a decision depends on the desires of the very few and that is why it can be made at any time.

As for the Eastern Partnership, the main task of the National Platform of EaP CSF is to help interested civil society bring Belarus back to the European path, and implement European standards in daily life. For me, as for the national coordinator, it is important that we Belarusians use the opportunities offered by the Eastern Partnership.

Siarhei Lisichonak is a contributing author

Siarhei is the National Coordinator of the Belarus’ National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum□