

The Urgency and Rationale of Reform

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Urgency

Few in Belarus would argue against the need for political reform. Despite the absence of any major decline in living standards lately, the number of people dissatisfied with the status quo has been on the rise. Alyksandr Lukashenka's low rating in the last few years proves general disappointment with his government's policies.

At the Belarusian Intelligentsia Assembly, the Belarusian intelligentsia have also pointed to the need for changes in statements like 'where is the way out?'¹⁶, or 'the issue of changes in Belarus has turned into one of saving the nation'¹⁷.

In contrast to the economy, the political situation has suffered greater instabilities. Instead of evolving, the government system established under the 1994 Constitution saw the personification of power since 1995, resulting in effective legalization of Lukashenka's dictatorial regime¹⁸. Therefore, it is time to ask

¹⁶ The question was raised by Pyotar Krauchanka, Belarus' former ambassador to Japan, on his return to Belarus. Cited by Halina Abakunchyk, in 'Participants of the Belarusian Intelligentsia Assembly Come Out for Unity and Vigorous Activity', Radio Liberty, www.svaboda.org.

¹⁷ Statement by Valer Kalinouski at the Belarusian Intelligentsia Assembly, cited by Radio Liberty on 17.03.2003, www.svaboda.org.

¹⁸ The conclusion was made by political analyst Viktor Charnau, 'Form of Governance in Post-Communist Belarus and the Problem of Choice of the Optimal Constitutional Model', Open Society, Information Bulletin № 3, 2000.

what lies ahead if the political system remains unreformed and developments proceed as chartered by the current government.

The gravest consequences would be the collapse and takeover of State institutions by the Lukashenka clique, inefficient governance and slower development of the civic society.

In the short term, the country may be taken hostage by those who are now struggling for power and maintain the system they have created. The society may find itself no longer in a position to influence the developments and control the clique.

Opposition politicians and independent experts speak volumes about the danger of the regime that is being built in Belarus¹⁹, yet the future may be even worse. A post-Communist hybrid may emerge on the ruins of the Soviet nomenklatura (mainly former secret agents, partly former ideology officers and *apparatchiks*) combined with members of the new elite, or clans coming from the same province. Thus, the cast of players interested in keeping Lukashenka in power is taking shape and gaining strength within the government. Belarus will soon cease to exist as a state with a president, government and parliament, and will turn into a country ruled by Lukashenka's clique acting beyond the political system.

In this system, governmental agencies would whittle down to performing seminal functions: keep the society under control (by harassing dissidents and enlisting new people to keep the society under control), gather information and report on public views and attitudes, tackle day-to-day problems and be the lightning arrester for public discontent²⁰. State apparatus would function less and less effectively as officials will not be interested in conducting reforms. People now have limited access to administrative services because of red tape, and this would not change for the better. The quality of public service would remain inferior. Inefficient administration and political system and the lack of institu-

¹⁹ See chapter on weaknesses of the current political system.

²⁰ For the sake of comparison, let us recall the basic principle of democratic governance. A government based on democratic principles has two major complementing functions: to exercise strong and fair rule with due regard for public interests and respect personal freedoms in the context of common interests.

tionalized and transparent decision-making procedures breed corruption. Corruption would thrive also because of inefficient service of governmental agencies vis-à-vis the population. Corruption would slow down the development of a market-oriented reform infrastructure, and have adverse effects on education standards. High education standards are needed to reduce the cost of the economy's integration with international markets. The cost of running such a system would be incommensurate with its efficiency. With the Soviet-era public debt still unsettled, the public debt of the Lukashenka regime continues to accrue due to delays in reforming the pension, healthcare and education systems and underdeveloped technical infrastructure. All this is a burden to the population that would also have to be borne by future generations.

The authoritarian government continues to hamper the establishment of a civic society. It should be noted that a civic society cannot develop if people have no opportunity to articulate their interests freely, and come together in carrying out civic projects or joint initiatives. In Belarus, political parties were the prime instrument for articulating public interests. Political parties mushroomed until mid-1990s, and were consistently forming a solid core of the political scene²¹; yet, the constitutional amendments adopted at the 1996 referendum and the authorities' effort to discredit and harass political parties weakened their ability to represent public interests. Civic initiatives, otherwise known as the third sector, started quite late, and consolidated by resisting the authoritarian neo-Soviet regime²².

²¹ Before Alyaksandr Lukashenka came to power, the nucleus was formed by several parties – BNF, ADPB and HP (AHP since 1995), BSDH, PNZ, KPB, and AP, which worked closely and often formed political alliances. The country's democratic development would ensure stable operation of the Parliament and government founded on a parliamentary majority (coalition of several close parties). With the exception of the latter two, the programs of most parties include proposals for further democratization of the political system and a market-oriented reform. After 1996, the parties focused on resisting dictatorship and forsook differences in their programs. However, forces opposing Lukashenka failed to focus on the goal of ousting the dictator. Probably, they would rally around the idea of European integration.

²² Before 1994 the third sector concentrated on efforts to win official recognition. It was only on 4th October 1994 that the parliament passed a final draft of the law on non-governmental organizations. In the first few years of Belarus' independence, most NGOs sprang up on the ruins of Komsomol (the Leninist Young Communist League), or other Soviet-type organizations such as the Association of War and Labor Veterans. Some of them managed to become independent of the government and grow

However, many NGOs remain purely notional, while the NGOs' caste-like behavior and occasional financial scandals in the third sector have drawn increased criticism from skeptics. In addition, the sweeping slogans²³ widely used by the NGOs are not taken seriously by most people.

In the unreformed economy, most people are employed by the State sector. The threat of unemployment makes them dependent on the employer, i.e. on government, which seeks to tighten control by building a doctrine-based network covering all state-run enterprises.

In a totalitarian state, only the ruling elite are allowed to enjoy a high standard of living, while continuous pressure on managers of undertakings is aimed at preventing a sudden and sharp decline in living standards. In such a situation, the public is increasingly accustomed to passivity, apathy and fear of authority. Thus, the country is losing opportunities for easier (i.e. embraced by the people) and more successful democratization.

Rationale

The European Union represents a model that would allow Belarus to avoid that prospect. Critics of the EU used to assert that political, economic and social globalization processes taking place within the EU might lead to the extinction of peoples and cultures in Europe. However, the political and economic union contributed to the prosperity of its members and enriched their culture owing to more transparent and direct trade and cultural exchanges. For instance, Ireland was one of the poorest nations in Europe before joining the EU; now, it is among the most prosperous ones. Belarusians should not mistrust and isolate themselves from Europe.

into truly non-governmental organizations. First NGOs specialized in aid for Chernobyl-stricken areas and population, such as the Foundation 'For the Children of Chernobyl' (1989), or youth issues, such as the Confederation of Youth Associations (1989). The opening of the Soros Foundation office in Belarus boosted the development of various NGOs. But, as Lukashenka tightened his grip on power, the authorities attempted to control the third sector by establishing state-supported quangos (the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union), and imposing restrictions and stifling NGOs. Many NGO activists filtered into politics by joining anti-dictatorship and pro-democracy forces.

²³ 'human rights', 'freedom of speech and expression', 'democratization of central and local authorities', etc.

The pro-European choice would not lead the nation to extinction, a destination to which the country is led by self-isolation, as it slows the development and makes the nation less competitive in external relations. When unreformed, the country may spawn a system more akin to that of Third World countries. EU membership means high living standards, prosperity, quality products, the rule of law, security and protection. EU membership may be the only chance to warrant personal inviolability and social security if Belarus' legal system adopts the *acquis communautaire*.

Moreover, in practice the idea of a 'European Belarus' is more appealing than the slogans of democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, the meaning of which is often incomprehensible to common people.

This is not to say that it is impossible to implant democratic values in Belarus. Efforts to import and copy the Western model of state and society have failed so far. It appears that it is much better to promote democratic values through a variety of micro-programs that would help the idea of 'Europe' take root in Belarus and fill the Belarusian form with European substance. The urgency of reform will increase as social and economic conditions deteriorate.

What are the possible benefits of reforms for the people that would approximate the country to the European Union?

The propaganda machinery claims that main achievements of Lukashenka's rule are that: 'above all, we are not involved in internal or external armed conflicts... We have no enemies and make no territorial claims. We have no religious or ethnic enmity'²⁴.

Indeed, Belarus is not at war or in external conflict. But, in today's world security is not only guaranteed by a strong army; rather, it results from having a strong economy and effective social security. Belarus lacks all these elements.

Opponents of democratic reform in Belarus maintain that changes would be difficult to carry out because of there being insufficient investments and Europe's indifference to Belarus. However, the main obstacle to reform is in the

²⁴ А. Лукашенко, *Мы создали страну – будем создавать граждан! Новогоднее поздравление Президента белорусскому народу, «Советская Белоруссия», 3 студзеня 2003.*

reluctance of the clique that seized power to make changes as they represent a threat to the authoritarian system of governance.

Part of the political elite who wish to see a prosperous and civilized Belarus should be interested in a pro-European choice. In current government, officials and members of the puppet legislature are not politicians per se as they merely obey orders of the president, himself the key political figure. Reforms geared to normalize the political system, i.e. balance the branches of power and institutionalize political competition, would enable those sidelined and in opposition to 'the chief politician' to resurface in politics.

The pro-European choice is also in the interests of most civil servants. The reform offers civil servants more benefits than disadvantages. They will see their status elevated, be protected against undue conduct of their superiors, and perform as indicated by their terms of reference. Civil service gains prestige if well paid and offering new career and professional opportunities. Civil servants would become more independent, network with their opposite numbers across Europe and have international career opportunities open.

Taking into account differences within the political elite, a compromise proposal could be one of a pro-European choice and reforms designed at Belarus joining the European Union. This is a constructive line that offers a clear alternative to the Lukashenka model.

The pro-European choice is likely to win majority support because, in geographical terms, Belarus is in Europe and has much in common with the continent in terms of history and culture.

However, the political elite should be aware that much time and effort would be required to join the European Union. In 1993, at the Copenhagen European Council, EU Member States agreed on three EU membership criteria:

- political: stability of institutions which warrant democracy, rule of law, respect for and protection of human rights and minorities;
- economic: a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union;
- ability to take on the obligations resulting from membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

Thus, a discussion on joining the European Union will be centered on these three criteria. State institutions play a key role in this process as they would have to align the country's legislation with European standards. This would be impossible without drastic political and economic reforms.