

The Western Approach to Belarus

While attending the annual convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) in New York last week, I served as discussant on a panel on Belarus.

A paper by Tatsiana Kulakevich, a PhD candidate at Rutgers University, focused on the possible impact of the Belarusian Diaspora on US policy making. While her findings were preliminary, they posed some fascinating questions, not least, why the United States, by any standards, a Great Power, has for the past decade been so preoccupied with Belarus, a nation of 9.5 million with few natural resources and a very minor trading partner.

Ms Kulakevich noted that the first major evidence of US concern about the flouting of human rights in Belarus was the US Democracy Act, introduced by Rep. Christopher Smith (R-New Jersey 4th district) in 2004, which was subsequently renewed and remains in place.

In the Senate, one of the Belarusian opposition's biggest supporters has been John McCain, the outspoken Republican Senator from Arizona. Around the time Smith introduced the Belarus Democracy Act, McCain was in Riga at a conference held by the Foreign Ministry of Latvia, lambasting Lukashenka.

US Interest in Belarus

The US perceives the country as an anomaly in Europe and its president as an outdated hangover from the Soviet period

Though at times the commitment of the United States to promoting democracy in Belarus has been exaggerated—the US spends far less money on the Belarus opposition than it did on

its Ukrainian counterpart in the past, and one would have to say that Ukraine is a much bigger priority—it perceives the country as an anomaly in Europe and its president as an outdated hangover from the Soviet period.

The corresponding question, however, is that given the commitment of government officials like Smith and McCain and their links with the Diaspora, why has support for the opposition been so ineffective? Dozens of opposition leaders and prominent figures have been hosted in Washington. The US also supports many NGOs directly or indirectly, which work on Belarusian affairs. Each election brings forth new leaders; all seem doomed to fail.

The EU and Belarus

Sikorski warned Lukashenka “Sooner or later, you will have to flee your own country.”

The same statement applies also to the EU. Four years ago, following the attack on demonstrators in Independence Square in Minsk after the December 2010 Presidential elections, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski warned Lukashenka “Sooner or later, you will have to flee your own country.”

EU governments pledged more than \$120 million to support opposition groups and the president’s time in office seemed numbered. In fact today it is Sikorski who is out of office, while Lukashenka remains very much in place.

One can suggest several reasons why the status quo reigns in Belarus in 2015.

US and EU commitment to change, while sincere, is far from wholehearted. The lack of change in Belarus paradoxically brings stability. There is no civil strife in Belarus. On 29 April, Lukashenka declared: “Belarus remains an island of peace, calm, and order, and that is our achievement.” For many

residents, these are not inconsiderable factors when entering a polling station.

Europe is like the Lernaean hydra of Greek mythology, it has many heads seeking different goals. Some would like change in Belarus, others seek its support in limiting Russian influence in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and other areas. Regime change in Belarus is very much on the back burner.

President's Control Mechanisms

Lukashenka's regime is not continually violent; it is selective

The president has acted vindictively and ruthlessly against any manifestations of opposition, while carefully controlling elections in his favour. But the violence is targeted and specific, and usually of short duration. Lukashenka's regime is not continually violent; it is selective. The extreme violence comes during an election or immediately afterward, or at times, such as 1999-2000, or 2010, when the president is genuinely afraid of being removed from office.

Also, by controlling most of the media, restricting alternative sources of power, and maintaining a populist and personal style of leadership, he has managed to stay in office, largely funded by Moscow loans, and balancing commitment to Russia with occasional moves toward the West, none of which seem remotely sincere. The media factor is the weakest grounded because of the increasing influence of social networks and growing ineffectiveness of the print media but it should not be discounted.

Miscalculations and Dissension

There is a fundamental disassociation between what the West has asked of Belarus and the needs and desires of its electorate. Part of the latter has a jaundiced view of Western

agencies and NGOs, and perceives some opposition leaders as practically Western puppets living off grants and subsidies from countries that seek to introduce radical reforms into the country. During elections, opposition candidates have had a tendency to spend as much time in foreign capitals as in the towns and villages of their own country.

Lastly, we should return to the Diaspora. As Ms. Kulakevich pointed out, the most influential group, and quite a small one, arrived in the United States after the Second World War, many fleeing from the Red Army. Three or four generations later, they are figuratively much further removed from their homeland and often deeply divided.

By contrast the much larger Ukrainian Diaspora in North America has close ties with the government in Kyiv. President of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, Paul Grod, was an invited guest at Petro Poroshenko's inaugural ceremony as president last summer, for example.

Another Option

Prominent Belarusians in the West have ties only with the opposition, which in turn is ever more marginalised. The assumption is that the Belarusian leadership is monolithic, devoted to its president. Not only is that unlikely in Belarus, it is far from the case anywhere.

Peaceful regime change usually takes place from within. It is less violent and more clinical than a revolution. Such an option has rarely been explored in Western policy toward Belarus, which instead opted to sanction the entire leadership. It is time for some rethinking of a policy that has clearly failed.

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Obama or Romney? Belarusians Decide

Even in Belarus political decision-makers will spend their time behind TV sets waiting for the US election result on the 6 November.

The Belarusian regime functionaries and Belarusian opposition will refine their strategies of relations depending on the new president's policy. Which candidate is preferable for Lukashenka, and which for the opposition?

Belarusian Americans have split in their preferences. Former President of the Belarusian-American Association Walter Stankievich conducted a mini-poll among Belarusian Americans for this article in order to find out whom American Belarusians support.

Differences between Republicans and Democrats do matter for the world's only superpower policy towards Belarus. During his presidency, George W. Bush paid significant attention to Belarusian problems. Barack Obama did not have the same take on it. Will this change if Americans elect Mitt Romney?

Since coming to power, Barack Obama has made clear that Europe is not a priority for the US foreign policy. In particular, Central and Eastern Europe, or more specifically Belarus. Naturally, the policy of "resetting" relations with Russia also has an impact on US-Belarusian relations. For many US politicians Belarus is still an "exclusive sphere of Russian

influence".

The Legacy of George W. Bush

However, Barack Obama has not disposed of the inherited legacy of George W. Bush's policy towards Belarus. In 2004, the U.S. Congress unanimously passed the Belarus Democracy Act, and renews it every two years. Under this law, the U.S. helps political opposition, civil society and independent media in the fight against the authoritarian dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenka. At the same time the Act prohibits any U.S. public institutions donating any funds to the Belarusian regime.

Moreover, the current U.S. administration have introduced additional economic sanctions against Lukashenka's regime. In 2007, the Bush administration imposed sanctions against "Belnaftakhim" – a Belarusian state oil conglomerate. From 2008 to 2011, the American authorities suspended sanctions because of the short-term "liberalisation" of the Belarusian regime.

On 1 December 2010, Foreign Minister Syarhei Martynau made a joint statement with Hillary Clinton for the first time in many years. Pro-Lukashenka analyst Vadzim Hihin celebrated it as "the beginning of a great friendship." However, already on 9 December Lukashenka flew to Russia and met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The Presidents met behind closed doors and did not allow the press even to take official photos.

After that meeting Lukashenka agreed on "tighter friendship" in exchange for supply of cheap energy, which provided an opportunity for Lukashenka to attack and disperse the civil protesters in the main Square in 2010. It seemed that Russia felt threatened by the "excessively pro-Western" policy of the Belarusian leadership.

As a result, the United States renewed the sanctions and

imposed additional ones against four Belarusian enterprises: "Naftan", "Hrodna Azot", "Belshyna" and "Hrodna Hkimvalakno". According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belarusian export to the U.S. fell from \$348.5m in 2007 to just \$86.1m in 2011.

Presence Matters

For Belarus, the principal difference between Democrat and Republican policy lies in personal presence. During his presidency, George W. Bush repeatedly met with representatives of the Belarusian opposition. Barack Obama has not publicly met with Belarusians even once. Obviously, such meetings promoted greater interest in Belarus in the world and irritated Alexander Lukashenka.

It seems that Mitt Romney, if elected, would continue the approach of George W. Bush. Even during his visit to Poland, the Republican candidate publicly expressed his support for the Belarusian opposition.

For sure, Mitt Romney will direct Belarusian issues to his more experienced team. Two months ago Foreign Policy magazine named the most influential foreign policy specialists in both parties. According to the magazine, the most important and experienced person in international relations among Republicans is a friend of Mitt Romney, John McCain.

Mitt Romney lost the 2008 Republican nomination to McCain, but then kept assisting him as a fundraiser. If Romney wins, John McCain may receive a position in presidential administration, or at least will have a great influence on the White House. McCain indeed has good knowledge of the situation in Belarus and has repeatedly met with the Belarusian opposition. Moreover, McCain attempted to visit Belarus, but the authorities denied him a visa.

Senator McCain became a key co-sponsor of the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, whose author was another longtime

friend of Belarus – Republican Congressman Chris Smith. In 2002 Senator McCain said at an international conference titled "Axis of Evil: Belarus – the Missing Link":

Lukashenka`s rule is an offence to the values whose victory was secured almost everywhere else in Europe with the end of empire. His rule will threaten America and Europe as long as the civilised world pursues the mission of our age: to work from within and without to change the very character of regimes that threaten us.

Ironically, Lukashenka can use Mitt Romney's victory in the election. Romney has repeatedly said that he sees Russia as a potential enemy. In this situation, Lukashenka can aggravate relations with the United States up to the point of severance of diplomatic ties. Thus he would testify his loyalty to Putin, which would ensure continuous financial support of his regime by Russia.

As for the Belarusian opposition, they hope that the Belarusian issue will be among the priorities of the US foreign policy.

How Will Belarusian Americans Vote?

Former President of the Belarusian-American Association (BAZA) Walter Stankievich organised a quick poll among Belarusian Americans specifically for this article. 108 Belarusians from all over the United States responded- from New York to California. The youngest respondent is 19 years old, the oldest 88.

Both candidates had almost equal support. 48% of respondents would vote for Romney and 45% for Barack Obama. So far, 7% have not decided.

44% of respondents were born in the United States or have lived there for a long time and 56% are those

who immigrated to the United States after the 80s.

There is a difference between generations. Older people remain pro-Republican and Romney wins among them – 56% against 37% for Obama. The situation with the younger generations changes – Obama and Romney are equal. As for the later immigrants, Obama wins among them – 55% against 45% for Romney.

Belarusian Americans consider that domestic problems are more crucial for the electoral campaign. Walter Stankievich thinks this happens due to “the influence of mass media, where most of the time and place is devoted to the domestic American issues. That is why Belarusians have a great preference for domestic issues, as a major in the election of a new president.”

American Elections, not Belarusian

Nevertheless, U.S. elections will not play a determining role in Belarus. U.S. government policy has been stable and predictable for many years.

At the same time the election of Mitt Romney would make policy towards Belarus more defined. The Republican administration is more likely to raise the Belarusian issue at international forums and meet more frequently with representatives of the Belarusian opposition, civil society and independent media.

But after all, America's impact should not be overestimated. Changes in Belarus remain [the task of the Belarusian opposition](#) and civil society, not American presidents.

Ryhor Astapenia