Belarus: What is to be done?

A summary review of recent writings on Belarus contained in *Changing Belarus, Chaillot Paper 85, The European Union Institute for Security Studies, November 2005.* The full collection can be viewed in PDF format at: www.iss-eu.org/chaillot/chai85e.html

By Robin Shepherd*

What are we to make of Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus? As his country gears up for presidential elections on March 19 an impressive collection of essays published by the European Union Institute for Security Studies offers a timely way of getting to grips with that question. Edited by Dov Lynch, a senior fellow at the Institute, Chaillot Paper number 85 entitled "Changing Belarus" brings together scholarly yet highly readable commentaries on subjects ranging from the internal situation in Belarus to relations with Moscow on the one hand and the European Union on the other, the influence of key neighbors such as Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine and the vexed problem of national identity in a country where the Belarusian language takes second place to Russian.

Introducing the collection – which was initially prepared for an EU foreign ministers' meeting in November 2005 – Lynch outlines the central paradox at the heart of President Lukashenko's world view:

"The leadership of the Republic of Belarus is fearful and confident at the same time. Europe's last dictatorship is fearful of the future because of the changes occurring around it but confident of its ability to survive despite these changes."

How indeed could President Lukashenko be anything other than fearful in view of the dramatic changes which have taken place across his borders since coming to power in 1994. During that time Poland and the Baltic states have joined both NATO and the European Union and, most recently, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine has inspired and re-energized a domestic opposition in Belarus which had all but given up hope. The wider context is no less challenging, with the Bush administration having dedicated its second and final term to the globalization of democracy. If there is one thing that the Belarussian leadership cannot be accused of, therefore, it is paranoia about threats emanating from abroad. The "threat" of good examples lies right on Lukashenko's borders, and the United States of America has his government in its sights.

And yet, from Lukashenko's point of view, there are also good reasons to be confident. For just as we have been learning from events in countries such as Ukraine so, rest assured, has he. If Western observers have learned that youth-led civic organizations can be devastatingly effective weapons in mobilizing mass democratic movements and should therefore be supported, Alexander Lukashenko has also understood their effectiveness and concluded that therefore they must be suppressed. If American think tanks appreciate that even a partially free media can be utilized to great effect in popularizing the cause of pro-democracy candidates during election campaigns, can anyone doubt that the regime in Minsk has drawn the same conclusion

and clamped down on the media accordingly? If "dissident" oligarchs such as Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymashenka can use their financial power to promote themselves and others in the cause of democratization, Lukashenko would not need powers of genius to conclude that continued state control of the economy is profoundly important to the survival of his regime.

The regime and its opponents have been on the same learning curve, and both sides have drawn opposite conclusions.

How can the circle be squared? In the first instance, we need to be clear about what is actually going on in Belarus. The collection's Belarusian contributor provides an illuminating description of contemporary realities and the backdrop to them.

Vitali Silitski, who was driven out of the European Humanities University in Minsk in 2003 for criticizing the government, describes the regime's transition from what he calls "soft" dictatorship from 1996 to 2001 to increasingly "hard" dictatorship from 2001 onwards. In Silitski's schema, the first period commences with Lukashenko's consolidation of "absolute authority" in a 1996 referendum. From that time, he says:

"A fully consolidated political authoritarianism coexisted with a remarkable degree of social pluralism. Zones of autonomy, such as in the NGO sector and with the independent press, were put under considerable pressure but nevertheless allowed to exist on a considerable scale. Academic freedom continued in non-state educational establishments. Venues for independent expression in art, literature and music were not curtailed."

But with the opposition failing to take advantage of the situation, Lukashenko went on to win the presidential elections in 2001, elections which though flawed would, concedes Silitski, probably have been won by Lukashenko even if the vote had been fair. Independent polls suggested that he took 48 percent of the vote.

The transition to more intensely authoritarian rule is attributed to a combination of factors: a dramatic decline in popular support (to just 26 percent by April 2003) partly attributable to declining living standards over the next 18 months; a retrospective appreciation of the dangers of mass democracy movements as witnessed by the fall of Lukashenko's friend Slobodan Milosevic in 2000; worsening relations with Russia over economic issues and, above all; fears that the regime would not be able to muster enough support for a referendum to extend Lukashenko's term of office beyond the September 2006 limit laid down by law.

The realities of "hard" dictatorship are elaborated in depressing detail. In the state apparatus itself, Lukashenko has carefully placed security service personnel in top positions in the government thus closing off the prospects for internal dissent or reform from within. Outside the regime a variety of methods are employed to drastically limit the opposition.

Opposition parties themselves find it enormously difficult to exist in full accordance with the law. The housing code, for example, forbids them from having offices in residential buildings. Unable to pay commercial rents or simply unable to find offices at all, local branches of the opposition frequently find themselves unable to officially

register. If they can jump that hurdle they then find themselves subject to constant harassment. To cite just two methods used by the authorities: parties can be immediately closed down for organizing unsanctioned rallies; the mere fact of being a member of an opposition party can in itself be de facto grounds for dismissal from one's job. As Silitski puts it:

"The status and condition of the political opposition is now reminiscent of a Soviet-era dissident movement, in spite of the fact that political opposition remains technically legal in Belarus."

Quasi-totalitarian control over other sections of society has also intensified dramatically. The independent media is all but extinct. Silitski notes that 34 newspapers were closed down or suspended in 2003 and 2004 alone. The remainder operate in a climate of fear. To illustrate the kinds of limits on public expression in Belarus, Silitski cites the case of two activists sentenced to two years in jail merely for putting out a leaflet criticizing Lukashenko for vacationing in Austria at public expense.

Education, particularly at university level, has also been targeted: unauthorized books and journals have been banned from libraries; students and professors have been forbidden from taking leaves of absence to travel abroad; courses on state ideology have been introduced; professors face the threat of having their qualifications rescinded for participation in opposition activities.

The non-governmental sector has, predictably, suffered particularly badly in recent years. In 2003 and 2004, 56 NGO's were closed down by the authorities and a further 42 were forced to “self-liquidate”. Registration of new NGOs is usually a non-starter. Silitski notes that "out of 1,464 organizations that submitted documents for registration in 2003, only 94 were registered."

Quite apart from the risk of political imprisonment and "disappearance" the regime thus has a near stranglehold on the political life of the country. To put it mildly, the political context in which opposition, however defined, can be expressed in Belarus is daunting. And since the state claims control of around 80 percent of the economy Lukashenko's ability to manipulate even the minutiae of people's lives is formidable.

Having elaborated such a depressing picture of the state of affairs in Belarus it comes as something of a surprise that Silitski concludes on a relatively optimistic note: "The prospects for political change in Belarus," he suggests, "are not a fantasy, but a real possibility."

Silitski reminds us that there is genuine and widespread support for political change in Belarus which goes well beyond the small circles of dissidents that existed under communism. Dissenters may operate in conditions reminiscent of communism but their numbers are vastly greater. The technological conditions under which Belarussian oppositionists operate are also very different. The days when communist governments could control the dissemination of subversive material by keeping tabs on photo-copying machines have been superseded by the era of the internet. Finally, although Lukashenko is taking steps to prevent his country falling prey to a democratic domino effect his increasingly isolated regime cannot forever remain

impervious to the political environment in neighboring countries. The situation in Belarus is dire, but there is no reason to give the country up as a lost cause.

This then raises the question of what outsiders can do to help. This theme is taken up in various forms and in separate essays by Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski – an expert for the European People's Party and European Democrats on Eastern policy at the European Parliament, Dov Lynch, Dmitri Trenin – a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, and Clelia Rontoyanni, who currently works for the Delegation of the European Commission in Moscow.

Grajewski begins with an important overview of Lithuanian and Polish policies towards Minsk ranging through the relevance of the Polish minority in Belarus (variously estimated at between 400,000 and one million), economic ties, and regional and cross-border issues. The text then moves on to EU-Belarus relations and concludes with a series of policy recommendations. Arguing that mere declarations of support for democracy coupled with criticism of the regime will no longer suffice, the author makes six suggestions.

Firstly, the EU should exercise constant public pressure on the government and should publicize the names of people who have been killed, imprisoned or persecuted by the regime. The logic is the same applied by rights groups such as Amnesty International: publicity provides protection for those under threat while simultaneously extracting a cost in terms of the regime's international reputation.

Secondly, independent radio and television stations should be set up, perhaps on the territories of Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, to broadcast into Belarus and thus break the state monopoly on mass media. What is missing here, however, is a clear explanation of how this could work in practice. How, from a technical point of view, would such a venture be put into effect? Since the authorities are unlikely to allow such stations access to mainstream broadcast frequencies or cable, how many people in Belarus would actually be able to see or hear such broadcasts?

Thirdly, a European Liberty Fund should be established to help distribute funds to the opposition in more imaginative ways. This is an important insight. Currently, the EU's ability to provide aid is hampered because EU funding for civil society depends on the cooperation of governments. Such cooperation is clearly not possible in contemporary Belarus where the funding of the opposition must, of necessity, be clandestine. Since EU rules stress the primacy of transparency, current policies effectively reward the regime for its repressive actions. Funds do not get through. New mechanisms must be found.

Fourthly, Grajewski suggests that the EU consider setting up a European Peace Corps along the lines of the U.S. equivalent.

Fifthly, he proposes the idea of a European scholarship program to help alleviate the problems faced by students, teachers and academics that fall foul of the regime.

Sixthly and finally, he recommends that the EU should condemn the Russian government for the support it gives to Lukashenko thus ensuring that Moscow is aware there will be a political price to pay for the continuation of such a policy.

The complexities of Russia's relationship with Belarus is the subject of Dmitri Trenin's contribution to this collection.

Trenin's central argument is that Moscow is effectively locked in a kind of "policy paralysis" with regard to Lukashenko's Belarus. Lukashenko, he argues, has cleverly played on Russia's post-Soviet insecurities to keep Moscow on side. He and his supporters in Moscow "present themselves as the only providers of strategic depth to Russia: should they be ousted 'Nato armies' would be deployed opposite Smolensk rather than opposite Brest." Such crude posturing has been famously refined to play upon Russia's hurt, post-imperial pride with the suggestion of a Russia-Belarus Union which has, at the rhetorical level at least, been on the cards for a decade. Unfortunately for Lukashenko – who apparently had it mind to head up such a union following the demise of Boris Yeltsin – the idea has run up against the uncomfortable realities of Vladimir Putin's own increasingly centralized and authoritarian Russia. Trenin notes the irony of Putin accepting the general idea in 2003 in the form of one proposal to incorporate Belarus into Russia with six "oblasts" of Belarus simply being added to the 89 regions of the Russian Federation. "Lukashenko called this offer an 'insult' and vowed to preserve his country's independence."

Nevertheless, close cooperation in the defense arena does exist between the two countries. So close is that cooperation, Trenin says, "that it would not be an exaggeration to say that a common defense and security space exists between Belarus and Russia." The idea that regime change in Belarus would lead to an imminent security threat to Russia from the West is viewed even in Moscow as fantastical. But this does not mean that sections of the Russian military and security establishment do not value the existence of a reliable defense partner which eschews all talk of joining the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Countervailing forces also exist in Moscow, however, most notably in the economic sphere: "Belarus is interesting to the Russian business community as one of the last countries awaiting large-scale privatization. Russian companies are eager to expand into the neighboring country but Belarussian authorities refuse to lift restrictions on privatization...Lukashenko...realizes full well that privatization would spell the beginning of the end of his control of the country. And he, of course, is right."

In the end, what the Russian leadership needs to understand, Trenin suggests, is that "in the medium and longer-term Lukashenko's regime is doomed." Whether the military industrial complex in Moscow likes it or not, therefore, Russia would be well advised to take a stake in regime change in Belarus so that when change does come it takes place in accordance with, and not contrary to, Russian interests. The best way it can do this – having made a very public mess of unilateral interference in Ukraine – is in cooperation with the EU and the US, he suggests.

Clelia Rontoyanni makes several complementary points in her essay on Belarussian foreign policy. She notes that despite its official designation as 'multi-directional' Belarusian foreign policy is all but entirely directed towards Russia and the CIS. She provides a detailed analysis of the background to the political union debate including opinion poll evidence suggesting that the general idea is supported by majorities in both Belarus and Russia. As ever, though, the devil lies in the details of what political

union would actually entail. She quotes the findings of a Public Opinion Foundation poll from September 2004 in which a mere 3 percent of Belarusians would support their country becoming part of the Russian Federation. 39 percent were in favor of an arrangement between the two countries along the lines of the European Union. The perceived interests, political and economic, of the two countries are different, if not mutually exclusive. Apart from anything else Putin and Lukashenko appear to loathe each other.

As far as Western Europe is concerned, foreign policy can be characterized as a mutually re-enforcing self-isolation and isolation from the outside in which Minsk rejects Brussels because of its continuing concerns over democracy and Brussels rejects Minsk for the equal and opposite reason. As Rontoyanni notes, the Belarussian leadership has "proved remarkably unresponsive to external criticism". It is a recognition that should prompt Brussels to re-think its entire strategy. In sum, she concludes:

"Belarusian foreign policy is currently content with preserving the status quo. It seeks neither further integration with Russia nor a fundamental improvement of relations with European institutions, the United States and its immediate neighbors on its western border (Poland and the Baltic countries). The parameters of Belarussian foreign policy are defined by domestic political considerations, namely an overarching preoccupation with regime survival..."

Written by Alexandra Goujon, of L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, the collection's only French language contribution (all the others are in English) provides an interesting survey of the development of Belarusian national identity from the pre-20th century period, through the communist era, to the present day. It is divided into three parts: nation and state formation looking at early ideological and cultural foundations; the development of nationalism and state ideology after the arrival on the scene of Lukashenko; and finally the Europeanization of Belarusian national identity and its relationship with democratization and European integration. The author argues that the European Union must find ways to end the isolation of the country but also to support national forces anchored in European democracy.

So, what is to be done? In the concluding essay, Dov Lynch outlines the options. Echoing the sentiments of other contributors, Lynch disapprovingly notes that hitherto "EU policy has sought regime change by declaration."

Lynch's essay takes us through the full gamut of EU policies and policy frameworks towards Belarus, particularly as they have evolved since 1997. There have been a number of recurring themes. One, he argues, has been a vain attempt to find "new 'starting points'" with Minsk in the hope that Lukashenko would use them to lessen repression in return for better relations. Another theme is that it has been Minsk and not Brussels that has set the pace and the agenda of the relationship, with the EU simply reacting to events unfolding in Belarus. The net result is that the EU has been completely unable to stem the tide of authoritarianism. How could Brussels proceed in a more effective manner? Lynch offers seven areas for the EU to consider:

Firstly, he recommends embedding Belarus into the region in which it finds itself, a region which has witnessed dramatic and largely positive change. The chief

instrument would be the European Neighborhood and Partnership Programmes which could be used to push EU interests on matters such as cross-border issues, justice and home affairs, transport and infrastructure. One advantage of such an approach would be to avoid being Minsk-centric.

Secondly, Brussels should open a full delegation in Belarus building on its 2005 decision to open a regionalized delegation in Minsk to give the EU a face in the country. The OSCE can no longer stand in for the EU.

Thirdly, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) must be exploited to the full. Contacts with all sections of Belarussian society such as regional elites, unions, business leaders and educational institutions need to be widened with particular emphasis on training and assistance. An EU-wide Fund for Supporting Freedoms in Belarus should also be considered.

Fourthly, The EU must become involved in the 2006 elections. Brussels must push for OSCE-led election monitoring. Even though the regime is almost certain to reject the idea, this would at least have the effect of delegitimizing fraudulent elections at home and abroad. The EU, he argues, should also help raise the profile of the main opposition candidate in the elections. Involving the United States in all this is considered vital.

Fifthly, tighten and possibly broaden targeted sanctions against Lukashenko and senior allies and consider freezing Lukashenko's personal assets which are estimated by some to run into billions of dollars. Simultaneously, the EU should ease visa regulations for members of civil society, scholars, students and others.

Sixthly, The EU should not simply rely on resources from Brussels. While Brussels is restricted by internal regulations, member states can often be more flexible. Member states with a serious will to effect change could also come together in a Belarus Task Force – a kind of European “Coalition of the Willing”.

Finally, Lynch suggests the EU could use the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster to engage more closely with Belarus – the country worst affected by the disaster – in a non-political initiative. 2006 could be declared a Year of Remembrance for Chernobyl and the EU could "launch a multi-dimensional program targeted at Belarussian youth affected and at risk."

Lynch concludes: "It is time for the EU to act more confidently with Belarus. The cycle of learned helplessness from 1997 must be broken."

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