

Test Case Belarus

Consequences for the EU after the 2010 Belarusian Presidential Election

by Marie-Lena May and Dr. Stefan Meister

On the evening of the Belarusian presidential election on December 19, 2010, Alexander Lukashenko showed that democracy in Belarus will only be possible without him. The violent disbanding of protests, the arrest of over 600 people, forced searches of the offices of human rights and media organizations, and the disregard for the most basic human rights by the Belarusian security service should be answered with harsh sanctions by the European Union. EU member states must put economic and political pressure on Lukashenko's regime without isolating Belarusian civil society. Russia must also be held to account for helping to stabilize Lukashenko's regime in the backstage. If the European Union takes its advocacy for democracy and human rights seriously, it needs to make Belarus a test case for a consistent foreign policy.

The True Face of Lukashenko's Regime

The rapprochement between the European Union and Belarus within the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) over the last two years and the cautious development of economic cooperation awoke hope that a slow opening and democratization of Belarus was possible (see DGAPanalyse 5/2010 "Between Reforms and Maintaining Power" by Marie-Lena May). But on election night on December 19, 2010, Lukashenko's regime showed its true face. Lukashenko never intended to allow political reforms. He needed the European Union to ensure maximum leverage for his ailing economic system during bargaining with Russia. However, the security service's well-prepared and brutal reaction on the evening of the presidential election, as well as continuous, systematic actions against the opposition, its sympathizers, non-governmental organizations, lawyers, and the media, show that Lukashenko and the security service are afraid of losing control through the opening provided by the election campaign and the growing interest in alternative candidates among the population. Independent polls had shown that the

genuine result for Lukashenko would have been between 35 and 45 percent of the votes, not roughly 80 percent, as the official election results claimed.

Russia's Role

During the months leading up to the election, the relationship between Russia and Belarus escalated like never before (see DGAPstandpunkt 10/2010 "The Economization of Russian Foreign Policy" by Stefan Meister). The reason for this was not primarily due to the rapprochement between the European Union and Belarus, but because of Lukashenko's actions independent from Moscow and the conflicting economic interests of both states. Shortly before the election, however, an agreement between Moscow and Minsk was reached regarding the entry of Belarus in a customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan as well as custom duties on Russian oil deliveries. This agreement signaled to Lukashenko that Russia supported him and ultimately gave him a free pass for his actions after the election. Russia's apparent financial support of certain

opposition candidates during the election campaign should be interpreted not as a search for alternatives to Lukashenko, but as a way to apply pressure during bilateral economic negotiations.

Lukashenko's isolation from the West after the election increased the Belarusian leadership's dependence on Russia. Parallel to the Belarusian security service's actions against the opposition, negotiations concerning the conditions for the delivery of Russian oil to Belarusian refineries also took place. Russia's negotiating position was clearly enhanced by Lukashenko's isolation.

How should the European Union react to this situation?

With regards to Lukashenko's regime, EU states should develop a three-stage approach. First, the EU should apply harsh economic and political sanctions against the regime to show that its actions are unacceptable and outside of international legal frameworks. Second, the EU needs to prove to the Belarusian population that these sanctions and isolationist policies are not aimed at them, but at Alexander Lukashenko and his inner circle, particularly the security service. Third, Belarus must be placed on the agenda of EU–Russia relations to show that the European Union has learned from its mistakes of the last 16 years and that Russia must take responsibility in the matter.

Establish Political and Economic Pressure

In order to carry out political pressure on the regime, the elections should not be recognized and new elections should be held under international control after the release of all candidates. The visa ban for Lukashenko and his inner circle should be reinstated and expanded to include the security service and all those who took part in the manipulation of the presidential election and the actions against the opposition. At the same time, it is necessary to hold low-level talks with the regime. Belarus should not be excluded from the Eastern Partnership because the EaP is EU's only point of access to Belarus. The country can

only change itself from within, and without contact with the official state apparatus, the European Union would lose any ability to assert its influence. Cooperation should continue to be put on the backburner and should only apply to multilateral platforms without any large financial investments. Furthermore, members of the Belarusian elite interested in dialogue and economic exchange should be identified. The brutal actions following the election and the replacing of, among others, the prime minister, have strengthened the security service among the Belarusian elite and weakened economically oriented structures. This makes it all the more important to identify reliable partners and to make contacts on a variety of levels.

The European Union should exert its powerful position as Belarus' second most important trading partner by increasing economic pressure. Belarus should not receive credit from European and international credit institutions and ongoing financial procedures should be broken off. The regime's foreign bank accounts should be frozen. Rotterdam is the most important harbor for shipments of Belarusian oil products, one of the most important sources of income for the Belarusian state and elites. It begs the question of whether the sale of Belarusian oil products can be sanctioned.

Strengthen and support civil society

The core of EU policies regarding Belarus should be support of the people of Belarus. EU member states should thus establish a Belarus fund for civil society projects. It should be outfitted with more resources than previous efforts and be adjusted to fit the actual conditions in Belarus. In other words, it should keep in mind that many organizations do not have a legal working basis, that their computers are often seized, and that they have to expect regular searches and even arrests.

The EaP's Civil Society Forum should be used more assertively as a platform for articulation and networking. In addition, visa fees for the Belarusian population should be repealed, the European Humanities Univer-

sity in Vilnius and two-way student exchanges should be expanded, and scholarships for Belarusians greatly increased. It is also important to financially support oppressed members of the opposition, media representatives, and lawyers, and to closely monitor developments in the country and point out problems when they occur.

Russia as the key to Lukashenko

However, all of these sanctions and support instruments will only have a limited influence on Lukashenko's actions as long as Russia continues to support him politically and economically. The Belarusian economy depends on Russian loans and cheap oil deliveries.

Aside from President Vladimir Medvedev's recognition of the election results, there is hardly any official reaction from Russia. Moscow knows that Lukashenko is even more economically dependent on them than before the election and will use this situation to its advantage. This will influence energy prices for Belarus and the entry of Russian firms in key industries in the neighboring country.

At the same time, Moscow currently has no interest in Belarus becoming a conflict situation in EU-Russian

relations. Moscow's agenda regarding the European Union comprises rapprochement and a partnership of economic modernization. This is exactly why the topic of Belarus should be included in the EU-Russia agenda and in so doing, be a test case for how seriously Russia takes its rapprochement with the West. EU member states must show that human rights and democracy in Belarus are worth a conflict with Russia. The failure of Europe's Belarus policies over the last 16 years has shown that only when EU member states take developments in Belarus seriously and finally develop a strategy for the country with the consideration of Russia's role there will be a chance to actually apply pressure on Lukashenko.



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