



The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans

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Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	2
1. THE 9 AUGUST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND ITS AFTERMATH	3
1.1. Police brutality against peaceful protesters	3
1.2. Crackdown of opposition	3
2. THE COLLAPSE OF ADAPTIVE AUTHORITARIANISM	4
2.1. Broken social contract	4
2.2. A unifying opposition	5
2.3. Deadlock	6
3. RUSSIA: AIMING TO ENSURE MONOPOLY POWERS	7
4. THE EUROPEAN UNION: A SYMBOLIC RESPONSE	8
5. FUTURE AVENUES FOR AN EFFECTIVE EU FOREIGN POLICY	9
CONCLUSION	11
REFERENCES	12

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



Introduction

Most commentators forecasted that the anti-Lukashenka movement would not maintain the impressive momentum that sparked unprecedented protests following the 9 August presidential election. Four months on from the election, as winter looms, the Belarusian people continue to defy the odds through persistent mass action of admirable resilience. It is imperative that progressives and democrats across the EU remain acutely aware of the moral duty to sustain the conversation and raise our academic and political engagement as a proof of solidarity vis-à-vis fellow Europeans fighting against authoritarianism. The values powering such historic awakening in Belarus align with the backbone of what the EU is said to stand for: democracy, freedom and human rights. Hence, Europeans cannot afford to fall into the trap of self-indulgence, cynicism and complacency at a time when the Belarusian people are in dire need of allyship and support. As long as basic human rights are on the line, the EU's value-oriented foreign policy should view Belarus as question of utmost priority and interest. To that end, the current dossier takes stock of these last four months of epoch-making action in Belarus. Despite the enormous media attention that the Eastern European country has attracted over the last months, Belarus's political system has not occupied a prominent place in the focus of Western scholars over the last decades. It is thus primordial to understand the myriad of drivers that explain the eruption of "real politics" after decades of relative stability. A thorough understanding of the dynamic context in Belarus will allow us to delve into the numerous dilemmas facing both the regime and the opposition movement as well as the possibilities available for EU policy action in the short- and medium-term.



Fernando Rejón

has recently joined FEPS as a trainee. He is a student at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, UCL, where he is studying for a BA in History, Politics and Economics. His main fields of interest include progressive politics, social policy, and the politics of eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space.



The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



1. The 9 August Presidential Election and its aftermath

President Lukashenka's rigging of the 9 August presidential election can hardly come as a surprise for anyone familiar with Belarus's recent history. The ODIHR, the OSCE vote-monitoring task force was not invited to observe the election. Indeed, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (2020) has reported that the government drew on early voting as its main modus operandi to falsify the election's results and, official figures of early voting turnout point an all-time high record of 42%. During the five days prior to the election, polling boxes remained completely unsupervised which permitted the government-controlled Electoral Commission to blatantly tame the results (Wesolowsky, 2020). According to the official count, Lukashenka won a landslide with 81% of the vote, while Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya fell short of 10.1% in the overall count.

1.1. POLICE BRUTALITY AGAINST PEACEFUL PROTESTERS

Ample evidence of large-scale violations of election procedures and the clear falsification of the results triggered the outbreak of protests across the country. Thousands of Belarusians took to the streets to demand the holding of free and fair elections and the ousting of President Lukashenko. The response launched by the regime and law-enforcement officials was breathtakingly violent during the first days of demonstrations. While the government's opacity makes it extremely difficult to measure and quantify the real magnitude of the crackdown, recent reports provide a bleak picture of widespread violence and alarming brutality. Immediately after the election, masked police officers attempted to disperse protesters through the use of combat weapons such as stun grenades and rubber bullets. Belarusian NGO Human Rights Center Viasna (2020) denounces the unlawful detention of at least 16,000 people since the start of the election campaign. Moreover, Viasna alongside the Belarusian

Helsinki Committee have set forward an appeal to the UN Committee against Torture on behalf of 47 people known to have been subject to torture and ill-treatment at KGB (unreformed secret police) detention centres (Viasna, 2020). OpenDemocracy alongside Mediazona (Litavrin et al 2020), a Russian media outlet, have published a leaked data archive from Belarus' Investigative Committee, an official governmental body, containing a detailed account of individual cases of police violence and torture perpetrated against peaceful demonstrators. The data reveals that at least 1,373 people suffered from injuries as a result of police violence during August and September alone. The report describes how police officers often aimed at protesters' vital organs when shooting rubber bullets leading to severe injuries and even death as it was the case for 34-year-old Alyaksandr Taraikousky who was murdered by a rubber bullet shot to the chest. Distressingly, the report likewise sheds light on instances of sexual violence and rape carried out by law enforcement officers against various detainees.

1.2. CRACKDOWN OF OPPOSITION

Widespread repression of great intensity in the first weeks of public revolt was coupled with targeted action against leading opposition figures in the following months. The main institutional body of the anti-Lukashenka movement, the so-called Coordination Council, has been de facto dismantled after nearly all of its presidium members have been either imprisoned or forced to flee the country. Opposition leaders Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsekalo fled Belarus in fear of their safety. Similarly, Maryya Kalesnikava was abducted by masked secret police officers and brought to the border of neighbouring Ukraine for deportation. In an act of inspiring courage, Kalesnikava is reported to have ripped up her passport in order to prevent deportation and is now facing charges of attempting to threaten national security.

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



2. The collapse of adaptive authoritarianism

Belarus has been cited ad nauseum as “Europe’s last dictatorship” but fewer attempts have been made to comprehend the factors that explain the longevity of Lukashenka’s regime. Political scientist Matthew Frear (2011) coined the term “adaptive authoritarianism” to capture the essence of the Belarusian political system. Adaptive authoritarianism refers to a sense of “pragmatism, expediency and opportunism”. In political terms, adaptive authoritarianism encompasses the combination of different elements: electoral authoritarianism, that is the holding of façade elections and managed pluralism, performance legitimacy through economic progress, the manipulation of collective memory and public consciousness and, crucially, employing coercion to varying levels of intensity. The secret of Lukashenka’s success has been to be flexible and deploy a stick-and-carrot strategy both domestically and in the international arena. In doing so, the regime has pre-emptively stifled any potential threat throughout decades such as the 2006 “denim revolution”, the 2011 clapping protests as well as the protests against the so-called “parasite tax” in 2017.

The situation in 2020, however, is unprecedented as the scale of public unrest has reached extraordinary magnitude. As we shall further explore, the “soft” elements of Lukashenka’s adaptive system have collapsed and hence Lukashenka is now relying on coercion alone. Belarus’ waning economy, as well as an energised opposition can be singled out as contributing factors leading to the dismay of adaptive authoritarianism. Lukashenka certainly believed that the protests would be short-lived and that the regime would effectively suppress demonstrations within weeks. However, this strategy has clearly backfired. Public outrage at police brutality and ruthless violence alienated supportive layers of the Belarusian public and contributed to the politization of formerly passive citizens who felt compelled to join the protests against the regime. State violence stopped being perceived as an abstract concept as a large number of people were impacted by such wide-encompassing levels of brutality. Social media,

chiefly encrypted Telegram channels, allowed protesters to bypass regime-controlled media outlets and internet bans to spread information, display an impressive level of self-organization, anticipate the regime’s movements and effectively reach out to different segments of the Belarusian people. For thousands of people, Lukashenko ceased to be the nation’s *Batka* (father) and was revealed as the ruthless dictator he has always been.

2.1. BROKEN SOCIAL CONTRACT

It would be simplistic to posit that Lukashenka has remained in power solely through the steady application of state coercion. As noted above, Lukashenko’s adaptive system has largely relied on the regime’s capacity to deliver material goods and be associated with the betterment of living standards for the Belarusian people. Haiduk et al. (2010) explore this element of Belarus’ political system through the lens of the social contract theory, developed by prominent XVII century French thinkers. A polity’s social contract is based on a non-written or tacit agreement between the authorities and the society stipulating mutual obligations and limitations for both parties. In the case of Belarus, a non-democratic state with a weak civil society, we find a vertical social contract where the package of obligations and responsibilities has been stipulated from above. The authors attempted to identify support for Belarus’ social contract by carrying out large surveys among different sectors of the Belarusian population. As of 2007, when the study was carried out, researchers found that a majority of 45% of respondents agreed with a social contract in which “the state secures civil peace and political stability, which justifies limitations on some civil freedom”, whereas only 36% disagreed with the latter statement. There is robust evidence suggesting that Belarus’ social contract was enhanced by a satisfactory economic performance during Lukashenko’s first 15 years in power.

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



The Belarusian economy grew by an astonishing average of 9.4% between 2003 and 2008 as Russia's energy subsidies and a favourable international context allowed the Belarusian economy to temporarily circumvent its structural deficiencies. During the first decade of the century, state-run enterprises constituted the bedrock of Belarus' social safety net as a source of employment for millions of citizens whose livelihoods were tied to state's payroll.

However, numerous indicators suggest that the social contract which has hitherto cemented state-society, is in clear decay and, as a corollary, increasingly large segments of the Belarusian society feel increasingly incentivised to join the protests and withdraw their loyalty for Lukashenka's regime (Tokbolat, 2020). The drop of oil prices as well as Russia's reduction of energy subsidies induced the Belarusian economy into recession in 2015, for the first time since 1995.¹ Faced with mounting macroeconomic imbalances, the government shifted its policy and began to prioritise fiscal stability over increases in output and wages (Åslund, 2020). In 2016, the government increased household utility tariffs (water, electricity, etc) and extended the retirement age for men from 60 to 63 by 2023). The government dropped price controls of essential goods and decreased state support to SOEs, leading to wage devaluation. Many people formerly employed by the state searched for better job opportunities in a more competitive private sector, on which the state's economy is increasingly dependent for labour absorption and economic growth. While 67.7% of Belarus' labour force was employed in the public sector in 2011, that figure has shrank to 57.7% in 2018 (Papko, 2020). Furthermore, Lukashenka's neglectful mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the country's economic issues and, crucially, it mobilized grass-root civil society movements to step in, in light of the government's absenteeism.

The absence of reliable sociological research makes it difficult to measure how the regime's support base may have morphed in recent years but it seems clear that the long-term economic decline of the Belarusian economy may have pushed numerous segments of the Belarusian society to voice discontent with the existing social contract. Workers from state-run enterprises initiated industrial action against the regime in the last weeks of August. Though it appears that these actions have

been halted after threats of dismissal from state authorities, this phenomenon certainly signals a tectonic shift in what constituted once Lukashenka's bedrock of social support. Moreover, protests are not exclusively concentrated in Minsk but have rather disseminated to rural areas where Lukashenka was largely uncontested in previous decades. The collapse of Belarus' social contract means that citizens' expectations are no longer met by the state's provisions. As a result, these grievances have been channelled by the protest-led movement that has stunned the world in recent months.

2.2. A UNIFYING OPPOSITION

As seen above, general dissatisfaction with the country's economic standing underpins Lukashenka's loss of support. However, it is likewise crucial to analyse how the anti-regime opposition succeeded in broadening its social support by framing the election as a plebiscite on Lukashenka's figure and the country's calamitous economy. Following the patterns of pre-emptive coercion², the main opposition candidates were barred by the regime-controlled Electoral Commission from competing in the election. The three main male candidates were subsequently replaced by three women whom Lukashenka dismissingly referred to as "poor things" (Wesolowsky, 2020). Lukashenka's sexist-driven underestimation would turn out to be a grave mistake as Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kolesnikova and Veronika Tsepkalo succeeded in conforming an energised anti-Lukashenka coalition that drew enormous crowds to public rallies during a seemingly competitive campaign.

The pro-democracy movement embraced a unifying discursive strategy aimed at mobilising a large coalition of Belarusians, united almost exclusively in its opposition to Lukashenka. The anti-regime opposition did not showcase any meaningful ideological pretensions and its political platform was limited to the ousting of Lukashenka, the holding of fresh elections and a persuasive critique of the country's socio-economic decline (Artiukh, 2020). When protests first erupted, some pundits intended to draw parallels with Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution in 2014. However, the anti-Lukashenka movement this

¹ See Papko et al, (2020).

² See Wilson, A. (2020).

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



time around is not significantly shaped by a nationalist narrative and the opposition led by Tsikhanouskaya has consistently refused to present itself as a pro-Western alternative to Lukashenka's Russia-oriented regime (Kuznetsov, 2020) As a result, protests against the regime now reflect a multi-constituency coalition that goes far beyond Belarus' nationalist opposition from the 1990s. Demonstrations encompass a wide array of social groups: the liberal urban youth, businessmen and representatives of Belarus' booming IT sector and, crucially, the movement's mobilisation capacity has also reached out to those socially and economically disenchanted in Lukashenka's stagnant economy.

Regardless of how the conflict unfolds in the coming months, the summer of 2020 marks the moment in which the anti-Lukashenka movement attained majoritarian social support. The opposition effectively reformed its discursive strategy to capitalise on existing grievances and galvanise a cross-cultural and inter-class coalition that is seriously challenging Lukashenka's regime for the first time in twenty-six years.

2.3. DEADLOCK

As of today, Belarus remains paralysed in a profound deadlock. Lukashenka's legitimacy is irremediably damaged as Belarus' model of adaptive authoritarianism is in clear decay. However, while the regime's overreliance on coercion does not assure its endurance in the medium- and long-run, the strategy of state violence levied against protesters seems to have secured Lukashenka's short-term survival. The country's economic and political elites have not shown significant symptoms of division and law enforcement officers remain loyal to the regime. Moreover, as we shall further explore, Russia has thrown its backing to Lukashenka, alleviating the regime's geopolitical isolation. While protests have continued almost on a daily basis, attendance seems to be shrinking as the population shows understandable signs of fatigue in the face of the regime's unwavering repression. The Coordination Council has been de facto dismantled and thus, the anti-Lukashenka movement lacks not only a clear leadership, but also any institutional outgrowth that may effectively channel the people's demands. Tsikhanouskaya launched a so-called

“people's ultimatum”, as an attempt to energise the movement's steam and ratchet up pressure against the regime. The ultimatum's deadline expired with no apparent reaction from the government and thus Tsikhanouskaya called on a nationwide strike. The initiative garnered ample support among students and workers from the private sectors and large columns of protesters filled the streets of Minsk. However, Tsikhanouskaya's call for national unity did not overcome the regime's intimidatory tactics in key state-run enterprises. 100 workers were arrested at Grodno Azot (Walker, 2020), the country's state-run chemical factory and virtually all workers from Minsk Tractor factory appear to have conceded to the authorities' pressure (Romaliyskaya, 2020). Meanwhile, as repression against protesters does not ease, Lukashenka appears determined to regear the crisis through a constitutional reform of doubtful credentials. As long as Lukashenka does not permit the opposition to develop institutional structures and participate in a meaningful dialogue as a legitimate interlocutor, Lukashenka's plans can only be considered as a mere sham intended to debilitate the movement's momentum.



The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



3. Russia: aiming to ensure monopoly powers

Lukashenka's flexible and adaptive rule similarly finds its manifestations in the country's geopolitical standing prior to the outbreak of social unrest. Through a multi-vector foreign policy, Belarus has maintained a precarious balancing act between Russia and the West, chiefly the EU. Prior to the presidential election, Lukashenka had heralded a process of diplomatic diversification and mending of relations with the West, which successfully led to the lifting of EU sanctions and the state visit of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Minsk last year. Lukashenka's discourse during the campaign denoted clear anti-Russian overtones as he went as far as to proclaim that "our brotherly relations with Russia have been changed to become a partnership" (Eckel, 2020). Notwithstanding Belarus' extensive economic dependency on Moscow, Lukashenka has adamantly opposed Russia's long-desired political union and the takeover of Belarus' unreformed economy by Russia's oligarchy (Socor, 2020). The vertical structure of Lukashenka's rule and the cohesion of the country's nomenklatura and economic elites have enabled Lukashenka to preclude further Russian encroachment in Belarus' political and economic structures over the last decades (Gould-Davis, 2020). All in all, Lukashenka's relations with Putin's Russia were characterized by uneasiness and mistrust in the years preceding the current political crisis and indeed, Russia's strategic leverage in Belarus was in decline since 2014.

The outbreak of domestic public revolt is leading to the crumbling of Lukashenka's geopolitical house of cards. Facing international ostracism from the West, Lukashenka has been left with no option but to turn to Russia's security and economic umbrella in order to secure his rule. The current political crisis has squandered Lukashenka's bargaining power vis-à-vis Russia, which sees the situation as uniquely favourable for the attainment of deeper economic and political integration between the two Slavic countries. At a meeting in Sochi on 15 September, Putin threw his backing behind Lukashenko and announced

the extension of a \$1.5bn loan meant to salvage Belarus' calamitous economy. While both leaders publicly reiterated that Russia's economic aid was exclusively motivated by longstanding historical and cultural ties, it is evident that Russia's support does carry political conditionality. Putin views Lukashenka's plans for a constitutional reform as an immense opportunity to replace Belarus' presidential system with a more fragmented parliamentary republic that would be closely aligned with Russia's political and economic interests (Slunkin, 2020). To that end, Moscow's envisaged reform would greatly weaken presidential powers by means of dispersing them to other more amenable representatives of Belarus' elites. Moreover, Russia will be trying to build a robust political infrastructure of parties, media organisations, cultural and educational associations that would further consolidate Moscow's veto powers over domestic decision-making in Belarus (Goble, 2020). After years of frustration at Lukashenka's unfulfilled pledges to liberalise Belarus' economy, Putin ultimately pursues the takeover of key economic assets by Russian oligarchy in the near future (Shraibman, 2020). For the time being, Russia believes that Lukashenka's acute vulnerability ensures his cooperation to steer a transitional period out of the ongoing stalemate. Moreover, the immediate fall of a veteran post-Soviet ruler into the hands of a democratizing movement would set a dangerous precedent as Putin is poised to reach 24 years in power with declining levels of popularity. Nevertheless, Russia is well-aware the Lukashenka's days in power are numbered as his loss of legitimacy among the Belarusian people constitutes an irreversible phenomenon. Russia will patiently exert its leverage to arbitrate a regime change that would ultimately culminate in the rise of a new and more obedient leadership that will put an end to Lukashenka's unaccommodating approach to Moscow's demands (Samokurov, 2020)

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



4. The European Union: a symbolic response

The EU does not have a monolithic foreign policy and hence, the EU's policy action springs from the bargaining among Member States, which tend to hold differing views, priorities and even perceptions of how the EU's foreign policy should look like. Belarus is no exception. The adoption of a unanimous response was hampered in an arduous negotiation by a divergent sense of urgency and sensitiveness to the crisis in Belarus among Member States. For weeks, the Cypriot government derailed the attainment of unanimity in the Council by linking action in Belarus to a tougher EU position vis-à-vis Turkey, a completely unrelated matter. Other Member States, namely France and Germany, advocated for more cautious response which sees regional stability and strategic engagement with Russia as two goals of utmost priority in the EU's neighbourhood policy (Dempsey, 2020). Conversely, Poland and Lithuania have acted as the leading voices demanding the EU to launch a more vigorous response (Jegelevicius, 2020). Both Member States have offered shelter to Belarus' political refugees, including opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, and have vehemently argued for the approval of individual sanctions for a wide list of individuals, including Lukashenka himself. Lithuania and Poland have urged the EU to provide robust financial assistance to the victims of Lukashenka's repression and in a joint non-paper (European External Action Service, 2020), the two Eastern European countries commended the EU to offer a package of economic support conditioned on democratising reforms in Belarus. Similarly, the main political families in the European Parliament have passed consecutive resolutions, prompting Member States and the European Commission to step up pressure against the Belarusian regime. In light of the murder of peaceful protester Raman Bandarenka, the MEPs demanded the European Union to support the opening of an independent investigation on the ominous violations of human rights perpetrated by Lukashenka's regime (EP, 2020). The Sakharov Prize has been awarded to the democratic opposition in Belarus (EP, 2020). All in all, the bargaining among Member States

resulted in a minimal coordinated response predicated on a series of steps. The EU does not recognize the results of the elections, condemns the deployment of state violence against peaceful demonstrators and demands the prompt release of those unlawfully arrested. Likewise, the EU supports the proposal of the OSCE, of which both Russia and Belarus are members, for mediation and dialogue in Belarus. The EU has committed to strengthening support to Belarusian civil society. To that end, the EU intends to repurpose the Eastern Partnership in order to move financial assistance away from the government and re-direct it to support independent civil society organizations engaged in the quest for democracy. Though the Council experienced significant delay, EU ministers for Foreign Affairs eventually agreed on the imposition of targeted sanctions against the individuals responsible for rigging the election and the violent crackdown on protesters. At the time of writing, the restrictive measures, a travel ban and an assets freeze, apply to more than 59 individuals, including Alexander Lukashenka and his son and National Security Adviser Viktor Lukashenka (Council of the European Union, 2020).



The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



5. Future Avenues for an Effective EU Foreign Policy

Any appraisal of the EU's possibilities insofar as Belarus is concerned must begin with an exercise of necessary humility. As opposed to Russia's multifaceted and well-institutionalized strategy toward Belarus, the EU's institutional, economic and political channels to exert influence on the Eastern neighbour are limited. Though the EU has granted financial assistance to Belarus through the Eastern Partnership, this is hardly comparable to the enormous economic dependence that ties the Lukashenka regime closely to the Kremlin's interests. As repeatedly stated in consecutive EaP Civil Society Forum reports, EU funding has failed to foster substantial democratisation reforms over the last decades. Any attempt to craft a consistent response at the EU level must weigh in these imbalances. **However, a realistic acknowledgement of the EU's capabilities cannot be mistaken as an excuse for self-complacency and determinism.** The Belarusian people fighting for democracy constitute a movement of fellow Europeans fighting for European values. This prompts EU institutions and Member States to offer a consistent response, re-evaluate our decisions and posit a coherent strategy in accordance with our value-oriented foreign policy. **The EU can do better if it assembles the necessary political willingness to do so.**

The EU's response is based on a clear maxim that has been unequivocally manifested by HR/VP Josep Borrell on numerous occasions: the crisis in Belarus is first and foremost a domestic struggle for the right to self-determination, democracy and political pluralism and hence, it cannot be misconstrued as yet another episode of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Protesters in Belarus are not poised to choose between the EU and Russia and, unlike past experience in Ukraine, the EU is seeking Russia's active involvement in the resolution of the conflict. However, while selective engagement with Russia is indeed desirable, it cannot act as a strait-jacket co-opting the EU's role in the crisis. Russia is trying to preclude the EU from exercising a relevant role in the

resolution of the crisis and will work to ensure that all avenues toward political change pass through Moscow. The impending constitutional reform offers Russia the opportunity to assert its leverage unilaterally. **The EU, on the other hand, needs to insist on the OSCE's suitability to be the primary forum for mediation.** Needless to say, the OSCE'S unresolved leadership crisis enormously undermines its efforts to act as meaningful mediating actor in the crisis. The so-called Moscow Mechanism (Hummel, 2020) was invoked to overcome the lack of unanimity within the organisation and launch an investigation into electoral fraud and the reported human rights violations. Once the OSCE rapporteur's report was published, there has been little discussion on any follow-up action. **The OSCE can, however, name a Special Representative to Belarus as temporary measure, pending further elucidation of the organisation's role in the crisis** (Liechtenstein, 2020). **Meanwhile, the EU should elevate the inclusion of the OSCE in mediating efforts as one of its central demands vis-à-vis selective engagement with Russia.**

With respect to the imposition of sanctions, it is important to note that the EU has previously levied sanctions against Belarus on numerous occasions ever since Lukashenka seized power in 1994. Despite the repeated implementation of sanctions, Belarus has recorded a consistent deterioration of democratic parameters. Thus, the potential effectiveness of this policy instrument in bringing about a tangible political change is largely symbolic in a country where high-ranking officials have grown accustomed to Western ostracism. **However, the launching of this policy instrument is to be welcome as a sign of European unity in rejecting the legitimacy of Lukashenka's regime.** Some commentators have urged the EU to adopt sectoral economic sanctions against Belarusian state-run enterprises. However, this could be highly counterproductive. The opposition movement in Belarus has succeeded in winning over the backing of key social sectors who had previously cemented the regime's political and social legitimacy. **The imposition of economic sanctions could endanger this**

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



crucial inroad and hence they should be avoided for the time being. Conversely, including 59 individuals only is by no means sufficient. **The EU must accelerate the implementation of broader targeted sanctions on members of the electoral commission, law enforcement officers and civil servants from the Interior Ministry, the KGB and other bodies responsible for the brutal crackdown of protesters and opposition leaders.** Finally, Joseph R. Biden's recent electoral victory offers a window of opportunity to strengthen the transatlantic alliance. **The EU should seek to work closely with the upcoming Biden administration on a coordinated strategy aimed at intensifying pressure on Lukashenka's regime.**

As arbitrary arrests and repression against protestors, human rights defendants, journalists and activists persist, the EU needs to provide financial and technical assistance to those facing continued fines and penalties from Lukashenka's heavily controlled judiciary. In this regard, the European Endowment for Democracy is an official EU body created in 2013 with the specific goal of "supporting the unsupported" (Youngs, 2020), as the body's official motto proclaims. The EED offers financial assistance to "newly created, non-registered organisations, informal platforms and individuals". While the EU needs to articulate a long-term plan to foster the institutionalisation of civil society, **it is imperative that, in the short run, the EU's financial assistance reaches out to the thousands of individuals who have faced extraordinary personal and economic hardship in the fight for a democratic Belarus.** While the EED arises as the most fitting institutional choice to channel this initiative, the body has remained inexplicably silent in recent months. **The EU should dramatically increase the EED's funding beyond the current 7-million budget and activate it immediately in order to alleviate the enormous pressure Belarus' pro-democracy activists are subject to.**

Though uncertainty about the prospect of the Belarusian stalemate does not dissipate, two predictions may be in order. Firstly, given Lukashenka's resilience in clinging to power, **it appears increasingly likely that the pro-democracy struggle in Belarus may turn into a long-term battle.** Secondly, attempts to advance the pro-democracy movement from the international arena have not yielded any significant results in the years past and thus, **any meaningful change will largely depend on the capacity,**

self-reliance, and mobilisation of the Belarusian people. These two apperceptions should prompt the EU to articulate a long-term strategy predicated on a series of steps.

First of all, the EU should unleash an overhaul of the Eastern Partnership in order to ensure that the bloc's financial assistance is driven away from the regime and re-directed instead to foster the institutionalisation of Belarus' civil society. Over the last months we have witnessed the spontaneous proliferation of innovative and highly successful ways of social self-organisation in the form of crowd-funding platforms, advocacy campaigns and protest strategies. The EU needs to repurpose the EaP to go beyond mere economic assistance. Civil Society in Belarus has been weak and greatly atomised up until today (Glod, 2020). **The institutionalisation of civil society should be bolstered by the implementation of consistent and long-term capacity-building programmes for independent media outlets, NGOs, think tanks, human rights organisations and other representatives of the country's civil society landscape.**

Furthermore, it is likewise crucial to articulate an alternative vision of how a post-Lukashenka Belarus would look like. Many hold the view that democratisation in Belarus should come hand-in-hand with rapid and extreme economic liberalisation, mirroring how transition to market economy in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe unfolded. **Here, progressives across the EU should set forward a radically different approach predicated on the portrayal of a democratisation process as an enabling condition to create a new social contract that is deeply inspired by Rawlsian principles of justice.** Pro-democracy left-wing forces in Belarus remain weak as Lukashenka has succeeded in making progressive ideas almost undistinguishable from his authoritarian rule. Lukashenka has enjoyed being portrayed by his opponents as quasi-Soviet unreformed "leftist" leader and hence, to a large extent, the dictator has co-opted the public perception of progressive politics (Kunitskaya et al, 2020). **It is thus fundamental that the European progressive family identifies those partners, be it political parties, independent trade unions or reliable academic institutions, with whom it can step up cooperation in the near future.** As we have seen, grievances of economic nature underpin a large part of the anti-Lukashenka movement, as the workers' strikes bring to the surface. EU progressives should

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



seek to lift up the voices of democratic progressive forces in Belarus by providing capacity-building opportunities, political and academic exchanges and opening a robust dialogue among progressive leaders in the continent.

The EU27 remains the world's largest trading bloc and indeed our economic might represents the cornerstone of the EU's normative power abroad. The possibility of benefiting from access to EU markets will in all likelihood outshine any proposal for deeper economic integration Russia could propose to Belarus' economic elites. **Hence, the EU should**

offer a prospect of enhanced economic integration to reinvigorate Belarus' precarious economy conditioned on the opening of real democratizing process. It is crucial to detach this incentive from any geopolitical consideration and assures that integration into the European market would result in better living standards for the Belarusian people. The envisioned economic partnership would provide a boost to Belarus' stagnant economy by offering access to the EU market for the country's flagship industries e.g. textile and IT sector, as well as the Belarus' main export products such as agrarian equipment or potash.



6. Conclusion

The Belarusian people have already accomplished something extraordinary: after twenty-six years of nearly uncontested rule, Aleksandr Lukashenka is facing the awakening of a united people. His days in power are numbered as his brutal assault against peaceful demonstrators has made him lose all remaining respect among his own compatriots. Coercion is all he has left to remain in power and yet violence will only assure his eventual downfall. All democrats and progressives across the EU must not forget that the struggle against nepotism and violence continues in Belarus. As presented in this paper, sufficient mechanisms exist for the EU to transform its largely symbolic policy into an effective commitment with the Belarusian people. Let us all work together to ensure that the dream of democracy the Belarusian people are courageously fighting for becomes a reality sooner than later.

The Belarusian Quest for Democracy: A Moral Commitment for All Europeans



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