

Belarus beyond sanctions

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»» The European Union's recent resurrection of sanctions towards Belarus returned the country's relations with the West to square one. Western pundits have rightly criticised the EU's soft economic sanction-based measures towards Belarus. The EU increased the number of Belarusian officials subject to a visa ban, adding re-elected president Alexander Lukashenko to the list. However, this seems an insufficient response to the events that accompanied Belarus's last presidential election, on 19 December 2010. Those polls were marred by protests and arrests, resulting in an increased number of political prisoners. Lukashenko's brutal crackdown warrants a more forceful response from the West.

The West must learn how to support Belarus's beleaguered opposition, while understanding that relying on the opposition alone is not enough to bring about democratic change. If the West wants to change Belarus, it must first undo the myths surrounding the country. This will allow the EU to formulate an appropriate policy and find an effective assistance strategy to promote democratic values. The EU must also recognise that Belarus does not have a problem because it has Lukashenko as a president; Belarus has Lukashenko because the country itself has a problem.

The recent wave of revolutions in North Africa enjoins the West to consider increasing democracy assistance, but also to think of ways to achieve democratic change that would lead to far-reaching reform. Learning from post-Orange Revolution Ukraine, the EU should aim fundamentally to change Belarus, rather than merely to remove its leader. Considering the shockwaves that swept through Belarus's entire society (not only the opposition) after Lukashenko's crackdown, the

HIGHLIGHTS

- Belarus does not have a problem because it has Lukashenko, but it has Lukashenko because of its problems
- In the absence of oil or gas, Lukashenko is selling his image as Europe's last dictator as Belarus's 'commodity'
- The real long-term challenge in Belarus is social and political change, not only regime change

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»»»»» growing feeling of instability caused by inflation, the severe budget deficit and a forthcoming privatisation process, the EU should isolate Lukashenko. Without oil or gas to bargain with, he is 'forced' to sell the only 'commodity' he has – his image as Europe's last dictator.

To be able to pursue viable changes the EU must increase its contacts among Belarus's most influential class, the bureaucrats. If the bureaucrats are persuaded that their leader is no longer in a position to broker concessions from the West (and East) or aid programmes aimed at civil society, the independent media or the opposition, a spark could ignite the much-needed change to Belarusian leadership and society. The real challenge in Belarus is achieving long-term social and political change, not only formal regime change.

FIVE MYTHS

In the wake of the December elections, the response from Western media and politicians has reconfirmed the myths surrounding Belarus and reinforced Lukashenko's image as Europe's last dictator. Brussels has tried a variety of approaches towards Belarus, from isolation to engagement, but none have delivered the desired results. The revival of a sanctions-based policy shows that the EU has come full circle. The visa ban illustrates how little the EU knows Belarus: dozens of those named are no longer state officials, a further dozen are not responsible for the actual court decisions, two are heads of presidential administration and one is dead.

In order to shape an appropriate policy, the EU must first understand what is happening in Belarus. The first myth held by the West concerns Russia's policies and strategic intentions towards Lukashenko. Despite the vociferous anti-Lukashenko campaign and speculation over support for opposition candidates, regime change does not feature on the Russian agenda. For Moscow, a change of president would represent the potential for Western influence in Belarus. Russian policy aims to guarantee the loyalty of the

Belarusian leader and to control Belarus's most important economic assets – energy transit and oil refineries. Russia does not want to weaken Belarus too much. As a result, Russia will again be ready to support Lukashenko's regime financially if necessary. In addition, the current situation in Belarus makes Russia look more democratic and its leadership more inclusive.

Lukashenko's crackdown and the EU's sanctions were timely events for Moscow: it needs to focus on its own elections, as well as on Ukraine and Georgia, its main foreign policy priorities in the neighborhood. The Russian ruling elite is also eyeing events in North Africa with increasing concern: the activism of opposition groups, whether nationalists or extreme right parties, is prompting the inner circle of power to tighten control over the media and population. To do otherwise would be too risky.

The second myth which needs debunking is that Alexander Lukashenko himself is a singular phenomenon. His rule is commonly perceived as iron-fisted. Despite the authoritarian repression of the opposition, however, he would not have been able to rule for 16 years without public consent. Independent research – such as that carried out by the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies – shows he is the reflection of an upgraded version of the Soviet model of politics which has been widely accepted. His social contract is based on constant economic growth and a more equal distribution of wealth. The strong control mechanisms, functional (in a Soviet manner) state institutions and the relative lack of corruption have until recently given Belarusians some faith in their leader. However, the price to pay for this modernised version of the Soviet Union is a lack of free and fair elections and fewer political freedoms. Nevertheless, many Belarusians – notably the older generations – believe this has prevented the stress of transformation undergone by other Commonwealth of Independent States countries.

However, the key component of Lukashenko's offer – economic growth – is now under serious threat. Without re-balancing the economy by

increasing the private sector share (through privatisation and economic reforms), it will be difficult to retain the current level of government control. Although privatisation will be a regime controlled process, allowing the private sector to have a larger market share should make society more amenable to change. Lukashenko's state-based ideology would no longer be the only option.

The third myth is the existence of a viable democratic opposition in Belarus. The degree of democracy within the country's 'democratic forces' is debatable. In their struggle for domination, NGOs and political parties mirror the regime by building their own mechanisms to control information and resources. These hermetic and fully-controlled top-down structures have proven incapable of reaching out to ordinary citizens and expanding their support networks. They also fall short of completing the fundamental organisational aspects that underpin democratic culture.

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Opposition groups are not entirely to blame: restrictive legal conditions, operating under constant surveillance and competing for resources from non-transparent donors have all left their mark on local non-state actors. In 2010, the democratic presidential candidates all employed anti-regime rhetoric to different extents, demonstrating courage and determination. But they did not present – or even believe in – a vision that incorporated the possibility of their victory. Still, there is now a base on which to build a capable pro-reform constituency.

Closely related to the third myth is the fourth: the December 2010 crackdown. The number of people imprisoned was unprecedented, sending a clear message from the regime to the West. The repressive post-election measures actually

targeted relatives of some of the opposition candidates, especially those linked with Vladimir Neklaev's 'Govori Pravdu' (Speak the Truth) campaign, which flourished thanks to funding from unknown sources. According to statistics from local human rights organisations, 37 people have been accused of mass riots, there have been 115 interrogations and 135 searches of activists' offices and apartments. Despite the Ministry of Education's announcement that no students would be dismissed, regional universities have reportedly expelled 5 students, while 7 people have been fired on political grounds. At least 15 activists are still abroad in Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, and Poland.

These statistics suggest that the opposition is far from numerous. However, it appears that rather than trying to wipe out the opposition, the KGB is actually searching for information regarding funding sources. Lukashenko's furious reaction could have been motivated by revenge, partly for the success this opposition party enjoyed thanks to its funding. One post-election poll shows that he received 51 per cent of the votes, a statistic which hardly warrants such an extreme reaction given its proximity to his usual vote share. The poll also reveals that Lukashenko fell far short of the officially announced 79 per cent. His aim may have been to create a situation that 'forced' him to react and gave him an excuse to attack the opposition.

The final myth is the idea that there are no financial resources in Belarusian politics (for the opposition, for example). In the recent election campaign, the strongest opposition candidates were not put forward by their parties as the result of a competitive democratic process as in 2006. Candidates were instead selected by parties' 'donors'. The availability of financial resources suggests that there are new internal and external players interested in influencing the political situation in Belarus. Although this development has often been perceived as negative, it should instead be viewed as a harbinger for greater interest in political change.

»»»»» **WHAT KIND OF CIVIL SOCIETY?**

The 2010 presidential elections and the post-election situation have revealed that Belarusian civil society is broader than previously thought. Civil society has grown during the past few years of relative liberalisation. It has infiltrated the wider society and is no longer restricted to members of opposition parties and NGOs. According to a Freedom House report published in October 2010, civil society is currently more developed in Belarus than at any point in the past ten years. A number of other developments seem to suggest that civic interest and activism are on the rise: the number of people who took to the streets on election night, the reaction of the public authorities, and polling numbers showing an increase in pro-reform constituencies. Overall support for opposition candidates was up 6 per cent from 2006, while Lukashenko's support base has decreased, and may soon dip below 50 per cent. These factors could also have influenced the post-election crackdown. Without the incentives that accompanied economic growth, the regime could turn from a reasonably popular authoritarian system into a more pathological dictatorship, with fear as its main weapon.

The question is exactly what change Belarus's newly-activised citizens want and can achieve – and what the West could or should do to support it. Many local experts believe that a significant number of people on the *Ploscha* were not there to support the opposition or a particular candidate, but to promote broader agendas for improved opportunities, change and reform. The regime is weakening, and is increasingly perceived as incapable of providing stability, let alone employment and economic growth. Prior to the elections, Belarusian civil society had proven to be a credible body of actors with new ideas and initiatives. In some cases, it also appeared able to act as an agent for social and political change. The shock of the crackdown and subsequent repressive measures hopefully won't change this, despite the bitterness it has stirred up among civil society. Civil society and the pro-reform forces need to clearly articulate their reform agenda. Belarusians

are now more willing to mobilise for change, but a clear and achievable vision of the country's future must be presented. The *Ploscha* was a protest to reject a falsified election, but is there an alternative plan for the general public? What action are the country's citizens going to take to achieve the change they desire? Will they risk their stability to fight for change?

Civil society institutions and Western actors currently have limited access to – and hardly any influence upon – Belarus's governmental institutions. Given the bureaucrats' stranglehold over society, change is virtually impossible without them. The Orange Revolution may have opened the border between Ukraine and the West, but a revolution in Minsk would most likely have the opposite effect for Belarus.

BEYOND THE LAST DICTATOR?

Lukashenko's decision to launch a crackdown could be explained by clashes among different interest groups in the regime, a Russian (or other external) plot, provocation by the opposition or simply by his own decision to put an end to 'this mindless democracy'. Rather than hypothesising on his reasons, we should take note that Lukashenko has weakened his own position ahead of the upcoming privatisation process. This has the potential to change the game. Obviously the regime wants to control the privatisation process, in addition to continuing its control over the opposition. If the EU takes a smart approach now, it may be possible to further isolate Lukashenko from his own society and force the bureaucrats to reconsider the risk of him remaining in power for too long. If he is no longer able to provide concessions to compensate for his autocracy, the door will open to other alternatives.

The Western media and policymakers are pushing for a tougher response to the current situation in Belarus. If it does not seriously consider economic sanctions, the EU will remain hostage to the opposition it supports. A new policy must finally

acknowledge that the challenge presented by Belarus is more complex than it initially appears. Lukashenko is not the only challenge: Belarusian society supports order and stability, and does not seem to mind the lack of freedom it has to contend with in return. In order to make Belarus embrace democratic values – such as free and fair elections – the EU needs to engage all layers of society. Unless the West is able to expand its contacts and influence among the bureaucratic circle, it stands little chance of building public support and underwriting systemic reform.

Although the details are still unclear, the path towards a new policy is now visible. An appropriate and viable medium-term strategy for the West is to isolate and ignore Alexander Lukashenko while focusing on society as a whole. This is not an easy task: the West strongly desires alignment with Belarus. Without oil or gas, Lukashenko can only trade with his self-image: that of a dictator. Until the West reduces the importance of this commodity, it will continue to read from Lukashenko's script.

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