*Chaillot Paper*

November 2005

n°85

# Changing Belarus

*Alexandra Goujon, Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski, Dov Lynch, Clelia Rontoyanni, Vitali Silitski and Dmitri Trenin*

Edited by Dov Lynch

Institute for Security Studies
Institut d'études de Sécurité
European Union
Union européenne

In January 2002 the **Institute for Security Studies (ISS)** became an autonomous Paris-based agency of the European Union. Following an EU Council Joint Action of 20 July 2001, it is now an integral part of the new structures that will support the further development of the CFSP/ESDP. The Institute's core mission is to provide analyses and recommendations that can be of use and relevance to the formulation of the European security and defence policy. In carrying out that mission, it also acts as an interface between European experts and decision-makers at all levels.

---

*Chaillot Papers* are monographs on topical questions written either by a member of the ISS research team or by outside authors chosen and commissioned by the Institute. Early drafts are normally discussed at a seminar or study group of experts convened by the Institute and publication indicates that the paper is considered by the ISS as a useful and authoritative contribution to the debate on CFSP/ESDP. Responsibility for the views expressed in them lies exclusively with authors. *Chaillot Papers* are also accessible via the Institute's Website: **www.iss-eu.org**

*Chaillot Paper*

November 2005

n°85

# Changing Belarus

*Alexandra Goujon, Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski, Dov Lynch, Clelia Rontoyanni, Vitali Silitski and Dmitri Trenin*

*Edited by Dov Lynch*

**Institute for Security Studies**
*European Union*
*Paris*

**Institute for Security Studies**
*European Union*
*43 avenue du Président Wilson*
*75775 Paris cedex 16*
*tel.: +33 (0)1 56 89 19 30*
*fax: +33 (0)1 56 89 19 31*
*e-mail: institute@iss-eu.org*
**www.iss-eu.org**

*Director: Nicole Gnesotto*


ISSN 1017-7566
ISBN 92-9198-082-X
Published by the EU Institute for Security Studies and printed in Condé-sur-Noireau (France) by Corlet Imprimeur. Graphic design by Claire Mabille (Paris).

# *Contents*

n°85 November 2005

# *Contents*

# *Préface*

**Nicole Gnesotto**

*Dernière dictature européenne, le Belarus est à la fois une aberration et une espèce de trou noir dans l'architecture politique du vieux continent : alors que tous les pays issus de l'ex-bloc soviétique ont tissé des liens plus ou moins étroits avec l'ensemble des institutions européennes, le régime de Luka survit dans un état d'autarcie politique et diplomatique à peu près total, dont seules émergent des relations privilégiées mais néanmoins complexes avec Moscou. En dépit de l'expansion continue de l'OTAN et de l'Union aux marges de ce pays, le Belarus reste obstinément réfractaire à toute influence occidentale et résiste à toute transformation : mais jusqu'à quand ?*

*Telle est la question majeure qui structure les différents chapitres de ce* Cahier de Chaillot*, coordonné par Dov Lynch, chercheur à l'Institut où il dirige depuis trois ans le secteur des études eurasiennes : qu'en est-il de la stabilité de ce régime paria ? Jusqu'à quand restera-t-il imperméable aux contagions démocratiques dont l'Ukraine, la Georgie, la Moldavie font progressivement l'expérience ? Au-delà des méthodes policières de contrôle des élections et de la population, quelles sont les forces qui assurent la permanence du régime et quelles sont à l'inverse les dynamiques susceptibles de nourrir une évolution future ? Surtout, quelles sont les marges de manœuvre de l'Union européenne et comment définir une stratégie capable de sanctionner le régime actuel tout en favorisant les forces du changement ?*

*Car cette plongée dans la réalité du Belarus, à partir des meilleures expertises européennes disponibles, trace une réalité beaucoup plus complexe et contradictoire que ne le suggèrent les clichés traditionnels : la société du Belarus n'est pas une masse inerte et décérébrée, les relations avec Moscou ne sont pas celles d'alliés inconditionnels, les influences extérieures ne sont pas toutes stoppées par les murs de la censure et de l'oppression. Alors que tout le voisinage européen du Belarus est en phase de transition vers des systèmes, sinon démocratiques, en tout cas plus conformes aux normes et aux standards de l'Union européenne, le temps est venu pour l'Union de s'interroger sur une nouvelle approche à l'égard de ce pays.*

*L'ensemble de ce* Cahier de Chaillot *suggère en effet que le signal du changement doit d'abord venir de l'Union elle-même. A condition toutefois que celle-ci parvienne à concilier ses propres contradictions : entre l'objectif d'une démocratisation continue du continent européen et l'incertitude sur l'extension future des frontières de l'Union ; entre l'ambition d'une réconciliation des peuples européens et le souci d'un partenariat stratégique avec la Russie ; entre la promotion des vertus et de l'image de l'Union à l'extérieur de ses frontières et la consolidation de sa capacité d'attraction aux yeux de ses propres concitoyens.*

*Paris, novembre 2005*

# Introduction

**Dov Lynch**

1

## Fear and confidence

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.

First, most saliently, the regime in Minsk is afraid of the consequences of change in its immediate surroundings. The region has changed dramatically compared to when Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994. At that point, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) had not enlarged to the Baltic states and Poland. Then, the Russian Federation had abandoned its initial 'romantic' infatuation with the West to pursue a foreign policy based on what was called 'rational egotism.' This policy included a heavy emphasis on relations with Belarus, with the purported long-term aim of integration of the two states. At that point, Ukraine and Moldova were profoundly weak states with uncertain future orientations. In sum, the neighbourhood was comfortable for Lukashenka, enabling him to craft an authoritarian regime from the weak structures he had inherited.

By 2006, the region has changed beyond recognition. Poland and the three Baltic states have joined an enlarged EU and NATO, and Belarus finds itself on the front line against the main Euro-Atlantic political and security structures. More dangerously, Ukraine had a popular revolution in late 2004 that brought to power a political elite determined to return the country to its rightful place in Europe. The means by which Viktor Yushchenko came to power are a model of inspiration for those inside and around Belarus seeking regime change. The former Soviet Union has entered a period of upheaval. In Central Asia, this has taken a violent turn. In Georgia and Ukraine, revolutions have seen the rise of genuinely nationalist leaders determined to integrate their countries into Euro-Atlantic structures. The Communist leader-

ship in Chisinau has also embarked on a path of anchoring Moldova into European structures. The former Soviet Union, as a concept and as a region, is disintegrating.

The Lukashenka regime is now an isolated pariah in an uncomfortable region. The revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia have emboldened the domestic opposition to the Lukashenka regime, and, perhaps worse for Minsk, strengthened the conviction of certain external forces that democratic uprisings *can work*. All of this, at a time when Belarusian relations with Russia are difficult. Vladimir Putin has taken a more distant view of Minsk, and sought to place relations on a sounder economic footing. If Lukashenka had once harboured dreams of becoming leader of a union state of Belarus and Russia, these hopes have vanished.

The wider setting around Belarus is not better. NATO has reached Belarusian borders, while the enlarged EU is becoming an important European security provider. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) gives pride of place to Belarus' close neighbours, Ukraine and Moldova. The Union's new members are intent on regime change in Minsk. Also, US policy has sharpened towards Belarus. Emboldened by changes in Tbilisi and Kyiv, Washington never misses an opportunity to highlight Belarus as the last 'outpost of tyranny' in Europe.

Yet, despite all of these changes, Lukashenka rules Belarus with confidence. His confidence is drawn from countervailing trends at work at each of the levels noted above.

Inside Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has created an authoritarian regime with firm foundations. Politically, Lukashenka has eliminated most sources of opposition to the regime. Voting in October 2004 created a docile legislature and approved a constitutional referendum that will allow Lukashenka to run for a third mandate in the presidential elections of 2006. Given state control over the media and electoral process, there is little reason to believe that Lukashenka will not 'win' a third term. Strange though it may seem, Lukashenka does have support inside the country, which draws on the fact that Belarus has avoided many of the difficulties of a 'transition.' What is more, the Belarusian economy has been surprisingly responsive to a favourable international context, with reasonably impressive growth rates that have allowed Lukashenka to increase minimal wages and sustain social structures. Belarus differs from Georgia and Ukraine before their revolutions.

Belarusian ties with Russia remain very strong. Whatever changes may have occurred, Moscow remains the main prop for Minsk. Faced with upheaval in the former Soviet Union, Belarus has acquired increasing significance for Russia. The Russian government will not abandon Belarus. As demonstrated in Ukraine, Moscow will go to great lengths to support a perceived allied regime. The revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine are blessings in disguise for Lukashenka.

Minsk also draws confidence from countervailing trends at the wider level. The Belarusian leadership is well aware of the difficulties of the EU as a foreign policy actor. The European Neighbourhood Policy is a limited instrument; Ukrainian and Moldovan membership of the EU remains a distant prospect. EU member states are also preoccupied with internal questions that leave little time for external adventures. In addition, the increase in external pressure on Lukashenka, especially from the United States, has become an internal prop for the regime, justifying its beleaguered isolation. The situation around Belarus, therefore, is difficult but not impossible for Lukashenka.

## Time to review EU policy

The framework for EU policy towards Belarus was set in 1997, and has changed little. In September 1997, the EU suspended contacts and contractual agreements with Belarus and limited assistance to support civil society. Since 1997, EU policy has sought to isolate the regime in Minsk and to induce positive change through the prospect of renewed ties.

It is worth reviewing EU policy for three reasons. First, nine years after the framework was established, the EU has not succeeded in supporting the development of democracy in Belarus. In November 2004, as discussed in the final chapter of this *Chaillot Paper*, the EU agreed on a new approach to Belarus, which still remains within the 1997 framework. The Council Conclusions of November 7, 2005, calling for democratic elections in 2006, also remained broadly within the set policy frame. The existence of an authoritarian regime on EU borders raises a question that member states must consider. This question goes to the heart of the new Union that is emerging; a Union that is developing foreign policy ambitions and capabilities and that has member states directly on

Belarusian borders. How long can the new EU countenance the status quo inside Belarus?

Second, the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia demonstrated the fragility of the order that emerged in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. For all its seeming stability, people *will* go out into the streets and regimes *can* be toppled. There is nothing inevitably permanent about the current regime in Minsk. Quite the opposite. The possibility of a crisis arising inside Belarus before or after the 2006 elections must be considered by the EU. What will be EU policy should a crisis arise? How can the EU prepare for this eventuality?

Third, the Belarus 'problem' is woven into EU relations with Russia. Throughout the 1990s, the EU sought to place Belarus on the agenda of the dialogue with Russia, but with little success. Since 2003, EU policy in the former Soviet Union has become a source of contention in EU-Russian relations. However, at the Moscow Summit in May 2005, Russia and the EU agreed to a roadmap for developing a 'common space of external security,' which is to include cooperation in promoting security and stability in the shared neighbourhood between Russia and the EU. Given the importance that Moscow attributes to Belarus and the potential for crisis inside that country, Brussels must develop a genuine dialogue with Moscow on this question, especially as Belarus and Russia have long agreed to a State Union between them.

## Outline of this *Chaillot Paper*

This *Chaillot Paper* explores various aspects of the Belarus problem for the EU. The first three chapters review the state of affairs inside Belarus. The chapter by Vitaly Silitsky examines internal political and economic components that underlie Alyaksandr Lukashenka's authoritarian regime. His conclusions are sobering with regard to the strength of the government. The chapter by Clelia Rontoyanni analyses the evolution of Belarusian foreign policy under Lukashenka, underlining the Belarusian leader's skilful use of limited options. Alexandra Goujon explores a perennial question facing any external observer of Belarus – the nature of Belarusian national identity. Subsequent chapters are concerned with external factors. Dmitri Trenin examines the evolution of

Russian foreign policy, and the factors that influence Russian thinking about this awkward ally. Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski discusses the experience of Poland and Lithuania in approaching Belarus. The final chapter examines EU policy towards Belarus and the impact of recent changes. This chapter also explores the elements of a new EU approach that would seek to catalyse change in Belarus.

# Nationalisme et identité en Biélorussie

**Alexandra Goujon**

2

Le nationalisme biélorusse s'est régulièrement transformé au cours de son histoire en s'adaptant à des idéologies et des politiques distinctes voire contradictoires. Sa création sous une forme moderne date de la fin du XIX$^{ème}$ siècle au moment où se créent les mouvements politiques et nationaux d'opposition à la politique tsariste de russification. Le nationalisme biélorusse s'allie alors le socialisme puis le communisme pour dénoncer toutes les formes d'exploitation sociale et nationale. En 1918, il donne naissance à la République populaire de Biélorussie dont l'existence ne dure que quelques mois avant que ne soit créée la République socialiste soviétique de Biélorussie en janvier 1919 par les bolcheviks. Une partie des nationalistes biélorusses rejoignent le projet communiste dans le cadre de la politique soviétique des nationalités des années 1920 qui accorde un traitement privilégié aux cultures nationales non russes. Mais les années 1930 sont marquées par une vague de répression de ces cultures qui s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une nouvelle politique de russification. L'occupation allemande utilise le registre nationaliste biélorusse pour bénéficier du soutien des mouvements anticommunistes dont une partie entre dans la collaboration avec le gouvernement nazi.

Après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, le nationalisme biélorusse, sous sa forme anticommuniste, perdure dans l'exil et dans la dissidence alors qu'il est contraint à se russifier et à se soviétiser pour subsister, à un état rudimentaire, dans la République soviétique de Biélorussie.

En URSS, l'identité nationale biélorusse ne disparaît pas même si sa soviétisation doit conduire à son anéantissement progressif. Ses principales manifestations officielles résident dans l'usage de la langue biélorusse, circonscrite à certaines activités intellectuelles, et dans un folklore qui met en avant l'archaïsme de la culture biélorusse. La *perestroïka* permet la création de mouvements nationalistes dans chaque république fédérée d'Union soviétique. Le Front populaire biélorusse, fondé en 1988, promeut un nationa-

lisme biélorusse antisoviétique qui met l'accent sur la spécificité culturelle et historique des Biélorusses par rapport aux Russes. Il cherche à encourager une renaissance nationale dont la réalisation n'est considérée comme possible qu'à travers le recouvrement de la souveraineté du pays.

L'indépendance de la Biélorussie, proclamée en août 1991, ouvre la voie à la création d'un Etat-nation biélorusse qui doit s'appuyer sur une identité nationale moderne. Pour une partie de l'élite politique et intellectuelle, la biélorussianisation du pays, aussi bien linguistique qu'historique, est envisagée notamment à travers sa dé-soviétisation. Mais, il n'existe pas de consensus sur la définition de l'identité nationale qui, comme les autres thèmes du nouvel agenda politique, renvoie à des rivalités d'ordre politique. Bien que tous les acteurs politiques s'accordent sur la singularité de la culture biélorusse, une partie d'entre eux considère que celle-ci est partie intégrante de la culture slave et qu'à ce titre il existe une proximité avec la culture russe. C'est notamment l'opinion propagée par les anciennes élites communistes qui sont les moins enclins à marquer la rupture avec le passé soviétique. Une autre partie, issue des milieux intellectuels et engagée au côté du Front populaire, souhaite, au contraire, forger la particularité culturelle biélorusse sur ses distinctions avec la culture russe et sur ses fondements historiques non russes. Ces divergences idéologiques montrent comment l'identité nationale biélorusse est mobilisée par les acteurs politiques pour légitimer des choix de politique intérieure et de politique étrangère.

Les premières années de l'indépendance sont caractérisées par une libéralisation de l'activité politique qui favorise la libre expression sur les questions identitaires et nationales. L'arrivée au pouvoir d'Alexandre Loukachenka en 1994 va progressivement mettre un terme à ce débat d'idées en instaurant, d'une part, un régime autoritaire qui relègue l'opposition à un rôle d'ennemi intérieur et, d'autre part, une idéologie nationale d'Etat établissant une seule vision politique légitime sur l'identité nationale dans le pays. Loukachenka met en place un nationalisme slave qui s'oppose à la construction nationale opérée aux lendemains de l'indépendance dont les tenants se rejoignent autour d'un nationalisme européanisé. Dans la Biélorussie du début du XIX$^{ème}$ siècle, les nationalismes biélorusses font, en effet, appel à des allégeances identitaires supranationales (européenne, slave, soviétique) correspondant à des entités ou des imaginaires politiques particuliers.

Dans le cadre de la recomposition des espaces politiques régionaux notamment en Europe, ces allégeances sont amenées à jouer un rôle majeur dans la consolidation d'une identité nationale biélorusse.

Dans ce contexte, plusieurs questions se posent aux dirigeants européens : quelle stratégie l'UE doit-elle adopter face à un nationalisme officiel qui légitime un régime autoritaire et qui se définit dans son altérité à l'identité européenne ? Que pourrait, ou devrait, proposer l'UE aux tenants d'un autre nationalisme qui s'appuie sur l'idée d'intégration européenne pour promouvoir la démocratie en Biélorussie? L'analyse des discours identitaires en Biélorussie et de leurs promoteurs montre que l'UE doit opter pour une stratégie claire vis-à-vis de ce pays qui s'est différencié de ses voisins, que ce soit de l'Ukraine ou de la Russie, en poursuivant une transition politique, sociale et nationale singulière. La politique de l'UE à l'égard de la Biélorussie doit ainsi s'affranchir d'une approche géostratégique qui inclut presque systématiquement ce pays dans la sphère d'influence de la Russie. Le changement de pouvoir en Ukraine à l'automne 2004 et le développement de forces politiques pro-européennes en Biélorussie prouvent, en effet, que la partie occidentale de l'ex-Union soviétique peut se transformer en une sorte de sphère d'influence de l'UE.

Notre analyse du nationalisme et de l'identité en Biélorussie sera organisée en trois parties. La première traitera des premières années de l'indépendance et des débats sur les fondements idéologiques et culturels de l'Etat-nation biélorusse en formation. Dans la deuxième partie, il s'agira de montrer les changements intervenus dans la politique identitaire en Biélorussie après l'arrivée au pouvoir du président Loukachenka. Les questions relatives à la création d'un nationalisme slave et d'une idéologie d'Etat feront l'objet d'une attention particulière. La troisième partie est consacrée au nationalisme européanisé de l'opposition qui revendique l'européanité de la culture biélorusse et qui associe la démocratisation du régime à l'intégration européenne du pays.

## La formation d'un Etat-nation biélorusse

Les premières années de l'indépendance sont marquées par la volonté de mettre en avant la spécificité historique et culturelle des Biélorusses de manière à montrer, dans le sillage de l'idéologie nationaliste promue par le Front populaire, que leur identité

nationale est ancienne et qu'elle a été pervertie pendant la période soviétique[1]. Bien que les instances politiques décisionnaires soient dominées par l'ancienne nomenklatura communiste, les idées nationalistes développées à la fin des années 1980 trouvent une certaine popularité auprès d'élites politiques qui cherchent à légitimer leur maintien au pouvoir et l'indépendance du pays. En 1992, une conférence internationale sur la formation et le développement de la conscience nationale biélorusse se tient à Minsk, puis l'Académie des sciences du pays entreprend le projet d'élaborer une histoire nationale scientifique[2].

Plusieurs historiens ravivent la théorie dite du substrat balte, qui atteste que le peuple biélorusse a des origines baltes et que son assimilation à des tribus slaves ne date que du Moyen-Age[3]. Cette théorie contredit l'historiographie soviétique qui présentait le peuple biélorusse comme issu d'une peuplade slave commune aux peuples de Russie, d'Ukraine et de Biélorussie. L'histoire de la Biélorussie vise également à prouver l'ancienneté de la construction étatique du pays et de ses orientations occidentales. C'est dans ce cadre que les travaux des historiens du début du XX$^{ème}$ siècle, tels que Vatslau Lastouki et Ousievalad Ignatouski, sont mobilisés. Ces travaux valorisent la période de la principauté de Polatsk (XI$^{ème}$-XII$^{ème}$ siècles), présentée comme le premier âge d'or de la Biélorussie, en raison du rôle de dirigeants politiques qu'y exerçaient les Biélorusses et de leurs efforts pour maintenir leur indépendance au sein de la Rus kiévienne.

La seconde période historique importante dans l'historiographie biélorusse indépendante concerne le Grand Duché de Lituanie, une entité politique médiévale allant de la mer Baltique à la mer Noire qui se forme au XIII$^{ème}$ siècle. La langue officielle de cette entité était le vieux biélorusse, comme en témoignent les Statuts du Grand Duché publiés en 1588. Pour certains historiens et hommes politiques, c'est dans le Grand Duché de Lituanie que les Biélorusses puisent leur tradition politique fondée sur des principes démocratiques et pluralistes et orientée vers l'Ouest. Suite à l'union du Grand Duché à la Pologne en 1569 (Union de Lublin), le Concile de Brest en 1596 instaure l'Eglise gréco-catholique (uniate) qui sera une des religions les plus pratiquées dans la région. Alors que la création de cette Eglise est présentée par l'historiographie soviétique comme un instrument de la polonisation et la conversion des Biélorusses au catholicisme, elle est valorisée dans l'historiographie indépendantiste en tant que spécificité nationale.

1. Sur les mythes dans les historiographies en Biélorussie et sur leur comparaison avec l'Ukraine, voir Andrew Wilson, « National history and national identity in Ukraine and Belarus », dans Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr et Edward Allworth, *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambrige, 1998, pp. 23-47.

2. Voir Jan Zaprudnik, « Belarus. In search of national identity between 1986 and 2000 », dans Elena A. Korosteleva, Colin W. Lawson et Rosalind J. Marsh (dir.), *Contemporary Belarus. Between democracy and dictatorship*, Routledge Curzon, Londres, 2002, p. 114.

3. Voir David Riach, « Nation Building : Identity Politics in Belarus », *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* (vol.27, no. 1-2, 2000), p. 50.

Dans cette même historiographie, l'intégration définitive des territoires biélorusses dans l'Empire russe à la fin du XVIII$^{ème}$ siècle est présentée comme une « catastrophe nationale » mettant fin au développement étatique biélorusse[4]. L'activité des mouvements nationalistes de la fin du XIX$^{ème}$ siècle et la création de la République populaire de Biélorussie en 1918 correspondent au troisième âge d'or des Biélorusses. La période soviétique est alors critiquée en raison de sa politique de répression des cultures nationales et d'éradication de ses représentants menaçant ainsi l'existence de plusieurs nations dont la nation biélorusse. Les révélations en 1987 concernant des charniers datant de 1937-1941 dans la banlieue de Minsk (*Kourapaty*) s'inscrivent dans cette entreprise de dénonciation. Elles contribuent à forger une histoire nationale qui devient officielle au début des années 1990 et qu'intègrent progressivement les manuels scolaires.

La valorisation de certaines périodes historiques se manifeste également à travers le choix des emblèmes nationaux qui sont adoptés peu de temps après la proclamation de l'indépendance. Le drapeau blanc-rouge-blanc et les armoiries *Pagonia* sont choisis en référence à leur usage dans le Grand Duché de Lituanie même si une partie des anciens communistes les qualifient d'antisoviétiques et de fascistes en rappelant qu'ils furent utilisés par les nationalistes biélorusses sous l'occupation allemande pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale[5].

Le renforcement de l'identité nationale biélorusse après l'indépendance passe aussi par la promotion de la langue nationale dans toutes les sphères d'activité. La biélorussianisation doit remplacer la politique de russification qui fut menée par les dirigeants soviétiques et qui se traduit par la disparition des enseignements en biélorusse : à la fin des années 1980, 0,2% seulement des élèves de l'enseignement secondaire sont scolarisés dans des écoles où la langue d'enseignement est le biélorusse[6]. Une loi sur les langues, adoptée par le Soviet suprême de Biélorussie en 1990, fait du biélorusse la seule langue officielle du pays. La langue biélorusse est alors privilégiée dans l'administration, dans l'enseignement, dans les médias et dans l'édition. Sa promotion fait toutefois l'objet d'une résistance de la part d'une partie des élites politiques et d'une majorité de la population qui sont russophones. Les domaines économique et financier sont dominés par la langue russe.

4. Ibid., p. 53.

5. Voir Astrid Sahm, « Political Culture and National Symbols : Their impact on the Belarusian Nation-Building Process », *Nationalities Papers* (vol.27, no. 4, 1999), p. 652.

6. Voir Grigory Ioffe, « Understanding Belarus: Questions of Language », *Europe-Asia Studies* (vol.55, no. 7, 2003), p. 1015.

## L'élaboration d'un nationalisme slave et d'une idéologie d'Etat

Les premières années de l'indépendance voient la promotion d'une identité nationale biélorusse distincte de l'identité russe mais aussi de l'identité soviétique. Elles sont caractérisées par une construction nationale spécifique qui est remise en cause avec l'arrivée au pouvoir de Loukachenka en 1994. Ce dernier valorise un discours historiographique et une politique linguistique de type soviétique tout en les adaptant à une stratégie politique personnelle. Ses promesses électorales sont destinées à promouvoir l'intégration de la Biélorussie avec la Russie et à satisfaire la population russophone qui est majoritaire dans le pays. Cette politique est mise en œuvre suite à la tenue d'un référendum en 1995 dont une des questions posées concerne la langue : « êtes-vous d'accord pour donner à la langue russe un statut d'égalité avec la langue biélorusse ? » et à laquelle 83,1% des votants répondent favorablement[7]. Le bilinguisme prôné par Loukachenka ne vise pourtant pas tant à corriger une biélorussianisation, considérée comme forcée, mais à y mettre un terme parce qu'elle est associée à l'opposition politique du pays. L'enseignement est le premier domaine visé. La proportion d'écoles élémentaires où existe un enseignement du biélorusse passe de 75% en 1993-1994 à 28% en 1997-1998 au niveau national et de 58% à 4,7% dans la seule ville de Minsk[8]. Dans ce cadre, le Lycée des sciences humaines de Minsk, seul établissement d'enseignement secondaire biélorusse créé en 1992, est fermé par les autorités en 2003.

Le référendum de 1995 entérine également le changement des emblèmes nationaux : le drapeau et les armoiries de la Biélorussie soviétique, auxquels ont été retirés les symboles du Parti communiste (faucille et marteau), sont réhabilités. Des dates de fêtes nationales sont rétablies comme le 7 novembre (Jour de la Révolution d'Octobre) ou instaurés comme le 3 juillet (Jour de la libération de la ville de Minsk occupée par l'armée allemande). Les premières années de la présidence Loukachenka sont marquées par la réhabilitation de l'historiographie soviétique conduite par les historiens officiels de la Biélorussie soviétique qui critiquent l'extrémisme nationaliste, l'antisoviétisme et la russophobie des écrits de la période précédente[9]. La Seconde Guerre mondiale est présentée comme une période phare et doit souligner le fort degré de patriotisme chez les Biélorusses. Cette reconstruction identitaire suit des buts politiques qui, lors du premier mandat de

7. Voir Alexandra Goujon, « Language, Nationalism and Populism in Belarus », *Nationalities Papers* (vol.27, no. 4, 1999), p. 665.

8. Voir Grigory Ioffe, op.cit. p. 1031.

9. Voir Rainer Lindner, op.cit. pp. 637-639.

Loukachenka, sont tournés vers le développement des relations avec la Russie puis qui correspondent à la mise en place d'un régime autoritaire et à une politique étrangère qui se veut moins pro-russe que spécifiquement biélorusse et notamment anti-occidentale.

L'instauration d'une idéologie nationale d'Etat au cours de l'année 2004 s'inscrit dans cette démarche. L'objectif est de produire un discours idéologique en adéquation avec le modèle politique érigé par Loukachenka et d'établir des normes idéologiques permettant un meilleur contrôle de la population[10]. Le président biélorusse expose alors les modalités d'un « travail idéologique » qui se concrétise par le rétablissement des préposés à l'idéologie dans l'administration et les entreprises d'Etat et par la publication de manuels scolaires destinés à l'enseignement d'une nouvelle discipline appelée « les fondements de l'idéologie de l'Etat biélorusse ». Loukachenka lui-même a dessiné les contours de cette idéologie, qui participe de la mise en place d'un nationalisme slave en Biélorussie.

Ce nationalisme vise à inscrire l'identité biélorusse dans la culture slave tout en soulignant sa distinction par rapport à l'identité russe. Il cherche, en effet, à prouver que le régime politique biélorusse est le produit d'une culture traditionnelle qui est « le leader spirituel de la civilisation slave-orientale » alors que la Russie en a perdu les atouts[11]. La mobilisation de l'Eglise orthodoxe s'inscrit dans cette vision tout en permettant de conférer une légitimité sacrée au régime politique du pays. En 2002, les amendements portés à la loi sur les religions prônaient « le rôle déterminant de l'Eglise orthodoxe dans le devenir historique et le développement des traditions spirituelles, culturelles et étatiques du peuple biélorusse »[12]. Cette prééminence fut, de nouveau, attestée dans un accord signé, un an plus tard, entre l'Etat et l'Eglise orthodoxe. Elle se réalise au détriment des autres confessions comme le catholicisme, l'uniatisme, le protestantisme ou le judaïsme qui sont discriminés.

Selon le président, l'idéologie d'Etat ne peut pas être la copie conforme d'une des trois idéologies existantes : « le marxisme, le libéralisme et le conservatisme »[13]. Elle doit être le reflet des manières de penser et de faire propres au peuple biélorusse. Empruntant au communisme quelques-unes de ses propriétés (« le collectivisme, le patriotisme et la justice sociale ») et au conservatisme la perpétuation de traits de caractère (« la bienveillance, la conciliation, la tolérance, le bon sens »), elle est surtout opposée au

10. Voir Alexandra Goujon, « Populisme et autoritarisme : l'exemple de la Biélorussie » dans Pierre-André Taguieff (dir.), *Le retour du populisme. Un défi pour les démocraties européennes*, Encyclopædia Universalis, Collection Le tour du sujet, Paris, pp. 73-82.

11. Voir discours de Loukachenka dans Respublika, 29 mars 2003.

12. Voir « Sur l'introduction d'amendements à la loi de la République de Biélorussie sur la liberté de conscience et les organisations religieuses », 2 juillet 2002.

13. Voir discours de Loukachenka dans Respublika, 29 mars 2003.

libéralisme défini comme « une idéologie agressive » symbole « de l'inégalité sociale entre les hommes, du profit et de l'individualisme »[14].

Loukachenka cherche ici à stigmatiser l'occident et à montrer que la Biélorussie ne peut suivre un mode de développement politique, économique et social de type occidental : « la Biélorussie n'a jamais fait partie de la culture occidentale et notamment pas de ce mode de vie qui s'est formée à l'Ouest »[15]. Les gouvernements occidentaux sont accusés d'avoir une attitude expansionniste à l'égard du pays (« nos partenaires occidentaux veulent dicter notre manière de vivre et décider avec qui nous devons nous lier d'amitié »[16]) et de mener une politique d'ingérence à travers leur soutien à l'opposition du pays. En 2004, la fermeture de l'Université européenne des sciences humaines de Minsk s'intègre dans cette logique.

Loukachenka justifie cette décision en invoquant « le projet de cette université de former une nouvelle élite biélorusse qui devait progressivement conduire la Biélorussie vers l'Ouest »[17]. Le nationalisme d'Etat prôné par le président biélorusse doit permettre de répondre à ce qui est présenté comme une incursion occidentale mais qui se manifeste aussi à travers le développement d'une pensée pro-européenne dans le pays.

## L'européanisation de l'identité nationale biélorusse

Parallèlement à la mise en place de ce nationalisme slave, les forces politiques d'opposition au président Loukachenka, telles que le Front populaire, le Parti de l'union civique et les différents partis sociaux-démocrates, inscrivent leurs activités dans le cadre d'un nationalisme européanisé. Dans le sillage des revendications de la fin des années 1980, ce nationalisme se construit autour de l'idée de renaissance nationale qui est considérée comme mise à mal par la politique dite de dé-biélorussianisation depuis 1995 que ce soit dans le domaine linguistique ou historique. La Société de la langue biélorusse qui milite depuis 1989 pour promouvoir la langue nationale dénonce une politique d'extermination de la langue biélorusse et porte régulièrement devant la justice des cas de discrimination linguistique. En 1998, alors que le Lycée des sciences humaines était menacé de fermeture, le Front populaire faisait une déclaration intitulée « Non au génocide culturel de la nation biélorussienne » en signe de protestation.

14. Ibid.

15. Voir discours de Loukachenka dans Belarus Segodnia, 28 septembre 2004.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

Depuis son éradication des institutions politiques du pays, l'opposition dispose d'un calendrier spécifique de fêtes nationales qui associe la commémoration de certains événements historiques aux manifestations d'une contestation politique. Le 25 mars, Jour de la déclaration de la République populaire de Biélorussie (1918) ainsi que le 8 septembre, appelé Jour de la gloire militaire biélorusse en référence à la victoire des troupes du Grand Duché de Lituanie sur le Duché de Moscovie à Orcha (1514), sont parmi les dates les plus importantes. Lors de ces manifestations, les partis politiques d'opposition utilisent les emblèmes nationaux officiels de 1991 à 1995 comme pour mieux signifier leur appartenance à un Etat biélorusse qui ne correspond pas à l'Etat que souhaite instaurer Loukachenka.

Dès le début des années 1990, le nationalisme anti-soviétique biélorusse prend une coloration européenne. Le Front populaire prône un retour à l'Europe comme le font les élites d'Europe centrale. Ce nationalisme vise à prouver l'ancrage européen de l'identité nationale biélorusse pour souligner sa propension à produire une société démocratique et un régime politique de type occidental. Des historiens cherchent alors à montrer que la Biélorussie a, de tout temps, fait partie de l'histoire européenne et qu'elle a adopté ses valeurs culturelles notamment à travers l'expérience du Grand Duché de Lituanie, symbole d'une tradition démocratique et d'un épanouissement de la culture nationale[18].

Alors que la politique étrangère de Loukachenka montre son aversion vis-à-vis de l'Occident, la politique d'élargissement de l'Union européenne offre de nouvelles perspectives à l'opposition, qui voit dans l'adhésion de la Biélorussie à l'UE la seule manière de sauvegarder, voire de sauver, l'identité nationale biélorusse. En 2004, lors d'un séminaire sur « le futur européen de la Biélorussie », un philosophe proche de l'opposition faisait remarquer que « l'UE se construisait en respectant les nations et non pas comme un Empire unitaire » et que « pour cette raison, l'intégration européenne de la Biélorussie permettait de garantir la préservation de l'*etnos* biélorusse sous toutes ses formes »[19]. L'intégration européenne est présentée non pas comme allant entraîner une perte de souveraineté mais comme la possibilité de recouvrer une identité nationale flouée par le régime de Loukachenka. Ses principaux promoteurs sont d'ailleurs des groupes qui se situent à droite de l'échiquier politique et qui défendent avec le plus de ferveur l'indépendance de la Biélorussie.

18. Voir Rainer Lindner, op.cit. pp. 634-636.

19. *Belaruski Rynok*, 28février-7 mars 2005.

Certaines forces de l'opposition considèrent que l'adhésion à l'UE est une des conditions essentielles au rétablissement et à la pérennité de la démocratie dans le pays. En juillet 2004, le Parti de l'Union civique a adopté un programme politique intitulé « La république de Biélorussie et l'UE : une stratégie d'intégration »[20]. Ce programme présente l'adhésion comme un moyen de préserver les intérêts nationaux mais aussi de garantir l'intégration du pays sur la scène politique internationale ainsi que le développement d'un système politique fondé sur le respect de la démocratie et des droits fondamentaux. En matière de politique étrangère, l'adhésion à l'UE est aussi envisagée par certains opposants comme un rempart à l'expansion de la Russie. Cette thèse est notamment présente dans les discours du Front populaire, qui est connu pour sa stigmatisation de la menace russe : « nous devons adhérer à l'UE parce, dans le cas contraire, nous devons nous attendre à une intégration dans l'Empire russe à court ou à long terme»[21].

Les opposants soulignent la popularité de leur projet européen en s'appuyant sur l'existence d'une opinion publique favorable à l'idée européenne. Selon une enquête d'opinion réalisée en 2001 par une équipe étrangère, 50% des Biélorusses interrogés répondent positivement à la question « pensez-vous parfois à vous-même comme à un Européen? »[22]. Selon les enquêteurs, ce résultat s'explique par la forte mobilité géographique des Biélorusses, notamment en Pologne, qui profite à la population locale. Il est également lié au fait que l'européanité est une référence identitaire large qui permet aux personnes de se distinguer d'une appartenance au monde asiatique. Lors d'un sondage réalisé par un institut biélorusse en 2004, le rapprochement avec l'UE était approuvé par 63% des personnes interrogées alors que l'adhésion à l'UE l'était de seulement 25%[23]. Ces chiffres sont à mettre en parallèle avec les résultats globaux du sondage qui intègrent parallèlement aux réponses sur l'UE les réponses sur la Russie. Ainsi, sur la question du rapprochement, 70% des personnes interrogées répondent la Russie. De même, sur la question de l'adhésion, 32% répondent positivement à une unification avec la Russie et 21% se déclarent favorables à une adhésion conjointe à l'UE et à la Russie[24]. Considérant la faible information dont disposent les Biélorusses sur l'UE mais aussi la politique étrangère et le discours anti-européen de Loukachenka, ces chiffres témoignent d'un sentiment européen et d'une opinion politique favorable à l'UE relativement développés. Ils reflètent aussi une certaine force de résistance aux

20. Voir http://www.ucpb.org/rus/documents/eustrategy.shtml

21. *Belaruski Rynok*, 16 février 2002.

22. A cette même question, seules 34% des personnes interrogées ont répondu positivement en Ukraine et en Moldavie. Voir Stephen White, Ian McAllister, Margo Light, « Enlargement and the new outsiders », *Journal of Common Market Studies* (vol.40, no. 1, 2002), p. 143.

23. Larisa Titarenko, « Belarus: Values, Fears and Hopes in the Period of Transformation », Diverse Dialogues across Europe: Humanities & Social Sciences Research Forum, Nicosie, Chypre, 27-28 janvier 2005.

24. Ibid.

antagonismes géopolitiques sur lesquels s'est forgé le nationalisme slave du président biélorusse.

## Conclusion

La politique de Loukachenka a souvent été qualifiée, par ses détracteurs, de politique anti-nationaliste. Pourtant, comme nous l'avons vu, cette politique s'appuie sur une idéologie d'Etat qui cherche à prouver les fondements culturels spécifiques au régime biélorusse post-soviétique et qui s'apparente à une forme particulière de nationalisme. Même s'il s'appuie sur une historiographie soviétique et un discours culturaliste slave, ce nationalisme est un facteur de production identitaire. Comme le suggère Jan Zaprudnik, la construction étatique en Biélorussie, soutenue par le président en exercice depuis 1994, contribuerait ainsi à forger un sentiment d'appartenance nationale qui distingue le peuple biélorusse des autres peuples de l'espace post-soviétique[25].

En 2005, près de 14 ans après l'éclatement de l'URSS, la Biélorussie est, au côté des nouveaux Etats indépendants, engagée dans un processus de différenciation politique, sociale et économique qui favorise la formation d'une communauté nationale singulière. Cette communauté nationale est traversée par deux principaux projets nationalistes, le nationalisme slave et le nationalisme européanisé, qui reposent sur des imaginaires culturels distincts et sur des choix de politique intérieure et de politique étrangère opposés. Une évolution démocratique du pays devrait permettre de concilier ces imaginaires, qui sont constitutifs de l'identité nationale biélorusse, et non pas de les confronter. Cette conciliation est nécessaire à une Europe qui s'attache à reconnaître la multiplicité et la diversité des allégeances identitaires.

Notre analyse montre que les discours identitaires en Biélorussie sont liés à l'évolution de la construction européenne et de sa politique étrangère en matière d'élargissement et de voisinage. L'exclusion de la Biélorussie de la Politique européenne de voisinage pour des raisons politiques se justifie non seulement par la consolidation d'un régime dictatorial mais aussi par ses fondements idéologiques qui voient dans l'UE non pas un partenaire mais un acteur doté d'un pouvoir d'ingérence. Les dirigeants européens ne peuvent toutefois pas ignorer l'existence de forces politiques pro-européennes dans le pays qui nécessite le dépasse-

25. Voir Jan Zaprudnik, op.cit, pp. 122-123.

ment d'une stratégie uniquement répressive du régime biélorusse de la part de l'UE.

S'il paraît difficile de coopérer avec les autorités biélorusses en raison de leur manque de volonté, de nombreux acteurs de la société civile (associations, syndicats, médias indépendants, partis politiques, étudiants, chercheurs) œuvrent dans le sens d'un rapprochement avec des structures associatives, partisanes, universitaires européennes et attendent le soutien de l'UE dans cette démarche. Les conclusions du Conseil de l'UE de novembre 2004 à Bruxelles ainsi que les conférences organisées par la Commission à Vilnius en février-avril 2005 sur l'aide de l'UE à la démocratisation et à la société civile biélorusse vont dans ce sens et méritent d'être concrétisées[26]. L'idée, présentée par l'ambassadeur britannique à Minsk en avril 2005, d'ouvrir une représentation de l'UE en Biélorussie permettrait aussi de mieux connaître les acteurs locaux, de mieux évaluer les besoins et de diffuser de l'information sur l'UE et sur ses débats politiques internes[27]. L'UE doit, en quelque sorte, investir l'espace public biélorusse pour désenclaver le pays mais aussi pour soutenir les citoyens favorables à une nation biélorusse ancrée dans la démocratie européenne.

26. Voir http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/belarus/intro/index.htm
27. Voir http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/2005/04/26/office

# Internal developments in Belarus

**Vitali Silitski**

3

## From 'soft' to 'hard' dictatorship

Belarus experienced only an agonisingly short period of political freedom and relative democracy in its recent political history, spanning the period from the collapse of Communist rule until the consolidation of absolute authority by the country's first president Alyaksandr Lukashenka in a 1996 constitutional referendum. The initial stage of Lukashenka's authoritarianism, between the 1996 referendum until the presidential elections in 2001, is best characterised as a 'soft autocracy'. 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 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. Government attempts to penetrate society by forming state-sponsored public associations (such as the Belarusian Patriotic Union of Youth) were clumsy, and for the most part ill-fated. Overall, with the exception of the harassment of independent political activity, the Lukashenka regime failed to reinstate comprehensive Soviet-era totalitarian control.

'Softness' of authoritarian rule did not pose an immediate political challenge to the regime. The president enjoyed continuous public support from a significant part of the population, and especially from predominantly elderly and rural constituencies whose mindset reflected a desire for state paternalism and Soviet-style stability. The opposition itself failed to act in a manner that might have won it broader public support, often preferring self-isolation to any real activity because this might drag it towards incorporation and submission to the regime. Independent social and political life remained restricted to a small network of opposition veterans, urban intellectuals, and regional NGO activists,

who made little impact on the strata of the population that composed the regime's social base.

The 2001 presidential elections confirmed Lukashenka's political hegemony and demonstrated his sustained ability to supplement his personal popularity with political control to keep challenges to his power at bay. This was not an 'elegant' victory, as Lukashenka claimed, for elections were marred by abuse of the media, intimidation of opponents, unequal campaign opportunities, and fraud.[1] However, no credible evidence emerged that the result would have been different had the vote been fair. The inability of the opposition to successfully challenge the president left him room for continuing with his 'soft' form of autocracy without serious political perturbations for the regime. However, political conditions hardened swiftly after 2001. By 2005, Belarus had a fully consolidated autocracy with pervasive government control over virtually all spheres of political, social, and economic life.

This turnaround can be explained by several factors. The first was a dramatic slump in popularity experienced by Lukashenka immediately after his re-election to the office of president in September 2001. According to a poll by the Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, around 48 per cent of the total population voted for him in these elections. Eighteen months later in April 2003, only 26 per cent intended to do so again in the next presidential ballot. Almost two-thirds of the electorate (63 per cent) believed at that time that the country needed a new president, with only 24 per cent thinking otherwise.[2] At the time, it seemed that Lukashenka was irreversibly losing the hearts and minds of even his most loyal constituents – the rural pensioners (only a half were ready to re-elect him). This sharp decline in popularity had much to do with the fact that living conditions got much harder after the presidential elections, as the time came to pay for the bills inherited from the campaign. The indicators were clear that at least a part of the population was growing increasingly disappointed with the authoritarian practices pursued by the president and the lack of personal freedom (the latter was particularly felt by the younger generation, among whom the president's support stood at little more than 10 per cent).

A second factor was the demonstration effect of several electoral revolutions. Unlike most post-Soviet autocrats, Lukashenka was alarmed as early as 2000 by the downfall of his friend Slobodan Milosevic. As a result, Lukashenka became convinced that tol-

1. The official elections results were 75% of the cast votes for Lukashenka and 15% for the opposition challenger, Uladzimir Hancharyk. Based on the result of independent election polls, the opposition claimed that at least a quarter of the votes had been rigged. This still meant a sound victory for Lukashenka. See Vitali Silitski, 'The Change is Yet to Come: Opposition Strategies and Western Efforts to Promote Democracy in Belarus', in Anne Lewis (ed.) *Belarus and EU* (London: The Federal Trust, 2002).

2. Vital Silitski, 'Belarus: The Fall of the Patriarch?' *RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report* (May 2003).

eration of even limited political pluralism and social autonomy would put his own rule in the same danger of disintegration.

The third factor was a standoff in Russia-Belarus relations over economic matters in 2002-2004, and, reportedly, President Putin's apparent opposition to Lukashenka's plans to extend his stay in office. Relations between the allies of the self-styled 'Union State' soured to the point of open confrontation and the cessation of gas supplies to Belarus for a short period of time in February 2004. Moscow eventually discovered that it had neither the leverage on Lukashenka to force him to change his ways and political plans nor the motivation to actively promote a regime change. Still, uncertainty about Putin's attitude towards Lukashenka prevailed.

Perhaps the most important reason for the hardening of Lukashenka's regime in 2002-2004 was the unresolved issue of extending the president's stay in office beyond the constitutional limit of September 2006. Not a single independent poll in 2002-2003 showed more than 35 per cent of the electorate willing to support the lifting of term limits, with the number of those opposed continuously remaining at about 50 per cent. Before going to the polls, Lukashenka chose to tighten up control to prevent even the slightest possibility of any unwanted scenario. At the same time, his clear intention to stay in power indefinitely required a more serious consolidation of the regime regardless of the timing and context of upcoming political campaigns.

## Consolidation of political control

The personalistic system of government hardly leaves room for political competition. The Belarusian authorities treat this as their achievement, as the competitive democratic process is portrayed in the official discourse largely as 'chaos' and 'anarchy' from which Lukashenka has spared the citizens of Belarus. Politics at the 'official' (i.e. regime) level are largely restricted to three paramount objectives:

1) First, to maintain the high profile and popularity of the president through a carefully crafted and basically never-ending propaganda campaign;
2) Second, to maintain the coherence of the internal apparatus of the regime;

3) Third, to identify and eradicate existing and potential challenges to the presidential authority.

Lukashenka has had a near perfect record so far in terms of three tasks. In spite of the loss of popularity in 2002-2003, he managed to restore his support base through a combination of such tools as administrative wage hikes, the provision of visible (even though dubious from a critical view) evidence of the overall improvement of living standards in the country (for example, the explosive growth of public infrastructure projects, such as the construction of a new national library, underground shopping malls, sports arenas, etc.), sympathetic media coverage, and effective propaganda campaigns. The president successfully reattached himself to his social base by becoming a cheerleader for Belarusian sovereignty (capitalising on a dramatic change in the public attitude towards statehood and sovereignty in the last decade); by manipulating the country's collective memory (especially successful were the state-sponsored campaigns to commemorate the 60th anniversary of Belarus' liberation from the Nazis in 2004 and of the victory in World War II in 2005, both of which turned into unabashed propaganda efforts to present Lukashenka as a guardian of a heroic past and protector of Belarus from the 'fascist-leaning' opposition); and by nurturing his populist image through PR activities, such as appearances at sporting events, harvest festivals, etc.

The state apparatus is carefully controlled, and the ominous presence of security officers at the top positions in the government has protected the regime from internal dissent thus far. Showcase reprisals against government officials arrested and imprisoned on real or dubious corruption charges continue to be a trademark of the official propaganda, although this is practised on a somewhat smaller scale compared to the earlier period of Lukashenka's rule. (Still, in 2004, a corruption scandal claimed the career and freedom of Halina Zhuraukova, the presidential property manager, and the highest-ranking official involved in such scandals so far.) A new tendency is to strengthen the bond between the head of state and the government bureaucracy through the provision of tangible material benefits (such as better wages and housing opportunities) in exchange for loyalty and active participation in preserving the status quo and cracking down on the opposition.

The surviving elements of political competition mostly exist for purposes of window dressing. Elections, with the exception of presidential ballots, are carried out for powerless offices, and their results are routinely predictable. Nevertheless, the government is still eager to claim democratic credentials, as it has no other way to legitimise its power. Hence, formal elements of political pluralism (such as parties and elections) continue to exist. These, however, are not meant to produce credible political alternatives, which are carefully destroyed and discredited, but rather to emphasise that Lukashenka is alternative-free.

The local elections conducted in March 2003 appeared as a rehearsal for the referendum and parliamentary elections in 2004. Pro-government candidates won the overwhelming majority of seats in local council elections, while opposition parties took slightly more than 200 seats out of 21,000 and failed to make significant progress in extending their popular base through campaigning.[3] It was remarkable, however, that, after years of expulsion (partly self-inflicted) from the electoral process, the opposition managed to win seats in the local structures at all. The 'overlooking' of some successful candidates occurred because even the most sophisticated control machinery failed to simultaneously oversee thousands of separate campaigns. At the same time, in Minsk, where the authorities focused their attention, not a single opposition candidate was elected.

Opposition parties in Belarus exist in a semi-legal state. The new housing code regulations prohibited keeping offices in residential apartment blocks. The enforcement of this rule by February 2005 has meant that most local branches of the opposition parties failed to confirm their registration (as they were either unable to pay rents for commercial office space or were unable to rent premises). Opposition and civil society groups face severe problems even with renting premises to conduct meetings, conferences, and party congresses, often facing intrusion and arrests when trying to organise them inside private residences. The law of mass rallies stipulates that a party can be closed down instantaneously once it has organised an unsanctioned street protest. Last but not least, the very membership of an opposition party involves the danger of losing a state job for an activist. 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.

3. *Belarus – Nations in Transit* (Budapest: Freedom House, 2004).

The near absence of political competition leaves street protests as the last remaining venue for political activity. However, the street opposition activity is at an all-time low. On the one hand, the opposition lost the capacity to mobilise the crowds after a series of unsuccessful attempts to challenge Lukashenka brought forward the loss of credibility and disillusionment of many activists (this was particularly noticeable in the aftermath of the 2001 presidential elections). On the other hand, punishments for unsanctioned political activity have been drastically intensified. Opposition activists are routinely arrested and beaten for staging rallies and pickets and distributing literature. The few opposition protests that attracted sizeable crowds in the past few years, such as 'The March For A Better Life' on 12 March 2003, the rally on 21 July 2004 marking the tenth anniversary of Lukashenka's rule, the post-referendum protests on 18-20 October 2004, and the rally in commemoration of Freedom Day on 25 March 2005, ended with dozens of protesters arrested and beaten up. Smaller protest attempts, such as flash mobs or street performances, are treated by the authorities as acts of public hooliganism. The government employs an efficient strategy of discouraging participation in opposition protests by slapping huge fines (up to 2,500 US dollars) on activists. Such fines amount to more than an annual salary, and act as a powerful disincentive to show up at any protest.

Overall, the repression and legal restrictions contain the opposition in a political and social ghetto beyond which its influence does not extend. Attempts to overcome the boundaries of this ghetto and broaden the circle of alternative actors beyond the network of veteran activists are resisted as well. Thus, in the 2003 local and 2004 parliamentary elections, most of the candidates representing business circles, those with some financial backing from Russia, and those representing semi-oppositional groupings (such as the Respublika parliamentary group in the previous convocation of the House of Representatives) were denied registration. The political groupings who claim to represent 'moderate' opposition are routinely denied registration (examples include the refusal to register the new 'Freedom and Progress Party' headed by former MP Uladzimer Navasiad in 2004 and obstruction to the unification congress of Belarusian social democratic parties under Alyaksandr Kazulin, former rector of the Belarusian State University who announced plans to run for president).

Another form of disabling political alternatives is repression against former government and economic officials who have switched to the opposition or are suspected of planning to do so. The case of Mikhail Marynich, a former government minister and diplomat with strong ties in the former nomenklatura as well as Russian business circles, who switched to the opposition during the 2001 presidential election, was the most vivid act of political reprisal in 2004. Arrested on 26 April, Marynich was sentenced on the basis of trumped-up charges to five years in jail in December 2004, officially for stealing computers from the organisation called 'Business Initiative' that he directed (the court interpreted as such the fact that computers were found at the Marynich's house, even though the NGO itself did not consider the equipment had been stolen). Another top-ranking official, the former director of Minsk Tractor Works Mikhail Liavonau, was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in February 2004 on embezzlement charges. In 2001, Liavonau had been considered by the media as a potential opposition candidate in the presidential elections. These rumours were enough to seal his fate.

## The subduing of society

The eradication of social, intellectual, artistic, and cultural autonomy was a natural step in the consolidation of political control in Belarus. Independent civil society was arguably a more active, versatile, and developed aspect of uncontrolled social life than the political opposition. Moreover, civil society, beside being a natural nurturing ground of political alternatives, provided, through employment in the NGO sector, non-state cultural and educational establishments, a space for legitimate activity and income for dissident politicians, intellectuals, and organisers.

The most vivid example of tightening social control has been the destruction of legitimate space for independent – that is, uncontrolled and unsanctioned by the authorities – social activity. In 2003-2004, fifty-six NGOs were closed down by the authorities, mostly for technical reasons, such as incorrect design of the official letterheads used by the organisations or the lack of a legal address.[4] Forty-two organisations have been forced to self-liquidate. Registering new NGOs with agendas that contradict official policies has become practically impossible, because the registra-

4. Alexander Dautin, 'Kniga ne dla Shirokogo Chtenia,' BDG, 14 September 2004.

tion procedures for new NGOs were drastically hardened in 2001 with the establishment of a State Commission for Registration and Re-registration of Public Organisations and Political Parties. This commission, staffed by the president's close associates known for their hard-line views, should give its advice to the Ministry of Justice on the desirability of registration of any NGO or party. As a result, out of 1464 organisations that submitted documents for registration in 2003, only 94 were registered.[5]

The independent media had been pushed to the brink of virtual extinction by a campaign of closing down and suspending the independent press. Nine independent newspapers were closed down or suspended in 2003 and 25 more in 2004.[6] Most other independent newspapers have received several warnings from the Ministry of Information and have just one more to go before formal liquidation. This condition has greatly encouraged self-censorship, as overstepping the boundaries can involve severe punishments. A leaflet criticising the president for taking a vacation in Austria at public expense that was distributed by Valery Levaneuski, head of the Hrodna-based Independent Union of Private Entrepreneurs, and his associate Alyaksandr Vasilieu, resulted in a two-year prison sentence for both of them for slandering the president.

The state printed press is heavily subsidised, and subscription to the largest official newspaper is often mandatory at public companies and institutions. The government also consolidated control over the electronic media by forcing Russian TV and radio broadcasts off the air and creating homemade substitutes. The result was the sharply declined ability of the Russian media to serve as alternative vehicles of information and opinion for the Belarusian audience (it should be mentioned, however, that this ability would have declined anyway due to the curtailing of media freedom in Russia itself).

The effects of this new media policy were visible in February 2004, when the conflict between the Belarusian government and Russian gas monopoly Gazprom led to a cessation of natural gas supplies to Belarus. The public accepted the view put forth by the official media that Russia's attack was an attempt to subvert the country's independence, and strongly backed Lukashenka in the conflict. The president's popularity soared. Consolidation of control over the electronic press had a more profound effect than simply reducing the influence of Russian outlets. Curtailing the information alternatives left the government outlets as the only voice of

5. For information of the Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGOs, see http://www.belngo.info/cgi-bin/i.pl?id=400

6. *Belarus – Nations in Transit* (Budapest: Freedom House, 2005).

information (and by default, propaganda) available for most of the population, as alternative sources (such as satellite and cable television or independent press) are prohibitively expensive or simply unavailable. Independent research showed that the popularity of official media grew exactly at a time when it was monopolised.[7] Any opinion, claim, even outright disinformation by the official media is taken for granted by a large part of the population, and delivery of alternative opinion is almost impossible and often punishable.

Introduction of a new 'state ideology' gave the regime a new set of instruments to control dissent. The campaign was officially launched on 27–28 March 2003 at a seminar of government officials, where Lukashenka called for the creation of an 'immune system' for the state, protecting it from internal and external subversion. The foundations of the new state ideology are composed of a vague and *ad hoc* collection of Soviet propaganda clichés that remain consonant with those Belarusians nostalgic for the Soviet period. According to Lukashenka himself, the new teaching should be based on the 'ability to work not just for the sake of profiteering, but for the good of the society, the collective, and other people. Our other values are the need for ideals and great goals, collectivism and opposition to Western individualism, social protection and respectful relations between the state and the people.'[8]

The educational system has been a primary target of a new 'state ideology.' The decree by the Minister of Education 'On Measures to Strengthen the Ideological Work at the Education Establishments', signed in April 2004, forbade granting leaves of absence to students and professors to travel abroad for study and research, demanded the withdrawal of unauthorised textbooks and academic publications from the university libraries whose content contradicted the official point of view, prescribed revision and curtailment of international contacts with Western partners, ordered the promotion of state-subsidised loyalist groups, such as the 'Belarusian Republican Union of Youth,' and even ordered that measures be taken 'to prevent access of foreign elements to campuses.'[9] New restrictions arrived after the October 2004 referendum. While promulgating constitutional amendments in November, Lukashenka ordered the cessation of foreign travel for children going abroad for medical care to prevent their conversion to 'immoral consumerism.' In March 2005, a presidential decree forbade unauthorised study abroad for university students. New

7. See the work of Andrey Vardomatsky, director of the NOVAK sociological research centre in Minsk.

8. *Belarus - Nations in Transit* (Budapest: Freedom House, 2003).

9. 'Shutki v Storony,' Belorusskaya Gazeta, 19 April 2004.

courses on state ideology have been introduced at secondary and higher educational establishments.

The ideological campaign has also affected the research process, as the content of theses and dissertations is now being checked for 'correspondence' to the official ideology. Other newly-invented mechanisms of controlling the minds and behaviour of students and professors include the introduction of compulsory work assignments after graduation for students educated free of charge (evasion of which is punishable by the revocation of diplomas), and threats to withdraw advanced degrees from professors and teachers found of 'unworthy' behaviour, such as participation in opposition rallies.

The closure in July 2004 of the Minsk-based European Humanities University, a private institution that defined its mission as 'to educate the new generation of young professionals capable of leading Belarus on its way towards civil society based on the values of European civilization,' eliminated the last stronghold of non-indoctrinated higher education in Belarus.[10] President Lukashenka himself admitted that the closure was politically motivated. While meeting students in Brest on 23 September, he expressed his anger with the determination of the EHU to train an Europe-oriented elite. 'What does it happen, future leaders, the elite, is trained in the centre of Minsk, and how about the other Belarusian universities? (*sic*)' he declared, 'Who are they training? Servants for this elite? (*sic*)'.[11] In the same speech, Lukashenka admitted that the liquidation of the Belarusian National Lyceum in Minsk (the only Belarusian-language advanced high school in the city capital) in June 2003 was also politically motivated, as the students at this institution, in his words, were being 'crippled by the opposition.'[12]

The ideological campaign also developed into curtailing the venues for unauthorised artistic impression. Thus, the government blocks circulation of 'undesirable' independent productions that offer alternative views on controversial political and ideological topics. The Ministry of Culture forbade distribution of the independent film, 'Occupation: The Mysterium', that casts new light on guerrilla warfare during World War II, and the documentary covering the life of the most prominent contemporary writer, Vasil Bykau (an ardent supporter of the Belarus national revival and a harsh critic of president Lukashenka before his death in 2003). Circulation of 'unwanted' books (such as 'Accidental

10. For information about closure of EHU, see EHU-International: http://www.ehu-international.org

11. Sergei Pulsha, 'EHU Fell in the Battle of Civilizations?' 25 September 2004. Available online: http://news.date.by/news.html?id_category=2&id_news=328

12. Ibid.

President' by journalists Pavel Sheremet and Sviatlana Kalinkina, inquiring into the life and career of Lukashenka) is prevented by detentions and confiscation. Magazines issuing critical views about political and social events are blocked from state-controlled distribution networks. In 2004, the independent literary and political magazine *Arche* was banned from bookstores for publishing an issue devoted to the tenth anniversary of Lukashenka's stay in office. Several prominent Belarusian rock and folk groups were ordered off FM broadcasts after they performed at the opposition rally of 21 July 2004.

Overall, this tightening of control over social, intellectual and cultural life has signalled to society the government's intention to punish unsanctioned and uncontrolled social and intellectual activity even when it does not result in a direct political challenge to the authorities. It has also worked to convince the public that anything that is not state-owned and state-controlled is unsteady, unreliable, and cannot be trusted. The crackdown did not eliminate independent life in Belarus altogether: disbanded educational establishments continue to exist either underground or through online courses; NGOs work without registration or under the aegis of surviving legal groups (as a matter of fact, none of the liquidated NGOs is known to have ceased working altogether); sales of 'banned' groups can be bought at music stores; enforcement of Soviet dogmatism in textbooks pushes young people towards new forms of self-expression (the emergence of a massive medieval historical restoration movement is a remarkable phenomenon in the cultural life of Belarus today); and eliminating the independent media has produced an explosion of alternative internet resources (although new policies to control the internet will be approved in 2005).

Still, the curtailing of legitimate space for independent social activity means the reduction of opportunities for civil society to connect to a larger public. At the same time, the implicit promotion of social atomisation strengthens citizens' dependence upon the state, a bond of dependency that few dare to ignore or abandon.

## Economic sticks and carrots

The Belarusian economy is continuously ranked among the most controlled in the world. The State officially controls almost 80 per

cent of assets, and privatisation (except at the level of shops) was never actively implemented. Nevertheless, the command economy maintains impressive viability, if not overall efficiency.

The rapid and explosive economic growth in 1997-1998 (when the economy grew at 8-11 per cent per year) was largely achieved by the inflationary stimulation of the economy and generous external subsidies provided by the access to cheap raw materials in Russia. The economy was hit hard by the consequences of the August 1998 financial crisis in Russia, and the command system appeared to be faltering. In 2001, Belarus had the lowest rate of economic growth among the countries of the former USSR. However, rapid growth of the economy restarted in 2004, with GDP increasing by 11 per cent.[13]

Economic performance has become one of the central points of official propaganda. Real positive trends (economic growth, the rise of real incomes, job security) are aggressively promoted by the state-controlled media and in official speeches without reference to the price at which they had been achieved, whereas problem spots (extremely high retail prices, the gap in wages between Belarus and its neighbours, such as Lithuania or Poland) are downplayed or ignored; and the economic situation in the neighbouring states is portrayed as one plagued by chaos, insecurity, and poverty. On this basis, propaganda presents Belarus as an 'island of stability in the sea of storm,' working heavily to persuade the population that any change of government would spell chaos and impoverishment.

When looked at more closely, however, the favourable economic situation on foreign markets should be noted as a primary reason for Belarus' remarkable economic performance. Skyrocketing oil prices generated strong economic growth in Russia, Belarus's main trading partner. Rapidly expanding purchasing power on the Russian market has created enormous opportunities for Belarusian exporters. Appreciation of the Russian rouble and the euro allowed Belarusian exports to be competitive on the Russian and European markets (which account for more than 80 percent of Belarus's trade turnover). Introduction of protectionist measures by Russia to limit imports from non-CIS countries also benefited Belarus, as it expanded its exports to Russia.[14]

The oil factor is reflected in the shifting composition of Belarus' foreign trade. While not a resource-exporting country in its own right, Belarus still benefits from its refinery and transit

13. Official information of the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis of the Republic of Belarus.

14. On causes of the recent economic growth in Belarus, see Vitali Silitski, 'Minsk Posts 10 Percent Economic Growth - True but Not Miraculous,' RFE/RL Belarus-Ukraine Report (August 19, 2004).

networks. The 2004 trade numbers showed a considerable increase of exports to the European Union and a simultaneous increase of imports from Russia. The Netherlands and the United Kingdom rank high as Belarus' export destinations even though neither the Britons nor the Dutch can recall ever buying Belarusian products (in fact, most of the oil which Belarus exports to these countries is processed oil). Ironically, in spite of its political isolation, Belarus is integrated into the European economy, even if one-sidedly and largely by default (due to Russia's energy exports to the EU and the transit networks that span through Belarus).

Such favourable tendencies on energy and currency markets largely offset the losses generated by the resource-dependent Belarusian economy by high energy prices and the withdrawal of privileged pricing for Russian gas and oil. Moreover, the continuing decline of the US dollar has helped the government politically, as it allows it to spend less in real terms to fulfil Lukashenka's promise to raise average wages to $250 by 2006, and economically, as the real value of the dollar-denominated energy bills Belarus has to pay to Russia has decreased. Overall, monthly payments for Belarusians have been steadily improved by the government through a series of wage hikes: average wages in Belarus grew to $200 per month at the end of 2004, up from $100 in 2001 and $130 in late 2003. Most of the wage hike, however, came in the months immediately preceding the October 2004 referendum, which underlines the populist character of official wage policy.

At the same time, there is a visible improvement in several qualitative indicators of economic development. The profitability of companies has increased, and the number of loss-making companies dropped. Lukashenka's version of a 'mobilised' command economy has proven to be responsive to a favourable economic situation, and it does not lack a growth potential. The achievement of macroeconomic stabilisation and a moderate hardening of budget constraints (inflation was brought down to 18 per cent per year in 2004 from 400 per cent in 1999) also played a positive role.

Still, the strong performance of the Belarusian economy is not a miracle. The country was not alone in reaching double-digit growth in 2004, and its performance reflects a general trend in the CIS. Ukraine and Kazakhstan, for example, have even higher growth rates, whereas the increase of output in these countries was generated by the private sector.

And despite some indicators showing an improvement in quality of economic growth, inveterate problems of the 'Belarus economic model' remain. First, Belarus hardly has sufficient resources to sustain the model once oil prices fall, as the internal sources of growth are weak. The performance and profitability of locally oriented industries are inferior to the export and resource-oriented branches of the economy. Second, the outdated Soviet-style industrial facilities (according to the official statistics, nearly 40 per cent of the Belarusian companies operate at a loss) are kept artificially alive at the expense of taxpayers. Third, wage hikes pursued by the direct administrative orders of the government overstretch company finances. Fourth, the tax burden on the economy is continuously increasing.

In these conditions, administrative means still play a major role in governing the economy. State companies' sales are guaranteed by the stifling of the remnants of the private sector and competition. The budget is increasingly dependent on customs revenues, which brought forth prohibitively high import duties, strict limits for exports by individuals (for example, any foodstuffs imported in the amount of more than 5 kg are heavily taxed), and the arbitrary confiscation of property and goods on the suspicion of smuggling which accounts for hundreds of millions of dollars per year. The government is not shy about using Soviet-era micromanagement to ensure that its plans are met: for example, Lukashenka recently threatened to close down any private companies that fail to meet the wage targets set by his decree. In another example, the authorities considered establishing criminal punishments for those enterprise managers who failed to meet the state-mandated production targets.

Since the government controls nearly all assets, it employs the vast majority of Belarusians. In the circumstances of deepening authoritarian rule, the government has readily used public employment as a tool for ensuring the loyalty of citizens. This tool began to be widely used after January 2004, when the permanent employment system at state-owned enterprises was replaced with short-term (one-year) contracts. This arrangement has been made obligatory now for all state sector jobs. Moreover, the presidential directive No.1 'On Strengthening Discipline and Order,' proclaimed on 9 March 2004, provided a wide range of pretexts for firing anyone from a public job, including for poorly concealed political reasons. These measures signal the insecurity of employment

for anyone who chooses either active political participation or even passive forms of protest (for example, refusing to take part in the falsification of election results).

The stifling of private initiative and overall domination of the government in the economy means that the state is still responsible for providing for the welfare of the citizens. For many Belarusians, this means a return to the easy, understandable Soviet practice of an implicit social contract with the state; that is, trading loyalty for guarantees of physical survival and prosperity. Soviet-era paternalism has not been restored on the full scale though, as the Belarusian economy cannot provide comprehensive cradle-to-grave welfare guarantees (for example, the state no longer provides free housing; almost a half of the university students have to pay for their education; and many healthcare services are not free of charge).

Inadequate wages, as well as overregulation and bureaucratisation of the economy, pushes a bulk of economic activity into the shadow economy, whose size reaches, according to different estimates, 20-50 per cent of the official one. Nevertheless, the average citizen is dependent upon a state job to provide what the state is no longer able to guarantee. Moreover, economic *étatisme* and paternalism has fuelled the fear, among those in society not willing to take risks and content with the state taking care of their needs, that political change would dismantle their lifestyle and bring instability and social turmoil similar to what happened in most East European societies after the break-up of Communist rule.

## The 2004 referendum and parliamentary elections

The intensification of political repression and social control left little doubt about the intention of President Lukashenka to extend his rule beyond the constitutional term limits with a view to an indefinite stay in office. The referendum in October 2004 was awaited by his opponents in an atmosphere of foreboding and doom, whereas the general public showed little sign of concern. Perhaps the only thing that delayed the referendum until the autumn of 2004 was the unresolved question of Russia-Belarus relations and the attempt by Lukashenka to receive assurances that the Kremlin would not oppose the referendum. The tense episodes in bilateral relations, proving the limits of Russia's leverage over

Lukashenka, and the turn to authoritarianism in Russia itself, making the Kremlin unlikely to support democracy anywhere in post-Soviet space, meant that all the Belarus president needed was the right moment.

The moment came days after the Beslan tragedy in Russia in September, 2004, which was exploited by the Belarus leader to contrast Belarus' stability with Russia's chaos. Thus, a constitutional referendum on lifting presidential term limits was called for by Lukashenka on 7 September, the day of official mourning for the victims at Beslan. The date was set for 17 October, the same day of the parliamentary elections. The tone of the campaign was set immediately: one man watching the live broadcast announcing the referendum on a big screen TV in the centre of Minsk was sentenced to ten days in prison for petty hooliganism just for shouting 'no!'.[15] Campaigning against the referendum, although formally legal, was obstructed by arrests, detentions, confiscation of leaflets, and intimidation.

The official propaganda machine worked at full capacity. Pro-referendum messages were broadcast several times per hour on major TV channels. Bashing the opposition reached the brink of absurdity (for example, former parliamentary speaker Stanislau Shushkevich was said to have had terrorist connections because he tutored Russian to Lee Harvey Oswald, when the latter lived in Minsk in the early 1960s).

What is more, the propaganda showed a considerable degree of sophistication in its campaign and message. Thus, official announcements were focused on issues central to the concerns of most Belarusians, such as peace, security, stability and the economic well-being. The presumed achievements of the past few years (raising average wages, improving infrastructure, etc.) were inseparably linked to the personality of Lukashenka. At the same time, conscious of widespread opposition to the idea of lifting term limits, the content of the referendum was barely mentioned in the media. Instead, the official campaign was carried out under the slogan 'Vote for Belarus!' – a fact remarkable for two reasons. First, the authorities copied the slogan of the country's foremost opposition party, the 'Belarusian Popular Front.' Given the fact that the Belarusian Popular Front is vilified in official propaganda as a hotbed of extreme nationalism and fascism, this turnaround reflects the strengthening of pro-independence feelings inside Belarusian society to the point that it can be employed to mobilise

15. 'Ten Days of Arrest for Participation in Anti-Terrorist Rally,' *Charter-97* internet service, 8 September 2004, available online: http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2004/09/08/arest

public support. Second, 'vote for Belarus' effectively meant 'vote for Lukashenka.' This highlighted the tendency of personifying the state in the person of the president, and of denying legitimate ground to his opponents. Lukashenka continued with such rhetoric in the aftermath of the referendum, when he called the opposition 'outcasts' and claimed that it 'did not have a country.'

Overall, the combination of pressure, slander, and rather sophisticated public relations allowed the government to win the votes of a considerably larger share of the population than could have been predicted before the referendum. According to the report presented by the Central Election Commission, 79 per cent of all registered voters said yes to the question proposed by Lukashenka.[16] These data were immediately questioned by the opposition and led to street protests suppressed by police. According to the exit poll conducted by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys centre, 48.6 per cent of registered voters said yes at the referendum.[17] The Gallup-Baltic Surveys numbers were confirmed by the post-election poll conducted by the Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies (IISEPS), in which only 49 per cent of the respondents declared they voted yes.[18] Importantly, independent accounts questioned not just the size of Lukashenka's victory, but its validity as such, for the first time since his accession to power. On the other hand, when asked by IISEPS whether they believed that the referendum was conducted in a free and fair manner, 48 per cent of the respondents said it was and only 35 per cent disagreed. Thus, the society was left uninformed about the real results of the referendum, and the overall perception that Lukashenka could still win any ballot remained unchallenged. At the same time, the authorities were obviously concerned that the alternative data, if established and disseminated, might undermine the credibility of regime-sponsored electoral exercises. Following the referendum, IISEPS received two official warnings, and procedures to close down the institute began on 12 April 2005.

In the aftermath of the 17 October election and referendum, street protests were dispersed with unprecedented cruelty. Anatol Liabedzka, head of the 'United Civil Party,' was seized by security troops during the rally on 20 October, taken inside the building of a restaurant, and beaten in front of the television cameras, suffering brain concussion and kidney haematoma. Criminal proceedings for organising anti-referendum protests were recently

16. Official information of the Central Election Commission, available at http://rec.gov.by

17. Don Hill, 'Belarus: Election Officials Say Voters Back Lukashenka,' 18 October 2004: http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2004/10/80d71056-54eb-42cd-9313-084f9aeceb17.html

18. 'IISEPS May Be Liquidated,' *Charter-97* internet service, 27 December 2004, available online: http://www.charter97.org/bel/news/2004/12/27/likvid

launched against several opposition leaders, including Mikalaj Statkievich, leader of the 'Belarusian Social Democratic Party,' and Paval Seviarynec, leader of the 'Young Front' movement.

The parliamentary election campaign proceeded simultaneously with the referendum, and was marred by the same allegations of abuse, harassment, and fraud. Almost half of the opposition candidates were denied registration or disqualified during the campaign for either distributing 'unauthorised' materials (mostly anti-referendum leaflets) or slandering the authorities during the five-minute appearances in state media granted by the law. Opposition representatives hardly had access to the electronic mass media. When they did (as mandated by the law), their speeches were censored, and some candidates were disqualified and subsequently faced criminal proceedings for slandering the authorities. Meetings with voters were restricted by expansion of the law on mass rallies to include the conduct of election campaigns (i.e., each candidate who wanted to meet the voters outdoors had to receive a permit as for a rally). Only a handful of representatives of the democratic opposition were included in election commissions nationwide. In addition, the opposition was not permitted to respond publicly to slander that the authorities propagated on state television and state newspapers. At the same time, the opposition's chances were hampered by its perennial internal problems. As in most previous election campaigns (except the 2001 presidential vote), the opposition failed to unite, and four opposition coalitions participated in the elections. These were the Popular Coalition 'Five Plus', the European Coalition 'Free Belarus', the 'Young Belarus Coalition,' and the 'Respublika' group of parliamentary opposition deputies.

According to the Central Election Commission, deputies were elected in 108 constituencies out of 110 in the first round, all belonging to the government list, whereas not a single opposition candidate won a place in the House of Representatives. The results of the elections matched exactly the 'requests' made by Lukashenka in his annual message to the National Assembly in April 2004 (he 'asked' that the elections be conducted in one round, and that the new legislature include 30 per cent of women and no businessmen).[19] Notwithstanding repression, isolation, and internal problems, the opposition would have done relatively well had the vote count been fair. According to the Gallup exit poll, 32 per cent of respondents who revealed how they voted in the par-

19. Jan Maksymiuk, 'Lukashenka Recounts Policies In Annual Address To Legislature,' *RFE/RL Poland Belarus Ukraine Report* (April 2004); http://www.rferl.org/reports/pbureport/2004/04/14-200404.asp

liamentary elections said they voted for a pro-democratic candidate from 'Five Plus,' European Coalition, or 'Respublika.' Since the opposition candidates ran only in 75 out of 110 constituencies, opposition support could have been as high as 40 per cent of those who took part in the elections, an excellent result given the near-complete shutdown of the independent opinion during the campaign.[20] Paradoxically, the referendum could have helped the opposition to build public support, as voters who turned down Lukashenka's proposal were naturally inclined to search for a candidate opposing the president. Yet, the opposition failed to convert these votes into political advantage. The atmosphere of fear and intimidation definitely played a role in discouraging the population from attempts to defend their votes on the streets.

Moreover, as the report of the Slovak Institute for Civic Diplomacy/Pontis Foundation stressed, 'the majority of Belarusian citizens is still waiting for signals that the democratic opposition is able to deal with the economic, political, and social problems of the population, not only to criticize Lukashenka. There is still no real trust between citizens and the democratic opposition.'[21] The problem is even broader: there is also waning faith in the electoral process and in the very idea of political competition, at least in current conditions when elections are predictable and meaningless.

## The Orange fear: reaction to contagion

A month after the Belarus referendum, another attempt to retain political power by fraud and intimidation ended in what is now known as the 'Orange revolution' in Ukraine. The battle of Ukrainians to ensure respect for their democratic choice, which lasted several weeks, ended in the annulment of a fraudulent vote and the eventual election of Viktor Yushchenko as new president. The 'Orange revolution' happened not least because Ukraine had managed to maintain vital elements of democracy even while consistently sliding towards authoritarianism under Leonid Kuchma's rule. Hence, the revolution seemed to have few implications for a far more repressive and consolidated autocratic regime in Belarus. Nevertheless, Lukashenka received a powerful signal of the potential of 'people power' to overcome intimidation. Given the geographic and cultural closeness of Ukraine to Belarus (and the fact

20. *Exit Poll and Election Success* (International Republican Institute External Memo, October 19, 2004).

21. See http://www.pontisfoundation.sk/

that hundreds of Belarusians marched the streets of Kyiv), contagion appeared possible.

The first to take notice of the lessons of the 'Orange revolution' in Belarus was Lukashenka and his entourage. In one of his speeches, the Belarus leader warned against the complacency in the ruling circles: 'The events in Ukraine show that modern political techniques and a weakly managed country are pregnant with serious consequences.' The lesson was simple: pre-emptive acts should be aimed at even the smallest signs of dissent and opposition.

In order to 'strengthen' the management of the country, the law-enforcement agencies (such as the KGB, Interior Ministry, Prosecutor's office, State Control Committee, and Security Council) have been reinforced and also purged of possible dissenters. Leanid Eryn, head of the KGB, was suspended from office after he met with opposition protesters on 18 October 2004, and then sacked one month later. Viktar Sheiman, formerly prosecutor general, was appointed head of presidential administration in December, replacing a retired KGB officer, Ural Latypau. The sacking of Latypau and Eryn purged Minsk of career officers with close ties to Moscow and replaced them with those who owed their rise to Lukashenka. Notably, Sheiman has been implicated as having played a leading role in the case of abduction and presumed murder of leading opposition figures in 1999, and was among the four officials whose removal has been recommended by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. His promotion marks Lukashenka's commitment to defy pressure for investigating the disappearances, and also indicates his commitment to further tighten his grip on power by allying with those who have a high personal stake in preventing his downfall.

The security forces have received the implicit order from Lukashenka to fight the opposition, who he refers to as 'the outcasts' and 'people without homeland.' In addition, the parliament has adopted amendments to the law on the security forces, changing the rules for opening fire in peacetime. The amendments allow the use of firearms 'in other cases determined by the president.'

## Conclusions

Given current conditions, are there any prospects for a political change in Belarus in the foreseeable future?

It would be wrong to presume that there is no demand for change in Belarus at all. However, the Lukashenka government is fully capable of foreclosing any changes by taking pre-emptive strikes aimed at vital political and social actors, who might act as prime instigators of reforms in the country. The domination of the state over society through political repression and economic control also provides the government with an opportunity to reengineer the social landscape, destroying remaining bonds of self-organisation, creating stronger links of dependence of citizens upon the state, and pushing the general public away from any form of independent activity. To a large extent, the opportunities for political change are reduced by the fact that the state has managed to convince even committed opponents of the status quo that no change is possible in Belarus. The failure of previous attempts to challenge the authority of the president have entrenched a feeling of hopelessness. Every new political event is awaited as another show of force by the presidency.

Belarus is sometimes referred to as a country where, upon arrival, one has to turn the clock back thirty years. There is some truth in this, but however hopeless its democratic opposition seems, when compared to Communist-era dissidents, it has a solid, broad and sophisticated network. New opportunities in communication (when underground literature can be easily downloaded from the internet) make the establishment of total control over the spread of information unrealistic. In addition, the new geopolitical status of Belarus, as an immediate neighbour of the EU and the Western world, will have profound implications for future developments in the country. Last but not least, there is authentic home-grown support for democratic change inside the country. Repressive though the current regime may be, predictions about the future of Belarus have to take this into account.

Altogether, in this broader perspective, the prospects for political change in Belarus are not a fantasy, but a real possibility.

# Belarusian foreign policy

**Clelia Rontoyanni**

4

Officially, the foreign policy of Belarus is described as 'multi-directional.' In fact, Belarusian foreign policy is overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, oriented towards Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Belarusian choice of close alignment and integration with Russia – while preserving good relations with the West – became clear as early as in 1993, when Belarus acceded to the CIS Collective Security Treaty and concluded a number of bilateral integration agreements with Russia. In this regard, Belarusian foreign policy has shown remarkable continuity over the past decade. Despite the stagnation of the bilateral integration process with Russia in the last five years, Belarusian policy has seen hardly any adaptation.

Belarusian foreign policy options were subsequently severely restricted due to the country's isolation from its Central European neighbours, the European Union (EU), the United States and more broadly from the part of the international community often referred to as 'the West.' Since 1997, President Lukashenka's unwillingness to modify his authoritarian style of government and his uncompromising rejection of international criticism has deprived Belarusian foreign policy of alternatives to dependency on Russia. This chapter examines the main dilemmas and strategies of the Belarusian leadership with regard to two main dimensions – the EU and 'the West' more broadly, on the one hand, and Russia and the CIS, on the other.

Despite the Belarusian leadership's occasional attempts to ameliorate relations with the West and its public criticism of Russia, it may still be misleading to refer to the existence of significant trends in Belarusian foreign policy. Inertia has been the dominant feature of this policy, which has been oriented mainly towards the preservation of the status quo domestically. Belarusian diplomacy has made ancillary efforts to improve the terms of the country's interaction with its main international partners, including the EU, but these are hardly aimed at changing existing relations in a funda-

mental way. For all its economic costs, isolation from the West is not altogether at odds with the Lukashenka administration's notion of the national interest, which is increasingly defined in terms of regime survival.

The success of the 'Orange Revolution' in neighbouring Ukraine, which the Belarusian authorities attribute to a Western agenda of 'regime change,' would seem bound to reinforce the Belarusian leadership's suspicious attitude to the West and the country's (self-)isolation. The longer-term viability of such a course will also depend on Russia's continued willingness to prop up the Belarusian unreformed economy and 'social model,' which underpins President Lukashenka's enduring support base.[1] The wish to prevent unmanaged political change in its neighbourhood, especially regime change that could bring to power Western-oriented leaders, may once again prompt Russia to support the Lukashenka administration economically and politically. A continued reliance on Russia carries the risk of Belarus missing out on opportunities (such as those offered by the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy) for diversifying its foreign policy and economic links.

## Belarus and Europe: eight years of isolation

Belarus stands out among its Central and East European neighbours as the only country that has not shown a serious interest in joining the process of European integration. In the first two years of independent statehood, Belarus flirted with the idea of neutrality and made some hesitant steps towards building ties with its Central European neighbours and even towards associating itself with Central Europe in terms of geopolitical identity. By 1993, however, when Central European countries one by one decided to seek membership of NATO and the European Union, it became clear that Belarus did not share the same overarching foreign policy objectives. Belarus joined the Central European Initiative as a full member in 1996, when this regional organisation had essentially fulfilled its primary political role as a lobbying group for its members' accession to the EU.

Despite the view of some prominent Belarusian policy-makers, such as the Chairman of the National Bank, Bogdankevich, who considered that the country's starting economic conditions were similar to those of its Baltic neighbours, the Belarusian leadership

1. Polls suggest that President Lukashenka has the loyal support of around a third of the electorate; his relatively stable support base consists mainly of the public sector employees and older, rural, less educated voters. See for example 'Lukashenka's electorate remains quite numerous', in *The Viewer*, analytical bulletin by Belapan news agency, no. 547, 2-8 August 2005

never seriously entertained the prospect of a path aimed at EU accession. In Belarus, a nationalist constituency intent on bolstering the country's independence by distancing it from Russia did not gain a determining influence over official policy. Belarusian foreign policy therefore lacked the motivation of 'a return to Europe,' which could have served as an anchor for economic reform. The relatively minimal elite turnover after the collapse of Communism and the Soviet Union also meant that Belarusian policy-makers had little enthusiasm for market reforms and their potential social costs. Their primary concern was to minimise the upheaval resulting from the break-up of the Soviet Union by preserving economic links with other CIS countries, especially Russia.

Still, under the leadership of Stanislav Shushkevich and then Vyacheslav Kebich, Belarusian authorities were keen to establish links with European international organisations. In 1992, Belarus joined the CSCE (later OSCE) and NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council (as of 1997, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council). In 1993, Belarus applied for membership in the Council of Europe. In November 1993, under the administration of Prime Minister Kebich, Belarus began negotiations for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU. The Belarusian authorities' interest in the European Union was limited to cooperation (not integration) in selected sectors. Belarusian negotiators were primarily interested in expanding export opportunities, notably by seeking EU recognition of Belarus as a country with a transition economy and the elimination of EU quantitative restrictions (quotas) for imports from Belarus. They were interested in obtaining EU assistance through the TACIS programme, especially towards preventing illegal migration and alleviating the environmental and social consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. They also pursued the mutual recognition of educational qualifications and a relaxation of EU visa requirements.[2]

The PCA, which provided for joint EU-Belarus institutions, political dialogue, trade preferences and wide-ranging economic cooperation, was concluded in March 1995. However, the agreement has never entered into force, as the EU suspended the ratification process in response to the referendum of November 1996, which President Lukashenka used to change the constitution and create a 'super-presidential system.' The legitimacy of the referendum was questioned because it was held despite a ruling of the

2. V.E. Ulakhovich, 'Belarus I Evropeisky Soyuz: desyat' let sotrudnichestva,' in *Aktualnye Voprosy Mezhdunarodnykh Otnoshenii i Vneshnei Politiki Belarusi* ['Belarus in the EU: Ten Years of Cooperation', in *Contemporary Questions of international Relations and Foreign Policy*] (Minsk: Centre of International Studies, Belarus State University, 2003), pp. 99-101. It is worth noting that the author of this chapter was a member of the Belarusian team of negotiators.

Belarusian Constitutional Court and without the approval of the Parliament. The EU and other international organisations also criticised the conditions under which it was held, where the opposition were not given a fair chance to present their arguments to the electorate. In addition, the international community considered that the constitutional amendments had eroded democratic principles by effectively removing institutional constraints on presidential power.[3] The political crisis, which developed in the aftermath of the referendum, also resulted in the exclusion of the anti-Lukashenka opposition from Parliament, as most opposition deputies refused to join a new, weakened Parliament, whose legitimacy they rejected. The members of the new Parliament, whose legitimacy was not recognised by the EU or the Council of Europe or the OSCE, were essentially self-selected supporters of the President.

### Isolation from Europe

In early 1997, the European Union called on the Belarusian authorities to open consultations with the former deputies of the 13th session – that is, the democratically elected parliament – to establish a proper balance between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary branches of power and to create mechanisms to guarantee human rights and the freedom of the non-state media. The EU offered Belarus assistance in meeting democratic standards, but the Belarusian authorities refused to acknowledge that their conduct was in any way deficient with regard to democratic norms. In January 1997, the Council of Europe suspended the Belarusian application for membership and the country's guest status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). In September 1997, the EU Council of Ministers decided to freeze the entry into force of the PCA and the more limited Interim Agreement (regulating EU-Belarus trade) of 1996; to refrain from high-level official contacts with Belarus; and to suspend all assistance except humanitarian aid and projects directly supporting democratisation.

Since then, Belarus has also missed out on trade preferences that the EU has subsequently extended to neighbouring countries such as Russia and Ukraine. The United States introduced a policy of 'selective engagement,' which consists of limiting interaction (including assistance and trade) with the official authorities to a

3. The main features of the constitutional amendments adopted in November 1996 were that the President gained the right to dissolve the Parliament, to call referenda, to issue decrees with the force of law, to hire and fire Ministers without parliamentary approval, to appoint half of the members of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court, and an eighth of the upper house of Parliament. The Parliament became bicameral with an upper house consisting of presidential and local government appointees, which weakened the influence of the directly elected lower chamber. The size of the lower house was reduced to 110 deputies without new elections.

minimum, while providing political, technical and financial support for the opposition and the 'democratically-oriented' (i.e. anti-Lukashenka) media and civil society.

International opprobrium and the near exclusion of Belarus from European cooperation and integration processes have had a rather negligible impact on the behaviour of the Lukashenka administration. President Lukashenka does not recognise the authority of the EU or other international organisations to evaluate the conformity of Belarus with 'international democratic standards.' From his point of view, the 'super-presidential system' received the overwhelming support of the Belarusian electorate and is therefore legitimate. The Lukashenka administration has no wish to see Belarus integrate into the EU or other 'Western clubs,' whose membership is conditional upon respect for democratic norms. Unlike Putin, President Lukashenka is not interested in gaining Western approval or being perceived as 'a good European.' For example, he did not hesitate in causing an international scandal and angering the EU when he expelled EU Ambassadors from their residences in 1998.

Lukashenka attracted further international criticism by refusing to hold presidential elections at the end of his first mandate in 1999 on the grounds that he had the right to a full mandate under the new Constitution. In 1999-2000, the disappearances of former Interior Minister Zakharenko, former Central Election Commission Chairman Gonchar, the businessman Krasovsky, and TV journalist Zavadsky further tarnished the international reputation of the Lukashenka administration. There was concern that the disappearances of Zakharenko and Gonchar in particular might have been related to their having joined the ranks of the political opposition. The imprisonment of several political opponents of President Lukashenka, such as former Prime Minister Chigir, deputy Klimov and former Ambassador Marynich, or even politically unengaged critics of official policies, most notably Professor Bandazhevsky, also raised international concern that the judicial system is being used for political purposes. Repressive methods (e.g. tax probes, prosecution of journalists for defamation of officials) have also been used to complicate or – in some cases – end the operation of opposition-leaning media, trade unions, NGOs and even independent higher education institutions.

### Efforts to mend relations

Belarusian diplomacy has made occasional, albeit half-hearted, efforts to improve relations with the West, and especially with the EU. In 1999-2000, the Belarusian leadership attempted to respond to the country's isolation from Europe, primarily from concern over the economic cost in lost trading and investment opportunities. The result was the adoption of a 'concept' (strategy) document on improving relations with the European Union in May 2000. Then Foreign Minister Khvostov suggested that Belarus would be ready to take EU criticism and recommendations into account in the context of 'a civilised, balanced compromise,' whereby the EU would also consider the Belarusian viewpoint. Belarusian diplomacy attempted to disengage relations with the EU from Belarusian domestic politics.

The Belarusian concept of 'responsible neighbourhood' was aimed at unfreezing the development of economic links with the EU on the basis of mutual interests. Once again, the main Belarusian priority was the revitalisation of trade – in the first instance an increase (ideally leading to the abolition) of EU quotas for Belarusian exports, especially for textiles. Relevant negotiations were launched in 2001. Belarusian negotiators argued that companies from many EU countries were interested in investing in the Belarusian economy, but were discouraged by EU non-tariff trade barriers.

In addition, Belarusian policy-makers were keen for their country to participate in EU regional cooperation projects in various areas. In 1999, Belarus applied for observer status in the EU's Northern Dimension and expressed interest in being included in Russian-Lithuanian cross-border cooperation projects in the following areas: environmental, public health, support to private business development, customs and police cooperation, administrative capacity-building and educational projects, including student exchanges. Belarusian regional authorities had a positive experience of cross-border cooperation, as in 1997 Belarusian regions were included in two 'Euro-regions': the Grodno region participated in the 'Neman' Euro-region along with neighbouring Polish and Lithuanian regions and Brest joined the 'Bug' Euro-region, which also includes Polish and Ukrainian border regions. Belarusian diplomacy also pursued the inclusion of Belarus in pan-European infrastructure projects (i.e. transport 'corridors', energy and telecommunications networks) and the reduction of barriers – primarily visa regulations – to people-to-people contacts.

However, the Belarusian pursuit of delinking economic relations and functional cooperation from politics failed. The EU was reluctant to revise the 1997 decisions without clear evidence of progress towards democratisation on the Belarusian side. For its part, the Lukashenka administration was loath to make political concessions under Western pressure – both for reasons of prestige and from an exaggerated fear that political liberalisation might lead to 'regime change.' President Lukashenka had been alarmed by the downfall of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic in 1999 and suspected the extra-parliamentary opposition of planning a campaign of public protests to oust him from power with Western – primarily US – backing.

The only significant Belarusian concession had been the acceptance of an OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group (AMG) in 1998. The Minsk-based AMG had the mandate to assist Belarus in complying with OSCE commitments on democratic institutions and monitor progress in this direction. By the end of 1999, the AMG had achieved some success in fostering a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition and in promoting amendments to approximate Belarusian electoral legislation with international norms. However, the dialogue between the Lukashenka administration and the opposition soon broke down and there was no movement towards political liberalisation, despite former Prime Minister Chigir's release from prison. In the run-up to the presidential elections of 2001, relations between the Belarusian authorities and the AMG deteriorated sharply, as Belarusian authorities accused the AMG of exceeding its mandate by training domestic elections observers and advising the opposition. The AMG was forced to end its operation at the end of 2002, when the Belarusian authorities' refusal to renew the visas of its expatriate personnel. Another OSCE mission was set up in Minsk in early 2003, but with a less politically sensitive mandate, which does not explicitly concern Belarusian compliance with OSCE commitments.[4]

In Brussels and several EU member state capitals, there was a growing recognition that the policy of isolation had not fostered political liberalisation in Belarus. If anything, the domestic situation in Belarus showed signs of deterioration (e.g. disappearances, pressures on the non-state media). The Lukashenka administration was capitalising on the isolation policy to whip up anti-Western sentiment at home. It was, however, NATO and the US that bore the brunt of the Belarusian President's anti-Western rhetoric,

4. The mandate of the OSCE mission covers institution-building, support for the rule of law, facilitating relations between the authorities and civil society as well as environmental and economic activities.

especially due to the Alliance's Kosovo campaign, which Lukashenka portrayed as 'anti-Slavic'. Due to the isolation policy, which allowed only minimal contacts with Belarus, the EU had been deprived of potential levers of influence over Belarus and had unwittingly reinforced Belarusian dependency on Russia.

In the run-up to the Belarusian parliamentary elections of 2000, there was broad consensus in the EU on the need to give Belarus a second chance by holding out the prospect of gradually restoring full relations with Belarus in the event that Belarus was prepared to return to the path of democratisation. The first step envisaged in this so-called 'step-by-step' approach was the organisation of parliamentary and presidential elections according to international standards. On the eve of the parliamentary elections of 2000, the EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE offered Belarus the opportunity to end its international isolation by returning substantial powers to the Parliament; ensuring opposition representation in electoral commissions; providing the opposition with fair access to the state media; and amending electoral legislation in line with international standards.

Despite some steps to address international criticism (e.g. amendments to the electoral law), a joint delegation of the OSCE, the PACE and the European Parliament, which observed the elections, found them to have fallen short of the conditions required to recognise them as 'free and fair.'[5] Despite this setback, European institutions presented the presidential elections of 2001 as another opportunity for Belarus.[6] Once again, the government in Minsk did not take the opportunity. A limited OSCE observation mission found that the elections, which President Lukashenka won with 75 per cent in the first round, had fallen short of international standards for similar reasons as the previous year's parliamentary elections.[7]

In October 2004, President Lukashenka held a referendum to change the Constitution to enable himself to run for a third term in 2006, ignoring appeals by the EU and other international institutions for him to step down at the end of his second term. Lukashenka obtained a 'yes' vote of 77 per cent, but the result was questioned by an OSCE observation mission, which found the referendum as well as the parliamentary elections that were held on the same day to have once again fallen short of international standards.[8] In response, the EU introduced a visa ban on high-ranking Belarusian officials believed to be involved in the organisation of

5. Serious flaws noted by the Parliamentary troika included the disbarment of opposition candidates; lack of transparency during vote counting and tabulation; and a marked anti-opposition bias in the state media.

6. *Report by the Parliamentary Troika on the political situation in Belarus in the light of the parliamentary elections of October 15th*, 16 October 2000, p. 4.

7. On the positive side, the OSCE observers noted that the electorate had a real choice, as four candidates were registered. International Limited Election Observation Mission, *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, Minsk, 10 September 2001, pp. 9, 12.

8. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, *Final report on the parliamentary elections in Belarus (17 October 2004)*, 9 December 2004.

the referendum – a measure that the EU has also applied to officials, including President Lukashenka, it considers responsible for the unsatisfactory investigations into the disappearances.[9] The EU also decided to further minimise official contacts with the Belarusian authorities – including bilateral contacts of EU Member States. The visa ban and the restrictions on official contacts exemplify the isolation of Belarus from Europe and with it the failure of either side's efforts to work towards a gradual rapprochement.

## Outside the 'European Neighbourhood'

On the whole, the Belarusian leadership has proved remarkably unresponsive to external criticism, prompting the European Union to describe the international isolation of Belarus as 'self-imposed.'[10] The presidential elections of 2001 and the referendum of October 2004 made it clear that President Lukashenka was not willing to take any steps that might erode his control over domestic political processes for the sake of improving relations with the West. The Belarusian administration's hopes of mending fences with the EU in particular seem to have shifted towards the expectation that the EU may eventually have to resign itself to the endurance of the Lukashenka regime and quietly give up on political conditionality. The main Belarusian argument purports that a stable Belarus is a good neighbour that poses no problems to the EU. Moreover, it is an essential partner for EU efforts to address pressing challenges such as illegal migration, especially after enlargement.

The longevity of the Lukashenka regime, combined with its determined resistance to external influence and pressure, has created serious dilemmas for external actors and especially for the EU, which since May 2004 is a direct neighbour. The Belarusian authorities' single-mindedness in resisting EU interference in 'internal affairs' has been successful in exposing the failure of EU attempts at exercising pressure through different kinds of sanctions. However, it has not succeeded in 'unfreezing' functional cooperation with the EU by delinking it from political conditions related to Belarusian domestic politics.

When the EU initially announced its 'proximity policy' (later renamed 'Wider Europe' and finally 'European Neighbourhood Policy' – henceforth ENP), Belarusian policy makers perceived it

9. *Common Position 2004/661/CFSP*, 27 September 2004.

10. *Declaration of the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the presidential decree on foreign aid and the by-elections in Belarus, CFSP statement no. 01/064*, 23 March 2001.

with guarded optimism. They interpreted the original proposal of British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw for the EU to introduce a new 'neighbour country' status for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine as a sign of an imminent, major policy change on the part of the EU – as an implicit admission that the policy of isolation had failed and would have to be abandoned. However, when EU policy crystallised into a specific set of propositions, political conditionality once again loomed large and the hopes of the Belarusian side were once again disappointed.[11] The EU specifically excluded Belarus from the full benefits offered by the ENP until the Belarusian authorities demonstrated 'a sincere willingness to re-engage [with the EU and] to respect democratic values and the rule of law'.[12]

In the past four years, the lack of progress has prompted a substantial debate in Brussels and European capitals on how to engage with Belarus and in particular how to promote democratic principles. It is now widely understood that the EU – or any other major international actor with the possible exception of Russia – lacks powerful 'carrots' or 'sticks' to alter the incentive structure of the Lukashenka administration, which is preoccupied with regime survival above all else. EU efforts to put pressure on the Belarusian leadership by enlisting Russia's support have also been unsuccessful, as Russia has consistently defended Belarus from international criticism. The EU Council Conclusions of November 2004 reflect an acute awareness of this dilemma and the need to find options to engage Belarusian society, including by new approaches to EU assistance.

A certain divergence of views is apparent in the EU debate on Belarus. Some EU member states, such as Germany and Sweden, have favoured an approach based on broad cooperation with Belarusian society and envisage some engagement with the authorities at lower levels. Such an approach would aim to avoid cutting Belarus off from Europe and also to help create – in the longer term – the conditions that would make democratic change possible by exposing Belarusian society to European values. It would also aim to strengthen EU-oriented societal actors such as private enterprise and civil society. This approach focuses on boosting people-to-people contacts, especially among intellectual and regional elites, the private sector and youth – especially students. It therefore favours educational, cultural exchanges and cross-border cooperation projects. Other member states, such as the UK or the Netherlands, have taken a stricter view when it comes to contacts with the

11. *Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, COM (2003) 104, 11 March 2003.

12. *EU Council Conclusions* of 22 November 2004.

Belarusian authorities, but still there has been wide consensus in the EU on the need to engage more with Belarusian society.

Indeed, as of 2000, the EC broadened its assistance to Belarus to include small projects in support of private enterprise and civil society, cross-border cooperation at the level of regional and municipal authorities and educational exchanges. In 2005, the EU increased assistance to Belarus with the aim of strengthening civil society and the higher education system. It also envisages increased cross-border cooperation (Neighbourhood Programmes) with neighbouring Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Some Belarusian opposition politicians (former diplomat Marinich, liberal Olga Abramova, Communist leader Kalyakin) welcome such an approach of broad interaction with Belarusian society. The West's policy of isolation – in the absence of substantial societal links – has helped strengthen Lukashenka domestically and increased Belarusian dependence on Russia. Others figures, such as former Parliamentary Chairman Shushkevich, former Prime Minister Chigir or Andrei Sannikov ('Charter 97') argue that the EU has never really isolated Belarus and call for a tougher EU line, involving trade sanctions and/or direct assistance to the opposition.

Belarus's neighbours, notably Lithuania and Poland, advocate a more proactive EU strategy, like that of the US, which would directly support the Belarusian political opposition. The Belarusian authorities' resentment of Poland's role in leading the campaign for a more activist EU policy and in supporting opposition-leaning civil society organisations in Belarus may be – at least partially – at the root of a recent deterioration in Belarusian-Polish relations.[13] The dissemination of alternative information to the population through non-state media, including radio stations broadcasting from neighbouring countries, is a cause championed by the Belarusian opposition, which after Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' has become more active in canvassing Western support. A more radical variant of such a strategy would envisage foreign support for opposition campaigns. The European Parliament appears broadly sympathetic to such an approach. The EU Council and the European Commission, as well as most member states, however, take a more cautious line and reject EU involvement in Belarusian politics. However, the EU has become more outspoken in condemning as politically motivated the imprisonment of opposition politicians Marinich and – most recently – Statkevich and Severyanets.

13. Polish Foreign Minister Rotfeld referred to 'a serious crisis' in bilateral relations following the Belarusian authorities' crackdown on the Polish minority organisation in Belarus, which led Poland to recall its Ambassador from Minsk on 28 July 2005.

## Belarus, Russia and the CIS

In the 1990s, integration with Russia was the cornerstone of Belarusian foreign policy. In the minds of most members of the Belarusian political establishment, the rationale for integrating with Russia was simply too compelling to even consider other options. The Belarusian economy was – and to a large extent still remains – primarily export-oriented and heavily import-dependent. Russia has traditionally provided both the energy resources and raw materials that Belarusian industry depends upon and a large, welcoming market for Belarusian manufactured goods that the domestic market cannot absorb and that – in most cases – have found it hard to break into new markets.

Belarusian initiatives to integrate with Russia predate President Lukashenka's arrival to power. A first agreement on monetary union, which was never implemented, was concluded in 1994 – one year after the collapse of the rouble zone. Between 1995 and 1999, the two countries concluded a number of bilateral integration agreements, most notably:

- An agreement on a Customs Union in January 1995 that required the removal of all customs controls, quantitative and tariff barriers to trade in goods and the harmonisation of tariffs on trade with third countries.

- A treaty on the formation of a Community in April 1996 that provided for the harmonisation of economic and legal systems with a view to the establishment of a common market characterised by free movement for goods, services, capital, labour and – later – monetary union; envisaged foreign policy coordination; setting up Community institutions: the Supreme Council (inter-governmental), a Parliamentary Assembly (delegates of national parliaments) and the Executive Committee (supranational secretariat).

- A treaty on the establishment of a Union in April 1997 and Charter of the Union that extends integration to defence policy and justice and home affairs.

- An agreement on equal rights for citizens in 1998 that provides for free movement, access to employment and social services for Russian and Belarusian citizens.

- A treaty on a Union State of Russia and Belarus in December 1999 that reforms common institutions and sets up a Council of Ministers, provides for a bicameral Union State Parliament with a directly elected lower chamber, a Union State Court and Audit Chamber, and also envisages the elaboration of a Constitutional Act.

Throughout the 1990s, President Lukashenka championed the cause of bilateral integration with Russia, which formed one of the two main pillars of his political platform along with his celebrated 'Belarusian social and economic model.' Indeed, Lukashenka repeatedly credited integration with Russia for the economic and social achievements of Belarus: sustained economic growth (at a time when most CIS countries experienced negative growth rates), low unemployment, free healthcare and education, regular payment of salaries and pensions. Belarus managed to avoid the sharp economic decline and social upheaval experienced by Russia and most other CIS countries by preserving certain aspects of the Soviet economic system, such as state ownership of large enterprises, price controls coupled with state subsidies for consumer and industrial staples, and currency controls and inflationary currency emission. These policies, which helped maintain a low but stable standard of living, especially for otherwise vulnerable sections of the population, seemed to account for President Lukashenka's considerable popular support, especially among rural and less educated voters.

However, reformist economists argue that the Belarusian 'model,' founded on the avoidance of market-economic reforms and Russian subsidies, is barely sustainable in the longer term. Still, Belarus reaped substantial economic benefits from the integration project. Belarusian experts estimated the annual level of Russian explicit and implicit subsidies to the Belarusian economy at around $2 billion. These came in the form of one-off debt cancellation ('zero option'), low interest loans, favourable terms of barter trade, revenue from the customs union, support for the Belarusian currency, and, most importantly, low-priced gas supplies.[14] The launch of the bilateral integration process was accompanied by progressive reductions in the gas price charged to Belarus, until this became equal to the rate paid by neighbouring Russian regions. More impressively, free trade with Russia, combined with the Lukashenka administration's active pursuit of trade links with

14. Valery Karbalevich, 'Vneshnyaya politika Belarusi,' in V. Karbalevich and L. Zaiko (eds.), *Natsional'naya i regional'naya bezopasnost'* ['The Foreign Policy of Belarus of Belarus', in *National and Regional Security*] (Minsk: Analitichesky tsentr 'Strategiya': 2001), p. 176.

Russian regions, made Belarus Russia's second-largest trading partner behind Germany. At that time, Lukashenka was not concerned about the increase of Belarusian economic dependence on Russia, so long as the terms of the two countries' economic relations were largely favourable to Belarus.

In addition, the Belarusian authorities were for long able to resist the implementation of those provisions of the bilateral integration agreements, which required Belarus to harmonise its regulatory legislation, economic and monetary policies with Russia. Rather than genuine economic integration with Russia, the Lukashenka administration was interested in Russian support for the largely unreformed Belarusian economy and social model. In this sense, Russian support actually functioned as a disincentive for reform and a barrier to economic integration. In the late 1990s, the Belarusian government introduced some reforms under Russian pressure: rigid currency controls (and with them multiple exchange rates) were eliminated, and price controls and subsidies to unprofitable enterprises were reduced. However, the privatisation of large enterprises has been indefinitely postponed, despite a few false starts, which whetted the appetite of Russian business.

On several occasions, President Lukashenka attempted to resist pressure from reformist elements in the Russian government by arguing that the Belarusian contribution to the 'Union' went beyond economics alone. Apart from a reliable, low-cost transit country for Russia's trade with Europe, Lukashenka effectively marketed Belarus to the Russian political establishment as Russia's only loyal ally.[15] The Belarusian President's rhetoric of 'Slavic unity' reached its peak during the Russian outcry at NATO's military campaign in Kosovo.

At a less visible level, however, military and foreign policy cooperation have been the most successful aspects of the integration process. The two countries have agreements on the joint use of military installations, conduct regular joint exercises and have integrated air defence, military planning and procurement. In terms of foreign policy, Russia and Belarus have consistently supported each other's positions in the UN, the OSCE and in negotiations with third parties. Russian officials always refrain from any public criticism of Belarus, despite EU and US pressure. At the same time, Belarus is an enthusiastic participant in all Russia-centred integration initiatives within the CIS. It is a signatory of the Collective Security Treaty since 1993 and a member of the Collective Security

15. Belarus charges lower rates for road, rail, gas and oil transit (by pipeline) than Ukraine. Belarus remains the dominant transit route for Russian oil exports and continues to charge lower rates, despite paying international market rates for Russian oil supplies.

Treaty Organisation, which was set up in 2002. Belarus is a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Community (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) and also of the Single Economic Space (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan), which was launched in 2003.

### Economic harmonisation or political union?

Under Putin, relations between Belarus and Russia have become more difficult. New integration initiatives have stagnated. A draft Constitutional Act for the Russia-Belarus Union State, which was envisaged by the 1999 Treaty on a Union State, has not been concluded. Elections to a Union State Parliament, which were also foreseen in the 1999 Treaty, have not taken place. A Union State Court and Audit Chamber have not been set up. The timetable for the introduction of the Russian rouble as a single currency for both Russia and Belarus has been repeatedly postponed. In recent years, there have been recurrent economic disputes, especially over the price of Russian gas supplies to Belarus.

Media commentators often attribute the stagnation in the two countries' relations to the poor personal rapport between the two Presidents. Lukashenka's anti-Western rhetoric was arguably rather embarrassing to Putin's efforts to forge close relations with the EU and the US. Other analysts have argued that, unlike Yeltsin, Putin bears no responsibility for the break-up of the USSR and does not need the Union with Belarus to prove his patriotic credentials. Putin's administration has been less inclined to go along with a façade of an integration process, which had hitherto allowed Belarus to rely on Russian political and economic support without implementing the reforms required for real integration. Under Putin, Russian negotiators have been more demanding than before, especially in pushing for the privatisation of large enterprises. Russia's gas monopoly Gazprom has actively pressed for the sale of Beltransgaz, the state company in charge of the Belarusian gas pipeline system, which transports some 10 per cent of Russia's gas exports to Central and Western Europe. The Belarusian leadership has repeatedly blocked the sale on the grounds that the price offered by Gazprom is too low, despite a treaty obligation to proceed with the sale.[16]

In August 2003, Putin came close to alienating the Lukashenka administration by urging Belarus to choose between two options

16. The sale of a majority stake in Beltransgaz is part of the *Programme of Actions* attached to the Union state treaty of 1999. Gazprom offered $900 million for a majority stake; Belarus demanded at least $2.5 billion for a 49% stake. *Kommersant*, 17 September 2003, p. 1.

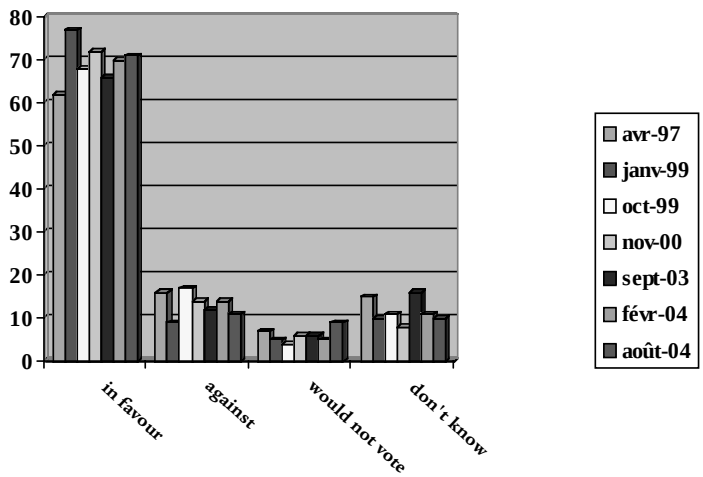
of integration: either incorporation into the Russian Federation or integration on the EU model, based on a single market – rather than pursuing the further institutional development of the 'Union State.' Both options were almost equally unpalatable to the Belarusian President. The loss of Belarusian statehood is unacceptable to Belarusian officialdom, which would lose its status, and also to the vast majority of the Belarusian population. The obvious unacceptability of this option was meant to heighten pressure on the Belarusian President to explicitly accept the second option and commit himself to reforms to liberalise the economy.

Lukashenka has remained very reluctant to open up the economy, as this would imply loss of control over the policy levers (notably monetary policy) necessary to maintain the Belarusian model, which underpin his domestic legitimacy. The Belarusian President, who takes pride in the absence of 'oligarchs' in his country, would also not welcome the emergence of an influential entrepreneurial class, which might seek political change. Thus, the Belarusian president reacted angrily to Putin's ultimatum and insisted that existing bilateral treaties should not be revised. The government continued its foot-dragging tactics to slow down economic integration by indefinitely extending the timetable for monetary union. Belarus was supposed to introduce the Russian rouble into circulation in January 2005 and received substantial financial assistance from Russia to support the relevant preparations. Despite the view of the Belarusian National Bank that there are no technical obstacles to the introduction of the single currency, the Belarusian side has advanced ever more new conditions for monetary union, ranging from a demand for Russian oil and electricity supplies at Russian domestic rates, and compensation for loss of VAT revenue to the equalisation of pension rights.[17] The bottom line for the Lukashenka administration is insistence on an equal say over monetary policy ('one state, one vote' in the Russian or Union Central Bank), a demand that Russia categorically rejects.

Nevertheless, neither side has been prepared to give up on the integration project. One of the reasons is that the idea of the Russia-Belarus Union remains popular among the general public in both countries. A poll conducted in August 2004 by Russia's Public Opinion Foundation shows that support for bilateral 'unification' has remained quite stable between 1997 and 2004, with more than two thirds of the electorate being prepared to vote for 'unification' in a possible referendum.

17. Paulyuk Bykowski, 'Belarus: Russian rouble is postponed,' Network of Independent Journalists Weekly Service (Issue no. 306, 30 January 2003).

**Table 1: Russian vote in a possible referendum on the question of 'unification' between Russia and Belarus (percentages)**




*Source: www.fom.ru*

However, both countries' electorates are much more sceptical when they are asked about a 'Union State.' Only 43 per cent of Russians were inclined to vote in favour of such an option in a referendum, while 33 per cent said that they would vote against. The Belarusian public appears to have grown quite adamant in its rejection of integration options that imply a loss of Belarusian state sovereignty. According to a Public Opinion Foundation poll of September 2004, only 3 per cent of Belarusian respondents favoured their country becoming a part of the Russian Federation and only 13 per cent were content with the institutional set-up envisaged by the Union State treaty of 1999. Some 25 per cent were against any kind of unification altogether. Still, a relative majority of 39 per cent supported integration with Russia according to a model resembling the structure of the European Union.[18] Recent polls from Belarus suggest that an absolute majority of the population (54 per cent) prefers an economic union with Russia to EU membership (25 per cent).[19]

For the Lukashenka administration, Russian economic and political support remains as crucial as ever to the maintenance of popular legitimacy and regime survival – a dependence that will become more acute as the presidential elections of 2006 approach. In previous years, Moscow had opened some contacts with the

18. Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), survey of 19 September 2004. Data published on www.fom.ru

19. However, 68% of respondents admitted to having insufficient information about the EU. Poll conducted in June-July 2005 by Gallup with the support of the International Republican Institute (IRI).

Belarusian opposition with a view to exploring prospects for an eventual change of leadership in Belarus. So far, the absence of any obvious credible challenger to Lukashenka, let alone a challenger who could also reassure Russia that its interests would be protected, has reduced the appeal of such a strategy for Moscow. The Russia government endorsed the legitimacy of the Belarusian referendum of October 2004 and President Lukashenka's right to seek a third term in office.

The 'Orange Revolution', which brought Viktor Yushchenko to the Ukrainian presidency in December 2004, provided a compelling reason for the Belarusian and the Russian Presidents to put their differences behind them. Lukashenka was very alarmed by the Ukrainian opposition's success in using street protests to contest and ultimately overturn the outcome of a flawed election with Western political support. He is concerned about such a scenario being repeated in the Belarusian presidential elections of 2006.

Apart from Western assistance to opposition-leaning NGOs and media, the Belarusian leadership is growing suspicious of Yushchenko's Ukraine and Mikheil Saakashvili's Georgia. The Lukashenka administration has interpreted Georgian President Saakashvili's reference to a 'third wave of democratic liberation' in the former Soviet Union as a sign of a GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) plot to remove him from office.[20]

For its part, the Putin administration is intent on preventing further 'revolutions' in CIS countries to avoid instability in its neighbourhood and to ensure that no unpredictable 'regime changes' bring Russia-sceptic politicians to power. For the Russian policy establishment, after 'losing Ukraine', a loss of influence over traditionally loyal Belarus would be a blow of almost unthinkable proportions to Russia's prestige. Russia's claim to be an alternative pole of attraction for CIS states (as opposed to the US or the EU) would lose all credibility. It would also be perceived negatively by Russian public opinion. In the last few months, Russia therefore has once again been inclined to ease pressure on Belarus to reform and continue to subsidise the Belarusian economy to avoid weakening the Lukashenka regime. In April 2005, a meeting between Presidents Putin and Lukashenka resulted in Russia making some substantial economic concessions. Putin agreed to keep, at least for the next two years, the current low price for Russian gas supplies to Belarus ($46.68 per 1,000 cubic metres).[21] Putin also took a more conciliatory stance regarding Lukashenka's reluctance to intro-

20. *The Chisinau Declaration on Democracy, Stability, and Development*, 22 April 2005, published by the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs on www.mfa.md, in fact limits itself to asserting member states' commitment to democratic values and refers to 'an area of democratic stability and security in the GUUAM region.' GUAM was formed by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova as an informal grouping of 'Russia-sceptic' CIS states in 1996. Apart for political cooperation, the grouping aspires to regional cooperation in the economic and security fields. Uzbekistan joined in 1999, changing the acronym to GUUAM. However, it did not subscribe to the Chisinau Declaration.

21. This is the domestic price charged to Russian regions neighbouring Belarus.

duce the rouble as single currency, indicating that Russia may be prepared to leave the donor-recipient relationship as it stands for the sake of stability and political influence over its immediate neighbourhood.

## Belarus between Russia and Europe

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 neighbours on its western border (Poland and the Baltic countries). The parameters of Belarusian foreign policy are defined by domestic political considerations, namely an overarching preoccupation with regime survival, which effectively rules out the bold steps required either to reinvigorate the integration process with Russia or to 'unfreeze' relations with the EU. It may seem a paradox, but Belarusian relations with Russia and the West have stagnated for essentially the same reason: the Belarusian leadership's unwillingness to undertake political or economic reforms that might create space for political change. The Lukashenka administration has proved exceptionally resistant to external pressures, both Western political pressure to liberalise the political system and Russian pressure – backed up by real economic levers – to liberalise the economy.

Loath to consider any options involving domestic liberalisation, the Belarusian leadership has had few outlets for its ostensible pursuit of a multi-directional foreign policy. Belarusian membership of major international institutions has been limited to the UN and the OSCE, where Belarus supports Russian positions with unwavering loyalty. Perhaps the only significant step taken to compensate for the stagnation of relations with Russia and the West has been the active pursuit of trade and political links with former Soviet client states (e.g. Vietnam, Libya, Syria), India and China. These countries present the key advantage of being indifferent to how the Belarusian President manages his country's economy and deals with his political opponents. Still, these efforts have failed to make a visible difference to the Belarusian economy's dependence on Russia or to offset the cost of isolation from the EU.[22]

In the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections, it would seem unrealistic to expect any significant foreign policy initiatives from

22. In 2003, China accounted only for 1.1% and India for 0.3% of Belarusian foreign trade, compared to Russia's share of 58.2% and the EU's 28.3%. Source: IMF data published by European Commission, DG Trade, available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade/issues/bilateral/data.htm

Belarus. Considering the inertia of President Lukashenka's foreign policy, especially during his second term, the substantive change in Belarusian foreign policy that would be required to improve relations with the West may ultimately be dependent upon domestic political change. Prospects for such change are far from clear at this stage, despite the Belarusian political opposition's recent efforts to unite in order to present Lukashenka with a credible challenger for the presidency. Still, even if such a scenario were to be contemplated, the strength of the pro-Russian orientation among the Belarusian public and the Belarusian economy's dependence on Russia would make it very difficult even for the most pro-European Belarusian politician to turn his back on Russia.

# Moscow's relations with Belarus: An awkward ally

**Dmitri Trenin**

5

Russia's relations with Belarus exhibit a number of paradoxes. Belarus was one of the founders of the Soviet Union in 1922, and one of its gravediggers in 1991. The dissolution of the USSR occurred in Belovezhskaya Puscha, on the Belarusian-Polish border. Yet, to this day this is the most 'Soviet' of all former republics. It is also the one country among the former Soviet republics that, due to its proximity to Russia, has failed to establish a distinct national identity. Geographically closest to the European Union, it is virtually entirely Russian-speaking. For about a decade, Belarus and Russia have been engaged in a process of integration officially aimed at creating a 'union state', yet the situation is as inconclusive as ever.[1] Moreover, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, apparently the chief proponent of the merger, is in reality the principle obstacle to its realisation. President Vladimir Putin, who seemingly has little time for his Belarusian colleague, has nevertheless been strangely timid in handling him. In fact, Minsk has been able to make Moscow pay for the upkeep of a regime that is not friendly to Russian interests and whose eventual demise could lead to a dangerous crisis.

Following the revolution in Ukraine and upheavals in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, Russia has been revising its approach to the newly independent states, both collectively and individually. This process is not yet complete. It is gradually dawning on the Russian leadership, however, that policies should be based on specific interests, which differ from country to country. Like the Soviet Union itself, the *former* USSR, as an entity, is no more. So what are the specific interests that Russia has in Belarus? To what extent are they compatible with the Belarusian interest in relations with Russia? What are the principal obstacles to promoting both sets of interests? What are the options for the future? What should an enlightened Russian policy toward Belarus look like? Finally, is there room for Russia-EU/Russia-US collaboration in crisis prevention and crisis management with regard to Belarus? These are the key questions this chapter will explore.

1. In April 1996, Russia and Belarus created a 'community'; in April 1997, a 'union' of the two states. In December 1999, three weeks before Yeltsin's resignation, they signed a treaty on creating a 'union state'.

## Geopolitics

Belarus' geography alone makes it supremely important to any Russian leadership. Sitting between Russia and Poland along the east-west axis, and between the Baltic States and Ukraine along the north-south one, it used to be both a principal defensive bulwark and a forward base for power projection. Since Russia entered, under Mikhail Gorbachev, a phase of geopolitical retreat and shrinking influence outside its borders, which continues to this day, the defensive function clearly predominates. The prevalence of traditional thinking patterns, however, distorts the reality. To many among the Russian policy elite, the West (whether seen as NATO or the European Union) is still a potential adversary, the Baltic States are virulently anti-Russian, and Ukraine is in the process of being taken over by the West and turned into a buffer state against Russia. Within such a context, a friendly Belarus is virtually priceless; and Russia is prepared to go to considerable lengths to keep it that way.

This is the theme most eagerly exploited by Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his advocates in Russia. They 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. However, in the ten years this argument has been used, it lost much of its erstwhile force. The two successive waves of NATO enlargement have not resulted in an increase of the military threat to Russia. EU enlargement, while creating more practical problems, did not change the fact that Union countries are by far Russia's principal trading partners and investors. At the beginning of the 21st century, a war between Russia and, say, Germany is as unthinkable as one between Germany and France. It is one thing when the Kaliningrad enclave is treated as a latter-day West Berlin (and that makes Belarus much more valuable to Russia); it is quite another when economics come to the fore, and new solutions need to be devised. All this makes Lukashenka far less than the only defender of Russia against a threat from the West.

A more sophisticated version of the same argument is based on the notion of a zero-sum nature of international relations and its concomitant regional versions of the Great Game. In this, Russia retreats, and the West advances. Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, formerly Moscow-dominated, have all joined the

West; Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have all indicated recently their desire to do so. If Russia wants to stand up to the process of western encirclement, she needs to start gathering lands herself, creating an Eastern 'European Union' as a counterweight to the EU and NATO. Where best to start than with Belarus, whose leader came to power in 1994 under the slogan of integration with Russia?

Lukashenka brilliantly exploited both the post-imperial nostalgia of the elites and the natural desire of many ordinary people to come together again, reducing the barrier function of the borders that had not existed in 200 years and establishing closer links across the board. However, many people were able to see through his game. As he offered Moscow a 'union', he meant to head it by in due course succeeding the ailing Yeltsin. When this hope faded, he used the 'union of two sovereign states' phraseology as a cover for consolidating his own rule in Belarus and as a pretext for receiving Russian subsidies for the upkeep of the regime. Until 1999, hoping to arrive at the Kremlin, Lukashenka posed as a 'true Russian;' since then, trying to keep Minsk under his control, he has switched to pose as a 'real Belarusian.'

Of course, there is every reason for Russia to work toward closer political, economic, and cultural integration with Belarus. There is no reason, however, to follow the idea, codified in the 1999 treaty, of a union of equals. Russia dwarfs its neighbour by a factor of 15 in terms of population, 25 in terms of GDP and budget revenues, and 11 in terms of trade volume.[2] After Yeltsin's departure, not only did Lukashenka disappear from the Russian political scene, but also Vladimir Putin, the new president, had little time for him. Putin quickly saw that Lukashenka never intended to make good on his promise of integration, but he couldn't see the way out of the blind alley. Moscow's frustrations became publicly vented. Putin himself bluntly formulated Russia's real political interest in relations with Belarus when in 2003 he proposed (among other models, which could be considered as side orders) Belarus' merger into Russia on the East German model, with six *oblasts* of Belarus simply joining the 89 subjects of the Russian Federation. Lukashenka called this offer an 'insult' and vowed to preserve his country's independence.[3]

Independence in the present context means above all regime preservation. However, to keep himself in power, Lukashenka needs Russian continued Russian subsidies. When from January

2. *Rossiya v tsifrakh 2004* (Moscow: FSGS, 2004); *Sodruzhestvo nezavisimykh giosudarstv v 2003 godu* ['Russia in numbers, 2004' (...) 'Cooperation between the Newly Independent States in 2003' (...) 'Russian-Belarusian economic relations and the interests of common business' in *The Influence of Russian interest groups on Russian policy to Belarus*] (Moscow: CIS International Statistics Committee, 2004). Quoted by Boris Frumki, 'Rossiysko-belorusskie ekonomicheskie svyazi I interesy otechestvennogo biznesa' in *Vliyanie rossiyskikh grupp interesov na politiku Rossii v otnoshenii Belorussii* (Carnegie Moscow Center Working Paper 9, 2004), p. 6.

3. Alexander Feduta, 'Belorussia otkryvaet vostochnyy front' [Belarus opens on eastern front], *Moskovskie novosti*, April 23, 2004.

2004 Gazprom, probably at the behest of the Kremlin, started charging Belarus the same rates as other foreign countries rather than as Russian consumers, a 'gas crisis' broke out. To counter-attack, Lukashenka invoked his country's position between Russia and the West as an instrument of blackmail. Having publicly rebuked Russia, he warmed up, rather disingenuously, to the European Union. Many seasoned observers in Moscow were stunned by such a cynical about-face. Predictably, however, the manoeuvre had no consequences.

The fact remains however that present-day Belarusian national identity is virtually inseparable from the personality of its current ruler. Ironically, this most 'Soviet' of all leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has become the father of the modern Belarusian state, by making it so different from *all* its neighbours. Lukashenka rules the country virtually single-handedly, tolerating no dissent, and allowing no security even to his minions. As of now, he is the one remaining openly authoritarian leader between Russia and the EU. Some Russian commentators note, with a hefty dose of cynicism, that it is Belarus' geography that is Lukashenka's bad luck: if the country were located in Central Asia, they argue, he could have become a valuable US ally. This international stigma weighs heavily over Lukashenka's actions. Ever since the Kosovo conflict and the toppling of Milosevic, he has been feeling the heat. The Ukrainian revolution and regime change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan only confirmed his fears. He took the *Belarus Democracy Act*, adopted by the US Congress in 2004, as a personal warning, and has begun striking pre-emptively at his enemies within and at foreign foundations operating in Belarus. In the fall of 2004, he used the situation in Russia after the terrorist attack at Beslan to hold a referendum to win approval for running for president a third time in 2006.

However, in the medium and longer-term Lukashenka's regime is doomed. Whatever happens to it will not be just an internal matter for the 10 million Belarusian citizens. Due to Belarus' simultaneous position within Russia's 'near abroad' and Europe's new neighbourhood, a political crisis there will have international repercussions. Though Moscow might prefer dealing with Minsk without outsiders, the Russians need to realize that even if they play the leading role among all international actors, they would do well to coordinate their steps with Brussels and Berlin, Washington and Warsaw. As the 2003 episode with the 'Kozak Memoran-

dum' on the proposed solution of the Transnistrian conflict demonstrated, even apparently benign Russian unilateralism on sensitive issues within the CIS carries a high risk of failure.

## Defence and security

Russia's interest in the defence and security field follows the broader geopolitical interest. For the defence establishment, Belarusian borders on NATO countries are *de facto* Russia's strategic borders in the west.[4] Long used to playing with the concept of buffer zones, the Russian General Staff considers Belarus, alongside with Ukraine (and Moldova) to be such buffers. Of the three, only Belarus is considered fully loyal and thoroughly reliable.

The 80,000 strong Belarusian army has been reorganised and is arguably in a better shape than the million-strong Russian army. A scaled-down version of the Soviet armed forces, the Belarusian military is designed for resisting a NATO invasion.[5] Lukashenka views the military both as a major regime prop in case of a domestic crisis and as an asset in relations with Moscow. Whenever conflicts have arisen between the two countries, the Belarusian leader let it be known that his military, through its very existence, was providing services to Russia, which should be compensated. Belarusian defence officials have also used the marginally better situation of their officer corps to stir envy among the Russian military officers and make them question the efficiency and competence of their own leadership.

Russian officials, publicly ignoring these pinpricks, consistently claim that, of all areas of bilateral interaction, defence cooperation is the most advanced.[6] Since Belarus joined the Collective Security Treaty (in 1993), and then its Organisation (in 2000), it has been Russia's closest military ally. The Belarusian armed forces and Russia's western military districts are assigned to a 300,000-strong joint command, to be activated in case of a crisis. In 2001, a joint military doctrine was formally adopted. Since Belarus joined the Joint Air Defence System of the CIS states in 1995, its air defences have been *de facto* integrated into Russia's. In return, Russia has supplied Belarus with modern air defence systems. Periodic military exercises have been held, with four in 2004 alone. This military integration has been intensified against the background of the successive waves of NATO's eastern enlarge-

4. Belarus' border on NATO countries (Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) is almost 1,200 km; with Ukraine, 975 km, and with Russia, 1,056 km.

5. Igor Plugatarev, 'Gribnaya pora' voennoy reformy v Belorussii' ['Military Reform in Belarus'], *Nezavisimoye voennoye obozrenie*, October 22, 2004.

6. See, for example, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov quoted by *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, February 22, 2005.

ment. The Russo-Belarusian collaboration in border security and anti-terrorism has been very close.

While Russia has no combat troops in Belarus, it does have important military assets. The two most important, even vital ones, are the missile attack early-warning station at Baranovichi and the naval communication facility at Vileika. The former allows the Russian military command to monitor missile launches in the western direction; the latter provides for communication with Russian ships and submarines in the Atlantic. Both facilities operate under a long-term lease. While Lukashenka has not dared, even during periods of high tensions with Moscow, to suggest the possibility of the removal of these facilities, 'inadequate compensation' for their use may become an issue.

In Soviet times, Belarus was a republic with a high concentration of defence industrial companies, which formed part of a USSR-wide complex. Even to this day, Russia, not fully self-sufficient, relies substantially on defence industrial cooperation with Belarus. Roughly two thirds of the Belarusian defence production is exported to Russia.[7] Lukashenka actively promotes the idea of 'restoring the former Soviet military industrial complex', in the hope of receiving even more Russian government orders. Even today, however, it would not be an exaggeration to say that a common defence and security space exists between Belarus and Russia. It is the economic space that is by far more problematic. It is also undoubtedly the most important one.

## Economics and finance

Since 2002, Moscow and Minsk have been formally engaged in an effort to build a common economic space. In this endeavour, they have followed two tracks: bilateral and multilateral, with other CIS states. The former has flowed from the objective of creating a union state. The latter has involved the parallel projects of Euro-Asian Economic Cooperation and the Single Economic Space of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.[8] Both experience major difficulties.

Belarus is interesting to the Russian business community as one of the last countries awaiting large-scale privatisation. Russian companies are eager to expand into the neighbouring country, but Belarusian authorities refuse to lift restrictions on privatisa-

7. According to Major General Ivan Dyrman, Belarusian Deputy Minister of Defence in charge of armaments, interviewed by *Nezavisimoye voennoye obozrenie*, January 28, 2005.

8. Agreed in September 2003 between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. The principal objective was to involve Ukraine in the process of economic integration. After the 2004 presidential election, Ukraine has identified the European Union as its integrationist priority.

tion, to guarantee investments, or to adjust customs, tariffs, taxes and budget policies with those of Russia. Certainly, there are some well-justified doubts, valid objections and normal fears. The main reason for the logjam, however, is elsewhere. Lukashenka, who probably has extremely limited understanding of modern economics, if any, realises full well that privatisation would spell the beginning of the end of his control of the country. And he, of course, is right.

Similar worries hang over the projected introduction of a common currency. In 2000, the two countries agreed to work toward this objective. However, the 2005 deadline for its introduction was not met. Russia insists that Belarus accept the Russian rouble and the Russian Central Bank as the only authority to issue money. Lukashenka has reluctantly accepted the latter and is resisting the former. Putin called the problem a 'politico-psychological' one, making clear the currency union was a take-it-or-leave-it offer.[9] Moscow has only agreed to provide some financial support to Minsk to offset the problems resulting from the introduction of the Russian rouble in Belarus. The existing Russian-Belarusian union's budget (just under $100 million) is used to finance several joint industrial projects, but their general effectiveness is not very high.

Nevertheless, bilateral trade is booming, reaching $15 billion in 2004. This compares to $12 billion in exchanges between Russia and Ukraine and $6 billion between Russia and Kazakhstan.[10] Russia is Belarus' dominant trading partner, accounting for roughly 60 per cent of its trade; Belarus is Russia's second-largest trading partner (over 6 per cent in 2002), after Germany, whose trade turnover with Russia is twice bigger.[11]

While trade is important, transit is vital. Belarus is the principal route for Russian oil and gas shipments to Germany, Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, as well as to Russia's Kaliningrad enclave.[12] Unlike Ukraine, Belarus did not engage in massive theft of Russian gas in the 1990s. This made transit through her territory preferable, from the Russian perspective. The problem with Belarus was different. For a dozen years until 2004, Belarus received Russian gas at Russian domestic prices. Gazprom ended this practice partly as a means of putting a political squeeze on Lukashenka on behalf of the Kremlin, and partly as leverage to make Belarus honour its long-standing promise of selling to Gazprom 50 per cent of Beltransgaz, the state company.

9. During his joint press conference with Lukashenka, at Sochi, on June 5, 2004. See the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, www.mid.ru/ns-rsng.nsf

10. See Carnegie Moscow Center Working Paper 9, 2004, p.7.

11. Russian-Belarusian relations. Reference information prepared by the Russian Foreign Ministry. 02-03-2004. www.mid.ru/ns-rsng.nsf

12. About half of Russia's oil exports to the EU countries (84 mil tons in 2003) pass through Belarus. The volume of gas shipments in 2003-2004 was in the range of 21-23 bcm.

In the tussle that ensued, Gazprom briefly halted the gas supply to Belarus, an act that boomeranged against Russia when Poland and other European countries raised the issue of the reliability of Russian energy supplies. The result of the gas crisis was a simultaneous increase in the price of gas and of the transit fee. On Beltransgaz, Lukashenka refused to yield control over the company to Gazprom, and put a much higher price on its shares. No deal was reached. Having lost tactically, Moscow made a strategic decision. In cooperation with Berlin, it proposed to lay a gas pipeline across the Baltic Sea, thus obviating the need for overland transit. This example of Russo-German cooperation, in turn, upset the governments not only of Belarus and Ukraine, but also of Poland.

## Humanitarian issues, culture and information

Belarus is a country with a relatively well-developed human potential. According to the United Nations, it is ranked 53rd in the world, compared to 63rd for Russia. Since the mid-1990s when border controls were abolished, Belarusian citizens have been able to visit and work in Russia, thus partially compensating for the growing shortfall in Russia's labour force. Virtually indistinguishable from Russians, Belarusian citizens have no problem with integrating into Russian society at all levels. The problems that exist are created by the immovable bureaucracies in the two countries. Despite the 1998 treaty guaranteeing Russians and Belarusians equal rights in the other country, the reality is different. In the 21st century, immigration policy is of utmost importance to a Russia that has entered a profound demographic crisis. It is also a test of the government's capability to face up to the new tasks. There is no reason to keep any restrictions on the freedom of movement and status of Belarusians in Russia: Russia is the prime beneficiary.

While Lukashenka is not trying to regulate the outflow of his country's citizens in search of employment, he does restrict the flow of information into Belarus. All attempts to create 'a single information space' between the two countries have been obstructed by the Belarusian authorities' periodic clampdowns on the Moscow-based media that have continued to broadcast in Belarus since the collapse of the USSR. For their part, the bulk of

the Russian media, including government-controlled ones, partly for ideological reasons, partly of corporate solidarity, have been traditionally very critical of Lukashenka and his regime. Since Lukashenka cannot censor what Moscow broadcasts, he has concentrated on what Belarusians can receive. In some cases the Moscow TV stations' airtime is restricted, in others broadcasts are switched off and replaced with homemade products. The Russian correspondents deemed to be too critical are expelled, and their bureaus are closed down. The official reaction from Moscow in support of the freedom of the media has been generally meek. This is no doubt a sign of weakness on Moscow's part, which only encourages Minsk to play the Russian media off against the Russian government.

Belarus is a predominantly Orthodox nation. The Moscow Patriarchate, which has lost ground massively in Ukraine, treats Belarus as Russian Orthodox territory under attack from the Vatican and the various Protestant denominations. While 20 per cent of the Belarusian population are Roman Catholics, compared to 70 per cent Orthodox Christians, the Moscow Patriarchate complains about the 'aggressive proselytism' of Catholics and Protestants in such traditional Orthodox territory. On this issue, the Patriarchate is supported by the Kremlin. The Russian Orthodox hierarchy has also maintained a good relationship with Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In exchange for the understanding of the Orthodox Church's interests, the Belarusian leader expects the Patriarchate to put in a good word for him in the internal Russian debate.

Lukashenka has been of some use in Russian domestic politics. Boris Yeltsin needed the mirage of a union with Belarus to counter accusations of having been the 'terminator' of the USSR. A merger with Belarus was one of the oft-mentioned gimmicks for extending Yeltsin's rule without violating the Russian constitution, by replacing it with a new joint one. As Putin is nearing the end of his second term, the same idea has surfaced again, and for the same purpose. Only time will tell whether this fairly far-fetched scenario will be exercised.

For his part, the Belarusian leader has been successful in procuring himself a lobby in Russia. Pavel Borodin, once head of the Kremlin household and a former Putin patron, is head of the union bureaucracy as State Secretary; Gennady Seleznev, former Speaker of the Russian State Duma, has also been an active sup-

porter of the union state. Although at a much lower scale than in the late 1990s, Lukashenka has been maintaining contacts with many regional governors in Russia. The Belarusian embassy in Moscow has branch offices in ten Russian cities.

## Options for the future

There are several scenarios of future developments, each with different implications for Russian and Western foreign policy.

*Inertia*

In the 'inertia' scenario, Lukashenka is proclaimed winner of the 2006 election and continues to rule as before. As discontent inside and pressure from the outside will grow, Lukashenka will become a liability for Russia. He will propose to Putin to jointly resist the revolutionary wave in the CIS, which will amount to Russia supporting his regime against the domestic opposition as well as its would-be partners in Belarus, against the West, and against her own best interests. Lukashenka will have won again. Meanwhile, the union state will remain unfinished, a political *dolgostroy* that is virtually impossible either to complete or to abandon.[13] Which is exactly Lukashenka's objective.

It should be clear by now that an effective *conservative* Russian policy vis-à-vis Belarus would require ending tolerance for Lukashenka's fiddling with the Belarusian constitution and the elections, stopping the generous imperial preferences which have outlived their usefulness, and protecting the Russian media rights. This implies not allowing Lukashenka to play on Moscow's imperial and anti-Western complexes and, above all, denying him the option of holding Russia hostage to the fate of his regime. A conservative approach, however, is not sufficient.

The current Belarusian regime is moribund, and is moving toward a crisis. The problem is not whether there will be a regime change, but what kind of change and when it will happen. This calls for regime change scenarios.

*Revolutionary change*

A revolutionary regime change could result in a turmoil that later might be consolidated around a pro-European – though not anti-Russian – consensus. With the Belarusian identity finally freed

13. This term was often used in Brezhnev's times, with reference to frozen (and hopeless) construction projects.

from Lukashenka's personality, Belarus could emerge as a genuine Eastern European country, a western, Europeanised version of Russia. Alongside with self-conscious Ukraine, sizeable Russian minorities in the Baltic States, and a Kaliningrad seeking some sort of a special status within the Russian Federation, this Belarus could become part of a new environment on Russia's western borders. Rather than a *cordon sanitaire*, the lands between Russia and the EU could function as a mediator, facilitator, and a bridge.

Although this is not a catastrophic scenario for Russia, it will again put the tolerance of the Russian elites to the test. The main problem with this scenario is that it implies a passive role for Russia at best, or a reactionary role (flowing from the preceding scenario) at worst. As such, it will lead either to a new sense of hostile encirclement, or to a direct confrontation with the more active and enlightened forces in Belarus, and with the West. To avoid this, Russia should be a player.

*Preventive change*

A preventive regime change is Moscow's best chance of defusing a western-oriented revolution in Belarus. That would require working actively with sensible Belarusian elite figures capable of leading the country after the departure of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, and pressuring Lukashenka to leave. The difficult task of modernisation that a new leadership would have to assume would necessitate Russian political, financial and economic support. In return, Russian businesses would profit greatly from the opening up of the Belarusian economy and harmonisation of the business environments in the two countries.

*Union*

Finally, there is a scenario of a pseudo-merger. Following the principle of political expediency, a union state is formally proclaimed between Russia and Belarus. Though the two presidents most probably hate each other, they become political bedfellows, and become equally illegitimate in the eyes of many of their citizens and of the world community. While Putin would receive the legal right to remain in office for another ten to twelve years, his position would probably be fatally eroded. Lukashenka would obtain some important post in the union administration, perhaps as vice president, but would retain *de facto* independence in his fiefdom.

This is a very bad scenario for both Belarus and Russia, one that makes a constitutional change of regime virtually impossible, and various forms of popular upheaval probable.

## Conclusions

Moscow's continued policy paralysis with regard to Lukashenka's repressive regime is not in Russia's best interest. The regime in Minsk is unable to evolve. Rather, it is likely to collapse suddenly, ushering in a major crisis with international overtones. Moscow's improvisations in a crisis environment can be both ineffective and costly. To promote Russia's interests, the Kremlin has to pursue a proactive policy course.

To be able to do this, the Russian leadership needs to distinguish between Russia's real interests, mostly lying in the economic sphere, which Lukashenka has been ignoring at best, and often working consciously against, and the cheap decoys, such as 'protecting Russia from a NATO invasion', which reflect a long-bygone era. To be effective, Moscow also needs to restrain Lukashenka's lobby in Russia, who primarily care about their own special interests, not their country's, and look for friends and would-be partners in Belarus beyond its present leader. The Kremlin needs not to be afraid that a policy defending the Russian national interest would provoke Lukashenka to look west: his reputation makes him absolutely unacceptable for any Western government, even if he were to turn openly against Russia. Lukashenka has nowhere to go, and should be made aware of that. Having overlooked the 2004 referendum, Russia needs to decide and announce that it will support a free and fair election in 2006, and will not accept vote rigging. It needs to make its preference known as to who is the best replacement of Lukashenka, from Russia's perspective, and support and protect that person. Finally, Moscow should initiate discussions on Belarus with the United States and the EU countries, such as Germany, but also Poland. To the extent that it is able to develop a proactive approach, Russia would be its own best friend.

# Belarus: The unrecognised challenge

**Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski**

6

The Republic of Belarus is the last dictatorship in Europe. Situated between the enlarged European Union (EU), an increasingly authoritarian political system under Vladimir Putin in Russia and a fledgling democracy in Ukraine, Belarus provokes deep concern. Before examining the state of affairs in EU relations with Belarus, this chapter will review the experience of Poland and Lithuania in dealing with Minsk since 1991. The chapter ends with suggestions for how the EU should set about addressing the issue of Belarus.

## Polish and Lithuanian policies

Of all the EU accession candidate countries prior to 2004, Poland and Lithuania, who shared six hundred years of a common history with Belarus as part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1385 and 1795, had the most intensive relations with Minsk. As the policies of the two countries were not coordinated, they will be treated distinctly in this discussion. From the outset, it should be noted that the ambitions and capabilities of Warsaw and Vilnius in dealing with Minsk have not been the same.

### Poland

Polish policy towards Belarus between 1991-2004 should be considered at four levels:

a) General policy questions, including security issues;
b) Minority issues;
c) Economic relations;
d) Trans-border co-operation.

*General policy and security issues*

The transition from Polish-Soviet to Polish-Belarusian relations went smoothly. Poland was one of the first states to recognise the independence of Belarus, with the Agreement on Establishing Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus, signed on 2 March 1992, followed by the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation of 23 June 1992. At the same time, Warsaw did not perceive Minsk as having a determining importance for developments in the region. That role was rightfully ascribed to Ukraine. It was Kyiv and not Minsk that Warsaw regarded as a place where the scale and the nature of a possible post-Soviet reintegration under Russian hegemony (perceived as a potential threat for Poland) would be decided.

Still, some effort was made to attract Belarus along the Central European pattern of post-communist transformation. For example, in the area of foreign policy, Poland reached an agreement with Belarus in October 1994 on a Protocol on Consultations between respective foreign ministries.[1] In the military domain, the Polish-Belarusian Agreement on bilateral military contacts and security in the border zone, signed on 21 April 1993, should also be noted. Yet, as with foreign policy, this agreement gained little substance as the earlier attempts to build genuinely national armed forces in Belarus, led by Mikalaj Statkievich, failed and the military forces of Belarus remained in practice under Russian control. As such, Warsaw has never treated Belarus as an independent military factor in the region.

At this point, fresh from the traumatic experience of Soviet domination, Warsaw was actively seeking extensive security guarantees. One idea that was briefly considered in Poland was the concept of regional security co-operation between Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine: this idea was initially put forward by Kyiv, before being shelved as impractical and insufficient. As with the Baltic states, Poland soon decided that nothing could replace NATO in providing security guarantees. The issue of Polish membership of NATO combined with the election of Lukashenka in 1994 to dominate Polish-Belarusian relations at the state level for the second half of the 1990s. For the state-controlled media in Belarus, NATO remained a 'hostile bloc.' Relations deteriorated rapidly.

Russia apparently gave Lukashenka the role of hostile protagonist, thus releasing itself from having to pay the political price

1. The document stated that: 'The topics of consultations may include: (a) global problems and the general progress of international relations, particularly issues related to activities within the United Nations, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe and other international organisations; (b) intensification and broadening of bilateral political, economic, scientific and technical, environmental, cultural co-operation and co-operation in the humanitarian field; and (c) exchange of information on the implementation of bilateral agreements.'

which otherwise would have been unavoidable. On February 23rd 1995, Belarus suspended the implementation of the CFE (Conventional Forces in Europe) Treaty. In summer of the same year, Belarus halted the withdrawal of its inherited nuclear missiles in protest against the planned enlargement of NATO. The climax of the Belarusian campaign against NATO enlargement occurred in March-June 1996 and had a Polish focus. In the Belarusian media, the entire problem was transformed into one of political confrontation with Poland. The Belarusian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Valeryi Cepkala, declared in May 1996 that 'militarised and economically unstable Poland may constitute a threat for the security of Belarus.' The aim was to prevent Polish membership of NATO by presenting Poland as a country having deep conflicts with its neighbours.

The increasingly hardline stance adopted by the Lukashenka regime in 1996 resulted in the further aggravation of Polish-Belarusian relations. Further deterioration took place in 1998 when Polish political parties AWS (Electoral Action Solidarity) and UP (the Labour Union), together with the Belarusian opposition, organised a seminar entitled *Democracy: Our Common Cause*, inaugurating the activities of the Poland-Belarus Civic Education Centre in Bialystok (Poland) on January 31 1998. As a result, the Belarusian media presented Poland as an American tool interfering in Belarusian domestic affairs. The regime implemented at that time by Poland, under pressure from the EU, on its eastern border with Belarus was also shown in Belarus as being linked to upcoming Polish membership of NATO.

The Polish state and Polish NGOs continued to support the Belarusian opposition movement and civil society. For example, between 1999-2003, the Polish-based Radio *Racja* broadcast from Bialystok in Belarusian in an attempt to break the Minsk regime's information monopoly. According to plans, from 2006 this radio station will broadcast across the entire Belarusian territory. Polish NGOs have also supplied groups from the Belarusian opposition with limited technical support and know-how. Polish organisations also maintain their monitoring of government actions against oppositional activists in Belarus and disseminate the information widely. Moreover, Polish foreign policy foundations and institutes have organised seminars and conferences on Belarus and developed strong contacts with elements of the Belarusian opposition, which, in turn, have been able to make use

of the structures of Polish NGOs to speak publicly about the situation in Belarus. As the information thus disseminated fails to reach inside Belarus, the impact of such activities, while important, has been limited thus far.

*Minority issues*

The Polish minority residing in Belarus is estimated to number between 400,000 and one million people. It is concentrated mainly in the Grodno (with a population of 300,000, representing twenty five per cent of the inhabitants of the district) and Lida regions, where they constitute a local majority in areas. Some dispersed Polish communities are located in the Novohorodok and Vitebsk regions and in the capital, Minsk.

Until 1989, there were no Polish schools in Belarus, as a result of the Soviet policy of Russification. In 1991, the Polish language started to be taught in two Belarusian secondary schools in the Grodno District; in 1992, five forms with Polish language classes were created in the schools in Brest. Ten other forms were created in Minsk. In spite of those efforts, after fifty years of forced Russification, only thirteen per cent of the people who declare their ethnicity as Polish actually speak Polish at home. In June 1990, a Union of the Poles in Belarus was created in Grodno. The Union edits the newspaper *Glos znad Niemna* as well as the quarterly *Magazyn Polski*. In general, the regime in Minsk views this community in the Grodno region as allies of the Belarusian opposition to Lukashenka. A constant threat hangs over the organisation and its printed media.

The 200,000 Belarusians resident in Poland are concentrated mainly in the Bialystok region, where they represent thirty three per cent of the population of the regional capital. This fact alone distinguishes Poland from Lithuania, which does not have a large ethnic Belarusian community as such on its territory. Belarusian education existed in Poland throughout the entire post-war period. With some forty-three Belarusian primary schools and two secondary (in Hajnówka and Bielsk Podlaski), it is paradoxical that there were more Belarusian secondary schools in Poland than in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). The Belarusian Socio-Cultural Society, the Belarusian Association in the Republic of Poland and the Union of Belarusian Youth are the largest Belarusian organisations in Poland. Polish Belarusians also edit a weekly newspaper, *Niva*, the monthly magazine *Czasopis* and issue

twice a year the *Bialoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne*. Belarusian organisations in Poland serve as a base for anti-Lukashenka Belarusian opposition activity in Poland.

The situation of the Polish minority in Belarus and the Belarusian minority in Poland has not influenced relations between the two states in a decisive way thus far.[2] One may imagine a situation in which Lukashenka may seek to consolidate power by worsening the situation for the Polish minority. Historically, however, there is no tradition of hostility between the two peoples and it is highly improbable that such an attempt would work.

*Economic relations*

Polish-Belarusian economic relations are not well developed. Certainly, the absence of serious economic reform in Belarus has failed to enhance the purchasing power of the majority of Belarusian citizens. More importantly, the current political regime is hostile to private enterprises, whether Polish or Belarusian, and the risks surrounding business activity are high, thus preventing foreign investors from engagement. At the same time, Belarus is a transit country for Polish trade with Russia, and, as such, the country has definite importance for Poland. Customs duties, as well as widespread corruption of Belarusian customs officers, have led to increased (and deliberate) cases of confiscation of the goods transported across Belarus under a range of unsatisfactory pretexts – these cases contribute to making Belarus an unfriendly zone for Polish companies, especially as the majority are of small and medium size and cannot afford the risk.

Nevertheless several hundred Polish enterprises, mainly involved in transportation, the trade of agricultural products and furniture, do operate in Belarus. Polish-Belarusian official trade turnover oscillates between 449.7 million USD in 2001 and 782.7 million USD in 2003. Moreover, a large shadow economy operates in border regions of both countries. Most importantly, one should note various forms of illegal trans-border trade as well as illegal labour force migration.

Until the end of 1997, an estimated 2.4 million Belarusians crossed the Polish border annually. The majority of these were so-called 'trading tourists.' (In this respect, it is surprising that the average Belarusian spent an estimated 460 USD per day in Poland; in comparison, the average German spent around 36 DEM at that time). Also, Belarusian groups and individuals (as well as Ukraini-

2. Unfortunately in 2005 the Belarusian authorities began to instigate anti-Polish policies. The new authorities of the Union of the Poles in Belarus (UPB), freely elected by the congress of the association, have not been not recognized by the regime and the persecution of the UPB activists has begun. The publication of *Glos znad Niemna* was stopped. Poland supported the UPB and Polish-Belarusian relations deteriorated rapidly in mid-2005.

ans and Russians) smuggled cigarettes and alcohol and sold cheap clothes and household equipment at outdoor markets. Estimates from 1997 (the last year when a liberal border regime existed) showed that, in the Bialystok Market alone, turnover was around 250 million USD and around fifty thousand people from the Bialystok region earned a living through illegal or semi-legal trade to Belarus.

However, the situation changed in late 1997, when Poland, facing pressure from the EU to adopt the Schengen *acquis*, introduced new border regulations. As a result, the numbers of visitors from Belarus fell by 35 percent and trade turnover in markets collapsed by 80 percent. The eastern Polish regions, having already suffered from large-scale unemployment, saw numerous local protests by a population distressed at having lost an important source of livelihood. The crisis soon passed, both economically and psychologically, as people adapted to the new rules and the Russian economic crisis of 1998 reduced the importance of trade with the East as a whole for Poland.

In spite of Polish efforts to develop co-operation with Minsk on controlling illegal migration, Belarus has followed the pattern set by Russia and has not signed a readmission agreement with Poland. Therefore, illegal immigrants crossing the so-called 'green frontier' from Belarusian territory remain a Polish problem. These immigrants are mostly inhabitants from the Far East and South Asia, for whom Belarus is a merely transit country.

*Regional and trans-border co-operation*

On December 18 1991, that is ten days after the collapse of the USSR, local authorities of the Polish and Ukrainian border regions signed an agreement on trans-border regional co-operation. The concept was developed further in May 1992 and gave birth to the creation of the Euroregion 'Bug.' The decision was taken to invite Belarus to participate in the project and consequently the Belarusian Brest District declared its readiness to co-operate with Polish and Ukrainian neighbouring regions. The Euroregion was officially created on September 29 1995. On March 30 1996, the Presidents of Poland and of Belarus, Aleksander Kwaœniewski and Aleksandr Lukashenka, met in Wiskule to discuss the creation of a Polish-Belarusian Euroregion 'Niemen.' Due to changes in the Belarusian internal political situation, Belarusian participation in the Euroregion 'Bug' was restricted; in the end, the Brest region

finally withdrew from co-operation within this Euroregion, which remained a solely Polish-Ukrainian construction. Belarusian participation in the Euroregion 'Niemen,' which was created between bordering Polish and Lithuanian regions and the Grodno District of Belarus as well as Kaliningrad Region of Russia, has never been active.

In sum, Poland not yet found a way of dealing successfully with Belarus in bilateral relations. Minsk was not a priority in Warsaw's 'eastern policy' in the 1990s, and attempts to develop a pro-European orientation in Belarus, albeit never very intensive, proved to be fruitless. The first period of relations, which lasted until 1994, was far more promising than the second one. Initiatives started in those years are similar to those undertaken by Poland in relations with Ukraine, but their results were different due to internal developments in the country under the Lukashenka regime. There is no chance for substantial changes unless this basic factor is altered. Apart from everyday interaction on border policing, ecology, transit issues, interpersonal contacts of citizens, and minority issues, the main aim of Polish foreign policy today is the democratisation of Belarus.

## Lithuania

### *General and security issues*

After fifty years of Soviet occupation, Lithuania, in contrast to Poland, regained not only independence but also statehood in 1991. Thus, initial relations with Belarus were different from the Poland's relations with that country. After mutual recognition of the independence of the other, the two states agreed to establish diplomatic relations on December 30 1992.

The Lithuanian government never recognised the legality of the so-called Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. As a result, the first agreements with Belarus sought to create the legal bases for relations between the two countries. The first question to be addressed was the border, which is some 650 kilometres long. It was created by Stalin and divides pre-war Polish territory; thus, its joint recognition by the Lithuanian authorities and the newly created Belarusian state was indispensable. In 1995, the two countries signed *the Agreement between the Republic of Lithuania and the Republic of Belarus on the State Border of Lithuania and Belarus*,

together with the *Agreement on Good Neighbourhood Relations and Co-operation*. The Agreement on the State Border is still under implementation and the state border demarcation is proceeding slowly because Belarus is reluctant to participate actively. Thus far, Minsk has equipped only thirty kilometres of the border with the necessary security infrastructure. The EU actively supports the normalisation process of the Lithuanian-Belarusian border in the framework of the TACIS programme. On December 27 2000, the Republic of Belarus and the EU concluded a contract to the tune of €1.34 million for construction of a border control post in Kamenyj Log. In addition, agreement was reached for the EU to allocate €1.25 million for demarcation of the state border with Lithuania.

Apart from the border question, relations have been dominated by internal developments in Belarus connected with manipulated parliamentary and presidential elections in 2000 and 2001. Vilnius associated itself with the EU position in terms of assessing these events, stressing however that 'Lithuania is not interested in the international isolation of Belarus, as this would not foster the further democratisation process in the country, and, bearing in mind its neighbourhood status, will continue pragmatic relations with this country.' The executive authorities of Lithuania declared their interest in developing pragmatic relations with Belarus, in order to address a number of urgent practical issues, such as illegal migration and regional co-operation. In this, the Lithuanian approach to practical co-operation with Belarus has been similar to the Polish one, and based on the same reality.

Moreover, Lithuania has supported civil society in Belarus. A number of Belarusian newspapers, persecuted by Minsk, were printed in Lithuania and then smuggled to Belarus. Lithuania has also shown interest in developing Belarusian radio on its territory to broadcast independent information for Belarusians. In some respects, one can note a degree of positive competition with Poland in support for democracy in Belarus. However, the lack of a large Belarusian minority in Lithuania and the difference of potential has put Poland in a far stronger position.

*Economic relations*

The breakdown of economic links from the Soviet era led both sides to focus on clarifying basic economic interaction. A vital point for Belarus has been to secure the right to use the Lithuanian

transport infrastructure as well as Baltic ports for the transit of Belarusian goods. An agreement on this was reached finally in April 2000. In addition, one should note that Belarus is a vital transit territory for Russian gas and oil supplies for Lithuania. In this respect, Vilnius shares similar problems with Poland.

Trade turnover between Lithuania and Belarus oscillates between 200 and 260 million USD. Lithuanian exports to Belarus have consistently represented between three to four per cent of its overall export, placing Belarus between the eighth and the twelfth position among Lithuanian trade partners. Imports to Lithuania from Belarus have amounted to around 100 million USD per year, constituting less than two per cent of its overall imports, and placing Belarus in the thirteenth or fourteenth position among importers to Lithuania.

*Regional and trans-border co-operation*

Projects on trans-border co-operation between Belarus and Lithuania are of a similar nature as those between Poland and Belarus and have had similar results. They have remained at the level of declaration. On November 12 1998, the Presidents of Lithuania and Belarus stressed their interest in fostering co-operation between the Lithuanian Alytus and Marijampole counties and the Belarusian Grodno region within the framework of the Euroregion 'Nemunas' (the Polish name is Niemen). Another Euroregion, 'E eru kraštas' (the Land of Lakes), comprising border districts in Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus, was established in July 2000 by representatives from districts from the respective countries. Lithuania favours the fostering of regional co-operation, the promotion of more active and direct contacts between municipalities of Lithuania and Belarus and hopes the legal basis for this will be provided in the agreement on cross-border co-operation, which is under preparation. However, it should be remembered that Belarus' highly centralised political system allows very limited decision-making power to local authorities.

Lithuania is interested in developments in Belarus for historical, political, cultural and economic reasons. Both countries are dependent on each other as transit routes: access to the Baltic ports for Belarus and transit of Russian energy supplies for Lithuania. On the whole, Lithuanian policy towards Belarus has been far more dominated by practical issues than that of Poland and has not been the subject of a great political battle. For one

thing, the Russian government didn't contest the Lithuanian membership of NATO in the bitter way it had with Poland.

Having failed to advance democratic change in Belarus, both Poland and Lithuania now look to the EU, viewing the Union's political prestige and economic power as indispensable tools.

## EU-Belarus relations: 1991-2004

Belarus is a new country on the political map of Europe. No member state of the 'old' EU had a diplomatic tradition of relations with it, and most people could hardly find it on the map before 1991. In the first months after the collapse of the USSR, the main concern of the European Communities with regard to the former republics of the Soviet Union, including Belarus, was to ensure a peaceful 'divorce' and to maintain state control over the nuclear arsenal deployed on these territories. Stabilisation was the first priority, with democratisation of the new states coming in second place.

Moreover, geopolitical circumstances were not in favour of greater European attention. The scale of Russian influence in Belarus remained much higher than in any other European country. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia were two weak and busy with regaining their own independence to support the nascent pro-democratic and pro-Western orientation in Belarus effectively. Belarus also lacked Ukraine's strategic weight. As a result, for the most part, in many 'old' member states it was then thought that the road to Minsk led through Moscow. Few European states saw Minsk as an important actor in itself.

Diplomatic relations between the EU and Belarus were established in August 1992 against this backdrop. In 1992, representatives of the European Commission visited Minsk and decided to prepare a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Consequently, an agreement on trade was reached in 1994 and the PCA was signed in March 1995. Between 1991-1995, Belarus received significant assistance from the TACIS programme. However, when, after his election president Aleksandr Lukashenka set the country on the path towards dictatorship, EU-Belarusian relations deteriorated rapidly. The EU withdrew its support for the Belarusian application to the Council of Europe. In September 1997, the EU Council suspended relations with Belarus at the ministerial level and halted the TACIS assistance programme.

Only humanitarian aid and assistance to civil society and democratic activity was continued.

In response, Lukashenka placed pressure on EU member state presence in the country. Under the pretext of modernising infrastructure, the government in Minsk pressed the EU embassies to move out of their residences in Drozdy, thus forcing many EU members and candidates to temporarily withdraw their representatives from Minsk. Since 1997, the EU has responded with a policy of seeking to isolate the Belarusian authorities. The limited monies that have been allocated have gone to such projects as the creation of the European Documentation Centre in Minsk, support for the publication of Belarus Economic Trends and the establishment of a Master of Business Administration degree programme. In October 1999, the European Parliament adopted a special resolution on the situation in Belarus declaring that the democratic mandate of Lukashenka as a president had expired that year and blaming him for the dissolution of the legally elected Parliament. The European Parliament also conditioned the further development of the relations between the EU and Belarus on pro-democratic and pro-market economy reforms in the country.

Moral pressure from the EU for the democratisation of Belarus proved fruitless. The EU declared the 2000 parliamentary elections and the 2001 presidential elections as invalid because they failed to meet OSCE standards. These declarations were made after much effort to induce Lukashenka to conclude some form of political truce with the opposition and to allow for free and fair elections. After having had these efforts shown to be ineffective in 2000, the EU launched a new attempt in 2001; again, in vain. Relations deteriorated further in 2002, after Minsk placed pressure on the OSCE mission in Minsk. Tensions led to the introduction of a visa ban against the seven top Belarusian officials. The struggle was lost and a new OSCE mission was opened in Minsk in 2003 under a restrictive mandate.

On March 28, 2003, Lukashenka revealed his new 'State Ideology' for Belarus, founded on a devotion to the 'Eastern European Civilisation' and rejection of Western liberal values. The president called on the nation to pursue 'hard work on the ideological front', invoking the spirit of the Soviet past. Finally, in October 2004, heavily manipulated parliamentary elections and a referendum gave Lukashenka the 'right' to run for president for the third time and also elected an obedient Supreme Council. Prospects for sub-

stantial change in EU-Belarus relations are poor as long as Lukashenka remains in power in Minsk.

The main obstacle to progress lies within Belarus itself, in the country's lack of a developed civil society, its society's profound sovietisation and Russification, as well as its weak national consciousness – all are vital for the process of democratisation and remain nascent in Belarus. Yet, EU policy has not been without shortcomings. Five problems should be noted:

- **The absence of instruments for effective political pressure**
  Only the promise of the prospect of eventual European integration can provide a country on the EU's borders with a real incentive to undertake reform – this is the EU's most powerful foreign policy tool. Fundamentally, EU political pressure on a state that does not want to be a member of the Union has very limited effectiveness.

- **Political reluctance (or inability) to challenge Russian neo-imperial ambitions**
  The EU has close economic ties with Russia, especially in the field of energy supplies. Russia is also considered a key part of European security and stability. In this respect, a number of member states, if not the EU itself, have been content to allow Russia a predominant role as stabiliser in the former Soviet Union, even if this entailed leaving Russia with predominant influence across this region. In addition, the fact that Russia has declared that it does not seek EU membership has meant that the Union has little leverage over Russian policy. Also, a number of EU member states have long viewed Russia as a potential counter-balance to US influence in Europe. With no instruments of leverage and even less political will, the EU has not pressed Russia effectively to withdraw political support for Lukashenka. In fact, any hope that cooperation with Moscow will help to promote democracy in Belarus is unrealistic. By seeking to advance freedom and democracy in Belarus, the EU challenges Russian interests as they are defined currently by the Russian political elite.

  In its *Strategy of the Developments of the Relations between the Russian Federation and the European Union in Medium Term Perspective 2000-2010*, written in 1999, the Russian government states that relations between CIS countries and the EU are contrary to Russian

interests if they are not co-ordinated by Moscow.[3] The Kremlin is well aware that it is competing with the EU in the post-soviet area, even if Brussels is not always aware of this reality.

- **The lack of a legal mechanism allowing for effective support for the 'illegal' opposition in authoritarian states**
  EU aid to civil society and the development of democracy is to a large extent based on support for NGOs. The problem in Belarus is that the government is against such activity. As a result, concerned citizens have no choice but to work for democracy in a clandestine or semi-clandestine way. However, European programmes of financial aid for civil society depend on the co-operation of the government of a country. Lacking such cooperation in Belarus, the EU faces the thorny practical problem of how to transfer EU monies to support pro-democratic developments in Belarus. Given EU rules, all financial operations must be transparent; given the reality of Belarus, such transfers must be clandestine.

  Technically, this situation should not pose a fundamental problem. During the 1980s, Solidarity in Poland received significant 'illegal' support from Western Europe, including from trade unions. However, it is difficult now to convince the EU to employ such Cold War methods in relation to Belarus. Yet conditions in Belarus increasingly resemble those of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the EU has difficulty coming to terms with this reality.

- **A 'Russia first' principle and mental inertia**
  Many in Western Europe still consider Belarus as a province of western Russia and see Russia as the USSR. The debates that occurred in Europe on the dangers of the enlargement of NATO to Russia's borders contained ample demonstration of this enduring obsolete mindset.

- **Differing political importance**
  Belarus is important for 'old' member states mainly as a transit territory for Russian gas supplies. As long as these supplies remain stable, no material interests are basically threatened. 'New' member states have different perceptions. In fact, these countries are often on the receiving end of Russian attempts to

3. Strategiya razvitiya otnashenii Rossiskoi Federatsii s Evrapeiskam Soyuzom na srednisrochnoyu perspektivu (2000-2010), ofistialniye materiali, zhurnal 'diplomaticheskii vestnik' ['Medium Term Strategy of the Russian Federation for Relations with the EU' published in Official Journal, diplomaticheskii vestnik], November 1999, no. 11, s.1-11. http://www.ln.mid.ru/dip_vest.nsf/3f48779de9b37e6c43256b8f002f34a7/e94c2359350e2df3c32568860050d965?OpenDocument

exploit its energy tool. A case in point occurred in February 2004, when Russia briefly halted supplies to Belarus, affecting Poland.

## The impact of enlargement

The enlargement of the EU in May 2004 altered the geopolitical context around Belarus and will impact on EU-Belarusian relations. The addition of three western neighbours, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, means that the EU now shares some thousand kilometres of border with Belarus. Ukraine has undergone an Orange Revolution, while Moldova has set its sights on a firmly pro-European direction. Even the remote Kyrgyzstan has overthrown its post-Soviet authoritarian leader. In all, the CIS as an organisation has been left with little future. These circumstances make the future of Europe's 'last dictatorship' questionable, stuck between an enlarged Union and a democratising Ukraine. Minsk's last hope lies in Moscow.

The current Belarusian dictatorship survives internally thanks to general social passivity, nostalgia for the stability of the Soviet era, the memory of the Soviet victory over fascism, and the notion of pan-Slavic brotherhood with Russia and Ukraine. All of these factors are weakening. The USSR collapsed some fourteen years ago and a new generation with no memory of the Soviet past is entering political life. In contrast to the EU, Russia pales increasingly, while Ukraine has made a Euro-Atlantic choice. Young Belarusians increasingly dream of acquiring Western freedoms rather than sustaining the most regressive of post-Soviet politics.

Since May 1 2004, for the first time in its history, the EU has member states with vital interests engaged in Belarus. To have a democratic and stable neighbour that shares and respects European values is the aim of all EU countries, and such is the aim also of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. But these new member states offer a far more developed and involved approach to Belarus. In some respects, one might argue that a pro-Belarusian lobby now exists within the Union in this group of states motivated not only by general human concerns for democracy and freedom but also by tangible national interests. These new members also know the region, its political traditions, language, political reality and ways

of thinking, and thus have few illusions. The problems of post-communist transformation are well known to the Central European EU member states. The EU as a whole should capitalise on this experience and know-how in order to deal with Lukashenka's Belarus seriously.

Active EU support for the Ukrainian revolution, and the role Poland and Lithuania played in this, has encouraged both of these new members to intensify their focus on Belarus. In addition, the European Parliament has been deeply engaged in following Ukrainian developments, with attention to Belarus increasing significantly. For example, on March 10, 2005, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that condemned repression against the opposition, demanded the release of imprisoned political prisoners, most notably Mikhail Marynich (former minister for foreign economic cooperation and an opposition candidate for the presidency who suffered a stroke on March 7 and has been denied medical treatment). The Parliament called on the Commission and the Council to take the necessary steps to freeze the accounts of the Belarusian nomenklatura in Western banks, and to create independent radio and television stations to reduce the governmental monopoly of information. The Marynich case was also raised by a joint declaration of two members of the European Parliament – the Latvian, Aldis Kuškis and the Pole, Bogdan Klich.

## Considerations for EU policy

Poland and Lithuania have put forward a number of ideas and initiatives. In early 2003, Poland submitted a non-paper on the proposed Eastern dimension for EU policy targeted towards Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The main idea of the proposal is to differentiate EU polices towards its eastern neighbours according to the situation in a given country. With regard to Belarus, some of the instruments proposed in that document remain worthy of consideration today. Although the Eastern dimension was never accepted, the Polish approach has been deepened with new ideas and experience stemming from recent developments in Belarus and the region. The following list of proposals merits consideration from the EU. In general, it is important that the EU has a material base for its policy with regard to Belarus and that its approach does not consist merely of declarations of support to democracy in

Belarus and criticism of the regime. Such declarations are no longer sufficient. Drawing on the range of proposals already made, in particular, the EU should consider:

1) Exercising constant public pressure on the Belarusian government in defence of freedom, and the life and health of opposition activists who have been killed, imprisoned, or persecuted by the regime. The names of those people should be publicised outside Belarus in order to deter the regime from undertaking further such actions.

2) Creating an independent radio and television station for broadcasting into Belarus in order to break the governmental monopoly on electronic media information. Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish territory, perhaps possibly Ukrainian also, may serve as a base for this in order to ensure the widest possible coverage inside Belarus.

3) Creating a *European Liberty Fund* based on special legal regulations so as to allow the distribution of support to the illegal and semi-legal opposition in Belarus, not dependent on the (improbable) co-operation of the governing regime. This instrument should improve the development and absorption of financial aid for Belarusian non-governmental organisations.

4) Creating a *European Peace Corps* similar in activities and mandate to the US government organisation.

5) Developing a European scholarship programme for students, researchers and teachers of the Belarusian private schools that are being closed by the authorities for political reasons, as well as for those students, researchers and academics who were fired from State Universities for their prodemocratic activity.

6) Condemning the Russian government for the support it gives to the dictatorship in Belarus, thereby forcing Moscow to incur a political price for promoting this undemocratic regime.

There are two reasons, apart from general support for democracy, that should lead the EU to engage more fully in Belarusian issues. First, Belarus provides the European Union with an opportunity to achieve a convincing success for CFSP. The Belarusian people, especially the younger generation, share European values and are ready to accept the risks required and burdens of fundamental reform. Their ambition is to become a member of the European family. Excepting Ukraine, one can hardly find a better chance for Europe to show that it is able to take bold decisions in the foreign policy area and to perform difficult but necessary tasks. In dealing with Belarus, the EU does not need military power as required in the Balkans – soft power is enough, and Europe has this power. However, the EU must decide to use the power it has at its disposal. Success would impact on Belarus and also on the new member states, as a demonstration of the EU's willingness to act and not only to make declarations. The European Union has the required resources to be effective in Belarus and help its transformation into a normal, stable and democratic country. It must decide to use these resources. In addition, the costs would not be that high for the EU, consisting mainly of support for the opposition that exists. The chances of inaction, however, are considerable.

Second, supporting democracy fully in Belarus (and Ukraine) may help to strengthen transatlantic relations. Working together in Belarus would help to recreate political unity in the EU by demonstrating to the 'new' members that the Union is an effective foreign policy structure that is able to resolve real problems in the EU's new neighbourhood. Belarus provides an excellent opportunity for this process. For many 'new' member states, the rise of the EU as a serious foreign policy actor with global ambitions must start with the Union successfully challenging dictators in the former Soviet Union.

In fact, the victory of democracy in Belarus is a goal shared by the entire Euro-Atlantic community. In this, it should be seen as a challenge equivalent to NATO and EU enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Supporting Belarusian democracy effectively can build the image of the EU as a serious international player able to solve real problems, most importantly in its direct neighbourhood.

# Catalysing change

**Dov Lynch**

7

*[Many thanks for their comments to Nicu Popescu and Kestutis Paulauskas, Visiting Research Fellows at the EUISS in 2005, and to Jean Michel Corre of the Crisis Group. This chapter benefited from a number of anonymous interviews in Brussels with the Commission and the Council in May 2005.]*

Shortly before the parliamentary elections and referendum in Belarus of October 17, 2004, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka declared: 'We should show who is the master of the house. We should leave no stone unturned (in beating) the domestic and external opposition (...) One should be able to stay in power and defend it. This is Grandpa Lenin's saying, not mine. We have enough power and techniques to win the elections and referendum overwhelmingly.'[1] Eminently quotable, Lukashenka is not known for being shy with words. Or with deeds. On October 17, government-supported candidates captured the overwhelming majority of seats, and the constitutional referendum that will allow Lukashenka to run for a third presidential term in 2006 was approved.

On November 23, 2004, the Council declared: 'The Council calls upon President Lukashenka and his government to reverse their present policies and to embark on fundamental democratic and economic reforms to bring the country closer to European values.'[2] Nothing less.

The statement revisited the three *leitmotifs* of EU policy as it has developed since September 1997, the date when the Union suspended the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Minsk. First, EU policy is mostly about declarations, in which EU member states state their displeasure with developments inside Belarus. Since 1997, such declarations have consistently followed on the heels of yet-another election in Belarus, which had been hailed beforehand as an 'opportunity' for change and was dismissed afterwards as not free or fair.

Second, the EU has called on Minsk to reverse its current policy course and to adopt one that is closer to the European values of democracy and market economy. Here, the requirement is not that Belarus should modify its behaviour or abandon several irritating policy lines but *fundamentally* alter its course. EU policy has sought regime change by declaration.

1. Cited by Jan Maksymiuk, 'Leaving No Stone Unturned,' *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* (vol. 6, no. 37, 12 October 2004).

2. General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC), Conclusions, 23 November 2004, Brussels, (14724/04).

Finally, the EU has always held out the prospect of greater cooperation should President Alyaksandr Lukashenka undertake the said reversal. In 2005, the promise dangled before Minsk was that of active participation in the *European Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP) and greater EU assistance

On November 7, 2005, the Council reached new conclusions in advance of the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus.[3] Basically, EU policy remains driven by the framework put in place in 1997. EU policy has been widened at the margins and expanded in scope, but its essential thrust remains the same: to seek change in the behaviour of Belarus through a mixture of inducement and pressure. The EU has failed in this challenge thus far. This failure should highlight the difficulty of inducing change – as opposed to *forcing* it – on the leadership of a country that is not willing to effect change. In the parlance of political science, such a policy is referred to as one of *coercive diplomacy*, where one state seeks to alter the behaviour in other state by the use of carrots and sticks. Coercive diplomacy is never an easy bet.[4] Given the peculiarities of the EU as a foreign policy actor, it is even more difficult for Brussels to wield against a third state.

This concluding chapter examines the evolution of EU policy towards Belarus since 1997 and explores options for how to address the Belarus dilemma. The argument is divided into five parts. First, the chapter examines why the EU can no longer afford to ignore Belarus. Second, the chapter sets out the dilemmas and constraints that have affected EU policy. Third, the chapter discusses the evolving objectives in EU policy since 1997. A fourth section analyses the new context for EU-Belarus relations in 2005 in the region and Europe. Finally, the chapter explores options for policy towards Belarus.

## Why does Belarus matter?

Belarus is an important neighbour for the EU for several reasons. First, with enlargement in 2004, Belarus is now neighbour to three EU member states, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, with which it shares a border over a thousand kilometres long. The danger of Belarus becoming a transit zone (and source point) for illicit goods and illegal migration into the EU is real. Enlargement has raised a

3. Council Conclusions on Belarus, 7 November 2005, Brussels.

4. See, for example, Alexander George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (US Institute of Peace: 1991), and Alexander George and Gordon Craig, *Force and Statecraft, Diplomatic Problems of our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

host of questions of proximity, linked to border relations between Belarus and the three EU member states, and including the Belarusian minority living in eastern Poland and the Polish minority in western Belarus. On the positive side, Belarus is also an important transit country for energy, especially Russian natural gas, supplies to the EU, having some two thousand kilometres of natural gas pipelines.[5] Given projections that EU reliance on natural gas is set to increase, especially from the Russian Federation, the importance of stability in Belarus gains even more salience.[6]

Belarus also matters for the EU because it is a problematic neighbour with which the EU does not have full or normal relations. Only one other neighbour shares this dubious distinction, Libya, and relations are developing rapidly with Tripoli since its change of policy on the proliferation of materials of mass destruction. Belarus is the main gap in the enlarged EU's immediate neighbourhood. Minsk is run by an authoritarian leadership bent on dictatorship that routinely violates essential freedoms and human rights. Since November 1996, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has steadily pursued increasing authoritarian control over the country. The EU is an association of states brought together by common interests as well as shared values, which means that it cannot turn a blind eye to developments in Belarus. The freedoms of the citizens of Belarus are a concern for the EU and member states. This also means that the protection of shared values will remain a standard for the EU by which to assess developments inside Belarus and relations with it.

Authoritarian Belarus also poses harder threats to EU interests in the recklessness of its leader, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Lukashenka has single-handedly isolated Belarus from the Euro-Atlantic community and set the country on an autarkic path, based on an ideology of Slavic greatness and nostalgia for the Soviet era. Along the way, Belarus has developed strong ties with parts of the developing world, where Belarusian weapons and equipment stocks are attractive commodities. For the United States and the EU, Belarus has become a concern in terms of the proliferation of materials of mass destruction as well as more conventional arms sales. Also, in the run-up to the second Iraq war, Belarusian banks were implicated in fraudulent activities linked to the oil-for-food programme. A pariah in Europe, Belarus is a natural ally to pariah states across the world.

5. See discussion in *On the Development of an Energy Policy for the Enlarged Europe, its Neighbours and Partners*, Communication for the Commission (Brussels, 13/05/2003, COM(2003)262final).

6. See *Final Report on the Green Paper 'Towards a European Strategy for the Security of Energy Supply'* Communication from the Commission (Brussels, 26/06/2002, COM (2002)321 final).

## Policy dilemmas

In developing policy towards Belarus, the EU faces significant dilemmas. These dilemmas complicate Union thinking and limit the conceivable range of actions. Any EU policy must navigate through these difficulties.

### Belarus recalcitrance

The first dilemma is that Alyaksandr Lukashenka has not deviated from a path initiated in 1996 of building an authoritarian regime. Nothing the EU or the international community has done has affected this fundamental drive. Quite the contrary. Lukashenka has exploited external pressure as justification for increasingly draconian measures for asserting control inside the country. The Belarusian president is brazen enough to admit to this. His reaction to the US *Belarus Democracy Act* (October 2004) was honest: 'If you scold me for seeing internal and external enemies, why are you giving me a pretext for finding such an enemy outside the country? Why are you supplying me with such a chance?'[7]

Lukashenka's position seems quite unassailable. 'Opposition' forces in Belarus are divided amongst themselves and unable to challenge Lukashenka's undoubted ability to seduce, persuade and control the Belarusian population. The parliamentary elections in October 2004 were neither free nor fair. The opposition was systematically harassed, exiled, imprisoned and censored in the run-up to voting, and excluded from the electoral commissions. Nonetheless, reliable surveys of exit polls by the Minsk-based Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies (which has since faced serious governmental pressure) show that 49 per cent of voters were in favour of Lukashenka's referendum. While lower than the officially designated result, the number highlights the fact that a significant number of voters favour the current president. According to Vitaly Silitsky, 'what can be concluded from the poll data is that Lukashenka soundly defeated the opposition on October 17 once again.'[8]

Belarus is a very difficult nut to crack. The essence of the authoritarian system built by Lukashenka, and the support it receives from the population, is built on avoiding 'transition.' Unlike states in the former Soviet Union and Central Europe, Belarus has avoided undertaking an economic and political tran-

7. Cited by Jan Maksymiuk, 'Lukashenka slams Belarus Democracy Act,' *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* (vol. 6, no. 36, 8 October 2004).

8. Vitaly Silitsky, 'Leading Independent Think Tank Faces Attacks,' *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* (vol. 6, no. 48, 29 December 2004).

sition. Many of the structures of state involvement in the economy and society remain in place. The strength of the Lukashenka regime resides in its ability to argue – quite persuasively – that it alone will protect the majority of the population from becoming 'losers' in a transition process.

The question posed by Belarus for the EU is extremely difficult: What can the EU do with a neighbouring state that is impervious to its influence and could not care less about its concerns?

## The Russian factor

While their relations go through peaks and troughs, Russia-Belarus ties are still the closest either country has with any other external partner. As examined by Dmitri Trenin in this volume, these relations have a solid military-strategic foundation as well as economic and political dimensions. At the formal level, the two countries have embarked since 1996 on a path of creating a union of states.[9] The symbolic aspect of relations was especially marked when Boris Yeltsin was Russian president, when unity with Belarus was presented as the renewal of Russian power in the former Soviet Union. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, relations have become more difficult at the political and economic levels. Putin has sought to prioritise economic relations with Belarus, in terms of ensuring an adequate return for Russia's provision of cheap energy supplies. This objective has translated into what has been referred to as 'gas wars' between Moscow and Minsk, reflected also in acrimonious exchanges at the highest levels. Certainly, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has become more wary of Russian (private and official) designs on Belarusian assets, and of the dangers of a union with Russia, which could reduce Belarus to the status of a dusty Russian province. The shine has gone off the 'State Union.'

And yet, relations between Russia and Belarus remain unique. The military-strategic union of the two states is a reality. For all the tensions over gas supplies, Russian companies continue to prop up the Belarusian economy with natural gas at relatively lower prices. Increasingly isolated in Europe, seemingly 'encircled' by an enlarged NATO and EU, Russia is Belarus' single significant international interlocutor, a factor that heightens an already deeply rooted identity affinity felt by many Belarusian citizens towards Russia.

9. See discussion in Clelia Rontoyanni, 'A Russo-Belarusian Union-State: A Defensive Response to Western Enlargement?' unpublished working paper from October 2000, University of Glasgow.

Belarus also matters increasingly for the Russian Federation. Belarus is the bulwark of Russia's aspirations to build concentric rings of political and economic integration within the Commonwealth of independent States (CIS). With 'coloured' revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, Minsk's significance has risen even higher for Moscow. In the western region of the former Soviet Union, Belarus is Russia's single remaining ally. The Baltic states have joined NATO and the EU, Ukraine has turned single-mindedly in the same direction, as has Moldova. The Belarusian star has risen in Russia's universe.

Russian-Belarusian relations are a complicating factor for the EU. Should the EU best accede to Minsk through Moscow? At the more general level, how should the EU react to Russian-Belarusian relations? Unfortunately, the Russian dimension plays on the weaknesses of the EU as a foreign policy actor. Member states have different interests and ambitions with regard to Russia, which are reflected in internal debates about relations with Moscow. To make things more difficult, Russia has been reluctant to allow discussion of Belarus in its dialogue with the EU, arguing that Belarus is an independent state that should not be subject to the Russia-EU dialogue.

## No traction

The depth of Russian-Belarus relations emphasises another dilemma in EU policy: the Union's lack of traction inside Belarus. Put bluntly, the EU is not seen as a credible alternative to Russia by most Belarusian citizens and elites. On the one hand, membership of the EU is seen as being unrealistic, with Belarus lagging too far behind economically. On the other, EU membership is interpreted in geopolitical terms, with the Union perceived as an association of states which are potentially, if not already, hostile to Russia and Belarus. Belarusian reliance on Russia is founded therefore on a bleak assessment of the country's future, which is seen fatalistically as having little choice but closer association with Russia. Moreover, for many the prospect of moving in the direction of the EU seems to be full of obstacles. Belarus has avoided the real difficulties of 'transition'; the path towards the EU would seem to produce only 'losers.'

What is more, the EU is constrained by its own regulations in supporting civil society in Belarus. The regulations for financial

transfers in TACIS restrict these to NGOs that are registered in Minsk. Project regulations require official support and cooperation – lacking in Minsk. Given Lukashenka's active policy of pressuring NGOs and de-registering them, this leaves the EU deeply constrained in its ability to support democracy activists inside the country. More widely, being dependent on the good will of Minsk is not comfortable.

## EU policy framework

The initial EU policy approach towards Belarus was part of its approach towards the new states of the former Soviet Union (except the three Baltic states). This approach, developed in the early 1990s, was founded on two pillars. The first was the negotiation of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and the second was the creation of a financial instrument, known as TACIS, to structure EU technical assistance to these states.[10]

By 2002, the 'PCA method' was nearing a dead-end. For example, EU assistance to Ukraine and Moldova had little impact on their domestic and external trajectories. At the start of the twenty-first century, Moldova was one of Europe's poorest countries.[11] In Ukraine, the EU was become increasingly concerned about incipient (and not-so-incipient) authoritarian tendencies under former president Leonid Kuchma.[12] In both Moldova and Ukraine, the essential logic driving politics and economics was anathema to the EU model.[13]

With Belarus, the 'PCA method' was never applied. EU-Belarus relations were frozen following the September 1997 decision to impose EU sanctions against Lukashenka's authoritarian policies.[14] With each new election in Belarus, the EU declared its hope that Lukashenka would seize the opportunity to liberalise Belarus' political system. With each election, this hope was dashed.[15] The presidential elections in Belarus in 2001, which returned Lukashenka to power with a surprising degree of popular support, highlighted the weakness of the EU approach. The suspension of contacts and assistance was not pressure enough to induce Lukashenka to change.

Enlargement has changed the geometry of the Belarus question. As discussed by Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski in this volume, Poland and Lithuania had developed their own polices of engagement with Belarus in the 1990s, which were different to EU

10. All of these documents may be found on the EU website, 'The EU's relationship with the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia': http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/index.htm On TACIS, see See http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/tacis/index.htm

11. See report by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, where per capita GDP for 2000 was noted as being 326 US dollars/month: http://www.ebrd.com/country/country/moldova/index.htm

12. On various aspects of Ukraine's internal and foreign policies, see Ann Lewis (ed.), *The EU and Ukraine: Neighbours, Friends or Partners?* (London: The Federal Trust, 2002).

13. See James Sherr, 'Russia and Ukraine: A Geopolitical Turn?', in Ann Lewis (ed.), *The EU and Ukraine: Neighbours, Friends or Partners?* (London: The Federal Trust, 2002), pp. 171-79.

14. *Council Conclusions on Belarus*, General Affairs Council, Brussels, 15/9/1997 (Press: 269 Nr:103-68/97).

15. On developments in Belarus and with regard to the EU, see Clelia Rontoyanni, 'In Europe with Russia or In Europe without Russia?: Belarus and Ukraine face Globalisation,' paper presented at the University of Kent, 8-10 September 2001, unpublished; and also the chapters edited by Ann Lewis (ed.), *The EU and Belarus: Between Moscow and Brussels* (London: The Federal Trust, 2002).

policy lines. Enlargement has also laid more stress on the contradictions in the policy framework defined in the late 1990s. The development of the *European Neighbourhood Policy* in 2003-2004 brought to the fore differences between member states over how to address the Belarus question.

## Values and interests

The Belarus question is revealing of deeper EU contradictions. With regard to the EU's immediate neighbourhood, tension is exemplified in the different manners of presenting EU objectives. In launching the *Wider Europe* initiative, former Commission President, Romano Prodi had declared that, 'I want to see a *ring of friends* surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours, from Morocco to Russia and the Black Sea.'[16] In contrast, Javier Solana wrote in the European Security Strategy (ESS) of December 2003 that the EU task was 'to promote a *ring of well-governed countries* to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations.'[17] One should avoid playing too much on the difference, as both officials have used different terms. However, the distinction between a 'ring of friends' and a 'ring of well-governed countries' is important. Of course, the two qualities usually come together; but one can imagine a well-governed country that is not friendly to the EU. EU external action faces the perennial task of balancing values and interests, which are not always the same thing or pursued in the same manner.

The pursuit of values has dominated EU policy towards Belarus. The General Affairs and External Relations Council Conclusions of April 14, 2003 are representative: 'The EU has made clear its desire to enhance its relations with its Eastern European neighbours on the basis of shared interests and common values. The development of closer relations between the EU and Belarus will depend on Belarus' effective implementation of further reforms, its willingness to respect its international commitments and to adopt European standards of democracy and human rights.'[18] The reasoning is simple: because Belarus does not respect common values, the EU must freeze relations, even if 'shared interests' fail to be promoted as a result.

The logic is not watertight. Could one not argue that the EU has interests in Belarus that require it to engage with Minsk? The

16. Romano Prodi, 'A Wider Europe - A Proximity Policy as the key to stability', 'Peace, Security And Stability International Dialogue and the Role of the EU,' presented to the Sixth ECSA-World Conference (Brussels, 5-6 December 2002).

17. *A Secure Europe in a Better World – European Security Strategy* (Brussels, 12 December 2003).

18. GAERC Conclusions (Luxembourg: April 14, 2003, 8220/03 Presse 105).

EU has pursued this logic in its relations with other states, such as Russia, where, despite EU objections to the conduct of the war in Chechnya, full relations are maintained with Moscow. And what of the population of Belarus? Does isolation from the EU advance their 'values'? Put bluntly, might fuller EU engagement with Belarus not be a better way of advancing EU values and interests?

This tension has been embodied in the debate in 2004 and 2005 between member states over policy towards Belarus. Some member states, mainly of them new, have argued that the EU should step up pressure on the Lukashenka regime by seeking to isolate the leadership even further and upgrading support to the opposition. The line of argument here is that the EU should support the single opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, in his campaign against Lukashenka. The European Parliament has followed a similar position. Much of the strength of this argument stems from the changes that have occurred in the former Soviet Union, and especially Ukraine. A second group of member states has argued that the EU should recognise the weaknesses of isolating Belarus and engage with Minsk in a dialogue. The aim here is to persuade the Belarusian leadership and society that the EU represents a genuine alternative to reliance on Russia and authoritarianism. Yet another group of member states has argued for the continuation of the 1997 policy framework of limited contacts with official Belarus and support to the development of civil society. The argument of this group, with the support of the Commission, is founded on the premise that change cannot be induced from the outside and the process of transforming Belarus will be long-term.

## Coercive diplomacy

Coercive diplomacy is a policy of pressure undertaken by a state to alter the behaviour of another state. Coercive diplomacy employs a range of tools to apply pressure, but without going to war. This means that coercive diplomacy, as opposed to a war-based strategy, is inherently indeterminate. As the external state is unwilling to impose its desires on the target state through force, the outcome of such diplomacy is dependent on the target's willingness to comply with external demands. Moreover, the success of coercive diplomacy has much to do with the external actor's ability to develop a consistent strategy of pressure towards the target that creates

urgency for it to comply. The ability to create serious incentives to comply, either positive through 'carrots' or negative through 'sticks' – or both – is a vital component. The nature of the demand made of the target state is important – this can range from demanding a single policy alteration to more fundamental political changes. If the demand is too all-encompassing, it will be difficult to create a sense of urgency for the target to comply. Finally, a target state's ability to find other sources of external support to offset the pressure is important.

From this brief account, it should be obvious that the EU faces a difficult, if not insurmountable, task in Belarus. The EU's ability to create a sense of urgency is weakened by its own policy contradictions and inconsistency. The demand made of Lukashenka is to alter fundamentally the regime he has spent close to a decade building. There is little any external party could do to have Lukashenka comply with such a radical request. Moreover, Russian assistance has provided vital breathing space to Belarus, diluting any real sense of pressure that the EU could apply against Minsk.

In fact, EU coercive diplomacy has become part of the foundation pillars of Lukashenka's authoritarian regime, allowing him to portray Belarus as beleaguered and victimised by a hostile 'West,' and with no choice but to rely on Russia and, ultimately, its own resources.

## Policy evolution

Since September 1997, EU policy has evolved in three phases. This evolution has displayed several recurring themes.

First, the EU has constantly searched for new 'starting points' in relations, declaring its 'hopes' that Minsk might seize them to unfreeze contacts, only to find these hopes dashed on the rocks of Lukashenka's authoritarianism. Second, the framework of EU policy has remained as it was set in September 1997. The EU has tinkered with this framework at the margins, but the essential thrust has not changed. Third, Minsk has set the pace of relations as well as the agenda. EU policy has been reactive to actions taken by the authorities in Belarus. Finally, nothing the EU has done has checked Lukashenka's drive to build an authoritarian regime. By 2005, Belarus has become an anomaly in Europe, an isolated

authoritarian state, surrounded by a sea of democracies or states on the path towards democracy. Belarus is not in 'transition;' it seems to have 'arrived,' and in a lonely, dark corner of Europe.

### 1997-2001: Setting the framework

The EU started to adopt a critical line towards Minsk in response to Lukashenka's movement to consolidate presidential power and weaken the role of the parliament by organising a referendum in November 1996. The replacement of the previously elected parliament by a controlled national assembly and Lukashenka's disregard for EU concerns led to the Council Conclusions of September 15, 1997.[19]

These Conclusions criticised Belarus' 'non-constructive, indeed obstructive, attitude in its relations with the EU.' The EU declared that it did not recognise the political situation in Belarus as a *fait accompli*. The referendum, the constitutional amendments, the creation of a new national assembly – none of these were recognised. In response, the EU called on Lukashenka to open a dialogue with members of the former parliament. The EU also determined a list of measures to be taken to induce a change in behaviour:

- The EU would not support Belarus' application to the Council of Europe.
- The EU would suspend the PCA and the Interim Agreement with Belarus.
- Contacts between the EU, member states and Belarus were to be severely restricted.
- TACIS assistance would be limited to programmes 'directly' linked to democracy building projects, humanitarian and regional projects.
- Member states would reconsider their assistance programmes with Belarus.
- The Commission was called on to study how to involve civil society and support the democratisation process in Belarus.
- The EU declared its support to working through the OSCE in Belarus.

In conclusion, the EU declared that relations would not improve 'while Belarus fails to move towards the respect for

19. See *Council Conclusions on Belarus*, General Affairs Council (Brussels, 15 September 1997, press: 269Nr 10368/97).

human rights and fundamental freedoms and to observe the constitutional principles inherent in a democratic state, governed by the rule of law.'

All policy elements were in place. The EU suspended contacts and contractual agreements and limited its assistance until Belarus respected democratic values. Until then, the EU would seek to work through the OSCE and to support Belarusian civil society through targeted programmes. In essence, this policy is one of pressure through isolation and condemnation, raising the prospect of renewed ties only after a reversal of a political situation that was not accepted as a *fait accompli*. The basic problem was also already clear: the 1997 policy satisfied member states whose concern was not to condone an authoritarian regime, but the EU was asking a leadership to reverse its policies for the sake of resumed contacts and TACIS aid. Hardly an attractive prospect.

EU assistance to Belarus was severely curtailed; the 37 million euro planned for 1996-1999 was suspended, and assistance was concentrated on humanitarian and regional projects and activities linked to attenuating the impact of the Chernobyl disaster. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2000, the EU coordinated its approach with the Council of Europe and the OSCE to propose criteria to Minsk that, if fulfilled, could have renewed ties. These criteria concerned opposition access to the media and the electoral commissions, the nature of Belarus' electoral legislation and the need to attribute substantial powers to the parliament. This 'starting point' was not seized by Minsk. In fact, during this period, Belarusian politics took a turn for the worse, with the 'disappearance' of several prominent national figures, continued pressure on opposition groups, a controlled media and fraudulent elections.

### 2001-2003: Tinkering at the margins

In July 2001, the Swedish presidency of the EU declared that the presidential elections of September could represent 'an opportunity for Belarus to improve its relations with the EU and the international community.'[20] In particular, the Presidency declared 'the EU is ready to engage in a dialogue with the Belarusian government in order to promote democratic presidential elections.'[21] If the elections were free and fair, after due monitoring by an OSCE mission,

20. Presidency Declaration, 27 July 2001 (Bulletin EU, 7/8-2001).

21. Presidency Declaration, 14 September 2001 (118 12/01)

the EU declared a willingness to take the first steps towards normalising relations. Once again, EU hopes were dashed, and the OSCE mission concluded that the elections did not meet international standards.

However, the election did force the EU to reconsider elements of the 1997 framework. First, the *fait accompli*, however distasteful, had to be accepted. There was no use pretending that the Belarusian authorities might be willing to return to the situation before 1994. They were not. Second, the election results showed that Alyaksandr Lukashenka did have popular support, no matter what fraudulent tactics had been used in the electoral process. The Belarusian opposition emerged also a clear loser, divided between itself and incapable of fielding a strong candidate able to challenge a charismatic incumbent president. Third, the 'all or nothing' approach – that Belarus reverse course fully before contacts with the EU would be resumed – had failed. Instead, European thinking was that a more gradual approach could be more effective.

In early 2002, the EU launched the 'benchmarks approach.' While remaining consistent with the 1997 framework, this new approach sought to induce Belarus to undertake small steps in the direction of shared values to which the EU would respond positively. As a result, confidential talks were held in Minsk in January 2002 with the aim of locking the Belarusian authorities into a gradual opening up of the regime that would be supported by the EU.

Again, EU policy had no impact. The year 2002 was marred by rising tensions with Minsk over the functioning of the OSCE Assistance and Monitoring Group (AMG). The process was painful, with Minsk first refusing to renew the visas of AMG members and then finally failing to renew the accreditation of the AMG as a whole. After having stated in September 2002 that 'a satisfactory solution to the AMG question would be taken as a token of the resolve of the Belarusian authorities to improve relations with the EU and other international organisations,' the great majority of EU member states reacted forcefully to yet another case of Belarusian recalcitrance by deciding on imposing a travel ban to the EU against Lukashenka and seven other officials in November.[22] Once again, Minsk was setting the agenda.

The visa ban was lifted in March 2003 after the satisfactory opening of a new OSCE office. The EU had come full circle.

22. Presidency Declaration 17 September 2002 (Bulletin EU, 9-2002).

### 2003 - Belarus and the European Neighbourhood Policy

Belarus was part of the Commission's first Communication on Wider Europe on March 11, 2003.[23] Having noted that Belarus was pursuing a 'policy of deviation,' the Communication explained that the EU faced a choice: either to let things drift, with costs for the people of Belarus and the EU, or to engage, at the risk of condoning distasteful policies. The Communication chose the first option, calling for a 'measurable, step by step process.' Belarus was also noted in the Commission's *European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper* of May 12, 2004.[24] The Commission Paper stated that the EU would not establish contractual ties with Belarus until the country was run by a democratic regime, following free and fair elections. 'It will then,' the Paper stated, 'be possible to extend the full benefits of ENP to Belarus. Meanwhile, the EU will consider ways of strengthening support to civil society.' Belarus was thus excluded from the *European Neighbourhood Policy*.

The Council Conclusions of November 23, 2004 remained within the bounds of existing thinking.[25] The conclusions drew heavily on a paper prepared by the Council's Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit. The EU Council noted that it was ready for the gradual opening of relations conditional on the goodwill of Minsk. The EU also instituted a visa ban on officials who had been implicated in the electoral process and had taken measures against peaceful demonstrators. Bilateral contacts between member states, the EU and Belarus are to remain restricted. EU assistance programmes will focus on humanitarian, regional and cross-border projects, as well as projects that are 'directly or indirectly' linked to democratisation. The Commission was called upon to organise assistance seminars to consider how to best coordinate international policy. Finally, the Council pledged to remain actively seized on Belarus arms sales and involvement in proliferation.

In terms of assistance, the EU has developed an Indicative Programme for 2005-2006 that envisages dedicating 10 million euros to Belarus. 4.7 million euros will be allocated to civil society and democratisation projects, 1.5 million euros to education and training projects and 2.8 million euros to programmes related to the consequences of the Chernobyl' disaster.[26] In March 2005, the Commissioner for External Relations, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, declared an increase from 10 to 12 million euros in total assistance for 2005-2006.[27] In addition, Belarus is allowed to participate in

23. Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours (Commission Communication COM(2003), 104 final: Brussels, 11.3.203).

24. *European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper* (Commission Communication COM(2004) 373 final: Brussels, 12.5.2004).

25. General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC), Conclusions, 23 November 2004, Brussels, (14724/04).

26. *Country Strategy Paper, National Indicative Programme, Belarus, 2005-2006* (Commission, Brussels, 28 May 2004).

27. Statement by Benita Ferrero-Waldner to Belarus Assistance Coordination Workshop, Vilnius, Lithuania, 18 March 2005, SPEECH/05/187.

the Neighbourhood Programmes of cross-border cooperation, such as the Baltic Sea Interreg III Neighbourhood Programme. The Commission proposal for the *Regulation on the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument* of September 2004 argued that 'in the absence of a contractual framework, assistance may be useful to pursue EU policy objectives' with Belarus.[28]

In March 2005, Benita Ferrero-Waldner explained EU policy as sending two signals to Belarus.[29] The first signal was to the authorities in Minsk that the EU would not countenance the systematic violation of shared values. The second signal was to the population of Belarus 'that they have not been forgotten.' In essence, additional pressure would be mounted on the top leadership of the regime while greater support would be provided to civil society. As a result, the EU Council instituted further travel bans against two high-level Belarusian officials involved in election fraud and the suppression of demonstrations in 2004. On numerous occasions since 2001, including most notably a meeting in May 2004 with eight members of the opposition, Javier Solana has met with Belarusian opposition leaders; the High Representative did so very publicly with Condoleeza Rice in early 2005.

In the first months of 2004, the Commission organised workshops to rethink EU policy in the light of the Council Conclusions. Most notably, the decision was taken to increase EU support to Belarusian civil society though the *European Democracy and Human Rights Initiative*, a framework that is more flexible than TACIS in its ability to provide assistance to NGOs that are not legally registered in Belarus and that opens the possibility of setting up, for example, radio stations outside Belarus to disseminate information inside the country.

In advance of the Belarusian presidential elections in 2006, EU foreign ministers agreed on new measures on November 7, 2005.[30] The focus of the Council Conclusions involved persuading Minsk to allow for an OSCE election-monitoring mission, and to ensure a free and fair electoral process. The Conclusions called for greater engagement with Belarus as well as increased pressure on the regime. On the one hand, the EU advocated more intense people-to-people contacts between Belarus and member states, stronger links between European political parties and their counterparts in Belarus, the possibility of engaging with Belarusian officials below the ministerial level, and the opening of a regionalised delegation in Minsk. Pressure came in the shape of greater support to civil

28. *Proposal for a Regulation laying down the general provisions establishing a European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument* (Brussels, 29.9.2004 COM(2004) 628 final 2004/0219).

29. Statement by Benita Ferrero-Waldner to Belarus Assistance Coordination Workshop, Vilnius, Lithuania, 18 March 2005, SPEECH/05/187.

30. Council Conclusions on Belarus, 7 November 2005, Brussels.

society inside Belarus through greater use of the less centralised financial instrument that is the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), increased allocations to the development of independent media stations, and the possibility of further restrictive measures against individuals in the Minsk regime.

Since 1997, the EU has failed to alter the behaviour of the regime in Minsk. The EU has failed to gain traction inside Belarus or with the government. Moreover, EU assistance to 'democratic forces' has paid few dividends. Finally, far from putting pressure on Belarus economically, the absence of EU assistance and contacts has gone unnoticed. In fact, the Belarusian economy has started to grow at a healthy rate.[31] The EU is sending signals to the leadership of a country that simply does not care to listen.

## The new context

Can this situation continue?

In a word, yes. Belarus does not pose a direct challenge or a hard threat to the EU. It would seem that the EU could afford to continue its current policy, betting on the hope that some day the people of Belarus will topple their leaders and return the country to the European fold.

And yet, the context is changing dramatically. The framework for current policy was set in 1997. At that time, the EU was preoccupied with enlargement and other pressing housekeeping chores. Relations with Russia were rosy, which seemed to posit a standoffish position from Brussels on Belarus. In addition, the EU did not have the policy tools necessary to engage with Belarus; the European Neighbourhood Policy and the European Security Strategy were still to come. In a word, Belarus was 'forgettable' in 1997. In 2006, this was no longer the case. The context has changed at four levels, which, taken together, call for new EU thinking.

### A new Europe

The first level concerns strategic developments in Europe. The security architecture that Europe inherited from the Cold War is

31. See discussion of Vitaly Silitsky, 'Minsk Posts 10% Growth,' *RFE/RL Belarus and Ukraine Report* (vol. 6, no. 29, 19 August 2004).

transforming and a new order is emerging. NATO is becoming a more globally oriented institution, with new roles in Afghanistan and Iraq and less direct involvement in European security. The OSCE has entered a crisis, as Participating States debate the question of its enduring utility, largely at Russia's insistence. At the same time, the role of the EU as a security provider is increasing. In 2003, the EU launched three missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2004, the EU assumed responsibility from NATO SFOR with Operation ALTHEA.[32] Moreover, EU member states have decided to create some thirteen battle groups of 1,500 troops to provide the EU with rapid capability. In addition, the first wave of Action Plans from the *European Neighbourhood Policy* has been agreed, notably with Ukraine and Moldova. Enlargement has transformed the EU, especially in its dealings with the Eastern neighbours. The active role of the Lithuanian and Polish presidents and Javier Solana during the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine was the physical demonstration of a new EU.

With these wider changes, the EU will find it difficult to continue to rely on the OSCE as the framework for policy towards Belarus. At the same time, the EU is emerging as an important actor in Europe, willing to act on behalf of its interests and increasingly able to do so. The EU can now consider policy options towards Belarus that were not available in 1997. And it should.

### A new US

A second strategic shift concerned the United States. In her hearing before the Senate in January 2005, the future Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, declared Belarus an 'outpost of tyranny.' In the wake of the popular revolutions that occurred in Georgia and Ukraine, this statement marks a new and more forceful US agenda towards Belarus. Especially after the change of regime in Kyiv, the US Administration views Ukraine and Georgia as models of inspiration for other states in the region. The former Soviet Union is in 'movement,' and the US is intent on seeking to direct the change that is occurring and to accelerate its pace. If US policy to Russia remains quite conciliatory, American strategy in the former Soviet Union, and especially the Western and Caucasian regions, is more 'revolutionary.'

32. See Dov Lynch and Antonio Missiroli, *ESDP Operations* (EUISS Web site, www.iss-eu.org, 2004).

The sharpening of US policy must be factored into EU thinking. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the EU and the United States pursued similar policy lines to Belarus. While transatlantic coordination has been strong on policy towards Ukraine and Belarus, the further sharpening of US policy may raise questions for the EU.

### A new Russia

A third change is tied to developments in Russia. Russia in 2005 is very different to the Russia of 1997. Russian domestic and foreign policy has changed, as have its relations with the EU.[33] Staunchly defensive about Russia's sovereignty, Putin has developed an interest in a strategic partnership with the EU that is not all-encompassing but limited. The Chechen conflict and the struggle against international terrorism have emerged as an area of difference with the EU. At the same time, since 2003, it is becoming clear that there are not only divergent perceptions but also clashing interests in the shared neighbourhood between Russia and the EU.

Under Putin, Russian-Belarusian relations have been troubled, even tense at times. The symbolic value that Boris Yeltsin has attributed to the union with Minsk has been abandoned by Moscow. Differences have arisen on the treatment of the Russian media in Belarus, Russian access to the privatisation of Belarusian assets, and the often embarrassing human rights situation. The Russian government is also in the process of rethinking its reliance on Belarus as a transit zone for energy supplies to Europe. Still, Belarus occupies a vital role in Russian foreign policy. In military terms, it is seen as a defensive *glacis* by traditional military thinkers, and at least as an important forward position on the borders with NATO. With the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the anti-Russian drift of Moldovan foreign policy, the Belarusian ally has gained vital importance for Moscow. In 2005, Russia and Belarus have deepened their security services and military cooperation. What is more, Moscow has positioned itself to back Lukashenka fully in the 2006 presidential elections. Russia is not going to let Belarus slip through its fingers.

More widely, EU relations with Russia in 2005 are different to what they were in 1997, which was a high point of optimism with regard to Russia. By 2005, member states were concerned with trends inside Russia and with its policies in the former Soviet

33. See discussion in Dov Lynch, 'Struggling with an Indispensable Partner,' in *What Russia Sees*, Dov Lynch (ed.) (EUISS Chaillot Paper no. 74: Paris, 2005).

Union. At the same time, the EU is intent on developing greater engagement in the shared neighbourhood with Russia. Current difficulties in EU-Russia relations impact on EU thinking and policy towards Belarus.

### A new region

Finally, the changes occurring in the former Soviet Union alter the context around Belarus. After the first years of euphoria following independence, the post-Soviet order that emerged in the late 1990s in most of the former Soviet republics was characterised politically by 'managed democracies,' economically by deeply corrupt and opaque private/public spheres, and socially by widespread poverty and social disenchantment.

In essence, these circumstances were comfortable for the authoritarian ambitions of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine mark the start of a new period of upheaval in the post-Soviet space, with the rise of democratic, nationalist and European-orientated regimes that have come to power through significant demonstrations of popular support. The inertia of the post-Soviet order of the 1990s has been broken and the former Soviet Union is in movement once again. Change is not limited to Ukraine and Georgia. Since 2003, Moldova has also adopted a firmly Europe-oriented foreign policy.

In 1997, the Baltic states and Poland were not yet members of Euro-Atlantic structures, and Ukraine and Moldova found themselves in an ambiguous position between Europe and the former Soviet Union. By 2006, Belarus' immediate neighbours of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland had joined NATO and the EU, and Ukraine and Moldova were intent on leaving the post-Soviet space to join European structures.

This new regional context is highly uncomfortable for Belarus. The revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine have become an inspiration for its domestic opposition forces, at least providing them with the hope that 'things can change.' More fundamentally, Ukrainian and Georgian events highlight the fragility of the post-Soviet order that had emerged in the 1990s. For all their seeming stability, regimes *can* be toppled in weeks. The apparent stability of Lukashenka's regime pales in the light of these events. There is nothing inevitably enduring about the current regime. Quite the contrary.

## Policy options

These changes in context have three implications. First, Belarus in 2006 cannot be left to its own devices. Enlargement precludes this option. Second, in the light of events in Ukraine and Georgia, Lukashenka's regime is much more fragile that it would seem. With presidential elections in 2006, the EU should consider the possibility of a crisis arising in Belarus to which it will have no choice but to respond. Third, given current difficulties in relations with Russia, the EU must think ahead of terms of the 'Belarusian factor' in EU-Russian relations. Should a crisis arise in Belarus, how will Brussels interact with Moscow?

Belarus raises a question about the ambition of the EU as a foreign policy actor. The central message of the *European Security Strategy* is the EU's desire to build a rule-based international society of states: 'The quality of international society depends on the quality of the governments that are its foundation. The best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states.' According to the Strategy, the EU's main ambition should be the promotion of democracy beyond its borders. Through successive waves of enlargement, the EU has an unbroken record of exporting democracy and importing democracies. However, enlargement is not yet conceivable for a country such as Belarus.

The question facing the EU becomes therefore: How can the EU best promote democracy in Belarus without offering enlargement? EU policy since 1997 has not worked. At the same time, the limited engagement undertaken by Poland and Lithuania before EU membership was not all that effective either.

What can the EU do? Hypothetically, the Union has two options.

### Genuine coercive diplomacy

A first option is for the EU to develop a genuine coercive strategy, employing instruments of pressure to alter Minsk's attitude of non-compliance with EU demands.

A reinforced policy of pressure on Belarus could include the following components:

1) Wider travel bans against the leadership in Minsk, as well as targeted asset freezing against Lukashenka.

2) Comprehensive support to Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the single opposition candidate to run in the 2006 presidential elections.
3) Providing extensive support to the opposition, and Belarusian civil society, before and during the campaign.
4) Raising the question of Russia's support to Lukashenka to the highest level of the Russia-EU dialogue.
5) Working with new member states, Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the US to present a united front against the current regime in Minsk.
6) Developing an active information and media campaign through independent radio and television stations on Belarusian borders for the dissemination of objective information to the Belarusian public.

This policy would seize the opportunity presented by the 2006 presidential elections by forcing a crisis in Belarus that would undermine the current regime and perhaps even replace it with a democratically oriented government. Such a policy would also signal the rising strength of the EU as a foreign policy actor in Europe, ready and willing to defend democracy through active measures in the states on its borders. The potential pay-off could be significant, with the emergence of a new Belarus in Europe.

Thus far, the EU has not employed such a strategy of coercive diplomacy effectively for three reasons.

1) EU policy has not been coordinated amongst itself, with member states and other international organisations. This has weakened the EU's ability to present a united face to Minsk.
2) The EU has never offered sufficiently positive incentives to outweigh the radical demand that it has made of the authorities in Minsk to leave power.
3) Finally, Russia's alliance with Belarus has relieved the pressure from Europe on Minsk and offered incentives to solidify the status quo.

As a result, the EU has been incapable until now of pursuing effective coercive diplomacy towards Belarus. In 2006, such a policy would face similar difficulties. It is not certain that EU member states would be united behind such a policy, especially because of its

implications for relations with Russia. In addition, the opposition in Belarus is not more united or effective than it was several years ago. There is little reason to believe that Belarusian civil society, and the general public, is similar to Georgia's and Ukraine's before their revolutions. One must also recognise that support for Lukashenka and his model of 'non-transition' is real inside the country.

**Deep engagement**

The second option is for the EU to seek to promote democracy by engaging deeply with Belarus. A policy of engagement would protect EU values not only by emitting statements of criticism against the regime but also by an active presence inside Belarus. Such a policy would pursue three strategic goals over the longer term:

1) *Build profile* – The EU would seek to develop credibility in Belarus through an active presence on the ground.
2) *Reach new interlocutors* – The EU would seek to develop contacts across Belarusian society, in the regions and mayoralties, in small and large businesses, in schools and universities and civil society.
3) *Delink the question from Russia* – The EU would ensure that in addressing the Belarus question it is not dependent on passing through Moscow. The question of Belarus should be raised in the Russia-EU dialogue, but the EU must be able to raise issues credibly and effectively with Minsk itself.

A policy of engagement is premised on the idea that the EU should seek to persuade Belarusian society and its political elite that the EU is a real alternative to authoritarian rule and an Eastern orientation. This policy would also recognise that the process of change in Belarus is likely to be long term. On the whole, this approach would seek to develop a wider profile inside Belarus. At the same time, the EU would continue to support civil society in Belarus and maintain a tough line on non-democratic developments.

Engagement is not without costs. Opening a delegation in Minsk would lead the Union to suffer the same kind of pressure the OSCE faced with its presence. Nor would this presence in itself be likely to alter Lukashenka's thinking that external involvement with civil society should be controlled. Contacts with various lev-

els of Belarusian society are not likely to be more open. Moreover, the EU could incur another cost in the shape of a backlash: extending a hand to Belarus might be seen as sending a signal to other EU neighbours that the Union will turn a blind eye to violations of shared values.

## Catalysing change in a new neighbourhood

Both options have strengths and weaknesses. The challenge facing the EU is to navigate between them, drawing on their positive points and offsetting negative ones. Rather than choosing between two extreme options, the EU policy should be active at a number of different levels in order to embed positive change in the region surrounding Belarus and to catalyse change inside the country.

The key point is that EU must break out of the learned helplessness it has developed on Belarus, in which little is done because nothing is seen as being possible. The reality is that the EU is already doing a lot that impacts on Belarus. Many member states, and not only new ones, have very active programmes in Belarus, supporting civil society, culture, education and health care. The EU is a vital trading partner of Belarus. Put bluntly, the EU already does a lot; it should do more and do it better.

Certainly, the EU has become better at refining its policy towards Belarus. The Council Conclusions of November 2005 presented an interesting mixture of inducement and pressure to advance change. However, the 1997 framework remains in place. By contrast, a policy of catalysing change would operate on two levels.[34]

### 1) The regional dimension

The regional environment around Belarus is a vital factor to consider in terms of inducing the transformation of the country. The regional level has two aspects.

#### *First, make ENP work for Ukraine and Moldova*

The EU should seek to tie Belarus to the positive changes that are occurring around it in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine and Moldova. In this context, it is vital that the European Neighbourhood Policy be given sufficient resources to support the movement of Ukraine and Moldova towards greater integration with the EU. Real progress in

34. Most of these ideas are not original, but have been inspired by the proposals of EU member states and the work of numerous research institutions and governments. See, for example, the 2004 report of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Efficiency First, Towards a Coherent EU Strategy for Belarus*, K. Pelczynka-Natecz, A. Dukba, L. Poti and V. Vatapek, *The Eastern Policy of the EU: The Visegrad Countries' Perspective* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, February 2003); G. Gromadzki and J. Boralynski, *The Half-Open Door: The Eastern Border of the Enlarged EU* (On the Future of Europe Policy Paper no. 2: Warsaw, March 2001); G. Gromadzki et al, *The Enlarged EU and Ukraine – New Relations* (Stefan Batory Foundation with CEPS: Warsaw, 2003); A. Naumczuk et al, *The Forgotten Neighbour – Belarus in the context of EU Enlargement to the East* (On the Future of Europe Policy paper no. 4: Warsaw, September 2001); and *New neighbourhood – New Association: Ukraine and the EU at the beginning of the 21st Century* (On the Future of Europe Policy Paper no. 6: Warsaw, March 2002).

Ukraine and Moldova would alter the immediate neighbourhood *fundamentally*. Their success would make the alternative that the EU could present to Belarus credible. Significant progress in Ukraine and Moldova could act as a magnet to Belarusian society and parts of the political elite.

*Second, raise Belarus in the Russia-EU dialogue*

Belarus must be an element of the EU-Russia dialogue. The EU has sought to place Belarus on the agenda of its political dialogue with Moscow, but with great difficulty because of Russian reticence. The increasing importance of Belarus for the enlarged EU makes it all the more important for Belarus to feature in EU-Russian discussions. The possibility of a future crisis arising there, on the lines of Ukraine or, more likely, Kyrgyzstan, makes a real dialogue all the more vital. The agreement at the Moscow 2005 Russia-EU summit on a roadmap for building a 'common space on external security' offers an opportunity for increased dialogue on areas 'adjacent' to the EU and Russia. Belarus is a prime candidate.

**2) The EU dimension**

There are seven areas of policy for the EU itself.

*First, embed Belarus into the region*

The Polish government proposed before membership that the EU develop an 'Eastern Dimension.' In the evolution of the *Wider Europe* initiative, however, the notion of developing regional cooperation between neighbours lost ground.

While the specific idea of an 'Eastern Dimension' is probably unrealistic, the EU should seek to embed Belarus deeply into the region that surrounds it. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Programmes offer an instrument with which to start developing a regional approach to Belarus that would advance a range of EU interests at the regional level, such as cross-border issues, Justice and Home Affairs questions, transport and infrastructure concerns. These programmes also have the advantage of not being Minsk-centric.

*Second, develop a profile inside Belarus*

In 2005, the EU decided to open a regionalised delegation in Minsk. This is an excellent idea. However, the EU must consider opening a

full delegation. The OSCE is no longer able to stand in for the EU, constrained as it is by a painful wider reform process. Having a full presence on the ground would provide the EU with a 'face' in Belarus – without this, the EU does not really 'exist' for Belarusian society. An EC delegation would also be important in providing well-founded and up-to-date analysis of domestic Belarusian developments for EU structures.

*Third, make the most of EIDHR*

One change in EU policy in 2004 was the decision to exploit the flexibility offered by the *European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights* (EIDHR) and the Decentralised Cooperation Instrument in terms of funding and supporting non-registered NGOs and undertaking other measures without the explicit support of the central government. This change was confirmed in the Council Conclusions of November 2005.

This is vital in the case of Belarus, and should be exploited to the full, including through shifting the allocation of financial resources to EIDHR from TACIS. EU support to the dissemination of independent information in Belarus started in Autumn 2005 with the launch of the EU-funded Deutsche Welle Radio 15-minute daily reports in October (causing controversy for broadcasting in the Russian language) The EU has allocated two million euros for further broadcasting activities in 2006-2008. These measures can only be a start.

Over the longer term, the EU should aim to widen its range of interlocutors inside Belarus to include regional elites, trade unions, business circles and educational centres. Training and assistance programmes directed at these targets are vital for supporting long-term institution building in Belarus. The November 2005 Conclusions stated that the EU would engage with Belarusian officials below the ministerial level; this opening must be exploited fully.

In 2006, the Union should consider the idea of creating an external fund for Belarus, an EU-wide *Fund for Supporting Freedoms in Belarus*, that would have partial EU funding and member state support, and be open to other sources of financing also. This Fund would provide the EU with greater flexibility and rapidity in the targeting of support to democratic forces inside and outside Belarus.

*Fourth, be engaged in the elections*

In the run-up to the 2006 elections, the EU has little choice but to become involved – its absence would only confirm the futility for Belarusian citizens looking towards Europe. To this end, the EU should start negotiating the organisation of an OSCE-led election-monitoring mission with the Belarusian authorities. Even if there is a little chance one will ever be put on the ground – the symbol of Lukashenka's rejection of international legitimacy matters. The November 2005 Conclusions put forward many ideas to this effect.

In conjunction, the EU and member states should seek to bolster the visibility and credibility of the opposition candidate. It is very unlikely that he will win, but these elections may represent the opportunity to destroy the pervading image of the opposition as divided, amateurish and ineffective. The opposition campaign should be united, professional and effective – even if it stands little chance of winning. For this, high-level EU statements, speeches and meetings on Belarus and with civil society representatives would be very important.

The transatlantic dimension is vital here. In early 2005, Javier Solana and Condoleezza Rice met jointly with Belarusian opposition leaders. The EU and US should organise many more such meetings in the run-up to the elections.

*Fifth, consider further coercive measures*

The EU should also consider how to tighten its pressure on certain leaders of the Minsk regime. The targeted sanctions could be widened to other members of the top leadership. The question of investigating and freezing assets (estimated at several billions of US dollars) held in Europe and abroad by Lukashenka must be considered and raised at a fitting time in a policy of increasing pressure on the top leaders.

At the same time, it is important that the EU combine such pressure with measures to simplify visa regulations for certain categories of Belarusian citizens (scholars, students and members of civil society).

*Sixth, activate Member state resources*

There is much that the EU can do in Belarus, but member states can do even more. The EU is so constrained by internal regulations on financial allocations that it can become paralysed when working with a state that acts contrary to EU interests and values. Belarus is

good example of this paralysis. As such, it is imperative that member states pick up where the EU leaves off.

One should note that member states are already deeply involved in Belarus, with a range of programmes supporting civil society, education, health care and cultural activities. It is important that an inventory be taken by the EU of member states' activities to share information and avoid duplication. The EU could consider framing a *Belarus Task Force*, composed of willing member states. In addition, non-EU states and regional fora could participate in the Belarus Task Force. In late 2005, for example, the Nordic Council and the Commission agreed on joint support to the exiled European Humanities Institute, now based in Vilnius after being forced from Minsk. This flagship example of international cooperation can be replicated in other areas.

As a whole, increased member state activities could include funding for radio and television broadcasting from outside Belarusian borders, forging ties between European trade unions and Belarusian structures, varied forms of support for the Belarusian opposition. The role for the EU here should be to provide a framework for member state activities and to help their coordination. Most notably, the Polish idea of creating a fully independent Belarus media could be supported by EU financing.

On a non-political level, for example, EU member states could consider launching a coordinated programme of cultural exchanges with Belarus where hardly a week would go by without a visit from a European cultural project. Such activities are important because they would help render the EU less virtual for Belarusian society. Such exchanges would also help break down Belarusian isolation.

### *Finally, focus in 2006 on Chernobyl*

The Chernobyl disaster occurred on April 25, 1986. Twenty years on, Belarus was the country most severely affected by the nuclear reactor disaster.[35] Twenty three per cent of its territory is contaminated with caesium-137 at high levels. At the time of the accident, 2.2 million people lived in this area. At the beginning of 1996, 1.84 million people, including almost 500, 000 children, still lived in the contaminated territories. As an example of a non-political initiative, the EU could declare 2006 a *Year of Remembrance for Chernobyl* and launch a multi-dimensional programme targeted at Belarusian youth affected and at risk.[36] Discrete programmes for Belaru-

35. For more information, see the Swiss website: http://www.chernobyl.info/index.php?userhash=10913702&navID=5&lID=2

36. The author wishes to thank Pavol Demes for sharing his thinking on EU policy towards Belarus. This idea, as many others, is his.

sian youth already exist but more could be done and in a much more high-profile way that would bolster the EU's visibility and credibility in Belarus.

## Conclusions

It is time for the EU to act more confidently with Belarus. The cycle of learned helplessness from 1997 must be broken. The measures taken in 2004 and 2005 are positive, but much more could be done. Fifteen minute daily reports in Russian are not enough to break Lukashenka's control over Belarusian society. The EU should seek to support the positive changes occurring *around* Belarus in a manner that combines with specific policies to catalyse change *inside* the country. More than anything, the EU must become credible in Belarus.

In line with the original inspiration of Jean Monnet, if the EU cannot solve the Belarusian problem itself then it should alter the context around it. For changes to occur inside Belarus, the country should be deeply embedded into the positive trends underway in the new Eastern Europe. This, combined with targeted measures towards Belarus itself, may catalyse change.

## *Belarus*


*Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection*

# About the authors

**Alexandra Goujon** est docteur en science politique et chargée de cours à l'Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris. Boursière de la Fondation Robert Schuman (2004-2005), elle a récemment publié « Les nouveaux voisins de l'Union européenne. Stratégies identitaires et politiques en Ukraine, Biélorussie, Moldavie », *Les Etudes du CERI*, Paris, no. 109, septembre 2004 et « L'Europe en quête d'identité : légitimation et politisation de la politique européenne de voisinage », *Politique européenne*, no. 15, hiver 2005, pp. 137-65.

**Dov Lynch** is Senior Research Fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies. He has a Doctorate in International Relations from St Antony's College, Oxford. He has a Tenured Lectureship in War Studies, at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. He has been University Lecturer in International Relations/Russian Foreign Policy at the University of Oxford in 1999 and Research Fellow at St Antony's College. He has been Research fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (London). At the EU Institute, Dov Lynch directs research on EU-Russian relations, security developments in Russia and the former Soviet Union, as well as EU policies towards the region. He has published with *International Affairs* and *The Washington Quarterly*. Recent publications include *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States* (USIP: 2004) and 'Russia faces Europe' (EUISS *Chaillot Paper* no. 60: 2003).

**Clelia Rontoyanni** obtained her Ph.D on the topic of Russia's contemporary policies towards Belarus and Ukraine from the University of Glasgow (2001). She subsequently worked as a Research Fellow at the Russia and Eurasia Programme of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, supported by the British Economic and Social Research Council. Her recent publications include: 'Belarus: an authoritarian exception from the model of post-Communist democratic transition?' (with E. Korosteleva) in T. Flockhart (ed.), *Socialising Democratic Norms: The Role of International Organizations for the Construction of Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2005); and 'Security or prosperity? Belarusian and Ukrainian choices' (with A. Wilson) in R. Legvold and C. Wallander (eds.), *Swords and Sustenance: The Economics of Security in Belarus and Ukraine* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004). She currently works for the Delegation of the European Commission in Moscow. The views expressed in her contribution to this *Chaillot Paper* are her own and do not represent the official position of the European Commission.

**Vitali Silitski** has been a Reagan-Fascell fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy in 2004-2005. Prior to this, he worked as an Associate Professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, a position he was forced to leave in 2003 for publicly criticising the government of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. He works as a freelancer for several Belarusian and international publications, including RFE/RL, Transitions Online, and Freedom House *Nations in Transit* report.

**Dmitri V. Trenin**, Ph.D, is a Senior Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Deputy Director/Director of Studies of the Carnegie Moscow Center. Before joining Carnegie in 1994 he served in the Soviet and Russian army. For several years, Trenin taught area studies at the Defence University in Moscow. He was also a senior fellow at NATO Defence College (1993) and, upon retirement from the military, a visiting professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (1993-1994). From 1994 – 1997, Trenin was also a senior research fellow at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences. He is the author of several books, including *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (co-authored, 2004), *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization* (two printings, 2002 and 2001), *A Strategy for Stable Peace. Toward a Euro Atlantic Security Community* (co-authored, 2002), *Russia's China Problem* (1998), and *Baltic Chance: The Baltic States, Russia and the West in the Emerging Greater Europe* (1997). Amongst others, he has edited also *The Russian Military: Power and Policy* (2004) and *Ambivalent Neighbors: The EU, NATO and the Price of Membership* (2003).

**Przemyslaw Zurawski vel Grajewski** is currently the EPP-ED (European People's Party and European Democrats) expert on Eastern policy at the European Parliament. He has an MA and a Ph.D in History from the Department of History of International Relations of the University of Lódz. His publications include *Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union – Baltic and Mediterranean Aspects* (published in 1998). He has been employed with the Office of the Minister of National Defence for Defence Policy Planning of the Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, the Office of the Undersecretary of State, Government Plenipotentiary for European Integration and Foreign Assistance – Council of Ministers, as well as with the Institute (now Faculty) of International Studies of the University of Lódz and the European Institute in Lódz.

## *Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| AMG | OSCE Assistance and Monitoring Group |
| CFSP | Common Foreign and Security Policy |
| CIS | Commonwealth of Independent States |
| CFE | Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe |
| EIDHR | European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights |
| ENP | European Neighbourhood Policy |
| ESDP | European Security and Defence Policy |
| EU | European Union |
| GAERC | EU General Affairs and External Relations Council |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| IISEPS | Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies |
| KGB | State Security Committee |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| OSCE | Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe |
| PACE | Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe |
| PCA | Partnership and Cooperation Agreement |
| TACIS | Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States |
| UN | United Nations |
| USD | United States dollar |
| USSR | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics |

# *Chaillot Papers*

**All** *Institute publications*
**can be accessed via the Institute's website:**
**www.iss-eu.org**

**n°84** International terrorism: the changing threat and the EU's response **October 2005**
*Paul Wilkinson*

**n°83** Disasters, Diseases, Disruptions: a new D-drive for the EU **September 2005**
*Stefan Elbe, Urs Luterbacher, Antonio Missiroli, Bengt Sundelius and Marco Zupi ; edited by Antonio Missiroli*

**n°82** EU-US burdensharing: who does what? **September 2005**
*Gustav Lindstrom*

**n°81** The question of Serbia **August 2005**
*Judy Batt*

**n°80** Promoting security sector governance in the EU's neighbourhood **July 2005**
*Heiner Hänggi and Fred Tanner*

**n°79** Looking into Iraq **July 2005**
*Martin van Bruinessen, Jean-François Daguzan, Andrzej Kapiszewski, Walter Posch and Álvaro de Vasconcelos; edited by Walter Posch*

**n°78** The European Union and the United Nations – Partners in effective multilateralism **June 2005**
*Sven Biscop, Francesco Francioni, Kennedy Graham with Tânia Felício, Jeffrey Laurenti and Thierry Tardy; foreword by Jean-Marie Guéhenno; edited by Martin Ortega*

**n°77** Effective non-proliferation – The European Union and the 2005 NPT Review Conference **April 2005**
*Darryl Howlett & John Simpson, Harald Müller and Bruno Tertrais; edited by Burkard Schmitt*

# *Books*

Defence procurement in the European Union – The current debate **2005**
Report of an EUISS Task Force
*Chairman and Rapporteur: Burkard Schmitt*

EU Security and Defence Policy — the first five years (1999-2004) **2004**
*Martti Ahtisaari, Michel Barnier, Carl Bildt, Elmar Brok & Norbert Gresch, Robert Cooper, Judy Dempsey, Lamberto Dini, Jean-Louis Gergorin & Jean Bétermier, Philip H. Gordon, Jean-Yves Haine, Gustav Lindstrom, Antonio Missiroli, Alberto Navarro, Martin Ortega, Ferdinando Riccardi, Alexander Rondos, Burkard Schmitt, Rainer Schuwirth, Theo Sommer and Laurent Zecchini; edited by Nicole Gnesotto; preface by Javier Solana*

European defence — a proposal for a White Paper **2004**
*André Dumoulin, Jan Foghelin, François Heisbourg, William Hopkinson, Marc Otte, Tomas Ries, Lothar Rühl, Stefano Silvestri, Hans-Bernhard Weisserth, Rob de Wijk; Chair: Nicole Gnesotto, Rapporteur: Jean-Yves Haine*

The existence of Belarus – Europe's 'last dictatorship' – on its borders poses a problem for the newly enlarged EU. The authoritarian regime in Belarus may be fearful of the changes that have recently occurred in its vicinity yet it continues to rule with confidence. The 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine has become a model of inspiration to those both inside and outside Belarus seeking regime change. Yet the case of Belarus is different from Ukraine or Georgia before they experienced their revolutions. Although Belarus is now isolated on the fringe of Europe, its ties with Russia, increasingly wary of the influence of the EU and NATO in the post-Soviet space, remain strong.

EU policy since 1997 has sought to put pressure on Belarus and induce positive change through the prospect of renewed ties. But this policy has not succeeded in fostering the growth of democracy in Belarus. In view of the events in Georgia and Ukraine, and also of its own new role as a foreign policy actor, the EU must consider the possibility of a crisis arising in Belarus either before or after the 2006 elections there and how it should prepare for such an eventuality.

This *Chaillot Paper*, edited and introduced by Dov Lynch and featuring contributions from a variety of academics who are specialists on the topic, explores the various aspects of the problem that Belarus poses for the EU. The first three chapters review the state of affairs within the country, while the other chapters consider external factors including the relationship of Poland and Lithuania with Belarus. The final chapter examines EU policy towards Belarus in the light of recent changes in the political landscape, and seeks to outline a new approach that could catalyse change in Belarus.

*published by*
*the European Union*
*Institute for Security Studies*
*43 avenue du*
*Président Wilson*
*F-75775 Paris cedex 16*
*phone: +33 (0)1 56 89 19 30*
*fax: +33 (0)1 56 89 19 31*
*e-mail: institute@iss-eu.org*
**www.iss-eu.org**
€ 10