

European Union Policy towards Belarus: An Extended Hand

Pirkka Tapiola

The basic philosophy behind European Union (EU) policy towards Belarus has been a strong willingness to engage in a relationship enabling the development of Belarus as a European country with a strong civil society, a strengthening democracy, the rule of law and a functioning market economy. It is against this backdrop that the EU has sent the consistent and clear message to Minsk of its preparedness to build a real partnership, including through the instruments contained in the European Neighborhood Policy.

However, the EU has been unable to move forward with engagement, as the preconditions for doing so have not been present. Belarus remains an island of authoritarianism in the middle of a region where democracy has increasingly gained momentum. Engagement is only possible when both sides desire it. Disappointingly, the Belarusian leadership have refused to open up their country. Through their actions, they stand in the way of a better and more European future for the citizens of Belarus.

The March 19, 2006 presidential elections were a sad reminder of the realities, which the Belarusian population face in their daily lives. As noted by the OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), these elections were neither free nor fair. The report of the observers cited abuse of state power to protect incumbent President Lukashenka in the run-up to the poll and drew attention to serious problems encountered during the counting of votes and the tabulation of results. The election result announced by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) lacked any credibility. While under the current circumstances in Belarus, President Lukashenka could well have prevailed in the elections, his announced support of over 82 percent of the vote and the official voter turnout of around 92 percent has raised serious questions on whether the electorate had been given an opportunity to have their say.

The months and weeks preceding polling day saw reports of harassment of the opposition and arrests of its supporters. The statements of the chairman of the Belarusian KGB and the Prosecutor-General in the week before the poll, threatening to treat those participating in unauthorized demonstrations as terrorists who could ultimately face even the death penalty, sent chills down the spine of people both within the international community and in Belarus. It was clear that the elections would be held in an atmosphere of fear, aimed at crushing the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.

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Remarks to the EU Ambassadors in Minsk by Foreign Minister Martynov that responsibility for the consequences of post-election disorder would lie with the opposition and “those foreign governments supporting it” underlined the deteriorating atmosphere before the elections. EU High Representative Javier Solana replied to Martynov in public, stressing that full responsibility for upholding the fundamental rights of and guaranteeing the safety of the Belarusian population lies with the authorities of Belarus. He reminded the Belarusian authorities that the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators exercising their indisputable rights of freedom of expression and assembly would meet with a strong international reaction.

Despite this background and the difficult atmosphere, the world saw strong popular mobilization in the aftermath of the poll, with supporters of the democratic opposition led by presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich gathering peacefully in the center of Minsk, demanding respect for their political rights. While the demonstrations were a far cry from the mass mobilization that had been seen in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, important segments of the Belarusian population showed strong will to take ownership of democratic political processes. Meeting on March 24, 2006, the European Council paid homage to the message of hope brought by Belarus’ democratic opposition and civil society and noted that “their brave efforts to advance the cause of democracy in exceptionally difficult circumstances” deserved the EU’s “full recognition and support”.

While the worst-case scenario of a massive and violent crackdown on demonstrators did not materialize, the Belarusian authorities did – after a period of hesitation – come down hard on those who opposed it publicly. As the week of March 20 progressed, arrests of demonstrators started again. The trend became all too clear when, in the early hours of March 24, the authorities dismantled a small tent camp, which had been set up on March 20, on October Square in Minsk, and arrested those at the camp. This camp had become a symbol of the perseverance of the democratic opposition. Its dismantling sent a clear signal that the regime would not tolerate further dissent. This was also proven on March 25 when a large opposition rally was held in the center of Minsk, under heavy surveillance by security forces. When a group of demonstrators joined the other opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Kazulin, on a march to the detention center where arrested demonstrators were being held, Belarusian Special Forces cracked down. They assaulted the marchers, arresting Kazulin and the most active participants.

The EU was quick to react to the elections and their dramatic aftermath. Already on March 20, the Presidency of the European Union announced that restrictive measures would be taken against those responsible for abuse and violations of international electoral standards. Following the dismantling of the tent camp on March 24, the European Council resolved to directly point to the responsibility of President Lukashenko and to include him as a target of the restrictive measures the EU would put in place. These restrictions – closely coordinated with international partners, especially the United States

– will include the expansion of the current visa ban list, which was originally drafted as a response to the disappearance of leading opposition figures and the fraudulent constitutional referendum of October 2004. It was this referendum, which allowed President Lukashenko to stand for a third term. Other measures are being closely looked into as well. The EU will review these restrictive measures on an ongoing basis, remaining open to any additions or other changes to the list of individuals that will be targeted by restrictive measures.

In addition to announcing the upcoming measures, the European Council called for the release of all detained opposition activists and underlined the continued right of the opposition to demonstrate peacefully. This continues to be a priority for the EU and will remain a focus in direct contacts with the Belarusian authorities and in consultations with the EU’s key international partners, especially the United States and the Russian Federation.

The immediate post-election reaction understandably focused on the dismay and disappointment the EU felt over the elections and on restrictive measures. At the same time, the Union’s message remains two-track. While the EU will continue to be tough on those responsible for the violations we have seen in Belarus, there is a strong commitment to engage with the Belarusian population, to support their efforts for democratization and development. The strongest link of the EU – Belarus relationship needs to be a people-to-people relationship. However, it is precisely this link, which the current regime most fears, as it will assist in developing civil society, providing objective information to the population and through this contribute to laying a strong foundation for truly democratic processes. It is the regime’s fear of its own people that leads it to isolate Belarus. In this vein, it is important that the EU works actively to counter this self-isolation and attempts to contribute to the empowerment of the country’s citizenry. In this context, it is also clear that the EU would not look into any form of sanctions, which would hurt the population, as a possible measure to respond to the recent political events.

Following the March 19 elections, Belarus stands at a crossroads in its development. On the one hand, President Lukashenko has reestablished his iron grip on the country. On the other, there is new and important momentum for change, emanating from civil society and the newly consolidated democratic opposition. Their bravery has given new hope to many Belarusians and can be the foundation of a stronger popular push for a democratic process. It is in this framework of a grim reality and growing hope that EU policy towards Belarus needs to develop further.

The cornerstone of the EU’s policy is already in place. The foundation has been laid by various past decisions by the European Union’s highest decision-making bodies. The restrictive approach of the EU towards the leadership will persist if no clear movement towards liberalization is evident. This approach will now be underpinned by a strong set of sanctions targeted at those responsible. However, a real policy cannot build on sanctions alone. The restrictive approach needs to be balanced by further consistent actions and programs to support

the Belarusian population in its course of becoming a stronger political and social actor. The EU realizes that democratic change in Belarus will not happen overnight and that there is a strong need for a consistent long-term approach. Even if current circumstances do not allow the use of the full toolbox of EU programs and policies in support of Belarus, there are important possibilities and assistance tools to help the people within the current framework.

Chief among the current community-funded tools are the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the so-called decentralized cooperation. These programs allow for direct support to civil society and independent media. Programs launched through them do not require the approval of the Belarusian authorities. They also make it possible to support even those civil society organizations, which are not officially registered in Belarus and to give support to Belarus through entities registered and functioning outside Belarus. In terms of civil society support, both EIDHR and the decentralized cooperation are the best possible community tools for direct support to strengthening the capacity of the population to act in promoting its participation in society. These tools are being used, and support from these programs to civil society and independent media has been considerably increased in the past years and is likely to be increased even further.

Support for independent media is of crucial importance. Were it up to the current authorities in Minsk, the Belarusian population would be nearly completely cut-off, not just from the outside world, but also from objective information and news about events in their own country. In close coordination with other international donors, the EU is supporting media programs aimed at filling the information vacuum in Belarus. Two new programs were started in 2005–2006, focusing on electronic media. In the autumn of 2006, the EU began funding regular radio news programming to Belarus, through a program implemented by *Deutsche Welle*. In an even bolder move, a €2 million program enabling an international consortium to provide a wide range of independent media services, including satellite television, was approved by the European Commission. These are important steps, but they will certainly not be the last. Further consistent efforts will be made to provide Belarusian audiences with objective news and information on developments in their own country, breaking the information monopoly of the current regime.

Another focus of EU support is education. This needs to be one of the main focal points in developing a new generation of Belarusian professionals and leaders to take charge of their country's destiny. The Union's support has enabled the Minsk European Humanities University (EHU), which was closed down by the authorities, to reestablish itself in Vilnius, the capital of neighboring Lithuania. While of key importance, this support is clearly not sufficient. The EU, its institutions and its member states are looking into further possibilities to enable Belarusian students to study abroad, either in the EU or the region. Scholarship programs are being developed for this purpose. Their importance is becoming increasingly central also as a way of helping those students who may have lost their places of study as a result of being active in the popular

mobilization for democracy seen around the March 19, 2006 presidential elections. The EU is prepared to do its part and very much hopes that the Belarusian authorities will refrain from preventing these students from taking their places at foreign educational institutions. They should remember that any such action would further harm the future of the Belarusian nation.

The people-to-people partnership to which the EU is so strongly committed needs to flow from a strong interface between Belarusian and EU citizens. The travel restrictions which are being placed on the leadership and other responsible officials are based on clear criteria of personal responsibility. They need to be balanced by facilitating travel to the EU of ordinary Belarusians, especially students and young people. Belarus is a neighbor of the EU, and one, which the European Union very much wants to engage in a common project for development of a functioning democratic society. In this context, it is vital that the Belarusian people know more about the realities of life in the EU.

If and when democratic change takes place, the European Neighborhood Policy will provide the framework for developing a close partnership between the EU and Belarus. This policy is a differentiated one, building on tailor-made Action Plans. While the status quo in Belarus makes it impossible to define in detail what would go into a Neighborhood Action Plan between the EU and Belarus, such a plan would provide a consistent and benchmarked roadmap for common efforts in moving forward with reforms in Belarus through joint policy action, including extensive and targeted financial assistance.

Depending on results - both in the implementation of reforms and in consolidating democracy - the policy would enable the eventual development of a very strong partnership, encompassing political, economic and trade fields, while also introducing elements of integration. It would provide tools for enabling the development of a strong Belarus as part of the European family of nations. Embarking on such cooperation and partnership building would require a strong commitment by both sides to work towards common goals, based on shared values. The commitment is there from the side of the EU, but currently absent from the side of the leadership in Minsk. We hope that over time, this commitment will be a mutual one. The European Union is working actively to make the benefits of the European Neighborhood Policy known to the Belarusian population so that it can make an informed choice in relation to its future.

The current situation largely rules out cooperation with the Belarusian authorities. However, here too the EU is concerned that its policy should not hurt the population. Programs aimed at the basic needs of the population cannot and should not be discontinued. Most notably, these programs focus on dealing with the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe, the 20th anniversary of which is being marked at the end of April 2006.

In order to have an effective policy on Belarus, there is a strong need for consistency in the actions of the EU and its international partners. This is true for both the policy and assistance coordination. The EU acts together with its

international partners. Of key importance among these partners is the United States, which shares the EU's overall aim of supporting the evolution of a strong, democratic and prosperous Belarus. Many have tried to look for cracks in the EU – United States partnership on Belarus. While there may be minor differences in nuance, there is little difference in the overall goals.

Ukraine is another potentially important partner, and one, which is in the region. In late 2004, Ukraine experienced large-scale political mobilization in support of democracy. As a result of this, the policies on Belarus of Kiev and the EU have been converging, and Ukraine has aligned with all of the EU's statements on Belarus. Ukraine's role is especially important, as it is a direct neighbor to Belarus, with relations on multiple levels.

The Russian Federation remains the one country in the region with the strongest potential leverage on Belarus, based on strong historical ties, economic cooperation and many elements of shared cultural heritage. It is also a strategic partner of the EU. At the 2005 EU – Russia Summit, this partnership was further operationalized with agreement on roadmaps for the so-called “four spaces”. The third of these is the Common Space for External Security, within which the partners have agreed to work for stability in their common neighborhood, based on shared values. For the EU, the concept of stability is closely connected to the consolidation of democracy. In this context, the Union continues to raise its concerns over Belarus with Russia.

The EU has a multi-faceted policy on Belarus with one clear aim: to foster the development of democracy, the rule of law and the market economy. In a nutshell, it is a policy to support the Belarusian population in assuming control of its own destiny, through the establishment of democratic processes. All elements of this policy are directed towards this aim. Independent media providing unbiased information on both domestic and foreign developments and a strong civil society are pre-conditions for this to happen. The policy also provides a roadmap for moving towards further domestic reforms and a closer EU – Belarus partnership.

It is the EU's hope that it can see a decent election in Belarus in the not too distant future and start work on a fully-fledged EU – Belarus partnership.

The United States and Europe's Last Dictatorship

Robin Shepherd

“We will work with our allies and partners to assist those seeking to return Belarus to its rightful place among the Euro-Atlantic community of democracies. There is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind.” President George W. Bush after signing the Belarus Democracy Act into law in October 2004.

On March 16, 2006, just three days before the Belarusian presidential “elections”, President Bush sent a letter and accompanying report to the chairmen and ranking members of the House Committee on International Relations and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The material was sent in accordance with the terms of the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, the landmark piece of US legislation seeking to foster democratic change in Belarus.

While repeating long-standing US concerns about Alyaksandr Lukashenka's creation of a “repressive dictatorship on the doorstep of the European Union and NATO”, the primary purpose of the report was to detail Lukashenka's links, including arms sales, to rogue states and “state sponsors of terrorism” such as Iran, Syria, Sudan and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and to explain the way in which the Belarusian president has amassed a vast personal fortune, amounting according to some estimates to over \$1 billion dollars, partly arising from such links. The regime was specifically accused of selling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) related technologies to Iran.

The timing of the report's release could hardly have been more provocative. And the substance goes some way to explaining why a country of such relatively small strategic or economic significance to the United States should have pushed its way so high up the administration's agenda. Clearly, since Belarus does not stand accused of actually being a state sponsor of terrorism its importance to the administration in this respect is not of the same order as for Iran or Syria, for example. But its links with these regimes do add a certain kind of piquancy to the situation.

While bearing this in mind, in order to understand US policy towards Belarus in recent years we need to put together two important blocks of administration thinking: the global freedom and democracy agenda set down by President Bush in his inaugural address in January 2005, and administration policy towards Russia. The former could be said to establish the broad moral and

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theoretical framework behind US policy on Belarus. The latter could be said to explain some of the difficulties of translating theory into practice.

Democratizing the World

In general terms, the global democracy agenda was always going to be a risky strategy for the administration. Even its most ardent supporters were aware at the outset that issues such as the war on terror or less grand but equally intrusive issues such as energy policy would make it impossible to apply such lofty ideals in practice with any great degree of speed or consistency. The administration's enemies would inevitably seize upon such inconsistencies as evidence of "double standards" or "hypocrisy". What value is there really, many have asked, in setting out a strategy for the democratization of the world, while the Bush administration stands shoulder to shoulder with the likes of President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan? Something similar could be said of the Bush administration's relationship with Russia, a country whose headlong retreat from democracy under President Vladimir Putin must count as one of the administration's most embarrassing setbacks, especially given the famously warm friendship which has been established between the countries' two leaders.

The more sophisticated members of the administration and its supporters, however, have come up with some interesting ripostes. Ruminating on the matter in *Commentary Magazine* in July 2005, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer argued "The question of alliances with dictators, of deals with the devil, can be approached openly, forthrightly, and without any need for defensiveness. The principle is that we cannot democratize the world overnight and, therefore, if we are sincere about the democratic project, we must proceed sequentially". In other words, tactical compromises in the short term do not impinge upon the long term strategic goal. Speaking in the context of a lecture on the upcoming elections in Belarus and Ukraine at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC on March 9, 2006 Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried acknowledged that there were difficulties in implementing the freedom agenda but said: "...The challenge the administration faces, and I'll admit this frankly, is how to operationalize a very bold vision with what it is possible to accomplish every day...[But] I would much rather deal with the problems of support for democracy, recognizing that there are problems, than the problems of the alternative". In other words, all potential foreign policy frameworks are imperfect. While alerting the administration to the difficulties and dangers of promoting democracy, therefore, do not forget the difficulties and dangers implicit in the "realist" foreign policy option which makes no substantial distinction between a tyrannical dictatorship and a liberal democracy. There are problems with both options. This administration, Fried

suggests, has decided that from a moral and ultimately practical point of view, the first option is superior to the latter.

So much for the theory. How has the democracy agenda translated into reality in terms of policy towards Belarus in recent years? And how has that reality been affected by relations with Russia, a country which claims Belarus as part of its sphere of influence?

Russia First?

To start with the second question, it is helpful to recognize just how important Russia has been perceived to be to the United States. The country is seen as crucial to at least four key areas of American foreign policy:

Firstly, intelligence sharing and general cooperation in the war on terror: Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to express his condolences and support following the terror attacks of 9/11. Since Russia's Southern arc borders into the Islamic world and since Russia in its incarnation as the Soviet Union fought a decade long war in Afghanistan in the 1980's, the country's ability to help or hinder operations against the Taliban and subsequently to secure stability in that country has long been perceived as invaluable. As has cooperation on broader intelligence sharing from the vast global intelligence infrastructure passed down to Russia after the demise of the Soviet Union.

Secondly, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related technology and know-how, especially to rogue states: After the United States, Russia has the largest stockpiles of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the world. It also has thousands of scientists and technical support staff with the training and qualifications to help build WMD. No other country could pose greater danger to the United States were cooperation on non-proliferation not forthcoming.

Thirdly, diversification of energy supplies away from the Middle East: Russia is a major supplier of and transit country for oil and natural gas. Its importance to United States energy policy is, therefore, enormous.

Fourthly, and finally, long term containment of China: While Europeans and others outside the United States usually overlook the fact, American policy makers are deeply concerned about the rise of China as a global power in the coming decades. Since Russia shares a 4,300 kilometer long border with China and is increasingly feeding the Chinese economy with much needed energy resources, Moscow is clearly a key consideration in US policy towards Beijing.

It is perfectly possible, of course, that on some of the above mentioned matters the United States is operating on misguided assumptions. It is not clear, for example, just how useful Russian intelligence sharing has actually been in the war on terror. Nor is it certain that Russia has played such a valuable role in non-proliferation especially in view of the fact that Russia is actually building Iran's civil nuclear capability. The perceptions of US foreign policy

makers may not match the realities. Nevertheless, such perceptions exist. And from this thumbnail sketch, it is not hard to see that Russia plays a hugely important role in some of the biggest issues of concern to US foreign policy makers and will probably continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Since the Putin administration views Belarus as part of its patch it should also be clear, therefore, that the United States, operating under the assumptions about Russia that it currently does, faces significant constraints in the practical application of policy towards Lukashenka. Before coming to that policy and its implementation it is worth pausing to consider Belarus from the other side of the same fence. Why does Russia view Western and specifically US designs on Belarus with such sensitivity?

In the eyes of many in Moscow, Belarus is the “last chance saloon” in the European theater. Following the humiliating “loss” of Ukraine in the wake of the Orange Revolution, it is the only remaining country in Europe through which nostalgic illusions of imperial greatness can still be sustained and its territory forms the ground for the last battle for “strategic space” in post-Cold War Europe. Clearly oil and gas issues, notably transit and refining capacity, are also important. But, the real political significance of Belarus to Russia is psychological, fitting as it does into a particular nationalist mind-set. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov put it succinctly in an interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in February 2006: “Belarusians and Russians are one people” he said, adding that the United States and the wider West had no business interfering. The Putin administration, despite widely mooted antipathy to the person of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, has so far shown itself determined to hold onto Belarus and subsidizes the Belarusian economy to the tune of billions of dollars a year in the form of cheap gas exports. One does not need to delve too far into the realm of pure speculation to also surmise that genuine democratic change in Belarus could be perceived in Moscow as a potentially dire threat to the model of so called “managed democracy” so much in vogue inside Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin. A democratized Belarus would leave Russia as the sole remaining bastion of authoritarianism in Europe and, the Kremlin must fear, may help reactivate pro-democracy forces in Russia itself.

For the United States then, Belarus emerges as a both an object of concern because of the pro-democracy agenda but also as a complicating factor in the wider interplay between US and Russian foreign policy.

An Evolving Policy Framework

Over the years, policy towards Belarus has evolved in fits and starts, and not a little controversy. The first US ambassador to independent Belarus, David H. Swartz, stepped down in 1994 in a storm of protest at what he saw as deep flaws in the first Clinton administration’s policy. Outlining those concerns in no uncertain terms in an op-ed revealingly entitled “The mess of Belarus, care

of the State Department” in *the Washington Times* on June 5, 1997 he said of that policy:

“Mr. Clinton and Co.’s Russo-centrism evinced itself from Day 1 of this administration. It served to: a) discourage independence-minded reformers in Belarus; b) encourage those in Belarus who want restoration of the Soviet empire; and c) give the clear message to Moscow that the US recognizes Russia’s hegemonic rights in what it calls the ‘near abroad’. (...) Devastating for the explicit US goal of fostering reform in Belarus was the near-total lack of effective US technical and economic assistance during the period when it could have made a real difference, 1993-95. (...) Instead of providing aid that could help advance US interests, Washington took steps that harmed our interests. Specifically, through 1995 the US provided nearly \$200 million in US surplus agricultural commodities to Belarus - a country which, as a Soviet republic, was a net exporter of food. This US “aid” did nothing other than help prop up the Soviet collective farm system there - the very heart of President Lukashenka’s political support.”

Even the Clinton administration’s greatest success in Belarus - getting the Belarusian authorities to hand over all Soviet era nuclear weapons to Moscow - was described by Ambassador Swartz as much less significant than was claimed since Russia’s military had complete control over the weapons in any case.

Whatever the truth about that controversy, the Clinton administration did change tack on Belarus. By 1997, a policy of “selective engagement” had been put in place and governmental relations were downgraded to the level of assistant secretary of state or below. Relations with Belarus at governmental level continued to deteriorate for the remainder of Clinton’s term while contacts with Belarusian civil society were significantly expanded.

Since then, broad bi-partisan agreement has developed culminating in the passing of the Belarus Democracy Act which was approved by Congress unanimously. The approval of the Act itself coincided with the rigged 2004 referendum allowing Lukashenka to stand for another term of office in 2006, but was introduced to Congress by Senator Jesse Helms as far back as November 2001. Its central aims were to authorize financial aid for pro-democracy organizations while banning financial support for agencies of the government. It also called on the President of the United States to issue reports to Congress on Lukashenka’s personal finances and the regime’s links, specifically via arms sales, to rogue states.

This then raises the question of what the United States has actually been able to do to promote change in Belarus, which kind of policies have been enacted and which have been ruled out.

To start at the extreme end of the spectrum of possibilities, military action has always been held to be out of the question partly because of the country’s proximity to Russia and also because the Lukashenka regime, for all its faults, is not warlike. Lukashenka is no Slobodan Milošević. On the contrary, one of the central strategies of regime propaganda is to constantly remind a people

that lost between a quarter and a third of its population in World War II of how fortunate they are to have a leadership which has kept them free from conflict. Neither is the regime so central to the WMD and global terrorism debate to constitute a real and present danger to US national security. Lukashenka has not in the past and is unlikely in the future to pose a direct threat to American soldiers or American civilians. (The only high profile incident involving loss of life occurred in September 1995 when the Belarusian air force shot down a hot air balloon participating in the Gordon Benett Cup race killing two Americans. No apology was issued). In short, the regime, however obnoxious from a moral point of view, has not yet done anything which would, in the eyes of the administration, merit a formal policy of "regime change". And although the Bush administration clearly does want a change of regime in Minsk, it has not yet regarded Lukashenka as being of such critical importance, especially given what else is at stake, to publicly outline its policy in such incendiary terms.

Policy has, therefore, focused on supporting "democratic processes" rather than anointing alternative candidates to Lukashenka, although administration officials have made their preferences crystal clear in terms of who they have been prepared to meet and, thus, to legitimize. Notable meetings have included Condoleezza Rice holding talks with Belarusian democracy activists in Vilnius in April 2005 and President Bush receiving two prominent wives of disappeared oppositionists at the White House in February 2006. Other officials, including Daniel Fried, met opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich personally in the weeks leading up to the election. The rhetoric against the Lukashenka regime has also been ramped up considerably in recent years. In January 2005, Condoleezza Rice named Belarus as one of six "outposts of tyranny" alongside Cuba, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Iran and North Korea.

In concrete terms, administration policy has mainly been built around helping create the internal prerequisites for democratic change by pumping in millions of dollars (\$11.8 million in 2005, for example) in assistance, though serious questions remain in the minds of some about how much of that money has actually gone to the kind of civic groups, such as those surrounding the Jeans Solidarity Campaign, which had such a powerful impact prior to and following the March 19 elections.

And the timeframe in which success is expected has been set for the long term. As Daniel Fried put it in the afore-mentioned speech at CSIS, "... We, the supporters of freedom and democracy in Belarus must be prepared for a long game. We must be prepared to work for the years it will take to build on (...) the base that the united opposition has presented and to work with civil society in Belarus and to make our message clear."

Generally speaking, US policy since 2001 has moved further away from a "single event", election focused strategy to one which divides its attention between elections, the development and sustenance of civil society and support for independent media.

Visa bans have also been put in place on a small number of officials associated

with vote rigging or participating in direct acts of repression, and there has been talk of exploring the possibility of freezing some Belarusian assets held abroad.

Conclusion: Where to Next?

The Lukashenka regime is viewed as an affront to the current US administration's broad political and moral vision. The fact that it is located in Europe may also inject a certain amount of added urgency, and Belarus has become the centerpiece of the administration's democratisation project in Europe's East now that countries such as Georgia and Ukraine have, we hope, matured into genuinely transitional states. President Bush and his senior colleagues may feel a strong incentive to mop up the remaining dictatorship on at least one continent while problems with implementing the democracy agenda remain so conspicuous elsewhere. After all, if Washington is unable to deal with Alyaksandr Lukashenka's little Belarus, what hope for democratizing China, the greater Middle East, or indeed, Russia itself?

What happens next in terms of Belarus policy will depend upon a number of factors. But it is unlikely, unless there is a democratic revolution that any of the major building blocks of that policy will change substantially as the Bush administration rolls on to the end of its final term of office. The pro-democracy agenda is the administration's proudest policy innovation and is here to stay. And despite a marked cooling in the tone of relations between Washington and Moscow in recent months, Russia is perceived as too important to US foreign policy to risk a major rift over Belarus. Reports are currently circulating that hardliners associated with Vice President Dick Cheney are arguing for a tougher line against Russia in response to President Putin's backsliding on democracy. However commendable this might be from a moral point of view, there seems little likelihood, though, that this will translate into anything much more substantial than stronger rhetoric. The White House and the State Department simply believe there is too much to lose. The only thing that may change as far as Russia is concerned is that Moscow itself may alter course on Belarus especially if Putin and his allies come to believe that Lukashenka's days are numbered or that it is too costly, in both political and financial terms, to continue subsidizing his increasingly ludicrous regime. That, however, is mainly a matter for Russia and it is unlikely that Washington could do much more than try to coax President Putin in that direction by the standard diplomatic means or try to exacerbate existing conflicts between Putin and Lukashenka to help destabilize the regime.

More broadly, it is not easy to see what more the United States could do to promote democratic change in Belarus. Even if the stakes were raised by introducing a formal policy of "regime change" most of the tools which could be used to achieve that aim are either being used already, such as visa bans, financial aid to civil society and the opposition, political isolation and rhetorical

denunciation, or have already been ruled out as unfeasible, such as military force, or economic sanctions which are (wrongly in the view of this author) currently opposed by the main leaders of the Belarusian opposition.

One much talked about tack which the United States could take would be to push for enhanced cooperation with the European Union along the lines pursued so effectively in the 1990's with Vladimir Mečiar's Slovakia. This, however, runs up against a two-fold problem. US and EU policy worked in Central and Eastern Europe because of the clear prospect of NATO and EU membership which in Slovakia's case acted as a powerful tool (often referred to as "conditionality") rallying the country's population to back democratic forces.

However, the Belarusian opposition says it is against NATO membership, which rules out the benefits of conditionality on that score. And, currently, there is great opposition within the EU to further expansion which rules out conditionality on the other score as well. It would certainly be helpful if the United States could use its influence to encourage a change of heart. But, as with Vladimir Putin's Russia, behind the scenes diplomatic cajoling is probably all we can reasonably expect.

This is not to diminish the importance of transatlantic cooperation on Belarus. A united front in terms of punitive sanctions is obviously crucial. It is also possible that the United States and the European Union could develop common strategies aimed, for example, at trying to split elements of the government apparatus and the security forces from Lukashenka and his closest cohorts. But none of these moves could be expected to yield the same results as prospective membership of transatlantic structures themselves.

In the end then, beyond fine tuning and a certain tightening of the screws, Washington's foreign policy towards Belarus has probably evolved as far as it can. Filled with indignation at the brutal and abusive nature of the Lukashenka regime, that policy is laudable and has been instrumental in setting the broader Western agenda on Belarus. Faced with a regime that appears not to care about international isolation, however, and which is located in a sphere of influence claimed by Russia, the United States has emerged as a potential facilitator for change in Belarus, but not as a prime mover. Washington is doing its best. But the real task of liberating Belarus remains something which can only be undertaken by other players, most notably the people of Belarus themselves.

Russia's Policy towards Belarus: A Tale of Two Presidents

Dmitri Trenin

Russia and its position vis-à-vis Belarus has, since its independence, been something of a thorny subject. Undoubtedly, the attitude of successive Russian presidents towards Belarus has been ambiguous and demands a certain attention, especially since the approach of President Vladimir Putin seems to be beginning to evolve and change.

During much of his first presidential term, Vladimir Putin did not particularly hide his dislike for the regime built by Alyaksandr Lukashenka or for the man himself. Above all, Putin wanted to bring to an end the games Lukashenka had been playing with former President Yeltsin, endlessly promising integration while profiting from Russian subsidies. Rather unceremoniously, Putin laid down Moscow's terms for integration and the options available to Belarus. Essentially, Russia offered Belarus full integration, European Union style, or accession to the Russian Federation on the model of East Germany. Lukashenka was shaken and vowed to defend Belarusian sovereignty. Moscow, for its part, chose to play hardball. When Minsk reneged on its promise to sign over the Belarusian gas transportation system *Beltransgas* to Russia, *Gazprom* halted for 24 hours its gas shipments to Belarus. Putin's succession of Yeltsin at the Kremlin undoubtedly put an end to Lukashenka's hopes, no matter how far-fetched, of rising to the position of supreme power in a reunified Russo-Belarusian state. Putin, for his part, reacted negatively to the idea of a third term for Lukashenka. After 9/11 and Russia's realignment with the West, the Kremlin feels embarrassed by an ally who has been dubbed "Europe's last dictator" by the international community.

The presidential administration in Moscow started putting out feelers to gauge who would be the best alternative figure in Belarus to receive Putin's support and contacted several potential successors to Lukashenka. Kremlin officials held private talks with prominent Belarusian figures, representing both the establishment and the opposition. Moscow, however, was cautious. Long accustomed to dealing with incumbent leaders, even those who were not too palatable, the Kremlin wanted to avoid an open break with Lukashenka. It feared that the Minsk leader would turn against Russia and embrace the West, and that the West would forgive him in exchange for launching Belarus into the European and Euro-Atlantic orbit. Afraid of the risks of exposure, the Kremlin did not want to plot to overthrow Lukashenka. Those in the Kremlin, who would have preferred a change of leadership in Minsk, also had to warily look over

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their shoulder: the cohort of Lukashenka friends in the Russian establishment were on their guard. Nevertheless and however indecisive or inconclusive, Moscow's policies toward Belarus from 2000 to 2003 already anticipated a post-Lukashenka Belarus.

Russia's Foreign Policy Change

Between 2003 and 2005, however, major changes occurred in Russia's domestic situation and its foreign policy. The Khodorkovsky/YUKOS affair resulted in the once relatively liberal approach of the government to domestic politics and economics giving way to a harder-line set of policies. The terrorist atrocity of Beslan, led to further political centralization with the announcement that regional governors would be appointed by the president rather than popularly elected. Reacting to Western criticisms of the rescue operation that had gone badly wrong, and of its steps towards power centralization, the Kremlin in turn accused the West of sympathizing with Chechen separatists, supporting a "fifth column" inside the country and wishing to diminish and even dismember Russia. The Rose Revolution in Georgia and particularly the Orange Revolution in Ukraine resulted in a revision of Russia's relations with the West. Essentially, Moscow decided to leave the outermost Western orbit and opt for an independent trajectory. Since then, Russia's foreign policy has been increasingly oriented towards building its own "solar system" separate from the West.

As a minor consequence of these fundamental changes, Lukashenka was essentially let off the hook. Ever the master tactician, he was able to use the post-Beslan confusion and consternation in Moscow to hold a referendum on changing the Belarusian constitution in October 2004, thereby giving him the formal right to run for (a hitherto unconstitutional) third term. Moscow was not in a position to object and had to accept "the will of the people". Thereafter, Lukashenka could fully exploit the frustration and fear experienced by Moscow in the wake of the Orange Revolution in neighboring Ukraine, which finally triumphed in December 2004. After the change of regime in Kiev, and Ukraine's increasingly pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation, holding onto Belarus became even more important, from the Kremlin's perspective.

The last of the three color revolutions, which took place in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, was followed by the riots in Uzbek Andijan, bloodily suppressed by the authorities with a massive loss of life in May 2005. By giving his support to Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, Vladimir Putin made it clear that Moscow favored stability in Central Asia and across the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at almost any price. The Kremlin was not amused by the founding in September 2005 of a Community of Democratic Choice which brought Ukraine and Georgia together with Poland and Lithuania. To the Russian leadership, color revolutions were the result of the West using

state-of-the-art political technologies to remove former Soviet republics from Russia's sphere of influence.

Lukashenka again made full use of the opportunity that presented itself. He claimed to be a victim of Western NGOs, and portrayed himself as the weak link in what the Kremlin perceived as the new Baltic-to-the-Black-Sea *cordon sanitaire*, intended to isolate Russia from Europe. The idea was that Belarus under his regime would be a bulwark preventing such a *cordon* from becoming reality. Alternatively, a regime change in Belarus would be tantamount to Moscow getting "a second Ukraine" right on its doorstep. While the Russian authorities were restricting the activities of Russian civil society organizations supported by the West, Lukashenka passed draconian laws to choke off outside funding to Belarusian NGOs.

Moscow and the 2006 Election

Putin must have heeded the message, despite his personal resentment of Lukashenka. Moscow refrained from any steps which could damage Lukashenka's position in the run-up to the elections. While all prices for Russian natural gas from January 2006 were at least doubled, even for Russian allies such as Armenia (or more than quadrupled, as in the case of Ukraine), the price level for Belarus remained the same. The Russian electronic media generally supported the incumbent. Belarusian opposition hopeful Alyaksandr Milinkevich traveled to Moscow, and met some Russian lawmakers, but no senior administration figure would meet him. Even though Putin himself refrained from personal expressions of support, high-level Russian delegations visited Minsk just before the elections to demonstrate Moscow's official backing for Lukashenka.

There had never been any doubt as to Moscow's verdict on the 2006 Belarusian election. In the eyes of the Russian *Duma* observers, and the Russia-led CIS team, the voting was free and fair, and Lukashenka's victory was fully legitimate. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, rejected the negative judgment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on the election as biased. President Putin duly congratulated the victor. However, Russian television did report on the mass demonstrations in Minsk following the elections, and refrained from summarily branding the protestors as "agents of the West". The Russian liberal press, that usually treats Lukashenka as something of a *bête noir*, was scathingly critical. In the end, there was a sigh of relief that the election protests had not ended in bloodshed, but also some frustration that the Belarusian *bat'ka* (father) had done it again.

Lukashenka's "83 percent landslide" does not resolve any of Russia's problems with Belarus. The Kremlin is determined to permanently link Belarus to Russia by means of economic, financial, social and political integration. In terms of the Moscow-centered "solar system", Belarus is the closest and most hospitable candidate planet. Especially now that it has become clear that Ukraine will not

join a single economic space with Russia, tightening ties to Belarus is a major priority. There is a feeling in the Kremlin that by 2008, when Vladimir Putin is due to step down as Russia's president, and when Ukraine may be invited to join NATO, "something must be done" about Belarus.

The hard fact is that during Putin's second term Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been able to considerably strengthen his position vis-à-vis Moscow. He has found new ways of exploiting the topic of Russo-Belarusian unity in order to consolidate his own rule and to prevent, or at least significantly restrict, the two countries' integration. Lukashenka knows full well that meaningful integration would mean the loss of the financial and economic power base of his regime. Once Minsk accepts the Russian ruble issued by the Central Bank in Moscow, and allows the privatization of Belarusian assets, Lukashenka's game will be up. Thus, he has a very good reason to persevere.

Future Scenarios?

The Kremlin sees itself outmanoeuvred. Even those who support Lukashenka as a lesser evil to a Western-leaning Belarus, privately refer to him as "our s.o.b.". The truth is that, although notoriously obstinate and treacherous, he is not Russia's s.o.b., but very much his own. In the past, Lukashenka countered Russian moves to make him behave by appeals to Belarusian sovereignty and even hints, however implausible, that he might re-orient his policy away from Moscow and toward Brussels. In the near future, his trump cards could be Kiev's desire to join NATO and plans to enlarge the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to include Belarus. Unless Moscow is careful, Lukashenka will play those cards to expand his room for manoeuvre even further in his dealings with Russia.

If Moscow continues with the current approach of supporting the status quo in order to prevent a regime change, assumed to be anti-Russian, it is unlikely to achieve much, and will make its interests dependent on Lukashenka's political future. For a time, Belarus will continue as before, with Lukashenka dominating, and the opposition weak. Having supported Lukashenka in 2006, Moscow may now be ready to put him under pressure, as seems to be indicated by the rise in gas prices announced immediately after the elections. Russia will also seek control of *Beltransgas*, and will press Minsk for some real integration and openness to Russian business. Lukashenka, however, will play for time. If Putin actually leaves the Kremlin in 2008, his successor will probably need some time before he is ready for a more active policy towards Belarus. As discussed, 2008 could be a very difficult year for Russia's relations with the West. Tension and suspicion form exactly the right environment for Lukashenka to peddle his unique commodity – loyalty to Russia against encroachments from the West.

Still, serious Russian observers can hardly ignore the message of the 2006 election. Lukashenka may have retained power, but he will not be president for life. Belarus is not Central Asia. In comparison with the previous elections, the

opposition has grown bolder, both at the level of its leaders and supporters. Lukashenka, the builder of a highly paternalistic system, is the default choice of the passive part of the electorate. The more active people prefer change. It is only a matter of time before the critical mass develops.

When this finally happens, much will be up for grabs in Belarus. There are immense dangers inherent in one-man rule. Even though it is frequently argued that Russia's political system has evolved to become virtually indistinguishable from that of Belarus, there is a difference. Under Russia's czarist political system, all major decisions are either made or sanctioned by one institution, the presidency. The czar, however, rules on behalf of the dominant corporation, and is more of a function than a personality. Transfer of power takes place within the corporation and is ratified in a popular election. In Belarus, Lukashenka is the regime. Thus, the political and economic system as a whole is intimately linked to one individual. Over the long term, this is not sustainable.

By 2011, when his newly-acquired term is due to expire, Lukashenka will have served almost as long as head of state, 17 years, as Brezhnev had when he died. Belarus' vaunted stability will look more like stagnation. The system will be eroding fast from within. Since two-thirds of Belarusian borders are with EU member states and genuinely pluralist, Europe-leaning Ukraine, the demonstration effect of the neighbors will also be significant. "We've had enough" could become a very popular slogan, uniting freedom-loving students and property-hungry elites. The more active part of the electorate would grow, and become more restive. Isolation of Lukashenka would increase, and his capacity for rational and adequate action will diminish. In principle, a revolution in Belarus could be realistically averted if Lukashenka decides to turn the country over to a successor who would then have to loosen up the system, and hold a free election. So far, however, grooming a successor is precisely the thing Lukashenka has been trying to avoid. If impatience for change on the one hand, and a provocation on behalf of those resisting it, combine and produce violence, the cost to Russia would be very high. Inside Belarus, Moscow would be associated with support for oppression. Internationally, the "Belarusian question" would become a permanent fixture on the Russia-EU and Russia-US agendas.

A Pro-active Strategy

For Russia not to be "used", it would need to act, rather than merely react. There is good reason to think that a post-Lukashenka leadership in Belarus would draw legitimacy from being anti-Lukashenka. It is not clear, however, whether the Kremlin understands this and how capable it is of developing a strategy that would be future-oriented. If they understood the realities clearly and were willing to act, they would probably have to use integration as a tool for change.

The Kremlin would have to publicly call Lukashenka's bluff on the issue of union with Russia. Moscow would have to seize the initiative, using integration as the vehicle. A serious and generous offer should be made to the Belarusian people, explaining the advantages of a common market with Russia, complete with the four economic freedoms, equal rights and equal treatment of the two countries' nationals in each country's territory, and the Russian ruble as a currency. The Kremlin would make clear at the same time that it upholds Belarusian independence and sovereignty.

It is crucial that the Kremlin, using the formal intimacy of the union state, publicly calls for political freedom in Belarus and privately tells Lukashenka that it will not support any further extension of his presidential mandate. Rather than leaving Lukashenka then to groom a successor, Moscow would need to open a dialogue with Belarusian politicians, thus encouraging them to come forward and engage. Lukashenka would have to be prevailed upon to hold early parliamentary, and then presidential elections. In order not to be constrained and second-guessed, Russia should not support Belarusian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, citing geography as a reason. Finally, the Kremlin must give Lukashenka an offer he cannot refuse, for example, some honorary position as head of the Russo-Belarusian parliamentary assembly that would give him immunity from prosecution, the only concession Moscow would have to make.

The possibilities for Russian-Western interaction on the Belarusian issue are limited, but an understanding is crucial. From Moscow's perspective, Belarus can not be "divided" or "shared" between Russia and the West, not to speak of Moscow "delivering" its nearest neighbor to the "common home" of NATO and the European Union. Russia would work with the West to eliminate the risk of bloodshed in Belarus and to win support for its policy when and if it decides to drop its support for Lukashenka in favor of another pro-Russian candidate. In this case, the "deal" would be relative freedom and a democratic future in exchange for informal Western recognition of Belarus as a Russian ally and as part of the Moscow-centered system. If this integration coincides with the wishes and interests of the bulk of the Belarusian people, then so be it.

There are risks for the Kremlin in the pro-active scenario. From being less free than Russia, Belarus would emerge as more free. That freedom of choice could also be translated onto international relations. The Russian offer would be judged against the possibility, no matter how distant, of acceding to the European Union. Russian business' appetite for privatizing the juicier chunks of Belarusian property would run against the desire of the Belarusian elites to enrich themselves, and the widespread anti-oligarchy sentiment of many ordinary people.

Yet, there is a price to be paid for inaction as well as for action. The difference is that in the former case one simply submits oneself to the tides of history, while in the latter case one consciously promotes one's interests. There is always a place for uncertainty in world affairs. However, a Belarus that is free to develop its identity beyond Lukashenka's unique and bleak brand of neo-Sovietism is not only a boon for all its neighbors, but a genuinely close partner to Russia, stimulating it, too, to move forward.

International Democracy Assistance to Belarus: An Effective Tool?

Balázs Jarábik

Democratic breakthroughs as witnessed in Georgia and Ukraine in recent years are often taken as reference points for assessing developments in Belarus. Yet, compared to those countries, it is blatantly obvious that the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been infinitely better prepared for thwarting anything resembling a color revolution from happening in Belarus, while the Belarusian democracy movement comprising political parties, non-governmental organizations and other civic actors is considerably less developed and strong. The key factor behind this state of affairs is (self) isolation. Over the twelve years of Lukashenka's rule, Belarus has increasingly isolated itself from the West and the rest of the international community, while retaining close ties with, and receiving massively subsidized natural resources from, Russia. This has enabled Lukashenka to maintain the Soviet heritage of far-reaching social welfare policies and redistribution that so far appeased a good part of domestic society, while conducting massive repression of independent political and social forces.

Faced with this regime, most analysts agree that the policies of the United States and the European Union have failed to achieve their often-stated goal: a democratic Belarus. This goal itself, it seems, has been rather weakly enforced over the last twelve years, a situation that appears to be slowly changing, as the blatant democratic lacunae and human rights abuses under Lukashenka are increasingly taken seriously by the West. More importantly, however, experiences to date have shown that making Western policies vis-à-vis Belarus more effective requires a review and redesign of its policy tools. This article argues that limited Western influence on democratization in Belarus is due to a lack of appropriate policy focus and mechanisms for implementing support.

Western Policy in the Past: Experiences and Constraints

If Lukashenka has managed to turn Belarus into the quasi-totalitarian regime it is today, this is also because of a long-standing lack of serious interest on

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the part of the West. Western concern was only really drawn by the presidential elections in 2001 and 2006 and by the referendums in 1996 and 2004. On those occasions, the United States increased election related assistance, especially in 2000 and 2001, while little was forthcoming from the European side to seriously support civic activities to ensure free and fair elections. More broadly, it seems that civil society support has not been prominent in Western policies, which were rather built around foundations of cooperation with the regime in Minsk. According to most analysts, this government focus has been the primary reason for the failure of Western policies to date.

Nevertheless, the US and EU assistance differ profoundly in character: while the US wishes to support democratization in the most direct way, the EU prefers to address “the needs of the population” through the establishment of humanitarian, healthcare and social welfare programs.

The US is by far the biggest donor in terms of democracy assistance and civil society. Prior to the 2001 presidential election, an estimated \$37.78 million in assistance was given to Belarus, including \$12.41 million in Freedom Support Act assistance largely addressing the elections themselves. After the election fraud became blatantly obvious, the US decided to maintain humanitarian aid and exchange programs, while democracy assistance decreased dramatically to \$7.8million. This shift indicates a lack of long-term strategy for supporting the development of Belarusian civil society.

The EU has found it even more difficult to address the erosion of democracy under Lukashenka. While the European Commission declares on its website that “[the] EU has consistently attempted to overcome this situation, providing assistance to bolster democracy, repeating its hope that Belarus would take its place among European democratic countries and offering co-operation in support of this path”, the scale, scope and impact of EU support seem to have been very limited. EU “assistance to bolster democracy” was provided overwhelmingly through TACIS, the program for Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States, one of the conditions of which is permission from the government in Minsk. Since 1997, TACIS implemented two programs for civil society (in 2000-2001 and 2002-2003) with a value of €5 million each. For comparison, activities related to the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster received a similar sum in EU support in 2003 alone. It is noteworthy that it is near-impossible to receive detailed information on projects supported, and the results generated, through EU democracy assistance to Belarus.

Usually, EU assistance is dispersed through government structures, and implementation agencies are used to being welcomed rather than restricted. In Belarus, however, the latter is the case, a realization that took considerable time to emerge in the EU. The only flexible mechanism for a long time – the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) – was largely paralyzed with unsuitable priorities, such as children’s rights that, while important, limited more effective support to democracy groups. In part as a result of diverging approaches to and focus areas for Belarus assistance, US and EU funded civil society efforts lacked communication and coordination on the

ground. Structural differences, especially, inhibited such coordination. The US provides assistance through regranteeing NGOs, while EU financial mechanisms are tailored primarily at consulting companies.

A further consequence of these diverging structures became apparent when it came to advocating for Belarus among policymakers: while US NGOs took an active role in pushing Belarus further up the policy agenda, European interest remained low until, with EU enlargement, NGOs from new member states started more active EU-level lobbying on behalf of Belarus.

A final obstacle to effective democracy assistance for Belarus also resulted from the broader policy debate. With the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, widespread suspicion emerged that US groups, such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, or the Open Society Institute, played a key role behind the scenes role in fomenting these democratic breakthroughs. The fact that the second administration of President Bush has made democracy promotion a central pillar of US foreign policy clearly added to an impression of “American interventionism”, a card played skillfully by authoritarian rulers in Belarus and beyond. What is more, Lukashenka drew important lessons from regime change in Slovakia (1998) and Serbia (2000), and particularly from Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), resulting in the regime’s imposition of substantial limits on international democracy assistance.

The Belarusian Regime: From Soft to Hard Repression of Civil Society

After 2001, the legal conditions for civil society in Belarus have changed rapidly and beyond recognition, and it has become increasingly impossible for foreign donors to support civic actors. Only a few donors, more American than European, have been flexible enough to continue support to civil society, which was forced to operate under conditions recognizable from pre-1989 communist Eastern Europe rather than from post-1989 new democracies. Largely de-legalized, civil society and its supporters abroad have been struggling to adjust to this new-old reality which, in operational terms, required most of all secure mechanisms for the provision of small-scale, highly targeted and swift financial assistance.

Limiting access to international organizations and partners engaged in Belarus has long been standard to the repertory of the Belarusian authorities. Numerous international activists and experts (including the author) have been denied entry to the country after the 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections. Some of them have become regular “participants” of propaganda films on Belarusian TV. According to independent observers, the Belarusian authorities keep a blacklist of about 40,000 names that includes criminal and political entries, the latter estimated to comprise several hundred names, at least.

Within Belarus, and on the recipient side for democracy assistance, pressure has equally heightened. Prohibitive conditions for the registration of non-governmental organizations were put in place, and any more active and visible NGOs were forcibly shut down between 2001 and 2006. These included those that took an active role in the 2001 presidential campaign, such as *Viasna 96* and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. In 2003, in particular, the state authorities unleashed a massive “clean-up” of Belarusian civil society, issuing numerous official warnings to NGOs, closing 51 public associations (NGOs) by court ruling, while the statutory bodies of another 78 associations opted for self-closure. One target of this campaign were regional NGO resource centers, such as *Varuta* in Baranovich, Civic Initiatives in Homel, *Ratusha* in Grodno, and *Vezha* in Brest. Another group of NGOs affected were youth organizations, such as *Hart* in Homel, *Kontur* from Vitsebsk, the Association of Belarusian Students, the Youth Information Center, the youth wing of the United Civic Party, and *Malady Front* (Young Front), which all lost their official status. As of 2005, thus, virtually no independent civil society organization remained registered in Belarus.

A next step was to de-legalize foreign aid. Belarusian legislation adopted in 2001 determines that development assistance cannot be provided to unregistered non-governmental organizations. The procedure for grant making foreseen by the Belarusian authorities is, according to the Minsk-based Foundation for Legal Technologies, as follows: the donor sends the financial support it wishes to make to the presidential fund and indicates the purposes of the grant, while the grantee is to request reimbursement. The fund’s administration keeps the grant until an official decision has been made whether or not the indicated purpose of the grant is admissible. This procedure may last for years, and the administration tends to not to approve funds for civic activities, as happened with several projects supported by TACIS and private US donors.

Prior to the March 2006 presidential elections, the Belarusian authorities concluded a year-long legislative campaign designed to prevent any popular protest by criminalizing its own citizens. A comprehensive legal package, known as “anti-revolution” legislation, was passed that included a presidential decree on human trafficking, a law on counteracting extremism, amendments to the criminal code pertaining to offenses against individuals and state security, legal measures designed to prevent the financing of terrorism, and a law on fighting corruption. While seizing international trends and addressing seemingly global problems, such as terrorism and trafficking, the legislation passed has been used primarily to put pressure on the democratic opposition, to discourage citizens by criminalizing any form of independent activity and civic protest, and to threaten international partners with criminal responsibility for supporting democratic actors, such as political parties and civil society. In passing these new laws, the Belarusian regime has markedly changed its attitude towards civil society. The phase of “kind” repression is over, and henceforth “tough” measures were to be taken against civil society, effectively criminalized by its mere existence.

The United States: “Their Money Can Change the Situation”

Focus group research undertaken recently by the Pontis Foundation seems to indicate that many people in Belarus think that US financial support can change the situation. Current US government assistance to Belarus is framed by a policy of “selective engagement”. Adopted after the constitutional referendum of November 1996, and reinforced after the fraudulent 2001 presidential election, “selective engagement” determines that no US bilateral assistance is channeled through Belarus’ central government except for humanitarian assistance and exchange programs with state-run educational institutions. According to a government website, US assistance to Belarus is almost exclusively targeted at the country’s non-governmental sector and independent media working to promote the development of civil society and the free flow of information.

Most of this assistance is channeled through US non-governmental structures, which have proved to be active and flexible actors in civil society development in Belarus, as well as important advocates for Belarus on Capitol Hill. When after 2001, US assistance decreased as a result of a lack of interest for keeping Belarus on the agenda of US foreign policy, lobbying became an important additional activity of American NGOs providing assistance to Belarus.

An important shift in US attention to Belarus occurred in 2005 when State Secretary Condoleezza Rice described the regime as “the last true dictatorship in the centre of Europe”. This followed the new policy of President Bush’s second administration that made democracy promotion a key pillar of US foreign policy. The Belarus Democracy Act, passed unanimously by the House of Representatives on October 4, 2004, stressed democratic development, human rights and the rule of law in Belarus, and a supplementary assistance bill added democracy assistance worth \$5 million in 2005. The act authorized necessary assistance for supporting Belarusian political parties and non-governmental organizations, independent media, including radio and television broadcasting into Belarus, and international exchanges. Finally, the House of Representatives earmarked a further \$24 million for the period of 2006 to 2007 and authorized the US government to spend the assistance on building democracy in Belarus including the promotion of free elections, the development of political parties and independent media, protection of human rights and ensuring the rule of law.

Considerable interest and resources notwithstanding, there are two main problems that impede effective US development policy towards Belarus. One is to do with an inconsistency between the stated aim of its policy – democracy – and the approach taken. While the US has arguably done more than any other country to provide political support and technical assistance, it has insisted on maintaining so-called “soft programs”. This implies a strictly non-political and non-partisan approach which, given the Belarusian context, weakens and dissipates the policy as a whole. In the unfavorable political climate, many

traditionally conceived and designed programs are simply not feasible. The second problem are inadequate implementation mechanisms, that is, limited capacity to provide direct assistance, such as small-grant facilities, urgently needed in Belarus. Few US implementers seem to have sufficient flexibility to respond to this need.

The US made clear its intention to remain engaged in Belarus for the long haul. At the same time, the US has started closer coordination with other state donors actively supporting Belarus, especially Europeans. This process has improved coordination of democracy assistance and increased the transparency of aid, awareness and information from inside Belarus. In engaging in such a practical coordination process and serious effort to engage the EU, the US basically accepted the geopolitics of Belarus and sent an important signal: unless the EU is engaged strongly in working towards democracy in Belarus, chances of success remain slim.

The EU: “Sleeping on Belarus”

This impression is also evident in focus group research in Belarus conducted by the Pontis Foundation. What it indicates is, at best, a lack of awareness among Belarusians regarding EU activities towards their country. At worst, this impression signals that the EU has little interest, and therefore, few programs, in Belarus.

It was only following the fraudulent 2004 parliamentary elections and national referendum that the EU committed itself to more serious support for civil society and democracy in Belarus. Not only did it seek out more flexible mechanisms than TACIS, it also increased its assistance to Belarus from around €10 million annually to around €12 million in 2005 and 2006, respectively. The European Commission announced publicly that “over €5 million will be available in 2005 alone to support civil society in areas such as strengthening NGO capacity, promoting awareness of and respect for human rights and democracy, promoting cultural diversity, and the fights against poverty and intolerance.”

However, only around €2 million of the annual €12 million was available through grant mechanisms independent of the Belarusian authorities and aimed at direct democratization and civil society programs: the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Decentralized Cooperation Budget Line (DC). Major parts of EU assistance continue to be processed through TACIS programs serving “to address the needs of the population, as well as to support democratization and civil society in a broad sense”. Yet TACIS has an in-built tendency to support non-political projects for the selected grants to be acceptable to the government authorities in Belarus.

Unfortunately, one of the EU’s “flexible mechanisms” proved to be counter productive to its own stated aim. Although formally not required, the DC budget line continues to try to register EU approved projects with the Belarusian authorities. While the selection time for projects has been rapidly decreased

to about three months for both flexible mechanisms EIDHR only managed to support two projects and the DC budget line only managed to support ten, before the 2006 presidential elections. A lack of management resources at Europaid seems obvious. Available information on grants awarded points to discrepancies between program priorities and decisions made on project support. DC budget line grants mostly went to humanitarian organizations with little or no experience in democratization or civil society development. Apparently, neither of the EU mechanisms seems to respond effectively to the Belarusian context and the need to support unregistered civic initiatives in a flexible and timely manner. And while the European Commission has demonstrated considerable willingness to adjust its regulations and procedures for rendering assistance to Belarus, the implementation of EU support remains disconnected from officially-stated policy.

In this respect, donors from individual countries, be they the US or be they EU member states (in particular Sweden, the Netherlands, Great Britain, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), are often more flexible and effective in supporting civil society and democratization projects in Belarus. Some European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sweden and Poland support Belarusian civil society via NGOs in their own countries, and despite more modest funding than that provided by the EU, the individual country programs and NGO interlocutors have been successful in developing closer contacts with (civil) society in Belarus, and more effective in addressing its most pressing need: small grants.

The West and Belarus: What Next?

With considerably more effort than before, Lukashenka and his regime have been trying to legitimate the third presidential term in the West. In informal talks, Belarusian diplomats have been suggesting a return to “normal” relations, including the possibility of taking part in the European Neighborhood Policy. This suggests a new, increased role for the EU and greater potential for the implementation of its policy. At the same time, however, the conditionality imposed by the Belarusian authorities toward the request of the European Commission to open a delegation in Minsk in an attempt to normalize EU-Belarus relations also shows the limits of what the Lukashenka regime is willing to concede.

EU assistance clearly lags behind the current policy. One of the primary reasons for this discrepancy is that the EU and the West more broadly believe that they lack influence on Belarus. Some analysts already argue that the EU should consider giving a chance to engaging with the regime at the same time as increasing the number of both carrots and sticks in its relations with Belarus. The EU seems to have noticed that the political space Lukashenka occupies has been shrinking in the face of the clear political alternative represented by the united democratic forces and a re-energized civil society, as visible in the

March 2006 post-election period. Adding to this are growing signs of a shift, if only temporary, in Russian policy towards Belarus.

What the EU can certainly do, and swiftly, is to openly provide assistance to the democratic movement, besides supporting civil society and establishing new communication and information channels in Belarus. It should put pressure on Belarus to restore the (legal) position of civil society organizations in the country. It should also increase the effectiveness of its existing “flexible mechanisms”, through the institution of clear priority for selecting projects in support of civil society and democratization.

If the European Commission finds it hard to provide such assistance within the constraints of its own procedures and regulations, the EU should consider an external grant-making structure. Such an external “European Fund for Democracy”, if not finding sufficient support from the European Commission, could be pushed ahead by those EU member states most active on Belarus, as well as by the European Parliament.

The West has made some important steps to improve its policy, and thus influence, on Belarus over the past two years. However, much remains to be done to improve Western assistance to Belarusian democrats, starting with those flexible mechanisms that exist already, but which need to become more effective. Only then will Western assistance tools live up to the good intentions of Western policy toward Belarus.

Part Three

The 2006 Presidential Elections in Belarus