

Mapping an Alternative Future for Belarus

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 160
July 2011

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Since the December 2010 presidential elections in Belarus, the level of drama permeating the country has been on the rise. There have been arrests and trials of prominent opposition figures, the rise and suppression of a new “silent” protest movement, a terror attack in the Minsk metro (April), growing trade imbalances and plummeting reserves resulting in a devaluation of the Belarusian ruble (May), and restricted foreign policy options stemming from Western isolation and Russian hardball tactics. Together, these developments constitute a fundamental – perhaps even insurmountable – challenge for President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994.

The West, in particular the European Union, has looked on with despair at the collapse of any expectation that liberalization might take hold in Belarus, as had somewhat naively been hoped for in the run-up to the elections. Once these hopes were dashed, the EU began to express political support for dissidents but refrained from instituting comprehensive economic sanctions or proposing other measures to promote change in Belarus. At present, the EU lacks a strategy to deal with Belarus and is apparently hoping that the deepening economic crisis and the unwillingness of Minsk to deal with Moscow will make Lukashenko compromise, just as he did in 2008 when he freed political prisoners. This hope is not entirely unfounded. The position that the release of prisoners remains a non-negotiable precondition for the restoration of relations may eventually bear fruit.

However, Lukashenko’s position as head of Europe’s last “dictatorial” regime is not the only negative scenario facing the West. There are two conceivable outcomes that are just as problematic, even if their sustainability can be questioned. The first is total economic crisis, resulting in chaos and pauperization of the population regardless of who is in power. The second is the replacement of Lukashenko with a much less autonomous figure, leading to the transformation of Belarus into a kind of outsized “South Ossetia,” totally dependent on Moscow, on Russia’s Western border.

It can be argued, therefore, that in addition to seeking to achieve the liberal evolution of the current regime, Western policy toward Belarus should take precautions to avoid these possible negative outcomes. The West needs to present Belarus with a clear vision of what it can offer if the country were to embark on a path of reform. In order for Belarus to choose a path of sovereignty, democracy, and partnership with Europe, the West should ensure that what it has on offer is appealing and workable. Most importantly, rather than contemplate carrots and sticks vis-à-vis the regime or foster instruments of support for remaining opposition structures, a significant package of incentives for the population-at-large should be prepared.

What Went Wrong with Western Policies?

Western policies toward Belarus have been uneven. The policy of engaging Lukashenko, which the EU adopted between 2008 and 2010, was largely a result of the perceived failure of Europe's previous approach, when interaction with Minsk was kept to a minimum (e.g., isolation). Engagement – or even the promise of engagement – was arguably a sound response to Lukashenko's own overtures resulting from Russia's increased assertiveness. However, the major weakness of the EU's engagement policy were also evident: the EU's readiness to deal with Lukashenko despite the fact that few of the West's longstanding conditions had been met indicated Brussels' awareness of its own powerlessness. The EU did not have sufficient leverage over Lukashenko and therefore had to rely on Lukashenko's own will to effect change. As was apparent, Lukashenko was aware of this weakness, and exploited it.

In fact, Western policy toward Belarus has been fundamentally deficient in many ways. First, economic sanctions, which the West and particularly Europe can apply, have very limited scope. The EU's economic assistance package to Belarus is negligible, and Belarus exports very few manufactured goods to Europe. Belarus receives most of its income from oil and gas transit, which cannot be severed by Europeans without damaging the economic interests of several EU member states (or those of Russia). Oil products refined by Belarus can also be re-exported through other countries. In fact, Belarus has lined up a string of peripheral trading partners. There are export markets and also moneymaking opportunities in using Baltic and Ukrainian ports. Belarus is also a player in the armaments and military technologies markets. These and other factors limit the EU's economic impact, while piquing the interest of opportunistic partners such as China, Venezuela, and resource-rich Azerbaijan.

Second, both the United States and Europe are extremely reluctant to admit that democracy promotion has a chance to succeed only in a regional context. By criticizing Lukashenko while paying less attention to the state of democracy in Russia or in other authoritarian CIS states, they undermine their own credibility and become an easy target of Lukashenko's propaganda machine, which successfully accuses them of double standards.

Third, the lack of coherence within Europe and lack of agreement between the EU and the United States undermines the efficiency of any policy course. Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov was received, if not entirely welcomed, in several EU

capitals, including Rome and Helsinki, just when Western unity in condemning Minsk's unacceptable behavior was most needed in the wake of the 2010 election. As Anais Marin from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs [observed](#), the French foreign ministry curiously held back criticism over the rigged elections.*

Fourth, the West never seems to have a sense of urgency regarding Belarus. It takes Western institutions months to pass decisions even when an immediate response is required. This indicates that political contingency planning is not a strong part of Western policymaking.

Fifth, the "spirit of the age" differs substantially from that of the early 1990s. Then, countries willing to try and transform themselves into liberal democracies and functioning market economies were considered worthy of the prospect of full Euro-Atlantic integration. Today's message from the West is quite different: whatever results are demonstrated by neighboring states, the EU will, at best, see them only as "partners." Even if this position is the only realistic one given the many problems (financial and otherwise) facing the EU, such a message discourages the political mobilization needed to achieve desired change.

The Russian Factor

Naturally, the West's Belarus policy cannot develop in a vacuum. How critical is the Russian factor? Is it axiomatic that without Russia onboard, changes in Belarus will remain a dream? Should the West "sell" Russia on its policies? The fact that these questions are frequently answered in the affirmative creates a distorted picture of Belarusian development and provides an excuse for inaction in the West's dealings with Belarus.

First and foremost, the political goals of Moscow today are incompatible with those of the West. The Russian leadership might be frustrated with Lukashenko (particularly with his public disloyalty and the amount of subsidies the Kremlin pays him), but Russia has nothing against the governing style of the regime. The Kremlin would probably accept any another similar leader, neither reformist nor liberal, who would be willing simply to grant Russia the economic and political control it seeks. If Lukashenko can perform his basic pro-Moscow functions, and guarantee that Belarus will not accept a European development path, Moscow will deal with him. The last thing the Kremlin needs in Belarus is a victory by opposition parties in free and fair elections. Russia's current policy thus seems to be this: conditional support of Lukashenko by means of loans, possibly in exchange for economic privileges for Russian companies.

Second, Russia may at the moment not have any other choice but to deal with Lukashenko. Contrary to common perceptions in the West, Russia is far from omnipotent in Belarus. The election campaign of 2010 clearly demonstrated that

* A previously published version of this memo mistakenly stated that the German Ambassador to Belarus attended Lukashenko's January 2011 inauguration. In reality, he attended the inauguration of the Belarusian parliament in October 2008. The author regrets and apologizes for the error.

Moscow lost the position of kingmaker in Belarus just as it had in Ukraine several years before. Russian media criticism of Lukashenko and the conflict between the top leadership of the two states did not influence the outcome of the election. This should not have come as any surprise: in Belarus, there is no “pro-Russian” opposition, no “Belarusian Yanukovich,” who can challenge Lukashenko on Russia’s behalf.

After the December election, public opinion toward Russia dipped further. This turn is also hardly surprising, taking into account Moscow’s solidarity with Lukashenko and Russia’s unwillingness to defend political prisoners. According to data from the Belarusian Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies, in March 2011, for the first time ever, the share of respondents who said they would vote in a theoretical referendum in favor of accession to the EU over unification with Russia formed an absolute majority. The share of those who said they would choose unification with Russia over the EU decreased from 56 to 31 percent between 2006 and 2011.

Finally, Russia’s economic resources are not unlimited. Russian lenders are reluctant to consider new loans for Belarus, as it is unlikely they will be repaid. More generally, there is a clear discrepancy between Moscow’s goal of keeping Belarus in its own geopolitical and security orbit and its unwillingness to pay a price in the form of new economic subsidies, cheap energy, and payments for military bases.

Toward a Policy Response

Is there anything that the West can do to make its Belarus policy more successful and to map an alternative future for the country? The answer is yes, but first of all it is necessary to realize that new policies should pursue more than one goal and focus on the future of the country, not that of Alexander Lukashenko.

There is no need to change the signal the West is currently sending to the regime. Lukashenko should know what his options are. He can release prisoners and slowly proceed toward normalization of relations with the West, which for him would imply access to the credit resources of international financial institutions and more room for maneuver both internally and externally. Or he can step on a slippery slope of concessions to Moscow, and at the end of that road meet his replacement.

Taking into account that the traditional—often dubbed “professional”—opposition in Belarus has been essentially destroyed, it makes little sense to look for a legitimate opposition leader among those people who are still free. After all, the record of most of these figures speaks more about their inability to agree with each other than about their appeal to voters. But Belarusian civil society is in the process of self-reorganization, and soon it can and will produce new leaders.

In order to build a bridge to potential opposition leaders, the United States and the EU need a strategy of “prosperity promotion,” probably even moreso than one of democracy promotion. The EU’s Eastern Partnership program, with its emphasis on status and institutions rather than economic assistance, is not designed for this. The most that the Partnership can contribute are projects of regional cooperation, which are helpful but by no means sufficient.

Plans and strategies for Belarus' step-by-step integration with the European Union should be made public and explicitly include discussion of trade liberalization and a visa-free regime for citizens of Belarus. Such a strategy would follow the example of EU engagement with Ukraine and Moldova. At the moment, Belarus is lagging far behind its regional neighbors but as a small and (until recently) less corrupt country, it can definitely catch up. Clearly embracing this possibility – and communicating it to Belarusians – is critical.

The West's desire to have a common position with Moscow on Belarus should be shelved and placed into the archives of diplomacy. If such a common policy were to emerge, it would likely lead to a replacement of Lukashenko by a figure whose political views would not be to the West's liking – if for no other reason than the fact that Moscow would be faster to react and more assertive than the EU. Moreover, the willingness to conduct Belarus policy in consultation with Moscow will only discredit the West in the eyes of the remaining opposition and the growing number of people who value political sovereignty for Belarus.

The regime of Lukashenko is approaching its end stage. Its social contract no longer holds, since the leader cannot guarantee economic stability or personal safety. Even the country's sovereignty is in jeopardy. To think about life after Lukashenko may seem impractical, but it is necessary. However, it is only if the West is able to produce a quality blueprint and convince the people of Belarus that it is realistic will it be able to act efficiently, genuinely, and decisively when push comes to shove again in Minsk.