



Belarus Brief

The Pregnant Regime

A Bolder Policy Giving Birth to Change

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Introduction

For more than thirteen years Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the enigmatic leader of Belarus has been able to surprise everyone whilst in reality, changing little. Making use of popular interest in romantic notions of a “last dictatorship” or the last true outpost of the Soviet Union, Lukashenka has been able to capitalize on Belarus’ geopolitical position during these past years. Meanwhile, he deals with blackmail and keeps no gentlemen’s agreements in his attempts to reverse any Western conditionality.

Events in the last few weeks have reinforced this pattern. Thus, the row with the US Embassy, the opening of an EU Delegation in Minsk, the surprisingly low price of Russian gas for Belarus, the old-style police behavior on Freedom Day, as well as the crackdown on independent media should all be analyzed within the framework of the current character of the regime. Even though the regime’s previous pillars of support, such as social benefits and economic welfare, are taking a back seat, policies are unlikely to change as long as Lukashenka is in the leadership seat. However, the contradictions of new developments may also suggest that the regime is not as united as it was in previous years.

Through recent actions, Lukashenka has reaffirmed his unwillingness to ease his grip on power. The West, especially the EU must now come up with a bolder policy to make use of the opportunities offered by a cautious transition which Belarus must make its path. This new Pontis Foundation Belarus Brief offers an analysis of these new developments and proposes a tougher policy for the EU to help the pregnant regime of Belarus to give birth to a healthy baby – change.

The Regime: Erosion, not liberalization

At one time isolated from the West, Minsk is now active as never before. There is certainly no other country in the world which is letting the EU open a Delegation, whilst simultaneously forcing the US to close its Embassy. These events clearly demonstrate what characterizes the regime most; an implementation of inconsistent policy, further reinforced by the recently visible erosion of the regime’s pillars, but not on the much-needed liberalization.

Eroding Facade

While the EU did not do much to encourage Belarus to agree to the opening of its Delegation by revoking of the Belarusian Embassy in Brussels' access to EU Institutions, the US went further. Washington followed up on sanctions against the state oil concern Belneftekhim after the regime broke a gentlemen's agreement on the release of all political prisoners, especially former Presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. The events surrounding the recent and unfortunate death of Iryna Kazulina, the wife of Alyaksandr Kazulin, as well as previous steps by the regime, such as "letting" Kazulin accompany his wife for treatment in Germany (negotiated by German Ambassador Weiss), but not guaranteeing his return, suggests Lukashenka is not ready to accept his rival's return to Belarusian politics.

The crackdown on independent journalists at the end of March seemed like another attempt to reverse Western conditionality. Minsk could be looking at using journalists, like hostages as a tool to negotiate by promising not to touch the media. Indeed, it was a well-prepared effort designed to limit the achievements of an independent media which has been gaining influence and becoming more professional than the state media. This opinion was also voiced in a leaked memo¹ from the presidential administration last year. The crackdown clearly intended to limit the capacity of electronic media in particular, especially since equipment was targeted. Moreover, those affected were journalists who can not work officially in Belarus (such as the European Radio for Belarus or the Radio Ratsya), thus, no official complaints about the crackdown were voiced. Many fear that more attacks can be expected online, especially as Minsk can not afford the voicing of alternative information sources prior parliamentary elections in the Fall. However, following the local logic restrictions on Internet will take place only after the necessary legislation is adopted.

The question also arose of whether the crackdown was orchestrated by so-called "old guards", who are seen to be most likely to loose their positions with any further opening-up towards the West. As Brussels has shown from its firm stance on Kazulin, the regime cannot expect that the EU will make any further political steps. In this regard the reaction of the Council of the European Union to prolong the EU visa ban, but not extend the list is being viewed as a rather mild reaction, allowing Minsk to carry on the pretence of business as usual.

These actions go a significant way in eroding the façade the regime has been using for last 13 years to maneuver and hide its true face behind. At the same time, they re-enforce Minsk's ultimate aim, which is to reverse even minimal conditionality from both the EU and the US and prevent any efforts for a united approach between the EU and the US.

Economic Interests: Touching a Nerve

US conditionality links the release of political prisoners directly to sanctions against Belneftekhim-controlled firms in the US. Although these sanctions may seem tough to Brussels, Minsk's nervous retaliation against the US Embassy in Minsk shows that the consistency in US policy actually works. Threats from Washington are carried through, regardless of consequences. According to internal sources, the regime took the policy seriously not because of their financial impact on the Belarusian economy, but after seeing the action taken by the US authorities immediately following their introduction, such as the freezing of Belneftekhim assets and sealing its building and the canceling of visas for Belarusian nationals in the US. Sanctions seem to have hurt certain regime operatives and their private interests and illustrate how applying a hint of internationalization to the Belarus economy puts pressure on Minsk. Therefore this creates the opportunity for the US and indeed for Brussels to condition policies further;

¹ The memo believed to be prepared by Nina Spak, the former head of the analytical department of the Presidential Administration was published by Nasa Niva.

such invaluable tools could be applied for further pressure on the regime. Although the EU understands this, it is the US who are pursuing the conditionality path to this affect.

For what buffer is good for

In a similar move to Russia, Belarus is not attempting to hold dialogue with the EU as a whole. This followed the move by Brussels who put forward a policy of conditionality based on 12 points at the end of 2006. If all EU states would accept minimalist concessions, Lukashenka would presumably have less of an incentive to take further steps. But at the moment, the Minsk regime seems able to manipulate current disunity in the EU position, by reducing the number of conditions it is willing to take seriously. Lukashenka seems to be in a position to continue pursuing dialogue with the EU regardless of the fulfillment of all conditions laid down by Brussels. This situation results in inconsistency from both Minsk and Brussels, effecting practices on a fundamental level.

The reluctance of Minsk to pursue dialogue with the EU as a whole is undoubtedly not accidental and follows the successful practice of Russia. The Lukashenka regime understandably prefers to talk to a few member states individually, led by Germany. "Belarusian democracy is just like in Austria" announced the Belarusian leader in an interview with APA, the Austrian news agency, whose representative, just like Ambassador Weiss in his famous February meeting with Lukashenka, forgot to ask about the fulfillment of any EU conditions. "Double standards" in treatment have been enforced further with the revelation that KGB officers were told to be careful with European diplomats. The newly exposed and fanciful "FBI spy ring" discovered by Belarusian TV served to further explain to the Europeans who are the real bad guys. The next target to attract could be the United Kingdom. At least the carefully presented meeting of Lukashenka with Timothy Bell, a leading specialist from the British PR firm, should be taken as PR itself targeting the European and international business elite, with the aim of portraying Lukashenka as a leader ready and willing to burnish his image in the West.

Illogical regime: Pregnant?

Meanwhile, besides cooperation within the realm of energy security, Minsk is proposing to the EU, an improvement of the environment for investment. Already in 2008 three presidential decrees were passed to "liberalize" the Belarusian economy. The regime's businessmen have been ordered to start privatizing, whilst the National Bank and the foreign ministry have explicitly spoken out saying sanctions hurt, hinting that normalcy is needed. Old guards such as former Prime Minister Kebich or head of the Academy of Sciences Miasnikovich confirm this, providing first time evidence of the existence of a softer wing within the regime.

At the same time, Minsk is deepening its exploitation of Belarusian nationalism at home. A few days prior to the 90th anniversary of Belarusian People's Republic, which is usually ignored by authorities, the "official" newspaper Belarus Segodnya hosted a roundtable with six leading historians of Belarus to discuss what the BPR meant for Belarus - without censorship. The regime also commemorated the anniversary of the Khatyn tragedy for the first time. On the other hand, renewed police brutality against opposition demonstrators marking Freedom Day (March 25) has showed how easily the hard liners can dirty their nest.

Thus, all these events suggest that there is an erosion of the regime, in terms of its interests and economics, as well as practices and morale. At the same time, it is important to note that while there are no qualitative changes or serious intentions to liberalize, a willingness to make some concessions in order to gain more time certainly does exist. This erosion also means that there is no strong push from below to change the system, so it is lingering on in an increasingly loose shape. However, the Belarusian

consumer class², which has steadily emerged during Lukashenka's thirteen years in power, is aware of the situation and watching, how long the pregnancy of the regime will last, and indeed what the name of the new child will be.

The opposition: The next Godot?

Meanwhile in the opposition, a business as usual approach is also in place. The effort to prepare one United Democratic Forces candidate per district for the parliamentary elections in September has now, in the case of few districts, reverted to back door deals among the leaders. The UDF has been struggling with a lack of motivation in identifying potential candidates to run in the elections. This places the opposition into a Catch 22 position: it knows it is important to carry its message through the election campaign, but it faces a major challenge in motivating members. A lack of common policy messages open to the mainstream, as well as the individual politics of the member parties stand beside the problem of stubborn leaders, which taken together erodes the image of a united opposition force. As a first structural sign of this erosion, the Young Front has officially left the UDF, while the Christian Democrats may follow suit, but only following the elections.

On the other side of the fence, the presidential party-to be Belaya Rus, has grown its base membership to 50,000 according to its chairman, the Education Minister Radzkow. In a similar approach to Putin's United Russia, this new political actor is full of patriotism. Making use of popular public figures, Belaya Rus is hoping to be "the nation's most numerous public force" taking part in the 2008 parliamentary elections. This paradoxically gives a chance for the opposition to re-new its position within the mainstream, as the parliamentary elections might be organized based on the Russian recipe: absolutely not fair, but relatively free. This is backed-up by a Minsk rumor that the regime has been working on choosing its own opposition in the parliament - from the opposition list of candidates. Given previous such projects (such as the Frolov-led Respublika faction in 2000-2004) the regime will make sure to be able to control "his" opposition, if it would opt for the option to have any.

The Milinkevich-led For Freedom Movement is focusing once again, on the conditions for free and fair elections which are useful to remind the West of the fundamentals of the process. As such a development could seem as a change in the Belarusian electoral context. Nevertheless, just like in the case of economic liberalization, the regime does not intend to give up its place, even though a few, technical aspects of previous elections might be changed.

From this viewpoint, the current state of affairs within the opposition is even more unfortunate as it is most likely the UDF will not be able to exploit any new features of an elections environment. Especially since the overwhelmingly individual policymaking within the opposition forces the "leaders" to focus on their individual goals, such as choosing who will be the opposition's candidate for the 2011 presidential elections. This new „Waiting for Godot“-style play began with Alyaksandr Milinkevich last year, whose young staffers were openly declaring that making Milinkevich "the candidate" (although not the president) is the movement's sole strategy. Amid the row over disputed single district seats for the parliamentary elections, mainly nationalistic politicians are speaking out about the strong position of Sergey Kaliakin, the Communist leader within the UDF. Perhaps this could prompt the Belarusian National Front to understand that this time Belarus' oldest party should have its own candidate. While this opposition cacophony

² According to local sources, the special forces (even those led by the notorious Pavlichenko) are forced to work on constructions sites to ease the lack of labor in Belarus. This may hit the morale of these forces, but it is also the aftermath of the consumer society created by Lukashenka's wage increases as well as labor migration to Russia. Belarusian companies can not afford to pay what the Belarusian workers would require. This tendency might be further strengthened if Poland and Lithuania will be technically (Schengen zone) consume more Belarusian workers.

does not provide the best proof that the UDF is a real political force, the regime may produce a new leader for the wider opposition – Alyaksandr Kazulin.

This social democratic politician has no doubt proved his commitment somewhat during last year's hunger strike, but a personal tragedy (the death of his wife Iryna Kazulina) as well as the authorities ugly mismanagement of Kazulin's short release for the funeral should not only alarm the EU about the regime's real character, but should help to increase the acceptance of Kazulin in general. During his three-day emergence he was able to change his previous radical tone, broaden his political appeal towards nationalists as well as in the eyes of the regime. Lukashenka should be aware that the longer Kazulin stays in prison, the stronger his moral appeal will be on his release.

Russian Relations: Big Brotherly Hug

The hike of \$9 per 1,000 cubic meters by Gazprom for Belarus for the 2nd quarter of 2008 came as a big surprise. This unexpected support from Moscow further deepened when Russian Ambassador to Minsk Surikov announced that the gas price for Belarus will stay the same for the rest of this year. With this action, Belarus became the only country so far this year where the current Russian economic policy toward the CIS altered. On the one hand, Lukashenka has made great use of the post-presidential turmoil in Russia, to create a conflict with the US in order to illustrate Belarus' geopolitical loyalty to Russia. On the other hand, price stabilization showed that the Kremlin has no real political motivation to pressure Lukashenka, despite the well-known antipathy of Putin towards the Belarusian leader. In addition, Moscow may worry about the simultaneous process of "nation building" pursued by the opposition as well as the regime. But this brotherly help would certainly prompt Lukashenka to continue to play off East and West. However, it remains too early to assess any policy change on the Russian side, as the only set rule of Moscow in its gas game, as Europeans have learned to their detriment, is that the price is always changing.

The EU: vs. Member States

Opening its long awaited Delegation in Minsk gives a chance to Brussels to make a check on policy and a more serious evaluation of its implementation. Although policy-wise Brussels is fulfilling most of its expectations, the unilateral policies of member states make the EU seem in a need of a revision of its joint policy.

However much Brussels has been sticking to its policy principles, the member states have not. Germany prefers its Ostpolitik, whilst Lithuania and Poland are doing business with the regime, at the same time as Slovakia wanting to prove it still has a foreign policy. While debating whether dialogue, business or a tough stance can lead to democratization, all are simply fulfilling what Minsk expects and how it views³ its business with the West. This can be defined as an inconsistent implementation of a consistent policy; the European Union which has not changed its democratization principles since 1997, despite the current erosion in some areas.

To escape this situation, Brussels must be less shy and more interactive toward Minsk. Its overall goal should be to win over the sympathy of ordinary Belarusians, not the regime. To start achieving this, the EU must take its own assistance program more seriously. In opposition to the more flexible EIDHR, the newly opened Non-State Actors and Local Authorities (NSA/LA) mechanism, supposedly replacing the also flexible Democratic Cooperation channel, has returned the implementation of EU policy into the

³ "We hope that the opening of the European Commission's representation in Minsk will create a foundation for further invigoration and expansion of our relations with the European Union in such mutually beneficial avenues as power engineering and energy effectiveness, transport and transit, environmental protection, interaction of customs and border services, scientific and technical cooperation and others". See the statement of the MFA of Belarus, BelTA, January 14, 2008

pre-2004 era, when registration from local NGOs was required. This act implies Brussels' stance towards assistance is moving backwards rather than progressing forwards; surely a poor move, even if unintended.

Bolstering Up for the Future: What the EU Can Do?

It is now time for Brussels to make bold proposals in order to make policy implementation more unified, but also make clear to the Belarusians where it stands. One of the topics the EU needs to address urgently is its own visa regime for the Schengen area. However, despite the insistence of many European NGOs, the problem is not only about the price of the visa, but the practices of many EU Embassies. The campaign to reduce visa fees, albeit justified, dilutes Brussels efforts to connect visa facilitation to the European Neighbourhood Policy. No wonder that Minsk has welcomed this initiative. Meanwhile the Minister of Foreign Affairs Martynov has written individual letters to his Polish and Czech counterparts urging these countries to bilaterally accommodate Minsk visa requirements. Last but not least, this helps to hide what Minsk is afraid of the most: that in solidarity with their US colleagues, EU Embassies will also suspend the issuing of visas, even in the short-term.

As part of a bolder policy proposal, Brussels should come up with a plan for a free visa regime, but in parallel to an increase in its visa ban list by including prominent regional and local figures in the regime. Such a move would clearly indicate that ordinary citizens matter for Brussels. It would also make the obstacles to better relations between the EU and Belarus clearer. Brussels may worry that its diplomats may follow their US colleagues in the case of bolder policy or more consistent implementation, but only these can aid the regime to move from erosion to liberalization.