

## **BELARUS: THE LAST DICTATOR**

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The authoritarian regime of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on Belarus is an affront to Europe. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice listing Belarus as one of six “outposts of tyranny” in January 2005, and Vice President Dick Cheney referred to the country as “the last dictatorship in Europe” in his 4 May 2006 speech at the Vilnius summit of nine former Soviet republics. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed, protestors are jailed at will, and four opposition figures have “disappeared.” Human rights aside, the persistence of the Lukashenka regime is also an obstacle to improved Russian-European relations (which have problems enough of their own). Yet Lukashenka appears to be well-entrenched and shows no sign of leaving office any time soon.

The West does not seem to know how to deal with this odious regime. Its primary strategy for the past decade has been to encourage the liberal opposition to use such democratic opportunities as there are to topple Lukashenka through a non-violent revolution - a continuation of the spirit of 1989. Hence Europe and the U.S. have offered support and encouragement for civil society groups, independent media, and opposition parties. The theory was that when election time came around, if Lukashenka blatantly rigged the election to ensure a victory or used police force to disperse the opposition, that could trigger a wave of public protest that would drive him from office.

It was precisely such a strategy that had removed Slobodan Milosevic from power in Yugoslavia in 2000, and Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” of 2003. Even more spectacular was the Ukrainian “Orange Revolution” that led to the election of Viktor Yushchenko as president in December 2004.

Western governments and democracy activists hoped that the “color revolutions” would continue to sweep through the other countries of the former Soviet Union, where creeping authoritarianism had crushed the democratic hopes of the early 1990s. March 2005 saw the fall of Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan: a messy process that involved some violence and looting, and that resulted in a new regime whose democratic credentials were not very pristine.

Still, Western democracy advocates had high hopes that Belarus would be the next domino to fall. They keenly awaited the 19 March 2006 presidential election, on the theory that “one more heave” would push Lukashenka from power. Western advisors persuaded most of the fractious opposition to unite behind a single candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, in October 2005. The opposition mobilized for what they chose to call a “denim” revolution. An impressive 200,000 signatures were gathered to register the candidacy of Milinkevich. Lukashenka played a cautious game: he preserved the façade of an open election by allowing two rival candidates to run. He even gave them 30 minutes each on state television, and allowed some opposition rallies (including a rock concert).

After Lukashenka declared victory with an implausible 83 percent of the votes (against 6 percent for Milinkevich), up to 20,000 took to the streets of Minsk in protest.<sup>2</sup> The police left the

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demonstrators alone for several days, then moved in on 24 March, arresting 600 and jailing them for up to 15 days for public order offences. Opposition candidate Alyaksandr Kozulin was eventually sentenced to 5 1/2 years for hooliganism and incitement to mass disorder. The Russian-led CIS monitoring team declared the poll free and fair, while the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) termed it “fundamentally flawed.”

The problem is that Lukashenka has learned to play the game of pseudo-democracy very well. After all, he had risen to power back in 1994 through the ballot box, using slogans of anti-corruption, and he has skillfully managed the half-dozen elections and referenda since then to consolidate his grip on the political system. Not only has the Western approach of a democratic transition failed, there is even some concern that the effort to export democracy has triggered a backlash, since Lukashenka was able to paint his democratic opponents as tools of the West, part of a conspiracy to undermine Belarus.<sup>3</sup>

### **The sources of Lukashenka’s strength**

The Western approach failed because it was based on a faulty analysis of the situation on the ground. Lukashenka is often portrayed as a buffoon, the bombastic former collective farm chairman only able to cling to power thanks to his ruthless use of force. But Lukashenka is actually quite a complex political phenomenon. While repression is certainly part of his political longevity, there are several other factors whose importance was often overlooked by outside observers.

**First**, there is the question of Lukashenka’s popular appeal. By all accounts, at the time of the March 2006 election Lukashenka had the voluntary support of about half the population – so he could have won even without manipulating the vote count.<sup>4</sup> Lukashenka of course had the advantage of total control of the media. The opposition newspaper *Narodnaya Volya* printed 250,000 copies in Smolensk, but they were seized at the border.<sup>5</sup> The fact that both opposition candidates were academics played into Lukashenka’s man-of-the-people image. Lukashenka made much of his ability to maintain the flow of cheap gas from Russia – in contrast to the troubles Ukraine was having with Gazprom in the wake of the Orange Revolution.

Lukashenka has been adept in harnessing the hopes and fears of the Belarusian people in the turbulent post-Soviet political landscape. He is usually portrayed as an anti-nationalist who plays on popular nostalgia for the lost Soviet past, and whose main political goal is unification with the Russian Federation. For example, Stefan Wagstyl wrote that “Among the former Soviet states, Belarus has the weakest sense of national identity and the strongest Soviet-era nostalgia.”<sup>6</sup> But Natalia Leshchenko, a Belarusian with a Ph. D. from the London School of Economics, persuasively argues that Lukashenka in fact succeeded by appealing to a new, post-Soviet Belarusian national identity.<sup>7</sup> This is a different type of national identity from that promoted by

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<sup>2</sup> Joerg Forbrig, David Marples, and Pavol Demes (eds.), *Prospects for Belarusian Democracy*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006. On the web at: [http://www.boell.de/en/05\\_world/4201.html](http://www.boell.de/en/05_world/4201.html) Turnout was reported at 93%

<sup>3</sup> Guy Dinmore, “Senate probes backlash over U.S. agenda on democracy,” *Financial Times*, 9 June 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Lukashenka enjoyed 55 percent support in January 2006, according to the independent Baltic-Gallup pollsters, against 17 percent for Milinkevich. *Financial Times*, 14 March 2006.

<sup>5</sup> David Marples, presentation at the University of Ottawa, 21 September 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan Wagstyl, “A little democracy need not hinder a popular dictator,” *Financial Times*, 23 March 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Natalia Leshchenko, “A fine instrument: two nation-building strategies in post-Soviet Belarus,” *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2004, pp, 33-52.

the nationalist opposition, who focus on reviving the Belarusian language and pre-Soviet cultural traditions. Lukashenka is happy to use the Russian language: only 10 percent of newspapers and about half the books are published in Belarusian, and only 20 percent of first graders are in Belarusian language schools.<sup>8</sup> He has built a new Belarusian post-Soviet identity based on collectivism and state-sponsored welfare. His success in appealing to this new identity is one reason why he has been willing to turn *against* Moscow when Putin started pressing Belarus to pay more for its oil and gas.

What of the idea of a “union state” with Russia, announced with much fanfare back in 1996? Lukashenka was only really interested in unification with Russia when there was a chance (however unlikely) that he himself could become president of the new federal state. But once the ailing Boris Yeltsin left the political stage in 1999, handing over power to the vigorous Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka’s enthusiasm for unification quickly evaporated. Despite a 2000 agreement to merge the two currencies, Lukashenka has consistently refused to give up the Belarusian ruble – so long as Moscow refuses to allow him to share in control of Russian ruble emissions. The unification idea is useful domestically for both Russian and Belarusian leaders, when it comes to winning the support of older, conservative voters. But in practical terms it is a dead letter. This is of course good news for the West – it lessens the chance that Belarus could be fully absorbed into the Russian state.

Despite media restrictions, the Belarusian population does have some independent information about the West. A surprising one in four has visited an E.U. country during the past five years.<sup>9</sup> But according to pollster Oleg Manaev only 37 percent wanted Belarus to join the E.U. as of July 2005, down from 60 percent in 2002.<sup>10</sup> (The decline may be due to state media publicizing the alleged economic problems of Poland after E.U. accession.) 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.

**Second**, there is the Belarusian “economic miracle.” Lukashenka largely resisted market reform: only 25 percent of GDP is in the private sector, and 20 percent of prices are still state-controlled. Despite (or perhaps thanks to?) these policies, Belarus reported a smaller dip in GDP than its Russian and Ukrainian neighbors in the 1990s. Most outsiders believed that Minsk was simply falsifying the data, but a 2005 World Bank study confirmed that Belarus has managed a 6.6 percent annual growth rate and a halving of poverty since 1996.<sup>11</sup> In August 2006 the IMF reported that “Belarus has enjoyed several years of relatively strong macroeconomic performance. [The IMF] Directors welcomed the authorities’ strong track record regarding the implementation of technical assistance from the Fund.”<sup>12</sup> There are now some signs of economic slowing. There has been very little new investment over the past decade, so the capital stock is exhausted, and a rise in real wages has eroded the low labor cost advantage that Belarus formerly enjoyed compared to Russia. Belarus reported a foreign trade deficit of \$415 million in January-

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<sup>8</sup> David Marples, “Changes proposed to Belarusian language,” Jamestown Foundation *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 September 2006.

<sup>9</sup> On 31 August 2006 Poland waived visa requirements for Belarusians coming to work on Polish farms for up to three months.

<sup>10</sup> Oleg Manaev, “Recent trends in Belarusian public opinion,” in Forbrig et al. pp. 37-45, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Belarus: Window of Opportunity to Enhance Competitiveness and Sustain Economic Growth. Country Economic Memorandum*, World Bank, 8 November 2005. Still, as of 2003 monthly average real wages were a mere \$217 a head.

<sup>12</sup> “IMF Executive Board concludes Article IV consultation,” Public Information Notice no. 06/101, 25 August 2006.

July 2006, compared with a surplus of \$770 million in the same period in 2005 – though this is against a 32 percent surge in trade turnover, fueled by high oil prices.<sup>13</sup>

A crucial element in the viability of Lukashenka's state-controlled economy has been subsidization from Russia through the supply of cheap oil and gas. This may or may not be to Vladimir Putin's liking: the facts of geography and the location of the pipelines inherited from Soviet times give him little choice. Fifty percent of the oil that Russia exports to Europe and 25 percent of its natural gas exports transit Belarus. Interruption of these supplies would be disastrous for Europe – and for Russia. This gives Lukashenka a powerful weapon in negotiating with Moscow, one that he has been more than prepared to use. Yes, Belarus is dependent on Moscow: but Moscow is also dependent on Belarus.<sup>14</sup>

Belarus only pays \$45 per 1000 cubic meters for gas – while Europeans are paying \$230 and Ukraine \$95 (since January 2006). The Belarusian state oil conglomerate buys oil from Russia at \$27 per barrel and resells it to Europe at double that price. (In 2005 it imported 19 million tons of oil and exported 13.5 million.) This preferential pricing amounts to a subsidy of \$2-3 billion a year (up to 10 percent of Belarus's GDP). Belarus also has two large Soviet-era oil refineries in Mazyr and Novapolatsk: more than half of their output is exported. Russia has tried to weaken Belarus's position by gaining ownership of the Belarusian gas infrastructure in return for cancellation of payment arrears. In January 2004 Gazprom actually cut off the gas supply for three days, but Lukashenka called Moscow's bluff, condemning what he called "gas terrorism." Ironically, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in December 2004 served to strengthen Lukashenka's bargaining position vis-à-vis Moscow, by increasing Russia's sense of strategic isolation. The latest effort to take over the infrastructure collapsed earlier this year when Gazprom said Beltransgas should be privatized at a book value of \$600 million, while Belarus priced the company at billion.

### **European policy towards Belarus**

Diplomatic relations between Belarus and its Western neighbors have been extremely strained.<sup>15</sup> Belarus's applicant to the Council of Europe has been frozen since 1993. The E.U. did negotiate a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Belarus in 1995, but it was suspended the next year and has never taken effect. Belarus and Turkmenistan are the only countries without a PCA. Technical assistance was halted except for humanitarian, regional and democracy projects. In total 221 million Euros was provided in E.U. aid between 1991 and 2004. On top of that the EBRD has lent \$60 million and the World Bank \$190 million. Belarus now falls under the European Neighborhood Policy announced in May 2004 – along with countries ranging from Algeria to Syria and Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

E.U. leverage has been remarkably successful in moderating political extremism in Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. But given that Lukashenka's Belarus was not a serious contender for membership of the E.U. (or NATO), E.U. policy was left hanging in the air. E.U. influence is predicated on the assumption of shared European values – but what to do with

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<sup>13</sup> Interfax, 17 September 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Hancock, "The semi-sovereign state: Belarus and the Russian neo-empire," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, (2006) vol. 1, no. 6, 117–136. Sixty five percent of Belarus's imports come from Russia, and half of its exports go to Russia.

<sup>15</sup> Dov Lynch, "A European strategy towards Belarus," in Forbrig et al, pp. 156-63.

<sup>16</sup> *Belarus: Country Strategy Paper*, European Commission, 28 May 2004.

determined dictator who openly ridicules those values? A measured “carrot and stick” approach does not work when your interlocutor does not like carrots, and is prepared to wave a bigger stick.

In a debate in the European Parliament in October 2004 Guenter Verheugen, the commissioner in charge of policy toward new neighbors, admitted there is very little the E.U. can do to influence events in Belarus.<sup>17</sup> Only 11 of the E.U. countries have embassies in Minsk, and the European Commission does not have its own representative there. The British Council closed up in 2000.<sup>18</sup> Poland launched a radio station for Belarus in 1999 with American funding, but the money ran out in 2002. It was reopened just weeks before the March 2006 elections, funded by the Polish government. Deutsche Welle also began broadcasts, but for just a few hours each week.

To a large degree, in practice E.U. policy towards Belarus was devolved to Warsaw. As an E.U. member bordering Belarus (along with Latvia and Lithuania) Poland had the biggest stake in the future of the relationship, and the greatest expertise in dealing with Minsk. It has been a firm advocate of active engagement. Poland was also concerned about the treatment of the estimated 450,000 ethnic Poles living in Belarus. Some in Warsaw feared that Brussels was growing tired of trying to deal with Lukashenka, and was ready to write off Belarus as a kind of “crazy uncle” living in Europe’s attic. A 2004 Batory Foundation report wrote “The lack of E.U. interest in closer relations might be justified only on the assumption that this country will always remain what it is – an unpleasant but hardly troublesome neighbor.... In the political vacuum in relations between Belarus and the European Union, one may see a clear lack of concepts as to how to improve these relations.”<sup>19</sup>

One downside to the prominent role for Poland was the history of enmity between the two countries. Catholic Poland had pursued a Polonization policy in Orthodox Belarusian regions which were part of Poland in the 1920s, and Lukashenka this exploited historical enmity to the full. In August 2005 Lukashenka cracked down on the Union of Poles after the ouster of a leader who was sympathetic to the president.<sup>20</sup> It does not help that Moscow’s relationship with Warsaw has turned deeply antagonistic, with “anti-Polonism” showing a surprising resurgence in Russian elite circles. The most important manifestation of this development is the construction of the North Europe Gas Pipeline across the Baltic Sea to Germany, bypassing Poland. The political geometry of the region is getting more complicated, with the German-Russian axis playing against the Polish-U.S. axis.

While the E.U. has attempted “conditional engagement” with the leadership, the U.S. has pursued “selective contacts” with civil society. Unlike the E.U., the U.S. does not have any practical worries over relations with Belarus, such as preserving energy supplies or managing refugee flows from third countries. The U.S. tends to treat Belarus, to the extent that it pays attention to the country at all, as part of its global strategy to battle terror and tyranny.<sup>21</sup> Robin

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<sup>17</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty *Newsline*, 28 October 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Grant and Mark Leonard, “The European Union’s awkward neighbour. Time for a new policy on Belarus,” Center for European Reform, Policy Brief, 6 April 2006.  
<http://www.cer.org.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> *Belarus Catching Up With Europe*, Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw 2004, pp. 31, 33.  
[http://62.89.72.199/doc/pogon\\_ang.pdf](http://62.89.72.199/doc/pogon_ang.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Jan Maksymiuk, “Warsaw seems to be losing duel,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12 August 2005.

<sup>21</sup> “Belarus and its future. Democracy or Soviet-style dictatorship?,” U.S. House of Representatives International Relations Committee hearing, 31 March 2004.

Shepherd glumly concludes that “Washington’s foreign policy toward Belarus has probably evolved as far as it can.”<sup>22</sup>

The Western powers have tried to use administrative measures such as travel bans and freezes on bank assets to express their displeasure. But these steps have at most symbolic value, and do not seem to have much of an impact on Lukashenka. In November 2002 the US and 14 E.U. states imposed a travel ban on Lukashenka and seven ministers after he had ordered the OSCE Assistance and Monitoring Group to leave. The ban was rescinded in April 2003 after the OSCE was readmitted. In 2004 the E.U. and U.S. again imposed travel restrictions on some senior officials in retaliation for the disappearance of four opposition figures in 1999-2000, and in connection with fraud in the October 2004 elections. There was another flurry of sanctions in the wake of the March 2006 election. It began with Poland imposing travel restrictions on top Belarusian officials on 26 March, just hours after a Polish diplomat, former ambassador to Belarus Mariusz Maszkiewicz, was jailed in Minsk for allegedly participating in an opposition meeting. The E.U. followed up on 10 April with a visa ban for 31 top officials implicated in electoral fraud, and the freezing of bank assets of 36 individuals on 18 May.

The E.U. has generally steered clear of economic sanctions – presumably because of all that oil and gas flowing across Lukashenka’s turf. Belarus has enjoyed Most Favored Nation/General System of Preferences status for its exports to Europe since 1989. In July 2006 the European Commission said it planned to expel Belarus from MFN/GSP in September, but postponed the decision for “technical reasons.” The step would introduce stiff tariffs on \$450 million worth of Belarusian mineral, textile and wood annual exports to the E.U.

Shut out from Europe and somewhat estranged from Moscow, Lukashenka has shown an ability to play global politics to his advantage. Increasingly, he has become wary of Moscow, and to broaden his options he has started to embrace the emerging anti-American axis in international politics. Lukashenka visited Damascus in December 2003, this was followed by a visit to Belarus by Sudanese President Umar Al-Bashir in July 2004, and by then-Iranian President Mohammed Khatami in September of that year. This trend culminated with the visit to Minsk of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez 23-25 July 2006, He signed a number of trade agreements, including arms deliveries worth up to \$1 billion a year. After returning from a Non-Aligned Movement summit in Havana Lukashenka explained that “Belarus today is creating a so-called ‘external arc’ in its foreign policy. It leads from Cuba through the countries of Latin America, Africa, the Persian Gulf, Iran, China, Vietnam, Malaysia.”<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The picture, then, is rather bleak. If democratic transition has exhausted its potential, what could bring about the end of the Lukashenka regime? 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. But with great uncertainty surrounding the Putin succession in 2008, Moscow is unlikely to do anything to disturb its petulant ally in Minsk.

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<sup>22</sup> Robin Shepherd, “The United States and Europe’s last dictatorship,” in Forbig et al, pp. 71-78, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> *Moscow Times*, 20 September 2006.