



By **Balázs Jarábik**
Associate Fellow,
FRIDE (Madrid, Spain)

BELARUS AFTER SANCTIONS: THE LOST DICTATOR

By reinventing the policy of sanctions, the relations of the West with Belarus returned to ground zero. Western pundits, rightly so, have mostly been critical of EU's soft measures that are based on economic sanctions. Even though the visa ban increased the number of blacklisted officials, it hardly seems to be a sufficiently tough response to the crackdown of December 19, which resulted in an increased number of political prisoners. Alexander Lukashenka raised the stakes with the brutal crackdown, and the West should equally respond respectively.

In the meantime the West should finally learn how to support the Belarus' beleaguered opposition but also that rely only on them in a country where most people work for the state, won't be enough for democratic change. Moreover, it is still unclear what the exact role/goal of part of the opposition on December 19 was? If the West intends to change Belarus, serious "de-mythization" of it should first take place to choose the right policy, and most importantly to find the right formula of assistance strategy that would promote the European values as the alternative for the current state of Belarus. For that matter, the world should finally recognize that Belarus does not have a problem because it has Lukashenka, but it has Lukashenka because Belarus has a problem.

The new wave of revolutions in North Africa – Tunisia and Egypt – should not only urge the West to consider the need to increase democracy assistance, but also to think of ways of achieving “democratic” change that would lead to reforms. Learning from the post-Orange revolutionary Ukraine Europe should aim at changing Belarus, not only shooting at its leader. Considering the shockwave that swept through the entire society (not only the opposition) after the crackdown alongside the growing feeling of instability caused by inflation, severe budget deficit, and the forthcoming privatization process, the West should isolate or even ignore Lukashenka. Not having oil or gas to bargain with, he is “forced” to sell the only “commodity” he has – the image of the last dictator of Europe. Therefore, unless the West is able to expand its contacts and influence among Belarus’ most influential class, the bureaucrats, it will have little chance to pursue desired change of the system. Proving to the bureaucrats that the leader is no longer in position to deliver concessions from the West (and East) joined with aid programs to the civil society, independent media, and re-building the opposition could spark the needed change in Belarusian leadership and society. Let’s face it, finally, the real long-term challenge in Belarus is social and political change, not only regime change. The former would give us another Poland, the later – Ukraine.

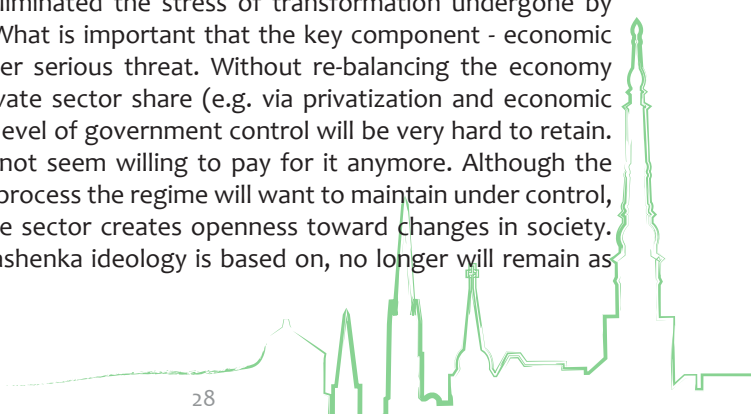
Five myths

The aftermath of December 19, the Western media, and political response have reconfirmed most of the myths and again reinforced Alexander Lukashenka’s image of Europe’s last dictator. Western press is eagerly discussing the lack of the right EU policy toward Belarus. Brussels has tried everything from isolation to engagement by now. With the renewal of sanctions based approach, the EU policy has returned to the same point after a full circle. Moreover the visa-ban itself is a great show case how much the West knows Belarus: dozens are left the positions, another dozen are not responsible for the actual court decisions, there are two heads of presidential administration and even a dead person on that list. Perhaps now it would be worth learning what is really happening in Minsk first of all in order to make the Western policy and assistance a better fit.

Let us start with Russia. The very first myth concerns Russia’s policy and strategic intentions in support of Lukashenka’s geopolitical juggling between the East and the West. Despite the noisy anti-Lukashenka campaign and speculations over possible support to opposition candidates, Russia’s intention has not been regime change. For Moscow any other president would

mean a new large opening to the West. The Russian policy merely intends to guarantee the loyalty of Belarusian leader and to get the most important economic assets of Belarus – energy transit and oil refineries - under control. Russia certainly does not want to weaken Belarus too much and therefore will be ready to support Lukashenka's regime financially (as it has happened before), should it be necessary. Moreover, Belarus makes Russia look more democratic and its leadership - inclusive. It is important to note that the crackdown and the sanctions came at the right time for Moscow as it needs to focus more on its own elections, as well as Ukraine and Georgia as its main foreign policy priorities in the neighborhood. In addition, the Russian ruling elites are looking with an increasing concern at the events in North Africa, as they measure everything by the same yardstick. The activation of various opposition groups in big cities, including nationalists and extreme right-wing parties, is making the power circle tighten controls over the crowd and media. The Kremlin simply cannot let the steam out of the pot now - it is too hot and too unpredictable.

Second myth is that Alexander Lukashenka is a phenomenon himself. His rule is usually characterized as ironfisted. However he would not have been able to rule for 16 years (by now) without public consent as well as without authoritarian conditions created for political opposition. In serious independent research (such as the series of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies on social contracts), he appears much more often as a reflection of the country where an upgraded understanding of the Soviet model of politics is very much alive. His social contract is based on constant economic growth and a more equal level of the distribution of wealth. The building of a strong power vertical, strong control mechanisms, functional (in Soviet manner) state institutions as well as little corruption used to give the Belarusians a better feeling about their leadership. However, the price to pay for this upgraded version of the Soviet Union is a lack of free and fair elections and fewer political freedoms. Nevertheless, for many Belarusians (the older generations) it has eliminated the stress of transformation undergone by other CIS countries. What is important that the key component - economic growth - is now under serious threat. Without re-balancing the economy by increasing the private sector share (e.g. via privatization and economic reforms) the current level of government control will be very hard to retain. At least Russia does not seem willing to pay for it anymore. Although the privatization is also a process the regime will want to maintain under control, larger share of private sector creates openness toward changes in society. State, the entire Lukashenka ideology is based on, no longer will remain as the only option.



Third myth is the democratic opposition. As a matter of fact, democracy within the “democratic forces” in Belarus may be easily questioned. In many cases NGOs and political parties in their struggle for domination mirror the regime by building their own “verticals” to control information and resources. These hermetic and fully-controlled top-down structures have been less capable of reaching out to ordinary citizens, building broader networks and they are in short of doing the fundamental organizing work that underpins democratic culture. It would be a shame to blame them, though: restrictive legal conditions, operating under constant surveillance of secret services and competing for resources from non-transparent donors has left its mark on local non state actors. Last year the democratically oriented presidential candidates all played on a certain set of anti-regime rhetoric, demonstrating courage and determination. But they did not believe or present a vision that incorporated the possibility of their victory. Still, given their (limited) access to state electronic media and the development of independent media voters, for the first time, they had considerable exposure to advocate for the alternatives to Lukashenka. There is a base to use and build a capable pro-reform constituency.

Similar is the fourth myth - the recent crackdown. Even though the number of prisoners is unprecedented showing the intention of the regime to raise the stakes toward the West, the post-election repressions were rather targeted at people related to some of the candidates, especially the campaign of Vladimir Neklaev “Govori Pravdu” (Speak the Truth), the one with flourished with cash from unknown resources. According to statistics of local human rights organizations, thirty-seven people have been accused of mass riots¹; there have been 115 interrogations² and 135 searches³ in activists’ offices and apartments. Regardless of the announcement made by the Ministry of Education that no students will be expelled⁴, regional universities have reportedly done so with 5 students, while 7 people have lost their jobs⁵ on political grounds. At least 15 activists are still abroad in Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, and Poland.⁶

¹ <http://spring96.org/be/news/40417> Out of them, 28 have been detained, 2 are under guarded house arrest and 7 have been imposed travel restrictions on; the remaining 15 people are in the status of suspects, 4 of them – under guard, 9 under travel restrictions, and 2 have left the country. All of them are waiting for a court decision on the degree of administrative offence. In addition, 2 activists of the Young Front are suspect under criminal offence on hooliganism.

² <http://spring96.org/be/news/40807>

³ <http://spring96.org/be/news/40809>

⁴ http://news.tut.by/society/212386.html?utm_source=news-right-block&utm_medium=other-news&utm_campaign=other-news

⁵ <http://www.svaboda.org/content/article/2289346.html>

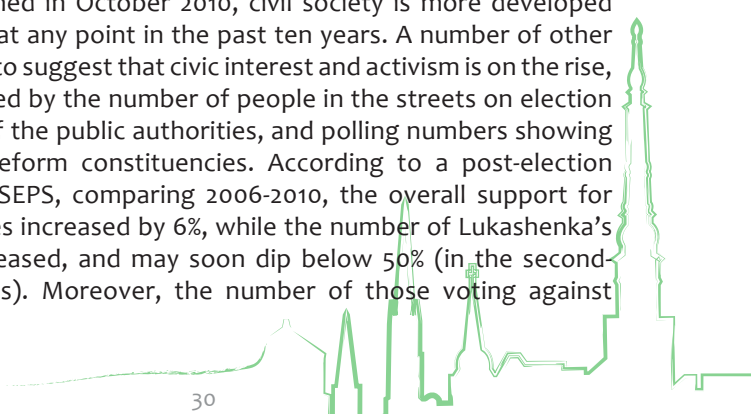
⁶ <http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=49198>

The provided statistics also reflect on the rather thin numbers of the opposition. Still, it seems that instead of trying to wipe the opposition out, the KGB seems looking for information about the sources of funding. Lukashenka's furious reaction could be a revenge, partly in connection with the funding for this part of the opposition. In addition, the post election poll by IISEPS – suggesting 51% of the votes for him – suggests that he did not need to react as the elections results were close to his “regular” support. The very same poll shows that he also was far from the officially announced 79%. Thus, he may have been aiming to create a situation where he was “forced” to react. In other words, the events could be well-prepared trap part for the opposition to march in.

Last but not least of the myths suggests that there are no financial resources in Belarusian politics, e.g. for the opposition. One of the lessons drawn from the campaign is that the strongest opposition candidates were not put forward by the traditional party establishments or in a competitive (thus democratic) process like it happened in 2006. They were selected by their “donors”. The availability of resources suggests there are new inside and outside players who are interested in taking a stake in political outcome in Belarus. While it has often been interpreted as a negative development (“where did the money come from?”), it should be seen as a harbinger of greater interest for the political change.

What kind of civil society?

The good news from the 2010 presidential elections and the post-election situation is that the Belarusian civil society is significantly wider than many had thought. It has grown in the last several years of relative liberalization to penetrate broader society and now involves more than just members or activists of opposition parties and NGOs. According to a Freedom House report published in October 2010, civil society is more developed in Belarus now than at any point in the past ten years. A number of other developments seem to suggest that civic interest and activism is on the rise, which is demonstrated by the number of people in the streets on election night, the reaction of the public authorities, and polling numbers showing an increase in pro-reform constituencies. According to a post-election poll conducted by IISEPS, comparing 2006-2010, the overall support for opposition candidates increased by 6%, while the number of Lukashenka's supporters has decreased, and may soon dip below 50% (in the second round vote scenarios). Moreover, the number of those voting against



have also increased, which is a clear sign of political frustration. These could be indicators for the post-election crackdown as well. Not having the incentives connected to the economic growth, the regime could turn from a (reasonably) popular authoritarian system into a real dictatorship using fear as the most important cement.

The question is what change these newly activated citizens want and can achieve and what the West could or should do to support changes in Belarus. First of all, most local experts believe that a significant number of people on the Ploshcha were not there to support the opposition or any specific candidates, but broader agendas of better opportunities, as well as change and reform. On the other hand, the regime is weakening and increasingly perceived as incapable of providing stability (not to mention more/better jobs and growth). Surrounded by a liberalized environment and information, the Belarusian civil society was increasingly demonstrating itself as a credible agent of new ideas and initiative, and, in some cases, of social and political change. The shock of the crackdown that followed and repressions hopefully won't change it. Even though the law enforcement agencies are acting with no visible cracks, the shock wave raised by brutality has swept through the government as well as through the civil society leaving the same bitter feeling.

However, the civil society and the pro-reform forces need to clearly articulate their reform agenda. People are more willing to mobilize for the change but for this a clear and an achievable vision of future Belarus must be presented. The *Ploshcha* was a protest to reject a falsified election, but is there an alternative plan for the general public? What are common citizens going to do to achieve that change, and will they risk their current jobs or put their future at stake?

The current civil society institutions and the Western community have a limited access to, not even mentioning influence on various governmental institutions of Belarus. Given bureaucracy's strong position in the society, any change is virtually impossible without them. While the Orange Revolution opened the borders of Ukraine and the West, a revolution in Minsk would most likely close Belarus's borders with the West.

How to get from the last to a lost dictator?

Lukashenka's decision on crackdown could be explained by cracks, clashes amongst different interest groups in the regime, a Russian (or other) plot,

opposition provocation or simply by his own emotional decision to put an end to “this mindless democracy”. Instead of guessing, it is more important to notice that he has weakened his own position before the upcoming privatization process. This has the potential of becoming a game-changer. Obviously the regime will want to control the privatization process and they want to (and actually do) control the opposition. With a smart approach, the West may have a chance to isolate Lukashenka further from his own society and make the bureaucracy to reconsider the risk of having him in power for too long. If he is no longer able to provide concessions to pay for his regime, the door for other alternatives will be more open.

The Western press and policymakers, rightly so, are pushing for a tougher response. Without seriously considering economic sanctions the EU, once again, will remain the hostage of the opposition it supports. A new policy must finally acknowledge that Belarus provides a more complex challenge than it seems. It is not only about Lukashenka but about a society that approves and supports order and stability and does not mind a lack of freedom in return. To make Belarus embrace European values – such as leadership change through free and fair elections - the West needs to engage with all layers of society. Unless the West is able to expand its contacts and influence amongst the bureaucrats it will have a little chance to support a systemic reform and build public support for it.

Think out of the box – consider that nothing can make the EU more attractive in the eyes of Minsk than ignorance. This is exactly what happened with the US before the elections. The American ignorance after the row over the US Embassy in Minsk (when Minsk forced the US to reduce its diplomatic corps from 34 to a mere 5) two years ago prompted Minsk to give up its enriched uranium before the elections. Although the delivery is in question, the path toward a new policy is there. Thus, a new viable mid-term strategy for the West at this moment is not only to isolate but also ignore Alexander Lukashenka, meanwhile focusing on broader society as a whole. It is not an easy task considering the strong intention of the West to be (at last) principled with Belarus. Having no oil or gas, Lukashenka has developed another commodity – his own image of a dictatorship. Until the West will reduce the importance of this commodity, it will keep continue to play its part from the Lukashenka’s script.

