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Preface

Pavol Demeš and Sascha Müller-Kraenner

This book is a joint project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Heinrich Böll Foundation and comes in the wake of two conferences – one in Warsaw, Poland, another in Bratislava, Slovakia – which examined recent developments in Belarus. This volume brings together contributions from democracy activists, analysts, policy makers and opinion leaders from Belarus, Europe and North America who share a deep concern about the prospects for democracy in Belarus.

With the recent eastward enlargement of the European Union, Belarus has become a direct neighbor of this community of democratic states. Yet its own domestic path of development has led the country further and further away from democratic norms, respect for human rights and fruitful cooperation with the international community.

The recent presidential elections on March 19, 2006, the vote-rigging that accompanied them and the subsequent police brutality against peaceful protesters have once again highlighted the nature of the current regime in Belarus, and have further isolated the country. By contrast, neighboring Ukraine reaffirmed its commitment to democracy with free and fair parliamentary elections on March 26, 2006 offering an example of what can be accomplished.

Without a doubt, the situation in Belarus poses a major challenge not only for democrats inside the country but also for policy makers in the European Union, the United States and Russia. There is clearly, therefore, a pressing need to better understand the domestic and international dynamics at the root of the current situation in Belarus. Such insights will also help to formulate coherent international strategies that are crucial to facilitating democratic development in Eastern Europe.

How should we proceed? How can we better focus our foreign policy instruments to support democratic developments? What sort of diplomatic initiatives or assistance programs should we undertake in the context of a closed, oppressive society in the European Union’s immediate neighborhood? Such questions are not easy to answer. But given what is at stake, for Belarusians but also for the credibility of our own democracies, it is vital that answers are found.

Both parties to this project will continue to cooperate with institutions inside and outside Belarus that are working towards democracy in that country. However complicated, the situation in Belarus is not at all hopeless. On the

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contrary, recent events have demonstrated that the democratic spirit in Belarusian society is strong, and that civic activists and opposition groups have never been more united.

We present this collection of essays in the hope that it will help a wider public to better understand recent social and political developments in the country, and contribute to the development of international strategies that can enhance prospects for democracy in Belarus.

Foreword

Alyaksandr Milinkevich

As I write these words, dozens of people are still in jail in my country, including my fellow presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin, following the unprecedented wave of popular protests against the rigged elections of March 19, 2006. People have been beaten and bloodied. Families inquire after the fate of their loved ones. None of us knows what repressive measures the regime is now planning.

And yet, I am filled with confidence. In the week following the farce of the “election” the tens of thousands of ordinary Belarusians that came out into the freezing streets of Minsk sent a message not only to the regime but to the whole country and to the wider world. The content of that message is clear and unambiguous: We refuse to be lied to! We demand to be free! We are no longer afraid!

The March 19 elections marked a watershed in the short history of Belarus as an independent state. The regime that planned an “elegant” victory has been exposed as nothing other than a fraud. The mask of legitimacy has slipped off.

Our country will never be the same. We have set in motion something that will not be forgotten and cannot be stopped. We do not know when victory will come but we do know that, at some time in the future, our victory is assured. We have never been as united as we are today with people, parties and civic groups from all across the political spectrum coming together to fight for freedom. We have never been as clear about the urgency of our task as we are today. We have never been as confident as we are today.

And part of that confidence is owed to those of you in the outside world that stood by us in our darkest hour. It is owed to the journalists who shone the light of truth on the darkest regime on the continent. It is owed to the people who lit candles with us on the 16th of each month to remember the disappeared. It is owed to the governments who argued in favor of our cause and to the representatives of Europe and America who received me and my colleagues with such warmth and hospitality in the run up to March 19. All of you showed us that we were not alone, that our fate was your fate and that we mattered to you. As the leader of the democratic opposition, I thank you for everything you have done.

This book will help a wider audience to understand the background to recent events in Belarus and, I hope, will inspire even more people to rally in our support. The book also addresses the crucial question of how the international community can help us in our struggle for democracy, and I am confident

Alyaksandr Milinkevich is leader of the United Democratic Forces in Belarus.

that the ideas outlined here will contribute to effective strategies in Europe, America and beyond.

It is vital that the momentum for democratic change continues to gather strength in Belarus. The struggle is not over. It has just begun.

Introduction

Joerg Forbrig, David R. Marples and Pavol Demeš

On March 19, 2006, presidential elections were held in Belarus. At first glance, nothing seems to have changed. As with other Belarusian elections in recent years, the poll was blatantly rigged, confirming Alyaksandr Lukashenka as president for yet another term. Prior to the elections, massive pressure was mounted by state authorities on the democratic opposition and civil society, depriving them of organizational structures and financial resources, arresting key leaders and activists *en masse*, and impeding any of their attempts to reach out to Belarusian society at large. A massive propaganda campaign was waged in the state-run media, praising the incumbent ruler (or *bat'ka*, father of all Belarusians) while denigrating those opposing him as hooligans, fascists and Western spies. During the elections, massive manipulations took place to ensure a landslide victory for Lukashenka, officially announced as having taken over 80 percent of the votes. This is known to be far beyond the support he actually enjoys in Belarus, extending as it does to approximately half of the Belarusian population. And when, after these sham elections, considerable numbers of Belarusians took to the streets of Minsk, the regime showed little reluctance to crush protests with brutal violence and to arrest hundreds of people. In light of recent events, then, one may be forgiven for thinking that business remains as usual in this unfortunate and overlooked country on the doorstep of the European Union.

Yet such an assessment would be premature. Important developments have taken place on several levels that cannot be without effects for democracy in Belarus, no matter how remote the prospect of a democratic breakthrough may seem after the recent presidential elections. Firstly, one cannot but be impressed with the strong show made by the political opposition, civic groups, and democratically-minded citizens at large, despite massive and prohibitive pressure by the state apparatus. In a sign of maturity, the political opposition largely united and rallied behind a joint candidate. Alyaksandr Milinkevich relentlessly toured the country for numerous meetings with Belarusians, and canvassed thousands of citizens door-to-door. Within a few months, and without access to mass media, this effort made the candidate known to a majority of citizens and demonstrated that democratic alternatives indeed exist to the powers-that-be.

No less than the political opposition, civil society visibly engaged in the struggle for democracy in Belarus. Several campaign efforts were launched

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by civic groups that variously addressed human rights abuses and the fate of political opponents and prisoners, demanded a free choice of Belarusians over the future of their country or, more aggressively, announced that many people had indeed enough of the propaganda, repressions and isolation that conditions their daily lives under the Lukashenka regime. Other civic organizations monitored the coverage of the election campaign in the state-run media, provided alternative information and critical content to the Belarusian electorate, addressed specific social groups from entrepreneurs to pensioners, monitored and recorded the manifold repressions faced by civic activists, and engaged considerable numbers of new volunteers.

These combined efforts by the democratic political opposition and civic groups and activists resulted, on election day and thereafter, in the largest protests seen in Belarus in many years. Thousands of Belarusian citizens took to the streets of Minsk for week-long peaceful demonstrations against the elections, withstanding both threats of violence by the regime and icy temperatures. Islands of a free and democratic Belarus emerged, such as the tent camp in October Square, where civic courage, solidarity and open debate defied the fear and apathy that many consider grip Belarusian society. Although this upsurge of civic feeling was soon thwarted by Lukashenka's police state, it signals an important change among Belarusian citizens, or a "revolution of the spirit" as one author in this book observes.

Secondly, and no less importantly, the Lukashenka regime itself has clearly undergone a significant evolution in the context of the presidential elections. Against the background of democratic change in other countries of the region, such as Georgia and Ukraine, and for fear that Belarus may become another stage of the success of people power, the regime has markedly stepped up its repressive actions. Hundreds of democratic leaders and civic activists have faced arrests, interrogations, prison sentences or heavy fines over the last months. Dozens of non-governmental groups and organizations have been shut down, and independent newspapers have essentially disappeared. New legislation was introduced to suppress critical voices from within and to prevent democracy assistance from outside. Propaganda in state-run media has taken on hysterical tones and the police eventually lost all restraint using unmitigated violence against peaceful demonstrators.

This unprecedented crackdown on the expression of democracy in Belarus should not, however, be misinterpreted as a sign of strength on the part of the regime. Instead, it indicates the regime's high degree of nervousness about demands for freedom, democracy and prosperity that are gradually becoming more widespread among Belarusians. The authoritarian logic of Lukashenka and his regime cannot accommodate and satisfy these demands, but requires acquiescence on the part of the population that can only be attained through ever greater repression. This repression is gradually beginning to affect a growing number of Belarusian citizens, rather than just isolated and small groups of activists. This was certainly the case with the mass arrests after the March elections. This authoritarian spiral of repression is likely to

de-legitimate Lukashenka among many Belarusians, including many not fundamentally opposed to his regime. In parallel, state-run media have taken their propaganda to levels of aggressiveness and hysteria that contradict the personal experiences of many Belarusians, trigger doubt among them and ultimately undermine the credibility of the regime's channels of information. Taken together, recent developments indicate a number of notable weaknesses in the structure of the Lukashenka regime.

Lastly, the international community has begun to pay more serious attention to the question of democracy in Belarus. While for a long time, Belarus had been a marginalized country known to few and covered rarely in the media, the recent elections and events thereafter have catapulted the country into the limelight of foreign media and policy makers. Western governments received opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich prior to the elections, and a flurry of resolutions and appeals from foreign governments and parliaments called upon the Belarusian authorities to ensure a free, fair and peaceful electoral process. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) sent an election monitoring mission, despite initial hesitation, as did the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Major international broadcasters covered news from Belarus for a full week after the poll, and European Union ambassadors visited street protesters in Minsk. Strong condemnations by the democratic community followed the election results and, in particular, the violence employed against protesters. And even Russia is known to have called upon Minsk to exercise restraint towards demonstrators, while congratulating Lukashenka upon his reelection.

This stronger engagement on part of the international community is a very promising, and much-needed, signal. For too long, the far-reaching international isolation imposed on Belarus by the Lukashenka regime has been replicated by little foreign interest in the country, especially on the part of the West. Yet domestic developments in Belarus cannot be uncoupled from broader international politics. The European Union directly borders Belarus, the United States have made explicit references to this country within its freedom agenda, and for Russia, this Slavic neighbor is a particularly close and strategic partner. It is through this triangle that international politics impacts on the domestic situation in Belarus, and foreign responses to the recent presidential elections appear to indicate considerable changes in this constellation.

It is against the background of these recent events and developments that this book was conceived. It brings together contributions from analysts, activists and policy makers involved with and caring about democracy in Belarus from within the country and abroad. These lend their expertise and experience to shedding light on a broad range of social, political and international factors conditioning the prospects for democracy in Belarus. In so doing, this book hopes to contribute to helping the growing international audience that is interested in Belarus to better understand recent developments in this country. No less importantly, it is on the basis of such better understanding that more effective strategies can be devised among Belarusian democrats and their

international partners. For this reason, the contributions to this book combine analytical insight with policy orientation.

The Contributions to this Book

The book opens with an introductory article placing Belarus in the context of recent democratic change in Central and Eastern Europe. Many observers harbored hopes that Belarus would witness a similar color-coded revolution as the ones that overturned authoritarian regimes in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in recent years. However, as Vitali Silitski of Stanford University argues in his contribution, such expectations have overlooked the critical fact that, compared with those more fortunate neighbors, Belarus today is a significantly more consolidated authoritarian regime. Faced with incomparably harsher conditions for democratic struggle, the events accompanying the recent presidential elections should be appreciated as encouraging signs of hope rather than interpreted as a failed color revolution.

In the first part of the book, the articles further deepen this analysis of the domestic situation in Belarus prior to the presidential elections. Ethan S. Burger and Viktor Minchuk, two Washington-based observers and analysts of Belarusian affairs, provide a detailed account of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's consolidation of power in recent years. Their chapter points to the fact that the regime in Minsk has systematically built its control over virtually all aspects of public life, while at the same time grooming its considerable base in society through anti-corruption measures, re-distributive policies, and job security.

Recent trends in public opinion in Belarus are the subject of a contribution by Oleg Manaev, a Belarusian sociologist of renown. Socio-economic attitudes as well as opinions on geopolitical issues substantiate the observation that Lukashenka can indeed rely on considerable support among Belarusians, yet one that is by no means as overwhelming as portrayed in official election results. Instead, a considerable portion of society clearly desires change in Belarus, but has not as yet crystallized into a strong and active electorate.

The political parties and actors to address change-oriented voters and pursue democratic transformation in Belarus are the subject of a contribution by David R. Marples of the University of Alberta, Canada, and Uladzimir Padhol, a political consultant from Minsk. Their detailed overview of the political opposition is followed by an analysis of the gradual emergence of coalitions among parties and politicians, which resulted in the candidacy of Alyaksandr Milinkevich on behalf of the united democratic opposition that was one of the main achievements of the democratic opposition in this presidential campaign.

A parallel process of cooperation has occurred among civil society groups, as outlined by Andrei Sannikov and Inna Kuley, two key civic pro-democracy activists in Belarus today, in their article. Their key observation is that the increasingly totalitarian nature of the pressure put on civic activists by the

Lukashenka regime forced them to choose between winding up their activities altogether and continuing to work in underground conditions. Those who continued substantially increased cooperation within civil society and made a considerable contribution to the pro-democracy struggle prior to the presidential elections, either through pre-election activities in close coordination with the political opposition, or more independently by mobilizing the public against the incumbent regime's human rights abuses and democratic lacunae.

The second part of the book turns to the international context of developments in Belarus. It opens with a contribution by Pirkka Tapiola, Senior Advisor to the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and a long-time observer of developments in Belarus and Eastern Europe. He provides a detailed account of European Union policy towards Belarus and argues that the EU is clearly committed to support the development of democracy, civil society, the rule of law and a market economy in that country. Yet its efforts to build partnership with Belarus have been frustrated by the authoritarian backslide of the regime in Minsk. In response, the EU has increased its pressure on the Lukashenka government while at the same time seeking to identify approaches to engage with Belarusian citizens, civil society and independent media directly.

This approach is, by and large, mirrored by the United States, as argues Robin Shepherd, Adjunct Fellow of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. The policies of the US government derive their broad moral impetus from the freedom agenda announced by President Bush at the outset of his second term in office, while facing important constraints in US relations with Russia, for which Belarus is a complicating factor. Navigating between these two poles, it appears that US policies to support the democratization of Belarus have reached a certain limit, beyond which engagement seems unlikely.

Russia and its policies towards Belarus are central to the contribution by Dmitri Trenin of the Moscow Center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. They are conditioned by a broader shift in foreign policy in recent years, away from a comparably liberal paradigm to a harder-line set of policies. This change certainly benefited Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Yet as the recent presidential elections have signaled, the Kremlin would also be well-advised to think beyond the current Belarusian regime and to pursue a more pro-active policy, in contrast to the hitherto reactive one.

The last article in this part is devoted to international democracy assistance, an instrument that in recent years has increasingly become a tool of foreign policy. Balázs Jarábik of the Pontis Foundation in Slovakia scrutinizes the extent, to which Western programs to support democracy in Belarus have been effective. The contribution presents sobering findings, as inappropriate policies and mechanisms for implementing democracy assistance on part of the United States and the European Union have combined with prohibitive strategies and hurdles imposed by the Belarusian government. As a result, American and European democracy assistance leaves much to be desired. Current interest

in Belarus provides an occasion to review approaches to supporting the democratization of authoritarian regimes.

The third part of the book looks more closely into the presidential elections that took place in Belarus on March 19, 2006. In a first article, Belarus expert David R. Marples provides a comprehensive overview of the presidential campaign and the elections. Detailed evidence is provided that the election campaign was accompanied by massive propaganda, intimidation of opposition leaders and their supporters, and manipulations of the electoral process that left few, if any, surprised at Lukashenka's landslide victory. More importantly, the aftermath of the elections, large-scale and enduring public protests, and the violent crackdown by security forces that ensued, were unexpected for many. Indeed, the events that followed the elections may well prove to be of more lasting significance than the elections themselves.

These observations are followed by two anonymous contributions that are based on personal observations by Western analysts of Belarusian affairs. The first of these provides a diary-style account of the atmosphere and events in Minsk prior to, during and after the elections, while the second contribution illustrates this account with amateur photographs taken on the ground. Both these contributions constitute evidence of the strengthening of civil society that, for many, signals the impending, if gradual, demise of Lukashenka's regime. The fact that "the die is cast!" in Belarus is passionately put forth in the contribution by Bogdan Klich, Member of the European Parliament and chairman of the EU-Belarus delegation.

Concluding this part of the book is an overview of international responses to the presidential elections, provided by Alina Belskaya of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. This account of reactions by the European Union, international organizations, and individual governments indicates clearly the unprecedented and wide attention Belarus has received in the context of the presidential elections, permitting the tentative hope that a degree of this interest will follow the further evolution of the situation in Belarus.

The last part of the book shifts in the direction of a strategy and policy-oriented discussion. Central to the articles included is the question how the West and Europe in particular can effectively help make democracy in Belarus a viable prospect. The opening article by David J. Kramer, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs at the US Department of State, stresses that Belarus is a challenge that is faced jointly by the United States and Europe. This partnership is based on the shared belief that Belarusians deserve their place in the transatlantic community of democratic nations, and cooperation towards assisting democracy in Belarus is to further intensify in the coming months.

On the part of the European Union, however, effective support for Belarusian democrats requires considerable strategic adjustment, as several further articles argue. According to Dov Lynch of the EU Institute for Strategic Studies, the principal problem of the EU is that it has been successful in exporting

democracy through enlargement but that it lacks strategies for assisting democratic developments in countries that have not, as yet, a membership perspective. Yet if the EU wishes to see stable democracies emerging in its neighborhood, it urgently needs to develop effective democracy assistance as a tool of its foreign policy.

One such mechanism for rendering support to democrats in countries neighboring the European Union is a European Foundation for Democracy, as proposed by Markus Meckel of the German Bundestag. As an autonomous entity funded from the EU budget, such an agency would provide assistance to civil society groups and activities to strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and independent media in countries in the process of democratization or even before the process has begun. This foundation would not only enable the EU to assist democracy in countries with less-than-democratic credentials but it would also be able to act more flexibly and faster than the European Commission with its often cumbersome procedures.

The contribution by Kristi Raik of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs further expands this line of thinking. It stresses the critical role civil society has played for democratization in Central and Eastern Europe but observes that this importance is not sufficiently appreciated by EU democracy assistance. Consequently, EU policies require adjustments to reflect the role of civil society for democracy, and commensurate support programs and mechanisms for their implementation need to be devised, including cooperation with EU-based NGOs active in democratizing countries, and specialized grant making foundations to disburse EU assistance.

These proposals indicate that much needs to be done to transform EU democracy assistance, to Belarus but also to other countries in its neighborhood where democracy has not yet taken hold. Adjustments of strategies and policies, and the possible establishment of new mechanisms and institutions are certainly necessary, but they will materialize and yield effects only in the long run. By contrast, democrats in Belarus also need immediate support, and a variety of options exist for the EU to help in the short term, as the last two articles of this book argue.

In his contribution, Jacek Kucharczyk of the Institute of Public Affairs in Poland draws on his country's rich experience with struggling for democracy prior to 1989. Back then, the democratic opposition was supported by symbolic acts on the part of the international community, such as international recognition of its leaders as legitimate representatives of a democratic society, the welcome offered by foreign embassies to opposition activists, providing them with resources, and serving as meeting spaces with representatives of the nomenklatura. There was also support for creating alternative channels to provide large parts of the citizenry with independent information. All of these and other forms of help can and should be rendered to the Belarusian opposition and civil society in the short term.

In a similar vein, sanctions are an instrument that can and should be employed

swiftly vis-à-vis Belarus. As Milan Horáček, Member of the European Parliament argues in his chapter, the European Union has not nearly exhausted the potential of sanctions. Although further steps in this direction have been made recently, a much broader range of regime officials in Belarus should face visa bans. Economic sanctions also deserve renewed consideration, especially those that target the foreign assets of officials. At the same time, it needs to be ensured that the negative effects of sanctions for ordinary Belarusians are kept to a minimum, and that they are accompanied by programs directly benefiting the population.

Taken together, the strategic papers brought together in the last part of this book provide a rich pool of thought and inspiration for policy makers, democracy activists and civil society leaders, analysts and experts concerned with democracy in Belarus, be they based in the country itself or abroad. The suggestions laid out here flow, in many ways, from the analytical parts of this book that provide a multifaceted view on recent social and political developments affecting Belarus. In this combination, this volume hopes to be a resource to all those who wish to better understand the complicated tasks facing Belarusian democrats today, as well as to those who are in a position to help their Belarusian partners in living up to those challenges.

An important caveat is appropriate at this point. Inspired by the March 2006 presidential elections in Belarus, the contributions to this book were drafted and published as events in the country were unfolding. While this will certainly add a note of authenticity to this publication, the tight timeframe has also placed limits on both authors and editors. Thus, this publication cannot claim absolute comprehensiveness in covering all aspects of developments in Belarus, nor has it been possible to establish full coherence on all accounts. For example, exact and reliable data on the numbers of protesters participating in the demonstrations in Minsk has not yet become available. These constraints, it is trusted, will be overcome by future analyses of the events.

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