

## **Rethinking Belarus**

Does Belarus matter for the European Union (EU)? Is democratisation of the country in sight? What situation do Belarusians face on the ground? Which EU foreign policy should be adopted?

### **Belarus is a European problem**

Belarus is not a far-away country. It borders Ukraine, Russia and EU Member States Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Its authoritarian regime poses a special foreign policy problem right on Europe's eastern flank. Belarusian people are deprived of fundamental freedoms. European citizens' quality of life is closely bound up with the political and economic situation of eastern neighbours. This became obvious when Russia cut gas supplies to Ukraine in January 2009. EU budgets were directly affected. Given the importance of economic trade and gas transit via Belarus for EU interactions with Russia and political challenges such as illegal migration and drug trafficking, normalised EU relations with the country are strategically crucial.

EU Member States must not be satisfied with mere economic stability. The EU should stay true to its principles and values, namely promoting good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law. A common EU foreign policy towards the country needs to aim at democratisation and domesticating Europe's bête noire, Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who tightly controls the country from its capital Minsk.

### **A wind is blowing in EU-Belarus relations**

Unlike its neighbours to the west, independent Belarus departed from a path of transition to democracy soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Those who call the regime totalitarian exaggerate. But Condoleeza Rice, former US Secretary of State, was right in dubbing Lukashenka "Europe's last dictator". The nature of his regime is authoritarian. Going through international media coverage and official statements from Brussels on the regime's alleged liberalisation steps, one gets the impression a wind is blowing in EU-Belarus relations. In February 2009, European foreign ministers approved a new European Commission (EC) initiative targeting six former Soviet states: the "Eastern Partnership" will build upon the existing European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It will be formally launched at a Prague summit in May 2009. So far, the door is kept open for Belarus. Membership would not include an explicit accession prospect, but allow intensified EU-Belarus relations on a range of topics. The climate in Brussels seems generally Belarus-friendly.

Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, welcomed the release of Belarus' last political prisoners in August 2008 and visited Minsk in February 2009 after long having ostracized Lukashenka. The EU Council lifted a visa ban on him and 41 leading officials for a six-month "grace period" in October 2008. It had been in place since 2004. Jacek Protasiewicz, chairman of the European Parliament delegation for relations with Belarus, welcomed a November 2008 non-paper with liberalisation announcements by Belarusian authorities. The European Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, welcomed the registration of the Belarusian non-governmental organisation (NGO) "For Freedom" in December 2008, spearheaded by leading opposition figure Alyaksandr Milinkevich. Belarus gained political credit in Brussels

for so far not recognising the independence of quasi Russian puppet states South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the Russia-Georgia War 2008. There was no interruption of gas transit towards Europe via Belarus during the January 2009 Russia-Ukraine crisis. The regime allowed two independent newspapers and established three so-called public “Consultative Councils” on the economy, human rights and media freedom.

It is tempting to see a wind of change in Belarus. Unfortunately, this is only possible when one perceives the situation in a very selective manner. It remains possible that there is yet another storm to come. For a comprehensive picture of the situation for Belarusians on the ground, one needs to look beyond the regime’s demonstrative steps and image building efforts, by the way supported by London-based public relations firm Bell Pottering Group.

### **Europe’s most repressive regime**

Monitoring reports by Human Resource Center “Viasna” and the “Belarusian International Implementers Meeting” of donor and implementer organisations, offer detailed insights into the extent of human rights problems. Authorities effectively outplay and destroy political challenges and deprive citizens of resources and basic freedoms. The government-created “Consultative Councils” risk being mere phantoms, empty of substance, not responsive to independent experts’ views and not leading to real legislative changes.

Political repression has become more sophisticated. Lukashenka has still not cleared himself of allegations that he has been involved in the disappearance and killing of opposition activists in 1999 and 2000. Brussels’ constant calls for proper investigation are refused. There are no political prisoners, but more nuanced repression of civic activities persists. Politically active university students are expelled from their studies and forcefully drafted into the military, sometimes beaten up in and in military hospitals soon after.

The freedom of assembly situation is problematic. A peaceful February 2009 Valentine’s Day “March of Love” saw demonstrators beaten up and disbursed by special police units. “House-arrest” is common practice for those who voice concerns. One risks jail sentences for violating it. Applications for demonstrations are turned down without explanations and many activists fined for political activities. Criminal code article 342 (“organisation of group events violating public order, or active participation in such”) remains unchanged.

Belarusian civil society faces major obstacles. Authorities refuse registration or re-registration of NGOs on grounds of technicalities. Working for NGOs without legal address is criminalized by criminal code article 193 (“acting on behalf of non-registered organisation”). Most real estate belongs to the state. Higher rents hamper civil society establishment. Without property protection, authorities can crack down on anyone.

The regime dominates all media. Television is state-controlled. The Internet is routed through a state-run corporation. Despite two allowed independent newspapers, 13 registered independent newspapers are refused access to the state-run distribution and kiosk system. “Reporters Without Borders” say journalists’ flats were searched and accreditation problems remain. Several criminal code articles are controversial (article 367: “defamation of the President”; article 368: “degradation of the President”; article 369: “discrediting the Republic of Belarus”). Society lacks independent information.

There is a long list of faux elections. Presidential and parliamentary elections have failed to meet Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) standards for

democratic elections. Lukashenka used the 2004 elections to hold a flawed referendum allowing him to rewrite the Constitution and stay in power. And he has, since 1994.

Belarus' economy is no "major Soviet success story", unlike Grigory Ioffe writes in a 2004 Europe-Asia Studies article. True, McDonald's exists in Minsk. But Belarus has no market economy. It is a centrally planned one with company production targets. Entrepreneurs face difficulties. Property confiscation by the state remains possible at any time.

Corruption flourishes. Lukashenka initially displayed himself as anti-corruption crusader. Belarus now ranks place 151 of 180 countries on the "Corruption Perception Index 2008" by NGO "Transparency International". Belarusians feel entrusted power is abused for private gain. Proceeds from profitable businesses often go to obscure presidential funds.

To put it in a nutshell: Lukashenka is no Gorbachev. Steps of political relaxation have so far remained demonstrative, cosmetic, fragile and reversible. Belarus lacks systemic and institutional changes. In a February 2009 International Herald Tribune article, Sergei Martynov, Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, eloquently states that "Belarus is changing" and praises the regime's sincere "path to liberalisation". But the way authorities treat the country has not substantially changed. Ten million Belarusians still live in an environment of authoritarianism. The EU should not underestimate Lukashenka's capacity to suddenly push for a different direction. Think Cuba. When EU-Cuban relations seemed well set in 2003, Fidel Castro rounded up the 75 most prominent Cuban dissidents. So far, Lukashenka is no spearhead for Belarusian glasnost and perestroika.

### **This year screams for a proactive EU strategy**

It is easy to lose optimism. However, this year offers unique EU foreign policy opportunities. Lukashenka's partnership with Russia is crumbling and Belarus is hit exceptionally hard by the financial and economic crisis, despite official downplaying. Lukashenka begs for loans on all fronts, be it Russia, USA, Venezuela, the International Monetary Fund or the EU.

The EU could limit itself to short-term realpolitik. I believe this would be a fatal mistake. What could be called the "Russian sphere of interest" doctrine, approaching Belarus only via Russia and limiting interaction to the economic sphere, is clearly out-of-date. The current Czech and upcoming Swedish EU presidency are in a good position to put democratisation back on the agenda. Belarus needs rethinking. EU politicians, think tank experts and Belarusian democratic forces with fresh ideas should cement the terms of a coherent, proactive EU strategy as soon as possible.

First of all, the record on the EU's foreign policy objective needs to be set straight. Goal is a democratic neighbour whose people enjoy fundamental freedoms, not mere economic stability. In my view, the EU strategy should be based upon two pillars, each with short term and long term measures: The first is consistent support for Belarusian civil society and the democratic opposition. The second is conditional reengagement with Lukashenka's regime.

### **Supporting agents of change**

The Belarusian movement in favour of European values is wobbling. Agents of change can be NGOs, student activists, entrepreneurs, journalists, basically all those with independent

life plans who group people around them. The EU first needs to help them get back onto their knees. A healthy civil society sector and grass roots work towards a non-apathetic democratic political culture are crucial for potential democratisation. As a reminder: Without dedicated work by NGOs, dedicated activists and mass mobilisation, Georgia's 2003 "Rose Revolution", Ukraine's 2004 "Orange Revolution" and Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip Revolution" could not have happened.

The short term objective has to be civil society capacity building. The EC as a large aid donor should assure that money flows to key forces pushing for democracy, not to phantom organisations. Otherwise, increased financing is unlikely to produce better results. By relying on NGO's reputation and external revisions of their policy positions, financing so-called "governmental non-governmental organisations" (GONGO) and "donor oriented non-governmental organisations" (DONGO) can be avoided. These are pseudo-NGOs that either loose independence by following the donor's policy in a very market-oriented manner or have been established by the government, which uses them to boost its image, expand into the civil society sector and assure its servility to the state. The EC should increase staff and funding of its Minsk delegation and reinforce its team in Brussels working on Belarus. It needs to listen and be responsive to civil society leaders' ideas about designing better programmes. The EC instruments, namely the "European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights", "Decentralised Cooperation" and "Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States", are sometimes off the target offering grants to "local authorities" and "civil society actors" not yet developed in Belarus. Practical research on civil society's situation should be financed to be in line with the reality on the ground. Calls for proposals need to be less bureaucratic. Relevant institutions should not have to spend all their time filling in forms and praying for one short-term project grant after another. Dissidents need to regularly convene. Diplomatic embassies and missions can insulate them from repression and remind that one first needs to work together for democracy before opposing each others policy preferences.

In the long run, the EU should try to get strengthened civil society experts involved in decision-making and EU-Belarus negotiations. Constant public diplomacy can work towards awakening the ensemble of society. Belarusians need to feel EU solidarity. Abandoning visa requirements for ordinary Belarusians, more student exchanges, integrating culture and business into closer relations are examples of EU soft power ideas.

### **Dealing with dictators**

There is no recipe for success for dealing with dictators. Foreign policy can assist change processes, but tends to not change autocrats overnight. Diplomatic platitudes and human rights lectures are ineffective. Joseph Nye's soft power approach with games of attraction, carrots and sticks is promising. The EU should seek critical dialogue with the regime.

In the short term, Lukashenka should be given a second chance. More precisely, the visa ban lift should be extended for another six months until October 2009. By April 2009, when this decision is due, the government should be presented a list clearly defining areas, measurement criteria and a timeline for liberalisation progress the EU demands to see implemented. Lukashenka or a senior Belarusian official should be invited to the "Eastern Partnership" summit in May 2009, but not promised anything.

Cooperation is no one-way street. The EU should stress that that it cannot be a politically unquestioning partner. Required measurable progress should be doable for the authorities.

For starters, electoral law should be made OECD-compliant, problematic criminal code articles abolished and journalist accreditation procedures simplified. Conditions for civil society have to be improved, independent information allowed, anti-corruption laws put in place, minorities' rights respected and arbitrary arrest, detention and ill-treatment stopped.

I think the EU has strong leverage and many incentives on offer. The regime urgently needs credits. It does not want sanctions reintroduced. "Eastern Partnership" membership would allow for a comprehensive free-trade area with an attractive EU market of nearly 500 million consumers, boosting the economy with foreign investors, more business opportunities and technical cooperation for modernising many fields.

In the long term, a more democratic Belarus could be offered normalised relations with the EU, ENP membership and ultimately full-fledged cooperation. However, if attraction does not work, carrots and sticks can be used. Sanctions in form of targeted financial or travel restrictions should be reintroduced if monitoring shows no measurable progress. The EU needs to be flexible and should not reward vague commitments.

## **Conclusion**

Belarus is a problem for Europe. The country is strategically crucial for the EU. The current human rights situation must not be ignored. Lukashenka's recent cosmetic steps have not substantially altered Belarusians' situation on the ground. But this year offers unique opportunities for a common EU foreign policy towards the country, which faces financial and economic hardship. It is the right time to rethink Belarus. A coherent and proactive EU strategy to continually strengthen democratic forces and gradually reengage with the regime is needed. Foreign policy probably will not abolish dictatorship overnight. Cracks in the asphalt might be limited at first and backlashes are possible. But grass shooting through can lead to unexpected consequences. A sustained EU engagement for Belarus has good chances of assisting a real Minsk spring and a Belarus ultimately anchored in the club of European democracies.

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