



THE EU MUST PERSEVERE WITH BELARUS, AND NOT ISOLATE IT

CHARLES TANNOCK

Until two years ago the European Union's policy had been to condemn and boycott Belarus, a policy that achieved precious little apart from bolstering the country's authoritarian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who was elected in 1994.

Belatedly and somewhat reluctantly, EU leaders have come more recently to accept that they had to deal pragmatically with the maverick and unpredictable Lukashenko if they wanted to promote reform.

The disappointing crackdown on opposition supporters following another flawed and probably falsified presidential election last December was typical of Lukashenko's intolerance of dissent, though many had hoped this time would be better.

It showed him still to be a caricature of the classic Soviet-era securocrat: an unreconstructed "Homo Sovieticus" whose secret police still goes by the disgraced name KGB and who, when faced with protests, reverts instinctively to oppression and mass arrests, and sometimes "disappearances".

But Belarus is by no means the worst offender when it comes to political repression. State-sanctioned harassment is commonplace in China, yet the EU has invested much political capital in a strategic, multifaceted partnership with Beijing, and similar arguments apply for varying degrees of EU engagement with undemocratic countries as diverse as Libya and Uzbekistan.

Belarus is symbolic for the EU because it is the missing link in the post-Soviet democratisation and integration of Eastern Europe, and rightly or wrongly higher democratic standards are expected on our own continent.

EU officials have nevertheless been at pains to try not to allow the enlargement of the Union to create new dividing lines between Belarus and its neighbours. For this reason it is part of the EU's Eastern Partnership, which links the EU to six countries on the EU's periphery. These countries can benefit from funds made available under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its Instrument (ENPI)

– the blueprints for relations with the EU's near neighbours.

In 2006, I proposed that parliamentarians from these six eastern dimension countries – Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia – should come together in a special parliamentary assembly (subsequently named EURONEST) to exchange views with MEPs and members of the six eastern partnership national parliaments. But Belarus has not so far been permitted to participate in EURONEST and given Lukashenko's recent repressive conduct EURONEST now falls or goes ahead without Belarus.

Nevertheless, the poor human rights situation is not the only consideration in the EU's relations with Belarus. The country has also loomed large for policymakers because of the EU's sudden appreciation of the need for a common external energy security policy. Given that 20 percent of Russian gas destined for Europe passes through Belarus, a stable and structured relationship with Minsk has leapt up the EU's priority list.

The thaw in EU-Belarus relations – an improvement diminished, but not entirely destroyed, by the conduct of the recent presidential election – remains, therefore, pragmatic in nature, but it must continue to be based on renewed democratic demands.

None of the EU's external relationships are free of conditionality, and the EU is constantly, rightly, emphasizing to third countries its own attachment to fundamental values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

As part of its policy of constructive engagement, the EU has in the past been ready to respond positively to the occasional shift in momentum in Belarus towards domestic reform and greater openness. The release two years ago of a number of political prisoners in Belarus did much to temper the EU's hostility towards Lukashenko, as did the decision to allow publication of an opposition newspaper. It was precisely the kind of astute move that he knew would maintain and encourage the EU's interest in an enhanced relationship.



Nevertheless, although the courageous stand of dissidents like Alexander Kozulin and Alexander Milinkievich must not be forgotten or sidelined it remains true that the political opposition to Lukashenko is hopelessly divided, plagued by infighting and still incapable of mounting any serious challenge to the authoritarian president's rule.

Moreover, Lukashenko appears to remain relatively popular in Belarus among some sections of the population particularly the elderly, who often appear to prioritize stability and order over democratic development.

Lukashenko has exploited this paternalist susceptibility and nostalgia for Soviet times by prioritising pension payments and preventing the emergence of a Russian style plutocratic oligarchy. It was often said after successive fraudulent elections in the early years that Lukashenko would have won a handsome mandate even in a free and fair vote, although it is doubtful this was still so in December.

The current antagonism between the EU and Belarus over the flawed presidential election is typical of their oscillating relationship over the past few years. Lukashenko has pursued a policy of divide-and-rule, courting favour alternatively with Brussels and Moscow. At a time when he was making overtures towards the West, many observers believed Lukashenko was in fact trying to build pressure for more support from Russia.

Such a tactic naturally caused alarm in the Kremlin, which is hypersensitive about challenges to its influence in its 'near abroad' of former Soviet satellites. For Russia, foreign policy remains a 'zero-sum' game in which the EU's gain in geostrategic terms can only mean Russia's loss.

However, Lukashenko only has to remember Russia's 2008 war against Georgia and its habitual destabilization of Ukraine's domestic politics to understand what he could expect if he moves precipitately. This is perhaps why he has decided again to shift away from the EU and back towards Russia. With the Belarusian economy stagnant and its export markets sluggish, Russia could easily exploit Lukashenko's vulnerability. Russia remains Belarus' biggest commercial partner and as Minsk's dependence on Russia grows the Kremlin has more sway over the country's external policy.

Russia could also insist on greater military cooperation with Belarus, including the enhanced deployment of Russian missiles in Belarus (where

Russia has permanent military bases) in response to NATO plans for a US-led missile shield in Europe.

Putin and Medvedev may yet also insist on Belarus recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, parts of Georgia annexed in last summer's war – knowing that this would make the EU even more hesitant to make further commitments to Belarus. The energy supplies from Russia on which Belarus relies for cheap energy and transit fees could also dry up if Lukashenko becomes too cozy with the EU.

Now, then, is the time for EU leaders to act decisively and present Lukashenko with a new road-map towards the normalisation of relations, and a series of linked human rights and democracy conditions. Clearly, though, Lukashenko's status as a self-styled strongman, as evidenced by yet another rigged election, cannot simply be brushed under the carpet.

Until the situation improves, renewed EU sanctions against Lukashenko's regime need to be reinforced to express the west's unwillingness to accept his continued contempt for democracy. Such measures taken together with the US should continue to include travel bans and the freezing of assets.

However, Lukashenko is here to stay, at least for the time being – and the EU's foreign policy needs to be realistic and pragmatic above all.

Policymakers in Brussels know that a retreat to an empty-chair policy of isolating Belarus is going to do nothing to advance the EU's interests in Belarus or help its citizens or stabilise the wider region. EU leaders must continue to make every effort to coax Belarus into the family of European nations where it belongs – and where its people undoubtedly want it to be.

CHARLES TANNOCK, MEP, is the British Conservative Party's Foreign Affairs spokesman in the European Parliament, ECR Coordinator on the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament and Vice-President of the European Parliament's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly