Belarus: A self-imposed isolation?

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Today, Belarus finds itself increasingly politically and economically isolated. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have withdrawn their representative office chiefs from Minsk, while the European Union and the United States, rankled by the ousting in June of their ambassadors from their residences in the Drozdy housing complex, have imposed visa travel bans on the entire Belarusian government and recalled their ambassadors. Belarusian ambassadors accredited to those countries were ordered to return to Minsk. To what extent can this isolated position be related directly to the policies of President Lukashenka and how might the international community persuade Belarus to revert to the path of democracy and respect for human rights?

Background

In the 1990s, Belarus' neighbours, Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Russia all ascended to member status in the Council of Europe. With regard to Russia and Ukraine, this status was achieved despite serious misgivings about Russia and Ukraine's adherence to human rights norms, in particular Russia's war in Chechnya and the continued application of the death penalty in both those countries. Their membership can arguably be said to be as a result of a stated commitment to address these issues. Belarus, in contrast, remains outside the pan-European organisation, its special guest status and membership application frozen. Under the leadership of President Aleksandr Lukashenka, Belarus has broken ranks with its neighbours and has embarked on a solo course of hostility and antagonism towards the West while pressing for reintegration with Russia in what some observers see as an attempted resurrection of the Soviet Union. In the past twelve months this policy of self-imposed isolation from the West has intensified culminating in the June ambassadors' residence scandal.

President Lukashenka publicly denies that his rule is authoritarian: in a Russian television interview in April, he admonished the interviewer for claiming that criticism of the President would result in arrest: 'It may sound a little immodest, but I have enough brains to rule a state in a sound way, without resorting to a stick or fist. Belarus is in the very centre of Europe, it is surrounded by democratic states, and believe me, it is not the kind of state that can be ruled by authoritarian means.'

Yet the reverse is true: security forces, ranging from uniformed riot police to shady plain-clothes officers, liberally use violent and brutal means not to break up demonstrations, but to attack and detain peaceful demonstrators as they disperse. Compelling evidence points to state security agents' involvement in the targeted beating of opposition figures. In today's Belarus, President Lukashenka employs precisely the methods outlined in his rebuttal above and has deliberately antagonised and alienated the countries of the European Union, its Eastern Europe affiliates and the United States. As such, Belarus' poor human rights record is directly attributable to the isolation in which the country is currently situated.

The state-sponsored campaign of human rights abuse can be broken down into four main areas: harassment of the mass media; disbarring independent lawyers; physical assault and/or the jailing of 'opposition' figures and political activists; and the mass beating and/or arrest of peaceful demonstrators.

Media crackdown
A free and independent media is a cherished institution of Western democracies. This importance is recognised by the West and reflected in a wide array of different programmes to support independent media in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Since coming to office in 1994, President Lukashenka has adopted a policy of harassment and intimidation of all facets of the media in Belarus. Recalcitrant editors of state-owned print media were dismissed and replaced with more subservient employees. The independent media and Russian media have faced unrelenting pressure to comply with the official version of events and abstain from critical reporting. The following cases from the past twelve months exemplify the Government's tactics.

In April 1998, a memorandum, entitled 'On Strengthening Countermeasures [Against] Articles in the Opposition Press', marked 'for official use', and signed by B.N. Bolozhinski of the presidential administration was leaked to the press in Minsk. The memorandum outlined three main points of action to counter anti-government media coverage: banning the passing of official documents by the Government and state organs to non-state media; banning commentary by state officials on official documents to the 'opposition mass-media'; and forbidding state enterprises from placing advertisements in 'opposition newspapers' from which important revenue for these papers is generated. The memorandum also referred to a 17 March 1998 letter from President Lukashenka and a 'Presidential Order on the Need to Strengthen Countermeasures against Articles in the Opposition Press'. President Lukashenka confirmed the memorandum's authenticity on 5 May in a speech addressing a C.I.S. journalists' forum stating that the letter's author should have given the directives orally and not in written form, adding that the instruction '...was done rudely: it was correct in content but rude in form'.

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