

It Is High Time for the West to Think About Belarus

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While the US Congress recently approved a vital and long-awaited 61 bln USD support package to Ukraine, the West should not forget about Belarus. Belarus has been a crucial actor in Russia's war in Ukraine. Whereas a civil society, political opposition, and the whole Belarusian democratic movement actively support Ukraine's fight for freedom, the authoritarian regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has been key to enabling the Kremlin's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Democratic transition in Belarus can help achieve sustainable peace in Ukraine — the very issue that is often left out when discussing solutions to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Three questions are critical in this respect. How resilient is the Lukashenka regime, and what is the Kremlin's role in reinforcing it? How far can the Belarusian democratic movement in exile influence the situation inside the country? What can the West do to speed up the democratic transition in Belarus?

Resilience of the Lukashenka Regime

The Lukashenka regime has so far demonstrated relative resilience to the Western sanctions. The repressions and the authoritarian tendencies in Belarus have not decreased, and the economy has been rather stable, with only a 4 percent drop in GDP.

However, there is another side to this 'success story.' Lukashenka would not have been able to remain in power if Russia had not supported him. Right after the massive anti-regime protests had swept Belarus in August 2020, Moscow not only provided the necessary political and financial assistance but even offered to intervene with military means to help suppress the protests.

However, this help from Big Brother came at a cost to the Lukashenka regime. The Kremlin launched a new phase of deep integration by starting negotiations on the Union State programmes, with 28 of them signed in 2021 and their implementation ongoing. They aim to

“unify spaces” between Russia and Belarus by gradually transferring control to the Kremlin, particularly in such crucial areas as customs and taxation, as well as foreign and security policy. If they were to be fully implemented, Belarus would lose its sovereignty and turn into an extension of Russia’s political, economic, and cultural space. Several trends emerging since 2020 demonstrate the danger of such a scenario.

First, over the last four years, Moscow has strengthened its economic leverage over Minsk, enlarging its share in Belarus’ total trade balance from 55 percent to over 70 percent. Russian businesses, including IT companies, have been gradually taking over the Belarusian market. In 2022, Moscow and Minsk ratified a treaty which envisaged the creation of the Supranational Tax Committee and an integrated system for administering indirect taxes. This provides Russia with information on various business entities in Belarus and further exposes the Lukashenka regime’s vulnerability.

Second, since 2020, Belarus and Russia have also widened defence cooperation. The Union State’s newest military doctrine, adopted in November 2021, focuses on a coordinated approach to security and foreign policy, regular joint exercises, as well as defence industry cooperation. The subsequent establishment of the Regional Group of Forces on Belarusian soil stepped up Russia’s military presence and accelerated the integration between the two armies. A de-facto joint military space allows the Kremlin to fully control Belarus while also using its territory and resources for aggression against Ukraine.

Finally, Russia’s growing presence is visible in the cultural sphere. The Belarusian language has been disappearing from public and official discourse. Some works of literature have been banned and labelled as extremist. The Russian language now dominates Belarus’s schools, academia, and media space. Ideology is a crucial component of the 2024-26 Union State integration plan, which is evidenced by the initiatives to establish joint educational programmes and co-write history textbooks. It poses risks to the survival of the Belarusian identity and the independence of the Belarusian nation.

How successful has Lukashenka been in navigating the Kremlin’s demand for submission while keeping some autonomous decision-making? Publicly, he often claims to be the only one who can guarantee Belarusian sovereignty and independence. In reality, Lukashenka is quickly turning into a pawn in the Kremlin’s geopolitical game. Diplomatic and political isolation has narrowed his room for manoeuvre on the international stage and weakened his leverage vis-à-vis Russia. Lukashenka’s positioning in relation to the Kremlin is driven by a multi-variable calculus, while his fate hinges on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, as well as the unity of the Belarusian opposition and the western support to the latter.

The Belarusian Democratic Movement

For nearly two decades, up until the 2020 presidential election, the political opposition in Belarus was weak, fragmented, and unpopular with its own electorate. Political parties would often fail to agree on a joint candidate or develop a long-term strategy. The internal cohesion of the Belarusian opposition improved after the 2020 electoral campaign.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team quickly galvanised the anti-Lukashenka voters and became a symbol of political change in Belarus. When the riot police began suppressing the massive anti-regime protests, the opposition had to emigrate but continued to function from abroad. Currently, there are several main institutions and groups in exile, which represent various voices of the Belarusian political spectrum.

First, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) was established in Lithuania after

Tsikhanouskaya was forced to leave Belarus in August 2020. The OST has founded several institutions, including the Coordination Council, a Belarusian parliament in exile, and a United Transitional Cabinet, a temporary executive body.

Second, there is the National Anti-Crisis Management (NAM) in Warsaw, chaired by Pavel Latushka, former Minister of Culture of Belarus who previously served as ambassador, including in Poland. This organisation aims to prepare institutions in Belarus for a transition period after Lukashenka's resignation.

The third formation is the Forum of Democratic Forces of Belarus (FDFB), established in May 2022 and led by one of Lukashenka's challengers in the 2020 campaign, Valery Tsapkala and his wife Veranika Tsapkala, with a goal to develop a national strategy to overcome the crisis in Belarus.

The radical nationalist strand of political opposition is represented by Zianon Pazniak, one of the founders of the Belarusian Popular Front.

Finally, there is the Kalinouski Regiment, a military formation created in March 2022 within the Armed Forces of Ukraine that consists of Belarusian volunteers defending Ukraine from Russian invasion. Over the last year, it has been developing a political agenda and gaining political weight both in Ukraine and the Belarusian democratic movement.

In the first year after the 2020 post-electoral protests, the Belarusian opposition in exile was relatively united. However, starting in 2022, Tsikhanouskaya and her team were criticised by other exile groups for alleged non-transparent management of funds provided by western donors. The resentment towards OST may be rooted in broader frustration at the inability to break down the Lukashenka regime and bring about changes in Belarus.

A European Belarus

Albeit no democratic transition yet, the Tsikhanouskaya team has managed to attract the global community's attention to the problems facing Belarus. Due to their efforts, the US launched the Strategic Dialogue, the EU set up the Consultative Group and the Council of Europe established the Contact Group on Belarus. In August 2023, the Belarusian democratic forces adopted an important document — the Declaration of Future Membership of Belarus in the EU. This European aspiration sends a strong message to the West that democratic Belarus does not see itself with Russia but wants to be part of the European family of nations.

The work should now focus on developing effective means to connect with Belarusians inside Belarus. Some important elements of this strategy include lobbying on the EU level for a visa-free regime; promoting cultural and educational exchanges; and designing mechanisms for reaching out to Belarusians with reliable information about the EU and Russia so that they can make informed choices about their geopolitical preferences. Some progress has already been made in this direction.

According to the annual report of the Tsikhanouskaya's team, OST has been cultivating such links with Belarusian citizens. However, some of those activities, cannot be made public due to security reasons. Closer cooperation with the West will benefit this effort and advance the bridge-building role of the democratic forces in Belarus.

The upcoming Coordination Council elections on the 25th of May will serve as a litmus

test for the coherence and strength of the Belarusian democratic movement. This will also be the first election organised by the opposition in exile. Some preliminary observations indicate that in spite of several tensions, it stays united and aware that internal rifts will only play into Lukashenka's hands. The trend towards consolidation must continue so that the representatives of the Belarusian opposition fight against the regimes in Minsk and Moscow but not against each other.

How Can the West Speed Up the Transition in Belarus?

There are several ways in which the West, including both the US and the EU, can help to advance democratisation in Belarus.

First, the West should provide stronger support to the Belarusian democratic movement, civil society, and independent media in exile until the fall of the Lukashenka regime. This support should be based on the fundamental principle that the future of Belarus and Ukraine are interlinked, and support to Ukraine also means investment in the future of democratic Belarus. Yet, significant political changes in Minsk can happen only if the Kremlin is substantially weakened.

Second, both the US and the EU should act as a united front on all questions concerning Belarus, including sanctions. Such approach will ensure that there is a close coordination between the US Strategic Dialogue and the EU's Consultative Group on Belarus. Brussels should consider appointing a special envoy for Belarus who would be responsible for aligning the policies in EU member states and Washington.

Third, opportunities for people-to-people contacts, as well as investments in the ability to travel, study, and work freely in the EU and the US for Belarusian citizens, should be broadened.

Fourth, the West should enhance initiatives to preserve Belarusian culture. This is particularly important now as democratic Belarus has announced its ambition to break the ties with Russia and embark on a pro-European path. Meanwhile, Belarusians inside the country are in danger of losing their national identity due to the pervasiveness of the Russian language in media, education, and everyday life.

Finally, the EU should clearly articulate the possibility of European integration for democratic Belarus, including the benefits it provides. An effective communication strategy is crucial to promote this idea to the Belarusian people. They should have truthful information about the European perspective as an alternative to the Eurasian choice, forced upon them by Russia within the Union State.

Western policymakers need to assign a higher priority to Belarus and develop a policy framework that would set specific tracks of cooperation and assistance to the Belarusian democratic movement, improve the West's image within Belarusian society and remove Belarus from Russia's zone of influence. Without a comprehensive strategy, the western governments risk losing the chance to help Belarus survive as an independent nation and counter Russia's expansionist ambitions in the region.

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