

GMF on Lukashenka, EU's power and Belarusian civil society

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Lukashenka needs to feel EU's power

by Pavol Demes

Due to ongoing and serious violations of human rights committed by the Lukashenka regime, in April 2010 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe decided to suspend high-level contacts with the authorities in Belarus. This decision reinforced the conclusion that the European Union's previous policy of engagement with President Aliaksandr Lukashenka had failed to lead to liberalization of his autocratic regime or real cooperation with the community

of democracies. That policy of engagement was launched almost two years ago, in 2008, when European Union leaders, responding to the release of internationally recognized political prisoners, suspended sanctions imposed against key figures in Minsk. Member states, together with the new post-Lisbon EU representatives, will review their policy toward Belarus in the fall of 2010, but most observers doubt they will re-introduce strict conditionality toward the Belarusian regime.

As a result, Lukashenka will continue bluffing and benefiting in the absence of a coherent, effective EU policy. Meanwhile, the 10 million people of this post-Soviet nation will continue to suffer under Europe's last dictator and will lose faith in receiving solidarity and support from the family of Western democracies.

The Sustainability of the Power of Aliaksandr Lukashenka

The departure from office of the 55-year-old Belarusian leader has been predicted many times during his 16-year presidency. In spite of growing domestic opposition, sanctions by the West, and pressure from his former patron and sponsor, Russia, Lukashenka is still fit and in full control of his peculiar self-centered regime.

To rule, he doesn't need a political party; instead he employs a police network, a government, and a parliament that are mere instruments in his hands. Ask the average Belarusian who is the country's prime minister or speaker of the parliament, and you're likely to get a blank stare. Flagrant legal changes allow Lukashenka to remain at the top of the power structure indefinitely while he governs via a huge ideological machine and a fear-based system of control over the country's social, economic, and political life. Any attempts to challenge his power are crushed; his opponents are removed from their positions, beaten, imprisoned, their reputations ruined – and a decade ago, some even “disappeared.”

This self-confident “orthodox atheist” is not afraid of violating even traditional moral rules by putting his two grown sons in important positions and allowing his six-year-old illegitimate son (the child’s mother is carefully hidden from the public) to accompany him at state functions, including military parades where he wears the uniform like his proud father, and on foreign official visits (including the Vatican last year and a meeting with the Pope).

Among the most intriguing aspects of Lukashenka’s regime are the country’s elections, whether local, parliamentary, or presidential. Although elections are held, they are under the control and direction of the president who created the myth and state ideology that only he is capable of guaranteeing stability, order, independence, and the well-being of Belarusians.

He simply does not care about international electoral standards or criticism from foreign bodies. The bizarre, almost ritualized electoral system characterized by large-scale manipulation and cheating has reached a point that leads one to wonder why he even bothers with elections, particularly at the presidential level. They are a charade but serve to keep Lukashenka’s state machinery in permanent alert, allow him to maintain control, and keep elected bodies clean of critics. And since the people hear about elections in other nearby countries, he probably feels a need to satisfy his nation by imitating free choice.

The April 2010 local elections were a farce, revealing yet again the lawlessness in Belarus. The upcoming presidential elections, which should take place at the end of this year or the beginning of 2011 (depending on Lukashenka’s mood) are already exhibiting familiar features – intimidation and arrests of journalists and civil society leaders, violent disruption of peaceful demonstrations, manipulated court cases, etc. Every candidate who decides to challenge the “father of the nation” in his re-confirmation game must be

ready to pay a serious price – harassment, physical attack, even imprisonment. So far there are about ten Belarusians who have announced their candidacy for this dangerous electoral roulette at a time when Lukashenka stands ready to “serve” a fifth term while grooming his little son Kolya to one day succeed him.

The Sophistication of Lukashenka’s International Game

One can hardly deny that Lukashenka is a master of manipulation not only within his motherland but also in the international arena. Not surprisingly, the key objective of his foreign policy is to maintain and prolong his own domestic power.

The logic of Belarusian foreign policy is simple: Those who help Lukashenka maintain his power benefit from it; those who do not are ignored or pay a price, whether they are his own people or foreigners. Lukashenka evolved from being a strong critic of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and propagator of the concept of unity with Russia to being a decisive fighter for Belarusian independence, particularly when he learned that the “big brother” might not guarantee his long-term future. Although Belarus was the only country excluded from the Council of Europe (in 1997) due to its autocratic political system, it has been better off economically and socially than other post-Soviet countries, enabling Lukashenka to remain popular among a fairly large segment of the population (though truly how large is virtually impossible to determine).

To his credit, Lukashenka has come to understand quite well how to adjust to today’s multipolar world. Paradoxically he has managed to turn current geopolitical shifts, including the world economic crisis, to his benefit, stressing the stability and security of Belarus in comparison with other countries.

He sees that the formerly self-confident and powerful West is

today preoccupied with multiple challenges, and he has rightly concluded that democratization in Europe's east is much less prominent on the EU's agenda than it was before. With some justification, he argues that democratic breakthroughs in some countries of the post-Soviet space did not bring more prosperity or clear prospects for joining European structures. He also sees that the newly assertive Russia has changed, is faced with its own challenges, and is not so "sincere and brotherly" as before.

As the biggest landlord able to single-handedly offer lucrative deals, Lukashenka is skillfully balancing between the two integration spaces – the EU and the Russian post-Soviet-space reunification project. At the same time, he has practically frozen diplomatic and many other ties with the United States, which, unlike the EU, has kept most of its sanction policy in place. (In fact, the Obama administration announced on June 8 its continuation of sanctions originally imposed in 2006.) To show his independence and self-confidence, and to compensate for some losses in the European and Russian markets, during the last few years Lukashenka has started to reach out to distant fellow autocratic regimes, especially energy-rich ones, with Venezuela and Iran at the top of his list. He even is willing to explore possible economic cooperation with countries in the Middle East and China. Even if these countries are geographically and culturally distant, the Belarusian leader appreciates that they never link progress on human rights or shared history to business deals.

Belarus as a Challenge for the EU

There is no doubt that Belarus poses a special challenge for EU policymakers, both on the European and the national levels. Even with the wealth of experience with democratization and integration of the post-communist nations to the EU, Lukashenka's Belarus is a unique case that reveals long-term resistance to Western conditionality and the "sticks and

carrots" game.

Hoped-for improvements in finding more effective democratization policies toward Belarus, particularly through listening more to the new member states, did not materialize. Lukashenka's machinery was also able to neutralize any spillover effects from democratic development from three neighboring new EU members – Poland, Lithuania, Latvia – and from Ukraine, with which Belarus has a shared history and numerous people-to-people contacts.

This long stagnation led EU policymakers to their controversial decision in the last two years to open up dialogue with "Europe's last dictator," believing that if exposed to growing pressure from an assertive Russia and an economic crisis, Lukashenka might in return start a liberalization process and open Belarus to closer economic and political cooperation with the West. In the meantime, the EU has undergone profound changes as a result of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and its own financial turbulence. Its new foreign policy chief is looking to consolidate its external relations and open up opportunities for Europe to act in a globalized world and its immediate neighborhood in particular. In September–October 2010, EU leaders will review any progress made by Belarus and decide which steps to take toward this rather peculiar member of the Eastern Partnership program during its increasingly repressive pre-presidential-election period.

The main arguments of prevailing skeptics of possible changes of "the Lukashizm" are as follows:

- 1) The position of Belarus in the European architecture. In the minds of those favoring continuation of current policy, this young, mid-sized post-Soviet country, even if governed with an iron fist and suffering from significant international isolation, shows relative prosperity and stability and does not pose significant threats to the EU or the region. It is

important to the EU as a transitional route for Russian energy products and for its potential for state-controlled companies that are bound to be privatized in one form or another due to Belarus' unsustainable centralized economic model.

If one compares the state of integration of Belarus in Western versus Russian-dominated structures two decades after the collapse of Berlin Wall and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the picture is quite clear: Belarus has very few links to European and transatlantic institutions but is a member of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States, Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Community – and its becoming part of a free trade zone is under consideration. Russia for sure has more ways and willingness to influence Belarus' future than the West in both the very near and the longer-term future.

2) The transatlantic divide and the lack of coherence in policy. For many years, the EU and the United States had similar positions toward the Belarus regime – sanctions and isolation due to the violation of human rights and the lack of political freedoms. However, during the last two years, this transatlantic commitment and unity was terminated. Although sanctions and low-level diplomatic contacts remain in force even after the change of leadership in the American White House, the United States' reset policy toward Russia is carefully taking into consideration any steps in its neighborhood. Those advocating for democracy and human rights are having a harder time convincing the new U.S. leadership to pay more attention to this isolated East European country.

On the other hand, the EU lowered its standards when it suspended its sanctions policy and reopened a more intensified dialogue with Lukashenka on the political and economic level, claiming that isolation of the autocratic regime failed to produce democratic change and even risked costing Belarus its sovereignty. Accordingly, the EU has adjusted to the situation in Belarus and sees little prospect for change in its policy

in the near future. Realists in Brussels' corridors claim that a return to the policy of isolation and sanctions is less likely than continued engagement in spite of the current level of repression and abuse of human rights in Belarus. In light of the U.S. decision to continue sanctions, the EU's position significantly reduces the odds of a joint transatlantic approach to democratic reforms in Belarus.

Risks and Hopes

It seems that pragmatism and realpolitik are winning at the moment over values-driven approaches in EU policy toward Belarus, while Lukashenka's power game continues eroding the EU's self-esteem. He is very well aware of the complicated procedural nature and internal problems of the EU and was not particularly shaken by the post-Lisbon proclamations that the EU would become a "more capable, more coherent and more strategic global actor." In spite of the shifts in policy in his favor and high-level handshakes from various European figures, Lukashenka openly criticizes the EU, including its Eastern Partnership program, for not doing even more; meanwhile, he ignores diplomatic messages related to his behavior and the new wave of repression toward the media and civil society groups.

If the EU, the largest union in the world, is serious about its commitments and political and economic weight, it should become more serious and stop playing this asymmetric game controlled by one man. It should do this in closer cooperation with the United States. It should stop claiming that it has no alternative but to allow Lukashenka to ski in Europe's resorts, legitimize him in front of his scared population, and give him financial and other assistance to prolong his autocratic regime.

It would be more than a moral hazard if EU leaders were to decide this fall to essentially accept Lukashenka's increased brutality as the cost of doing business. If EU leaders could

focus on using their power effectively, rather than pointing to their own weaknesses, there is a good chance that the largest union in the world would be able to adjust its policy and come out with more uplifting approaches toward its small Eastern neighbor.

The upcoming presidential election period in Belarus, connected with a re-evaluation of EU engagement policy, offers numerous incentives and instruments for reintroducing strict conditionality toward Lukashenka's regime. Will the EU rise to the occasion?

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We should remind ourselves of what worked in stopping similar autocrats during the last two decades, including the seemingly omnipotent Slobodan Milosevic, whose defeat ten years ago will be commemorated this fall. In all cases, brave local people, who were fed up with endless lies and manipulation, received foreign diplomatic, political, moral, material, and financial support to help rid them of their nefarious manipulators. In all democratic breakthroughs in Central and Eastern Europe over the last 20 years, it came as a surprise for the West that these autocrats were defeated.

We should be prepared for the fact that Lukashenka will be defeated as well. Belarus and the Belarusians are changing. For two decades, Belarus has continued to emerge as an independent country. That independence is increasingly beyond doubt, and now Belarusians have started asking the question of what kind of Belarus they want to live in. This will make it increasingly more difficult for Lukashenka to keep his people calm and resigned to a fate that has him staying at the top.

The opposition is far less weak than it seems on the surface. Lukashenka, supported until recently by Russia, has simply

adjusted his environment much more brutally than have other autocrats in this part of the world. The courage and resistance of countless Belarusians should give us hope, and demand from us that we encourage and support those working to liberalize Belarus and end its self-imposed isolation.

It is unlikely that Lukashenka's departure from power will take place via a standard electoral process. He is too scared to let that happen and lose. And for good reasons. Domestic dissatisfaction is growing, and Russia is losing patience with his arrogant behavior. The names of current nationwide civic movements in Belarus contain words like "freedom," "Europe," and "truth" (among them are the Movement for Freedom, the opposition group European Belarus, and the Tell the Truth! campaign). One can only speculate, but the fate of Lukashenka's Kyrgyz comrade Kurmanbek Bakiyev, to whom he provided asylum recently, provides an interesting scenario for the future destiny of such abusers of power.

Dr. Pavol Demes is director for Central and Eastern Europe at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF).

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The Jamestown Foundation: Belarus Survey Reveals

Changes in Public Mood

✘ WASHINGTON – David Marples published the following piece on changing attitudes towards the West in Belarus in the Jamestown Foundation's Eurasia Daily Monitor.

The warming relationship between Belarus and the European Union has given rise to discussions about whether a new dialogue is possible under Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. It also leads to questions about the link between the world financial crisis and the more conciliatory attitude in Minsk. An equally important but often ignored factor is whether Belarusian society supports the new direction and whether the government will remain the sole decision-maker for future policies.

From the official standpoint, Belarus is well-placed to withstand the effects of the world crisis. The growth rate from January through November was reported to be 10.8 percent, with an anticipated 7 percent rise in GDP in 2009 (Reuters, December 9). In other respects, however, the outlook seems less optimistic. Inflation has risen to 12 percent compared with 9.4 percent last year. The Belarusian currency continues to fall—the rate was BR 2,200 to the dollar last week in Minsk and even worse in other cities. The price for imported gas from Moscow seems certain to rise above Belarus's desired price of \$140 per thousand cubic meters (Belapan, December 11). Equally critical is whether Russia will reduce purchases of Belarusian goods, particularly machinery and tractors, which would make the country's impressive industrial output somewhat meaningless.

On the surface, the country seems bent on a new pro-European direction. On Belarusian Television on December 11, an earnest Lukashenka was shown in a conversation with the departing Ambassador Extraordinaire and Plenipotentiary of Italy to Belarus, Norbert Cappello. The Belarusian president

lauded Italy's role in improving relations with his country and stated that Belarus was ready for an open-ended dialogue with the EU, but without prior conditions (ITAR-TASS, Belarusian Television, December 11). A new official of the European Commission in Belarus was formally approved the next day (Interfax, December 12).

Read full text at jamestown.org