

## **Leveraging Lukashenka**

Peter Rutland, *Transitions Online*, 23 August 2006.

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Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, and dictatorships differ, too. Belarus is indeed “the last dictatorship in Europe,” but it is not North Korea. The authoritarian screws have been tightening, with strict censorship, closing of civil society organizations, arrests of activists, and the “disappearance” of at least four political figures. Yet Alyaksandr Lukashenka continues to hold elections and continues to enjoy the support of about half the population. Thus in the March 2006 presidential election, he allowed two rival candidates to run, gave them 30 minutes each on television, and allowed some opposition rallies (even a rock concert). Lukashenka in other words has mastered the art of pseudo-electoral democracy. The opposition may even be useful to him, providing a threat that he can demonize.

This places Western policy makers in a dilemma. Extrapolating from the experiences of Solidarity in Poland and the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, the United States and European Union assume that support for civil society and “one more heave” at the next election will topple the Monster of Minsk. But, as Dov Lynch points out in this collection, this strategy has been tried for 10 years and has failed.

This volume presents 20 short essays on the recent political history of Belarus and the efficacy of Western policy to promote democracy in that troubled country. The authors range from Western academics and politicians to Belarusian scholars and activists, with Russia’s Dmitri Trenin for good measure. It is a useful collection that brings the reader up to speed, though it makes it clear that democratization will not be an easy task.

### **THE VICE TIGHTENS**

Vitali Silitski puts a cautiously optimistic spin on the March 2006 election. First, he argues that it served to trigger an unprecedented mobilization of civil society groups, with 200,000 signatures being gathered for the main opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and up to 20,000 taking to the streets against Lukashenka's victory. Silitski concedes, however, that there is a gap between the democratic subculture and mainstream society. Rather oddly, the opposition chose denim as the color of their would-be revolution, launching a full-blown Jeans Solidarity campaign in September 2005.

Second, Silitski argues that the election drew increased international scrutiny to this hitherto-overlooked corner of Europe. Third, he suggests that if Lukashenka continues to rely on (rigged) elections as the principal tool for legitimizing the regime this may prove to be a “design flaw” that could backfire in the future – like the gun on the wall in the Chekhov play, it will probably go off before the curtain falls. Still, Silitski concludes, “The struggle for democracy promises to be long and hopeless for some time.”

The next chapter, by Ethan Burger and Viktor Minchuk, documents the tightening of the authoritarian vise over the past decade, with a referendum extending Lukashenka’s term limits beyond 2006 in October 2004, followed by new limits on foreign nongovernmental organizations and on domestic political organizations, in August and November 2005. Despite these measures, the regime still fears the public, and this may be a weakness that could be its downfall.

Pollster Oleg Manaev, who since April 2005 has been forced to work out of Lithuania, reports interesting findings from independent polls that shed some light on the character of Lukashenka's base of support. They suggest that the "yes" vote in the October 2004 term limits referendum was only 49 percent and not the officially reported 79 percent, and that about one-third of respondents voted for pro-presidential deputies in the parliament, slightly more than those who said they voted for opposition or independent candidates. One-quarter thought their personal economic situation had improved in the previous three months vs. 14 percent who thought it had worsened, but only 18 percent considered the economic situation good or very good. Lukashenka's approval rating nevertheless rose from 48 percent in October 2004 to 59 percent in March 2006.

Despite media restrictions, the Belarusian population does have some independent information about the West: a surprising one in four had visited an EU country during the past five years. But only 37 percent wanted to join EU as of July 2005, down from 60 percent in 2002. The fall in support may be due to a perception that the economic situation in Poland and the other new members deteriorated after EU entry (a main theme of the Lukashenka media). Regarding Russia, 45 percent preferred the status quo: only 14 percent wanted integration into one state and 39 percent a union of two independent states.

#### MIXED MESSAGES

The second part of the book addresses the international context, with EU policy described by EU senior adviser Pirkka Tapiola, while Robin Shepherd details the U.S. government attitude. Shepherd sees U.S. policy as somewhat constrained by Washington's desire to maintain a working relationship with Russia, at least under President Clinton. The rhetoric has been stepped up under President Bush's democratization drive, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice listing Belarus as one of six "outposts of tyranny" in January 2005. Shepherd glumly concludes that "Washington's foreign policy toward Belarus has probably evolved as far as it can."

Dmitri Trenin tracks the shift in Russian policy since 2000 from exasperation to grudging acceptance, a result of the creeping authoritarianism within Russia and fear of the Western-inspired color revolutions. Although Putin did not openly support Lukashenka in the 2006 election, the Russian-led CIS monitoring team declared the poll free and fair, while the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe termed it "fundamentally flawed." Still, Trenin argues that Lukashenka will not last forever, and it is in Russia's interest to cooperate with the West in ensuring a bloodless transition.

The Slovak activist Balazs Jarabik argues that Western assistance to democratic groups was too little, too late, and by the time it arrived in 2001, the scope for opposition activity was already reduced. Washington gave \$38 million prior to the 2001 election. EU assistance in contrast has tended to avoid direct support for opposition groups. Western policy toward the other states in the neighborhood was driven by the carrot of membership in the EU or NATO. Given that Belarus is not a serious contender for either of these organizations, EU policy is left hanging in the air. All it can do is fund a few hours a day of Deutsche Welle broadcasts and slap a visa ban on top Belarusian leaders – a mere six individuals.

#### INFLUENCE PEDDLING

One part of the volume is devoted to the March 2006 presidential election. According to the official tally, Milinkevich got 400,000 votes, 6 percent, against 83 percent for Lukashenka. David Marples estimates the demonstrators at 15,000 at the high tide of the demonstrations, 19 March,

dwindling to 2,000 to 5,000 on subsequent days until they were broken up at 3 a.m. on 24 March. He includes an interesting diary of events on October Square during and after the election that is accompanied by a collection of photos.

Marples and Uladzimir Padhol provide snapshots of 10 opposition political parties, the largest of which, the Liberal-Democratic Party, garnered the support of just 6.2 percent of respondents in an independent 2003 poll. They document the leadership splits and efforts to coordinate the parties. In 1999 the OSCE formed a consultative council of opposition parties, and 800 delegates gathered in October 2005 to select their unified candidate, Milinkevich. Andrei Sannikov and Inna Kuley write on civil society and the difficult choices NGOs face in trying to play by the (ever more restrictive) rules. For example, registering an NGO just makes it easier for the authorities to collect data on whom to arrest.

Finally, several contributors consider future policy options. Dov Lynch argues that it is time for a fundamental reappraisal of EU strategy, which has been tried for 10 years and found wanting. Rather, Lukashenka has consolidated his power and is unresponsive to EU carrots and sticks. Lynch argues, "The EU can no longer afford to ignore this country" and wants the EU to become a "real" influence on Minsk, but this is easier said than done, and most of his concrete policy suggestions look like more of the stuff being done already.

German parliamentarian Markus Meckel and several other contributors propose a new and better-funded European Foundation for Democracy. The EU spent just 8.7 million euros on democracy assistance for Belarus in 2005. Poland's Jacek Kucharczyk and EU parliamentarian Milan Horacek propose expanding the EU's visa ban, while cutting the 60-euro visa fee for ordinary Belarusians. Horacek also argues that the EU "should convince Russia that it is in its own interest to support democracy in its immediate neighborhood," something that may strain the persuasive powers of Brussels.

It's a pity that the volume could not find space for discussion of the Belarusian economy, since Lukashenka's ability to maintain economic stability seems to be a key feature of his regime. In their contribution Ethan Burger and Viktor Minchuk do mention that Lukashenka's political stability is tied to job security, repeated anti-corruption campaigns, and redistributive policies that maintain a degree of security. A report released by the World Bank in November 2005 is the most thorough explanation yet of the Belarusian "puzzle" – how the country managed to achieve 6.6 percent annual growth since 1996 while halving the number of people living in poverty. A large part of the answer lies in the favorable economic relations that Belarus enjoys with neighboring Russia – cheap energy, but also the benefit of wages and prices 30 percent lower than in Russia. But the report notes that this model may have reached its limits. Investment has been low, especially foreign investment, so the capital stock is expiring, while real wage growth undercuts the competitive advantage with Russia. (On top of which Putin may at some point choose to cut off the cheap oil.)

There are three possible scenarios for change. First, the autocratic regime could implode. If Lukashenka continues to purge insider members of the elite to fend off fictitious threats to his rule, segments of the elite could turn against him. Second, an economic downturn could undercut Lukashenka's core support. Third, external pressure could force a change – but the pressure would have to come from the East, not the West.