



The Belarus dilemma

by Elizabete Vizgunova

There never was much doubt that Alexander Lukashenko would obtain a fifth mandate in the presidential elections held in Belarus on 11 October. The incumbent, often labelled as Europe's last dictator, won another landslide victory, with 87.75% of the recorded votes. More surprising was the limited protest that greeted his re-election, despite the OSCE's preliminary conclusions that serious flaws occurred in the electoral process. While the crackdowns on opposition demonstrators after previous elections in 2006 and 2010 are still etched in everybody's mind, the fear of triggering a Ukraine-type crisis followed by direct intervention from Moscow was probably also a contributing factor. In light of all this, much of the liberal Belarusian opposition – which failed to unite behind a single alternative candidate – simply decided to boycott the ballot.

Last August, in contrast, Lukashenko released six jailed opposition figures in one of his intermittent attempts to improve relations with the West. Coupled with his ongoing reluctance to support Russia's policy over Ukraine (and refusal to accept Crimea's annexation) and his role as facilitator for the Minsk I and II high-level talks (and agreements), this move has reignited the debate in the EU over how to handle Belarus – namely, when and how to use carrots, or sticks, or a combination of both.

On and off

The first time the EU applied sanctions to Belarus dates back to 1998, when it introduced travel bans

on 100 individuals accused of violating the Vienna Conventions following a controversy related to the Drozdy compound, where Western diplomats resided. The sanctions were lifted, only to be re-imposed after the disappearance of two politicians, a businessman and a journalist in 1999/2000 as well as openly rigged parliamentary (2004) and presidential (2006) elections. The EU temporarily suspended some sanctions against Belarus again in 2008, in response to an apparent change in the political behaviour of the Lukashenko regime.

However, the 2010 crackdown on anti-regime protesters in Minsk led the EU to gradually tighten its restrictive measures against Belarus. During the latest review, in October 2014, the list of EU sanctions included an arms embargo, a trade ban on arms-related services, financial restrictions, and travel bans on 201 individuals and 18 entities. The aim of these sanctions was primarily to penalise human rights violations, assist in the pursuit of specific individuals for prosecution by international courts, and ensure compliance with international treaties.

Among those hit by the travel bans, the EU listed the most high-ranking figures in the government responsible for serious violations of human rights or repression of civil society and democratic opponents, or whose activities undermine the rule of law in other ways. Sanctions have also had an impact on the cost-benefit calculations of the Belarusian business elite, closely linked with Lukashenko, with the aim of inducing them to reduce their support for the regime.



Due to the limited number of entities and persons targeted by the sanctions, these have not caused significant damage to Belarus's economy. Factors which normally increase the impact of sanctions – starting with significant bilateral trade and investment volumes – have been offset by Moscow's subsidies (including cheap energy): Belarus is now a full member of the Eurasian Economic Union and its economic dependence on Russia has even increased lately. This has allowed Moscow to put extra pressure on Minsk for opening a strategically crucial military base on Belarusian soil in Babruysk, very close to Kiev and the EU's eastern frontier.

On the other hand, the measures have succeeded in further isolating Belarus on the international stage, cutting off international lending, and restricting the freedom of movement and financial resources of those directly targeted by the sanctions.

Between Moscow, Kiev and Brussels

When the Ukrainian crisis broke out, Lukashenko displayed evident reluctance to toe Russia's line and readiness to reopen channels of communication with the West, and in particular the EU. Meanwhile, since October 2014, following the deteriorating economic situation in Russia, the Belarusian rouble has lost 30% of its value and currency revenues from oil (its primary export commodity) have decreased by 50%. According to the IMF, by the end of 2015 the country's economy will contract by more than 2%, and inflation rise by 5%.

Confronted with this change of tack by Lukashenko (for which he enjoys wide popular support), EU foreign ministers have recently signalled their intention to suspend some of the targeted sanctions imposed on the Belarusian president and senior officials in the wake of the 2010 crackdown.

The EU had already been faced with comparable situations when it eventually decided to lift sanctions on Uzbekistan (2009) and Cuba (2014), after assessing changes in the behaviour of their respective governments.

The temporary suspension of some targeted sanctions in response to improved behaviour by the regime is not the only 'carrot' that the EU has at its disposal. Along with a number of sectoral dialogues (e.g. on human rights), negotiations are currently under way – within the Eastern Partnership framework – on visa liberalisation and a package of €129-158 million for the period 2014-20 (through the European Neighbourhood Instrument) to support social inclusion, civil society, local and regional development, and the environment.

That said, Lukashenko's recent opening may well be of a tactical nature, and he is thus liable to make fresh U-turns, especially if pressure from Moscow grows. For the EU, the policy dilemma remains the same, in the presence of a neighbouring country that has no apparent intention to 'Europeanise' itself while stopping short of aligning itself fully with Moscow. The overall constellation may have improved in and with Belarus, but it has significantly worsened in and with Azerbaijan – raising similar dilemmas to those with which the EU was confronted with regard to Belarus a few years ago.

In the Freedom in the World Index, the Media Freedom Index, and the Worldwide Governance Indicators, Azerbaijan's performance is assessed to be close to that of Belarus. As a response to the human rights situation there reaching a new low, in September 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling for targeted sanctions against the Azerbaijani authorities – a resolution dismissed by the Azerbaijani government as 'anti-Islamic'.

A Nobel voice

In this context, the announcement on 8 October of the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to investigative journalist Svetlana Alexievich has proved as timely as it was symbolic. Alexievich fled Belarus in 2000, after being persecuted by the Lukashenko regime, only to return in 2013.

Alexievich has focused her work on what she calls 'the Soviet civilisation' for the past 40 years, writing in the genre of a 'novel of voices' to map the key historical moments shaping *homo sovieticus*: the Second World War, the Chernobyl disaster, the Afghanistan War, the collapse of the USSR and life after it. Her journalism reveals the unique human experience that is never reflected in official government reports.

Alexievich's books are scarcely available in Belarus, but have been translated in 19 countries worldwide. Her moral stance against Lukashenko represents a glimmer of hope in the atmosphere of passivity, fear and intimidation that prevails in Belarusian society. She agrees with Lukashenko only on the need to stop the violence in Ukraine. The 'Zinky boys' – a name used by Alexievich to describe the Soviet-Afghan war victims, shipped home in zinc coffins – are still returning to Russia, this time from Eastern Ukraine. Clearly, the Russo-Ukrainian war will become another critical episode in the formation of the post-Soviet mindset.

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